Rants, Reactions, and other Rhetorics: Genres of the YouTube Vlog

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Abstract

ERICH ALAN WERNER: Rants, Reactions, and other Rhetorics: Genres of the YouTube Vlog
(Under the direction of Dr. Jordynn Jack and Dr. Daniel Anderson)

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examines the YouTube vlog or “video blog” as a rhetorical mode of address and a portal to the public sphere. Vlogs are technically simple videos in which a person faces a camera and addresses a public viewership briefly, informally, and more or less intimately. This dissertation explores how and why these largely unrehearsed, unedited, and unorganized videos have nonetheless become one of the internet’s most magnetic and beloved forms. Through case studies of four vlogging genres (the confession video, the reaction video, the rant video, and the witness video), I identify four sources of vlogging’s rhetorical vitality and force: (1) their conversational mode of address, which invites ongoing dialogue with viewers; (2) their ability to relay emotion, especially emotion displayed bodily through facial, vocal, and gestural expression; (3) their ability to broadly spread information of public interest that is being overlooked or ignored by old media; and (4) their many and complex speeds, which afford both immediate public expression and indefinite public archiving. The conclusion explores relationships between vlogging genres and the preexisting genres they remediate. Just as webpages remediate print encyclopedias and newspapers, vlogs remediate earlier genres of speech and emotion display. However, by situating those genres within new
performative settings or “ceremonials,” remediation endows those genres with new meanings and movements, and opens up new possibilities for social action. Specifically, three affordances of vlogs differentiate them from speech genres they remediate: vlogging’s reach, replayability, and modularity. As the technology necessary to vlog becomes more and more inexpensive and ubiquitous, rhetors gain new and wide-reaching access to public spheres. Vlogging’s easy modularity makes them open to rapid movements, recontextualizations and the transformations—all of which may be wanted or unwanted, thrilling or chilling. Overall, this dissertation presents vlogging as a powerful rhetorical act as well as an act of extreme bravery. Within the ceremonial of online video sharing, vloggers make themselves vulnerable not only by exposing their private thoughts and emotions to public audiences, but also by exposing themselves to the complex and unpredictable rhetorical ecology of YouTube, by facing the possibilities of harsh criticism and profound connection, of indefinite stagnation and instant virality, of unexpected reach as well as unexpected reappropriation.
Table of Contents

Chapter

1. Introduction: The Rhetoric of Vlogging.........................................................1
   Research Aims..................................................................................................2
   Defining the Vlog............................................................................................5
   Vlogging and New Media...............................................................................10
   Vlogging, Genre, and Emotion.....................................................................17
   Research Methodology..................................................................................20
   Chapter Overviews.......................................................................................27

2. The Confession Video: Vlogging as Monologue and Dialogue..............31
   Vlogging as Monologue...............................................................................37
   Vlogging as Dialogue....................................................................................44
   Conclusion: Vlogging as Identification.......................................................57

3. The Reaction Video: Vlogging and Emotion Display............................66
   Vlogging and Emotion...............................................................................69
   Reaction as a Genre......................................................................................88
   Emotion as Intervention: Vlogging about *Twilight*.................................94

4. The Witness Video: Vlogging and the Problem of Online
   Credibility......................................................................................................112
   The Witness Video Genre..........................................................................115
   Witness Videos and Media Convergence...................................................116
Credibility and Vlogging.................................................................120
Distributed Credibility and the Witness Video...........................132
Limitations of the YouTube Interface for Assessing Credibility..................144

5. The Rant Video: Vlogging’s Many Complex Speeds..................153
   Tracking Speeds Online.............................................................157
   The Speeds of the Rant.............................................................167
   Ranting against the Rant...........................................................175
   From Rant to Ruin: the Afterlife of Vlogging..............................182

6. Conclusion: The Apology Video: How Vlogging Remediates
   Expression..................................................................................187
   Vlogging and Remediation..........................................................189
   Vlogging’s Vital Expressivity.......................................................192
   Implications for Composition Pedagogy.....................................197

WORKS CITED.................................................................................201
List of Tables

5.1 A Taxonomy of Rhetorical Speeds.................................................................162

5.2 Oral Rants vs. Rant Vlogs, a Comparison of Rhetorical Speeds..................169
List of Figures

1.1 The vlog’s characteristic mode of address: casual, close-up, and uncut...........8

2.1 A vlogger shares his experiences as an African-American atheist................32

2.2 Another vlogger shares his experiences as an African-American atheist........39

2.3 Another vlogger shares her experiences as an African-American atheist......40

2.4 Another vlogger shares her experiences as an African-American atheist......51

3.1 A vlogger shares her reaction to the trailer for the movie Twilight.............66

3.2 A vlogger captures his (lack of) reaction to the Twilight trailer...............77

3.3. Breaking Dawn reaction videos....................................................................97

4.1 A witness video claiming that it was raining oil due to the Gulf spill..........123

4.2 A YouTube user channel..............................................................................125

4.3 Cleanup worker Jennifer Rexford’s first vlog...........................................134

4.4 A BP-produced witness video.................................................................141

4.5 Illustration by Jessica Hagy of Indexed, poking fun at the crudity and incivility of YouTube comments.........................................................145

4.6 An anti-BP video featuring ad for a BP-sponsored video.......................148

5.1 The infamous “Asians in the Library” vlog by former UCLA student Alexandra Wallace.................................................................154
5.2 Video statement by UCLA Chancellor Gene Block, responding
to Alexandra Wallace’s rant. ......................................................179

6.1 Politician Charlie Christ apologizes via vlog........................................188
Chapter 1

The Rhetoric of Vlogging

Many media commentators have hailed vlogging as a revolutionary mode of address. Vlogs are brief video speeches, composed casually and shared online. Despite their unassuming tone, however, some have ranked vlogs among the most transformative of all new media forms. Media industry player Michael Rosenblum, for example, describes vlogging as a “liberat[ing]” medium, comparing the spread of vlogging to the history-altering spread of the Gutenberg printing press (qtd. in Betancourt). Striking a similar note, Wired journalist Clive Thompson suggests that vlogging will radically change communication, and maybe cognition too. As video digitizes and democratizes, Thompson claims, we are developing “a new language of video—forms that let us say different things and maybe even think in different ways.” (Thompson). Rumors of a vlogging revolution come not only from media journalists and insiders, but also from scholars. Stressing its psychological effects, anthropologist Michael Wesch suggests that vlogging has the power to “shock” composers “into new forms of self-awareness” (21). Stressing its social effects, communication scholar Michael Strangelove grants online video sharing and vlogging sweeping social and political powers, including the capacity to “redefine national identity, challenge
normative assumptions [. . . ] subvert the agenda of corporate news, mediate historical traumas [. . . ] and propagate counternarratives” (24).¹

Many believe that prophecies like these, testifying to vlogging’s transformative, democratizing potential, have already begun to be fulfilled. For proof, many point to the 2011 Arab Spring. Writing in Foreign Policy, David Kenner claims that while social media sites have played key roles in Egyptian and Syrian uprisings, it is vlogs that “provide the best window into what’s happening on the Arab street,” allowing protestors to intercommunicate, to sidestep media censorship, and in general to craft effective, efficient, and emotionally powerful messages. Vlogging, it seems, may be more than a revolutionary medium. According to commentators like these, it may be helping to spark actual social revolutions. Not all media observers, however, agree about vlogging’s revolutionary potential. There are many media observers who downplay or outright dismiss the role of vlogging and other social media in the Arab spring and other movements, arguing that while these indeed “played a major role in how the Arab Spring transpired,” there is no way to prove whether internet platforms actually caused these movements or effected their outcomes (Carvin). Regardless, the rhetoric of revolution that surrounds vlogging, along with online video sharing more generally, seems to warrant an investigation of vlogging’s rhetoric.

Research Aims

¹ Throughout this dissertation, I use bracketed ellipses to indicate where I have omitted words from text or video sources. I reserve unbracketed ellipses for video sources only, to indicate moments in which speakers pause.
As a rhetorical study, rather than a historical or sociological one, this
dissertation can neither definitively prove nor disprove claims about vlogging’s
supposedly revolutionary social powers. Instead, this research adopts a more
modest aim. Guided by rhetorical genre theory, it documents how YouTube vlogs,
in their first few years of existence, have been cultivated and used by rhetors and
their audiences. Specifically, the dissertation examines four of vlogging’s
emergent genres: confession videos, reaction videos, witness videos, and rant
videos. These genres are recurrent forms that vlog-makers and vlog-watchers
have collectively created and curated, and therefore reveal a great deal about
vlogging’s growing social currency. From the perspective of rhetorical genre
theory, genres are far more than simple templates or blueprints for composing
texts. Rather, genres are powerful instruments that allow rhetors to carry out
established “social actions.” As theorists like Carolyn R. Miller and Charles
Bazerman have illuminated, genres are customary ways of acting, of doing things
with words. As Miller puts it,

> What we learn when we learn a genre is not just a pattern of
> forms. . . . We learn, more importantly, what ends we may have:
> that we may eulogize, apologize, recommend one person to another,
> instruct customers on behalf of a manufacturer, take on an official
> role, account for progress in achieving goals. [. . . . ] As a recurrent,
> significant action, a genre embodies an aspect of cultural rationality.
>
> (“Genre” 165)

Bazerman, reaffirming and riffing on Miller, writes,
Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact. Genres are the familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the unfamiliar. (“The Life of Genre” 19)

If we accept that genres represent recurrent social actions and perhaps even “forms of life,” then one fruitful way to study the social impact of vlogging is to examine its genres. By investigating a number of vlogging’s most popular genres, this study offers an (admittedly incomplete and exploratory) report on vlogging’s social applications, a sketch of what people currently use vlogs to say and do.

Extrapolating from these genres, this dissertation identifies a number of rhetorical characteristics distinctive to vlogging as a mode of address. Behind all the claims about vlogging’s revolutionary social powers lies the assumption that vlogs somehow communicate differently than other modes of address, even other electronic modes. This dissertation tests this assumption about vlogging’s uniqueness by diagramming its idiosyncratic rhetorical workings. It takes a look under the hood, so to speak, in order to examine how vlogging works rhetorically, and how those workings differentiate vlogging from its rhetorical relatives and ancestors: modes of address like television, blogging, social media, and face-to-face conversation.

In the pages that follow, I suggest that the vlogging is rhetorically distinctive in how it connects its interlocutors, the videomakers and viewers
whom vlogging puts into conversation. Specifically, vlogging encourages extreme candidness and emotionality among strangers and promotes ongoing back-and-forth conversation in much the same way that face-to-face conversation does. In many ways, vlogging is much like communicating verbally with a stranger or strangers (whether at a party, a pub, or anywhere else one might wander into intense but short-lived intimacies). I also suggest, however, that despite the sense of intimacy and cooperation that grows between videomakers and viewers, vlogging can nevertheless have highly unpredictable outcomes, as videos take on altered and unintended meanings and effects as they circulate among viewers, in extreme cases going “viral” for all the wrong reasons.

Overall, the dissertation presents vlogging as a highly interactive and highly emotional mode of address that resembles and remediates specific genres of face-to-face conversation. However, because of its digital nature, vlogging departs considerably from face-to-face conversation, taking on new affordances that allow video messages to circulate in extreme, unpredictable, and transformative ways. My hope is that my study of vlogging’s distinctive rhetorical properties can help inform debates about its supposed revolutionary powers, but also contribute to scholarship on new media, on rhetorical genre theory, and on the rhetoric of emotion. Before I discuss what those contributions might be, however, I want to more sharply define my research object.

**Defining the Vlog**

Vlogs are perhaps the simplest, most elemental mode of video address. In a vlog, a person faces a camera (usually, an inexpensive webcam attached to their computer) and addresses a public viewership, briefly and informally. Wesch
describes vlogs as “videos of people sitting alone in front of their webcams and just talking to anybody and everybody who cares to click on their video” (21).

Vlogs tend to be loose in their tone, loose in their organization, and loose in their orientation. As Wesch points out, vlogs usually “have no specific addressee. They are meant for anybody and everybody, or possibly nobody—not addressed to anyone in particular—or perhaps only vaguely addressed to ‘the YouTube community’” (21).

This looseness, it seems, is part of what attracts videomakers and viewers alike to vlogging. The looseness of vlogging, Burgess and Green recognize, carries with it a vitality, a feeling of “liveness, immediacy, and conversation” (54). Though they are actually prerecorded, vlogs suggest liveness and immediacy by presenting themselves as spontaneous, unstaged, and unrehearsed. Vloggers tend to ramble and repeat themselves and wander off course. They rarely edit, preferring instead to leave in all their fumbles, mistakes, and pauses, whether for the sake of convenience or rawness or authenticity.

As Patricia G. Lange has articulated, vlogs tend to possess a sense of intimacy and vulnerability (“Vulnerable”). Like webcam feeds (those continuous online video streams of baby pandas playing or Las Vegas wedding chapels bustling) vlogs seem to offer access to what would otherwise be hidden or private. Adding to the sense of intimacy, vlogs nearly always have intimate, domestic settings. Basements, bathrooms, living rooms, and bedrooms provide the (poorly lit and out-of-focus) backdrop for most vlogs. Unlike webcam feeds, however, vlogs are limited in duration and asynchronous in delivery, thereby allowing
vloggers to channel that sense of intimacy into more focused, purposeful, and replayable public messages.

Vlogs also feel intimate because they echo face-to-face exchanges. As in a face-to-face conversation, the vlog brings the viewer visually close to the speaker, with his or her face and upper body filling the frame. Furthermore, the always-present possibility of interacting with the vlogger, through comments, personal messages, response videos, and other forms of exchange built into online video sharing platforms, means that vlogging does not merely simulate one-on-one conversation, but actually remediates it, creating a new channel for interpersonal dialogue.

The term vlog, both generally and for the purposes of this study, encompasses any and all online videos (serial, single, or otherwise) that involve a certain characteristic mode of address: one that is casual, close-up, and (seemingly) uncut (Figure 1.1). The term “vlog” was originally a sandwiching of “video” and “blog.” This portmanteau is accurate insofar as vlogs share the textual weblog’s informal tone, as well as its fundamental interactivity; vloggers like text-based bloggers tend to interact energetically with their audiences. The comparison between blogs and vlogs, however, only goes so far. Textual blogs are mostly serial, offering or promising a regular sequence of entries, while vlogs often appear singly or in clusters.\(^2\) While some of the vloggers discussed in this dissertation do vlog serially (for instance, the impassioned Twilight fan

\(^2\) Granted, there are many vlogs that are serial, including popular vlog series by Nigahiga, a Japanese-American comedian; by geriatric1927, the self-proclaimed “Internet Granddad” who shares stories and reflects on his long, active life; by JennaMarbles, known for her blunt commentary on dating and other issues relevant to young people; and many others.
NuttyMadam3575 discussed in the third chapter, most (like the African-American atheists discussed in the second chapter) have only uploaded one or two vlogs, rhetorical one-offs that respond to singular exigencies, without any intention of vlogging regularly. In short, while the term vlog seems to have originally designated a “video blog,” it seems more accurate to think of vlogs more expansively, as “videologues,” as speeches or addresses circulated via online video sharing platforms.

Despite, or because of, their haphazard production and highly personal content, vlogs have become fantastically popular, particularly on today’s largest online video sharing site, YouTube, from which this dissertation draws its case studies. Back in 2007, when Jean Burgess and Joshua Green performed a study on video sharing platforms, they observed that vlogs were emerging as a new form of popular culture, with a particular appeal to young audiences.

Figure 1.1: The vlog’s characteristic mode of address: casual, close-up, and uncut. From Vlogbrothers. “How to Vlog: From the Vlogbrothers.” YouTube. 20 May 2011. Web. 2 May 2012.
comprehensive analysis of the site’s most popular content (tracking what videos were most viewed, favorited, discussed, and responded to) they found that the most popular videos, according to these metrics, were not clips created by or cribbed from old media, as they originally expected. Rather, the most popular content on YouTube was generated by the site’s users. Perhaps surprisingly, most magnetic of all were these dashed-off, rambling video speeches, vlogs (42).

Not even YouTube’s founders seemed to foresee the popularity of vlogging and other user-generated content. In early internal e-mails, YouTube’s founders expressed deep doubts about the value and currency of user-generated video, arguing that the site would thrive on clips borrowed from commercial media, and not on user-generated videos like vlogs. “If you remove the potential copyright infringements,” wrote one YouTube exec, “site traffic and virality will dropt [sic] to maybe 20% of what it is” (qtd. in Viacom). “Steal it!” wrote another exec bluntly, “[ . . . ] We have to keep in mind that we need to attract traffic. How much traffic will we get from personal videos?” Burgess and Green provide a surprising answer to this executive’s sarcastic question. According to their sample, user-generated content comprises about two-thirds of the most “responded to” and “most discussed” videos on YouTube. In other words, while commercial content drew more overall views, user-generated content drew far more engagement and participation. Furthermore, among the most popular user-generated content, it was vlogs that drew the most attention and interaction. “Vlog entries dominated the sample,” write Burgess and Green, “making up nearly 40 percent of the videos coded at Most Discussed and over a quarter of the videos coded at Most Responded” (53). Their study shows that vlogs, the mode of
address once dismissed as dead-end “personal videos,” are actually what brings many users to the site—and, equally important, vlogs are what bring users back, again and again. While they represent a fraction of the total videos uploaded to YouTube (about five percent by Wesch’s rough count) vlogs nevertheless are YouTube’s most magnetic form. “A thriving community has emerged around such videos,” Wesch observes, “one that some participate in and believe in with almost religious zeal” (21).

My study does not claim to be exhaustive or authoritative, as a study of YouTube, or as a study of vlogging specifically. As anthropologist Patricia G. Lange observes, vlogs are staggeringly diverse in their content and character. While their basic (intimate, conversational) mode of address remains more or less stable, vlogs vary considerably in terms of content. Briefly cataloging the variety of vlogs, Lange explains that they “may be diary-based, artistic, journalistic, entertainment-based, or they may take any number of other forms” (“Vulnerable”). This dissertation more fully maps the scope and variety of vlogging by studying four of its most prominent genres: the confession video, the reaction video, the witness video, and the rant video. Each chapter pairs an analysis of one vlogging genre with a broader theoretical exploration of vlogging’s rhetorical affordances: specifically, its participatory architecture, its capture of emotion displays, its mechanisms for constructing and assessing credibility, and finally its speech and reach.

**Vlogging and New Media**

Despite their magnetism, vlogs have received scant attention from scholars of rhetoric and composition. In general, the field’s studies of online video sharing
tend to focus on digital videos that are overtly political, like those associated with presidential campaigns and debates (Dietel-McLaughlin, Dubisar and Palmeri, Jackson and Wallin). Other rhetorical studies have focused on redactional video content: the remixes, mash-ups, dubs, and other user-generated genres composed by creatively altering or combining old media materials (Dubisar and Palmeri, Schaffner, Skinnell, Stedman). Though vlogging has been largely overlooked in rhetorical scholarship, it is highly relevant to broader scholarly conversations on interactivity and speed in new media, as well as conversations about emotion and remediation. Because vlogging lies at the intersection of two relatively new and important developments in online rhetoric—namely, the rise of video and the rise of social media—vlogging therefore allows me to further explore these longstanding rhetorical concerns and extend the existing scholarship for new digital and rhetorical moment.

Vlogging, Interactivity, and Participatory Culture

At first glance, vlogging appears to be a unilateral, even solipsistic mode of address. Some media commentators, for example, have accused vlogging of providing a public stage for empty self-expression, for egotistic rambling, blathering, ranting, vociferating, and the like. As this study demonstrates, however, vlogging is (or at least can be) a highly interactive mode of address, leading to constructive, ongoing dialogue among videomakers and viewers, and even potentially creating new social relations, both online and off.

Scholars of new media have been studying interactivity for decades, examining its workings and theorizing about its rhetorical implications. In her 2001 book Cyberliteracy, Laura J. Gurak notes the importance of interactivity to
rhetoric online, observing that unlike television, radio, newspapers and other one-way modes of public address, online media tends to allow for meaningful (and instantaneous) exchange between authors and audiences. This interactivity alters the communication substantially; because rhetoric online grants audiences ready access to composers, Gurak observes, audiences become more than passive consumers of messages. Rather, they become active participants in the communication: “This ability to interact, combined with the encouragement we feel because of the speed and reach of the medium, encourages talking back” (44). More recently, scholars have recognized that much more is possible online than merely “talking back” to authors.

Moving beyond Gurak’s primary genres of study (listervs and message boards) as well as the binary concepts of “author” and “audience,” subsequent scholarship has tracked the rise of “participatory culture,” a term coined by media scholar Henry Jenkins to describe the collaborative and redactional practices of composers who crib and poach material, who “sample” and “remix” both from commercial media and from one another. Alongside these redactional composing practices have emerged genuinely collaborative forms of composition, including encyclopedic wikis as well as digital art and music authored by mass collectives (Cope and Kalantzis, DeVoss and Webb, Fleckenstein, Lessig, Jenkins, Manovich, Welch). Although the video addresses at the center of vlogging often feature a single person speaking, the larger exchanges they inspire subsequently bring together a multitude of participants, all of whom contribute to the meaning and movement of the vlog. Because they configure participants in this idiosyncratic way, vlogs offer a fresh example of how a multitude of participants contribute to
the composition, contextualization, and circulation of online messages. Specifically, by contributing to comment threads, and by embedding and linking to videos in other online spaces, viewers participate actively in the rhetorical proceeding we call vlogging.

Vlogs also reveal how online interactivity is structured, both technologically and culturally. While the interactivity of new media may invite audiences to “talk back” and even participate more directly in online communications, that interactivity is never free or unstructured. The interactivity of online platforms may alter, and sometimes radically transform, the terms on which individuals communicate. However, vlogging shows that online communications remain deeply structured, possessing their own formal protocols: constraints, decorums, and etiquettes. These protocols are determined not only by the technological affordances of a given online platform, but also by culture, that is, by the collective and cumulative activity of a platform’s users.

Drawing on the genre theory of Anne Freadman (discussed in greater depth below), I use vlogging to illustrate that “We never leave a space of rituals for a space of non-rituals: we choose one ritual instead of another” (61). Specifically, the vlogging “ceremonial” prompts videomakers and viewers to interact in certain ways and not others, strategically positioning its interlocutors, and thereby encouraging and discouraging certain modes of interaction. More broadly, I suggest that each and every online mode of address, from podcasting to photo sharing, comes along with its own rituals or protocols, however invisible or taken-for-granted, rituals that profoundly structure participants’ interactions, and that therefore deserve and demand further study. Interactivity and
participation, in other words, are everywhere structured by rhetorical protocols—rich, complex, and ever-evolving rituals that create and constrain how online rhetors interact with one another.

_Vlogging and Speed_

This study also extends and complicates understandings of the “speeds” of rhetoric online. For decades, the rapidity or quickness of new media has inspired composers, fueled media journalists and advertisers, and fascinated scholars. Gurak, for instance, declares that the speed of the internet “is certainly changing how we live and what we expect, and it may be changing our mental states as well” (*Cyberliteracy* 30). Likewise, in the stories told by popular mythmakers (advertisers, journalists, technology moguls, and the like), online communication is constantly accelerating. Like a sprinter or an experimental racecar, online communication supposedly sets new speed records every year, with every new platform and device transmitting information faster and faster. Ads for internet devices now stress speed in virtually every sentence, leaving copywriters seemingly desperate for imaginative synonyms for “fast.” Similar stories have been spun about the speed of vlogging. Back in December 2006, *Time Magazine* proclaimed “You” their Person of the Year, praising online video sharing, along with other Web 2.0 platforms, for granting nearly everyone speedy access to public spheres (Grossman). The magazine traced online video sharing’s power, in part, to its unprecedented speed and reach, presenting the video sharing site as “a place where ideas and images can spread instantly, cheaply, democratically and anarchically” (Poniewozik). With occasional exceptions, commonplaces like these portray the internet and vlogging as faster, farther-reaching versions of previous
communication technologies. This is a somewhat accurate, but simplistic portrait that scholars of new media have worked to extend and complicate.

The speed of rhetoric is indeed a complex matter (Jack, Hartley, Mutnick, Schryer), with the speed of online rhetoric being perhaps even more complex (Brown, Gurak, Eichhorn). As Gurak cautions, “Speed does not equal salvation; the speed of the Internet does not necessarily bring us closer to any sort of utopia” (30). Building off the work of Gurak and other scholars, this study of vlogging helps untangle speed from ease, simplicity, and utopianism, dissolving the associative webs woven by advertisers and other mythmakers. Going further, the study illustrates that the internet generally, and vlogging specifically, have many and sometimes conflicting speeds. Popular commonplaces will continue to celebrate the ever increasing “top speed” of hardware and software, but just as we rarely drive our cars or bicycles at top speed, this study demonstrates that we also rarely communicate at top speed.

As a number of scholars have noted, online video sharing has at least two main speeds, speeds that like an automobile’s forward and reverse can push composers in very different directions (Grainge, Davies). In “forward,” online video sharing becomes a virtual agora, promoting immediate back-and-forth conversation, allowing users to compose and share and respond to vlogs more or less instantly (Jackson & Wallin, Lange, Juhasz). Meanwhile, in “reverse,” online video sharing become an interactive archive, allowing users to create enduring records or exhibits of video material that will remain open to public audiences indefinitely (Snickars & Vondreau, Skinnell). Unlike an automobile, however, online video sharing can and does operate in forward and reverse at once. This
paradox can be confirmed by the many unintended composers of “viral” videos, videos that circulate beyond or despite the videomaker’s intentions. Acknowledging the complexity and unpredictability of rhetorical speeds online, I suggest that online composers, including would-be vloggers, painstakingly study and imitate the speeds of the genres they hope to compose in. Attending to speeds helps composers understand the risks and rewards inherent in particular online platforms and genres, assessing their many speeds of composition, publication, and circulation. This may lead composers to realize that on the internet our compositions may take on speeds we never anticipated, desired—or dared to hope for.

**Vlogging and Remediation**

This study of vlogging also contributes to scholarship on remediation, documenting how new media including vlogs both revolutionize and recycle existing communicative practices. In their book *Remediation*, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin challenge the assumption that new media evoke brand new rhetorical and aesthetic practices. As they use the term, remediation describes the process by which new media composers inevitably borrow from existing media in their forms and functions. Just as the webpage borrows from the book or notebook page, so too does the podcast borrow from the radio program, the vlog from the reality TV confessional, and so on.

This study of vlogging reaffirms that remediation is real and ongoing. Vlogging too remediates preexisting rhetorical practices, including face-to-face conversation. This dissertation extends the scholarship on remediation by offering a more precise account of how remediation takes up and transforms
specific rhetorical genres. Specifically, vlogging shows that even when a genre’s features appear unchanged, remediation may alter their function and effect dramatically (Bolter and Grusin). I offer the term genre transfer to describe this process of transformative recontextualization. As my second chapter explains, vlogging may remediate existing genres, but it also resituates those genres within a changed environment or “ceremonial,” thereby both perpetuating and radically repurposing forms of expression (Freadman).

This dissertation tracks the movement of genres, especially emotional or pathetic genres, as they transfer from face-to-face settings to the setting of the vlog, contemplating how this transfer both extends, and alters, these genres’ meanings and applications. For example, a face-to-face confession and a confession vlog may share many features, but remediation substantially alters the genre. Remediation, of course, alters who witnesses the confession. Equally important, however, remediation alters how the confession is witnessed, affording different possibilities for uptake, interpretation, and response. In short, remediated or parallel genres may perform very different social actions within different media and different ceremonials.

**Vlogging, Genre, and Emotion**

Drawing on rhetorical genre theory throughout, this dissertation does more than catalogue the recurring formal features of the vlog; it also offers an account of vlogging’s “social actions,” to borrow Carolyn Miller’s term. The pages that follow document the many actions that vloggers carry out through their videos: to persuade, to release emotions, to spread information, and perhaps
most importantly, to seek out identification—to reach out to likeminded but distant and unknown others.

While my study is deeply informed by rhetorical genre theory, I do not identify the vlog itself as a genre. Like Miller and Dawn Shepherd, who in the course of their 2009 study came to realize that the blog was not a single genre, but rather a flexible “medium” accommodating a variety of genres, I too have realized that vlogging is simply too diverse to be considered a genre (Miller and Shepherd, “Questions”). However, vlogging is not exactly a medium, either, since that label seems more appropriately applied to online video sharing more generally. Vlogging, in my terminology, is a ceremonial, a mode of address that involves a certain medium and a certain, characteristic configuration of interlocutors, a configuration that comes along with its own norms, decorums, codes of conduct, and so on. Within this ceremonial, many different social actions and therefore many different genres are possible, including those discussed above. Again, to be clear, within the terminology of this study, online video sharing is a medium, vlogging a ceremonial, and within that ceremonial many genres have developed, genres including (but by no means limited to) the ones discussed in the following chapters: confession videos, reaction videos, witness videos, and rants videos.

This dissertation extends rhetorical genre theory by offering an account of genre transfer, describing how remediated genres, despite formal parallels, take on differing social actions as they are adapted within new media and new ceremonials.
I also propose that the genre concept be expanded to include forms of communication beyond verbal speech and text. Specifically, I propose that emotion, alongside and intertwined with verbal speech and text, likewise adopts recurrent forms and carries recurrent social actions: emotion, in other words, is generic, genre-ic. To emphasize the rhetorical and generic nature of emotion, I propose the concept of pathetic genres.

The pathetic genres concept builds on a growing body of theory and scholarship on emotion and affect within rhetorical studies and related fields. Emotion has been central to rhetorical theory at least since Aristotle articulated the concept of pathos or “emotional appeal.” Recent scholarship on emotion, however, suggests that emotion plays a much more fundamental role in communication than previously imagined. More than a means to some external end, emotion is present in all rhetoric, and indeed a rhetorical enterprise itself. While emotion is often imagined to be exclusively internal or personal, Edbauer Rice explains that it is also inescapably social. Operating alongside and sometimes through verbal language, emotion displays are signs that do more than reveal existing internal processes: emotion displays drive social interactions, prompting audiences to think, feel, act, orient themselves, and respond in certain ways. Like words, then, emotion displays do things, signaling inner states, but also prompting actions and influencing orientations. Daniel Gross affirms that emotions are rhetorical in *The Secret History of Emotion*. Classical thinkers like Aristotle got it right, according to Gross, when they represented emotions like anger, for example, as being fundamentally “psychosocial.” For Gross, following Aristotle and Homer, an emotion like anger “presumes a public stage” rather than
private feelings” (3). Like all emotions, anger is an act of orientation, making or re-making or un-making social relations, including relations of power. In short, Gross’s rhetorical understanding of emotion resonates with Kenneth Burke’s suggestion that emotions “[require] an audience” (39).

To be clear, in proposing the concept of pathetic genres, I do not mean to suggest that some genres are emotional, and others unemotional. Rather, I acknowledge that, in a sense, all genres are pathetic genres, that all genres involve emotional expression. Throughout this dissertation, then, the concept of “pathetic genres” is simply meant to emphasize that emotion is one of the materials out of which utterances and genres, as learned templates for coding and decoding those utterances, are composed.

**Research Methodology**

My final contribution to rhetorical genre studies is methodological. Specifically, I develop and employ a method of genre research designed for the study of public and online genres. This method employs intertextual rhetorical analysis to track the movement and uptake of genres in online spheres. Because public and online genres are, in a sense, more slippery than genres embedded in particular professions, disciplines, and other social institutions, this intertextual method can more thoroughly and accurately track the social actions that public and online genres carry out, thereby extending the ethnomethodological traditions of rhetorical genre research, and updating these for a new rhetorical moment.

In the 1984 article widely recognized as the foundation of rhetorical genre studies, Carolyn R. Miller acknowledged that conceptualizing genre pragmatically,
as “social action,” challenges scholars to adopt quasi-ethnographic methods, as they research not only the form, but also the function and effect, of genres (155). Studying genre as social action must be “ethnomethodological,” in Miller’s words, because while textual analysis can illuminate the “substance or form of discourse,” it cannot shed light on “the action [that discourse] is used to accomplish” (151). To study genre as social action, then, scholars must not only look at, but also look beyond, genres themselves, examining also the social matrix that produces that genre, and which that genre in turn helps to (re)produce.

Earlier forms of genre research within both literary and rhetorical traditions have adopted a deductive method. Aristotle, for example, posited genres based on their orientation to time, the forensic oriented towards the past, the epideictic oriented towards the present, and the political oriented towards the future. According to Miller’s vision, however, genre scholarship should proceed not deductively, but rather inductively. In terms of method, studying genre as social action should lead researchers to identify and situate genres in the environments of their use. Above all else, this inductive, quasi-ethnographic method targets the context of genres. As Bawarshi and Reiff observe, “understanding contexts (and their performance) is both the starting point of [rhetorical] genre analysis and its goal” (59). While deductive or formal methods illustrate the internal substance or content of genres, Miller-inspired methods instead illustrate how genres are embedded in, and contribute to, larger social and cultural enterprises. Subsequent genre researchers including Bazerman, Catherine F. Schryer, and Carole Blair have taken up Miller’s ethnomethodological challenge, producing insights that help us understand not
only particular genres (from patent applications to insurance rejection letters to memorial quilts) but also, and more importantly, the traditions, rituals, institutions, and other social establishments that these genres participate in, that produce these genres, and which these genres help to reproduce.

This methodology, however, is not without its limitations. Notably, rhetorical genre research following Miller has tended to focus on communication that occurs within relatively discrete social establishments, bounded spheres like professions, academic disciplines, corporations, and so on. Bazerman’s body of genre scholarship, for instance, despite its impressive range, rarely strays outside these kinds of limited spheres or “activity systems,” where genres remain fairly stable and where their social roles remain relatively transparent and measurable. Public genres like the vlog, however, pose a serious methodological challenge to rhetorical genre research, since these genres are not produced by or for particular social establishments, and therefore carry social actions that may be far more complex, diffuse, and indeterminate. The social action of a middle school quiz, for example, may be fairly easy to identify, since the genre performs a particular function within a particular social institution. The social action of a YouTube rant video, however, or any other public utterance, for that matter, is methodologically speaking far more elusive. What is interesting and challenging about public genres is that they are pitched to individuals and groups explicitly outside of one’s everyday activity systems. (In fact, as Michael Warner might observe, this is precisely what makes these genres public, their being targeted towards strangers.) Schryer is able to produce an insightful genre study of “bad news” insurance letters through a combination of textual and ethnographic
methods, specifically by examining sample letters and interviewing those who produce and receive them. Schryer’s methods prove effective and manageable, however, only because these letters are produced within bounded spheres or activity systems. The social actions of public genres, which have far more indeterminate audiences and movements and effects, prove far more difficult to track.

The fluidness and indeterminacy of public genres is only compounded when they are also online genres, genres like the confession, reaction, witness, and rant vlogs that populate this study. As new media scholars including Barbara Warnick and Lev Manovich have observed, online texts are highly modular, capable of being readily taken apart, remixed, reframed, recontextualized, and redeployed for alternate purposes. Manovich notes that while modularity and remixability predate and extend beyond new media, online connectivity is making uptake easier and more widespread. He notes that “the Internet greatly increases the ease of locating and reusing material from other periods, artists, designers, and so on,” while increasingly powerful composing software is making “the technical operation of remixing very easy.” Because of these developments, Warnick argues that in online environments authors lack even the illusion of control over their texts’ meanings and movements, thereby fulfilling the vision of deconstructionist literary critics like Roland Barthes (37). For example, as my fifth chapter on the rant video genre illustrates, the social action intended by a vlogger, and the social action that subsequently attaches to his or her video, may radically differ and even conflict with one another. In this case study, through the alchemy of circulation, a racist tirade is actively reframed and recirculated by its
viewers, becoming instead a parody of racial ignorance. Methodologically speaking, because of its multiple and shifting meanings and application, neither a rhetorical analysis of this vlog, nor an interview with its creator, could fully illuminate its multiple and conflicting social action(s), nor could it explain how the video functions as a genre.

All this is to say that, in online environments, genres and their attendant social actions are fundamentally dispersed, challenging genre research to upgrade its (ethno)methodology. To study rhetoric that is modular and distributed, Warnick suggests that rhetorical research methods become more intertextual, giving less attention to authorial intention and formal matters and giving much greater attention to audience response and uptake (28–30).

Acknowledging the methodological challenges posed by public and online genres, this dissertation adopts intertextual rhetorical analysis as its primary method, closely examining not only individual vlogs but also their con-texts: the surrounding videos, comments, playlists, and other texts (online and off) with which vlogs interact. In other words, I track how they are taken up and (re)interpreted by other texts. Following these patterns of response and uptake, I am able to assemble a fuller account of vlogging’s genres and their multiple, distributed social actions. The fruits of this intertextual method are perhaps most evident in my chapter on rant videos. A rhetorical analysis of the vlog, or even an interview with this racially insensitive vlogger, would have suggested that the rant video’s primary social action was to spread negative and even hateful attitudes. However, tracking response and uptake reveals comment threads that mock the vlogger and blog entries that recontextualize the video as an exemplar
of ignorance and bigotry. Thereby, this account of vlogs offers a richer account of the text, the genre, and the social actions that play out through viewings and responses.

I believe that this intertextual rhetorical method is especially useful for studying genres online, where traces of response and uptake are, after all, easy to come by. I also believe, however, that recognizing genres as fundamentally intertextual and “intersubjective” phenomena (to borrow Miller’s phrase) can enrich an even wider range of genre research. Whether online or off, whether electronic, print, or spoken, the “genre” that applies to a given utterance is not determined finally or wholly by the author. Indeed, the genre of a given utterance is never fully determined at all, since the utterance can always be reclassified or relabeled, whether by its authors, its audiences, or by genre researchers. As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell recognizes, all utterances are inherently multigenre, not only because their form is influenced by many traditions, but also because utterances can always be interpreted through different genre “frames”:

any example of public discourse can be approached through many different frames so that a given work, such as Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” can be treated as protest rhetoric, an apostolic epistle, an apologia, Southern rhetoric, religious rhetoric, and so on [ . . . ] Each frame is as apt as the extent to which it helps us understand the power of King’s letter and the sources of its invention; criticism is not a contest to discover the best niche. (259)
Campbell here focuses on critical interpretation, explaining how rhetorical critics approaching the same text with different genre frames may produce different interpretations and insights. Genres, however, are heuristic not only for critics, but for authors and audiences as well, who are constantly applying genre labels to utterances, as a natural and necessary literacy practice that informs understanding and uptake. Often, audiences even reject the genre labels offered to them. A dissatisfied moviegoer, for instance, might write a scathing online review that relabels an action film as a romantic comedy. A spouse might likewise relabel an apology as a patronizing insult. Genre, then, is not fixed by the author or even the critic, but rather emerges intertextually and intersubjectively. Within this dissertation, this is perhaps most obvious in chapter three, where viewers strategically (and mean-spiritedly) relabel a “reaction video” as a “seizure” and an “orgasm.” This sort of (re)labeling, which we might give the more formal name genre attribution, is readily apparent in participatory online platforms like those of online video sharing. However, as my examples above show, genre attributions and reattributions occur both online and off. An intertextual rhetorical method, like the one that this dissertation experiments with, may help researchers better understand genre as a literacy practice, as an essential part of how we compose and read (and research) utterances.

In short, vlogging reaffirms that genres participate in broader ceremonials, rhetorical proceedings that structure the roles that interlocutors adopt and thereby shape possibilities for participation, uptake, and response. Vlogging further reveals that parallel or remediated genres take on different social actions as they are transplanted from ceremonial to ceremonial, a transformative process
we might call genre transfer. Vlogging also shows that emotions, like speech and written text, are composed and read generically. Therefore, we can identify and study pathetic genres or genres of emotion display, in much the same way that we identify other genres. Finally, situating utterances (including emotion displays) within broader ceremonials reveals that “genre” is fluid and socially constructed. During uptake, utterances can be identified with, and interpreted using, any number of genre labels. An intertextual method allows me to account for these multiple and conflicting genre attributions as I track the meanings and movements of individual vlogs.

Chapter Overviews

My second chapter uses the “confession video” genre to explore vlogging’s interrelationships with the rhetorical forms (comment threads, response videos, etc.) that surround and support it. This chapter demonstrates that while vlogging may seem emptily expressive or monologic, most vloggers are actually in intense and ongoing dialogue with their viewer/interlocutors. Through a case study of emotional confession videos uploaded by African-American atheists, young skeptics who feel alienated by their deeply religious families and communities, the chapter reveals that vlogging allows rhetors to connect with distant but likeminded others, and to engage in intense, frank, and often constructive dialogue with their viewers. However, despite the intensity of vlogging exchanges, the connections made, and the dialogue inspired, remain relatively “loose” or without constraint, allowing interlocutors to engage one another without incurring mutual responsibility, and likewise to ignore or dismiss those they disagree with.
My third chapter uses the reaction video genre to emphasize the importance of emotion to vlogging, and specifically the importance of bodily emotion displays, including facial, vocal, and gestural expression. To theorize how emotion displays communicate and persuade, I bring together insights into the emotions from rhetorical theorists including Aristotle, M.M. Bakhtin, Burke, Gross, and Edbauer Rice. I test these theoretical insights through a case study of vlogs uploaded by Twilight fans. In 2008, readers of the young adult novel Twilight: Breaking Dawn uploaded a flurry of reaction videos to YouTube. This vlogging genre allowed discontented fans to circulate public messages about the novel through intense emotion displays, messages that reached hundreds and even thousands of viewers, including the author of Twilight herself, Stephenie Meyer. However, the “reaction video” frame also allowed viewers to dismiss those emotions as impulsive, potentially undermining their effectiveness.

My fourth chapter uses the witness video genre to explore how viewers assess the credibility of vlogs. The chapter offers a case study of witness vlogs shared during the 2011 Gulf of Mexico oil spill. During this public controversy, both citizens affected by the spill and the oil company responsible for it uploaded testimony videos to YouTube. These videos offered conflicting information, challenging viewers to critically evaluate their authenticity and authority. To analyze how viewers assess the credibility of vlogs, I review the comment threads on two witness videos that offer competing claims about the spill. I conclude that, through their public comments, viewers not only reveal their private assessments, but also participate in the collaborative construction of a vlog’s credibility. By publishing their support or skepticism, by vowing to share or squash the video, by
performing close analysis of the video to test it claims, and by contributing context in the form of personal experience or factual information, viewers help create the “distributed credibility” of vlogs.

My fifth chapter uses the rant video genre to chart vlogging’s rhetorical speeds. While the speediness or rapidity of vlogging (and other internet communications) has been widely discussed, this chapter complicates understandings of vlogging’s speeds, charting its complexities, contradictions, and unpredictabilities. To replace simplistic speed-rubrics, I offer a more detailed and elaborate taxonomy of rhetorical speeds, advising would-be composers to consider vlogging’s many complex speeds, from composition (tempo, pacing, duration), to publication (timing), to circulation (velocity and continuance). To illustrate the value of these concepts, I examine the rant vlog “Asians in the Library” and its global spread, suggesting that while this racially-insensitive vlogger seemed highly attuned to the genre’s composing speeds, she recklessly ignored its potentially unpredictable speeds of circulation, leading to her own viral ruin.

Together, these four genre studies shed light on vlogging’s rhetorical workings and help to explain vlogging’s popularity, as well as its surprising and even deceptive rhetorical power. While they may ramble and wander, flicker and pixelate, even the most ineloquent vlogs carry a sense of immediacy and intimacy that can be difficult to resist. As such, I hope that, in addition to offering broad insights into remediation, interactivity, speed, and emotion, this dissertation will help readers better understand what makes vlogging such a magnetic—and, in
some senses, revolutionary—mode of public address, despite (or because of) its fumbles and idiosyncrasies.
Chapter 2

The Confession Video: Vlogging as Monologue and Dialogue

What’s up, YouTube? This is your boy cpiercej making my first YouTube video about being a black atheist. I decided to come out as a black atheist today after spending like the weekend looking at all the different YouTube videos about the black atheist experience. So I decided to lend my voice to the chorus of voices out there to let other people know that’s it’s okay to come out, that we need to come out, and that we need to form community, since we know that the black church has such a strong *hold* on our community and our culture. (cpiercej)

As of April 2012, a YouTube search for the terms “black atheist” summons nearly 7,000 videos, many of them powerful “coming out” or “confession” videos like the one transcribed above (see fig. 2.1). By the thousands, African-Americans have uploaded videos in which they declare that they do not believe, that they no longer believe, or that they have never believed in God, creating a “chorus of voices” affirming the possibility of nonbelief for African-Americans, voicing the otherwise silent or shamefaced presence of atheism in their communities (cpiercej). Echoing cpiercej, video after video on YouTube decries the oppressive power of religion (the “hold” of the “black church”) over African-Americans’ beliefs, thoughts, and lives. Feeling choked and silenced by their families, friends,
and communities, many African-American atheists have turned to vlogging to declare their nonbelief, reaching out via online video to audiences who might be in some way receptive to their confessions.

As a recent piece in the *New York Times* attests, the emerging African-American atheist movement has swelled far beyond the bounds of YouTube, giving rise to local meetup groups and national organizations, along with a vibrant presence in other forms of new media (Brennan). Nonetheless, as the confessor above, cpiercej, suggests, YouTube seems to be a particularly magnetic medium for African-American atheists, including those who watch videos, those who make videos, and those like cpiercej who are inspired to cross over, who decide to “come out” themselves, summoned to speak by the confessions of
others. But why YouTube, of all places? What is it about this platform and the vlog (the pseudo-intimate public webcam video) that compels people to confess things they cannot confess, even or especially to those closest to them? Why turn to vlogging, especially when the unknowable audience on the other side of that webcam might include not only hostile strangers, but also, potentially, the same friends and family from whom the confessor is withholding secrets? YouTube confessor cutemama007 explains, “I tell people I am atheist if they ask. Other than that I don’t go broadcasting to people I interact with everyday.” Puzzlingly, though she withholds her atheism in everyday life, the vlogger continues “broadcasting” it publicly online. Like the engaged young man or woman who blithely and publicly cheats on a nationally broadcast reality show (cf. all 26 seasons of MTV’s The Real World), YouTube confessors like these seem to forget or overlook (or possibly hope?) that their viewers likely include the very same people they betray, denounce, or distance themselves from. What accounts for this seeming cognitive dissonance, this seeming rhetorical buffoonery or bravado?

This chapter suggests that we can much better understand confession vlogs, their power and their seeming contradictions, by widening our lens and examining the contexts in which vlogs are embedded and the rhetorical activities that orbit around them—in this case, by examining the “ceremonial” of the YouTube vlog. Put simply, these videos encourage public confessions by placing speakers in confessional roles. The composing scene of vlogging draws speakers into unguarded monologues that then, within the scene of YouTube, lure vloggers and their viewers into intimate and ongoing dialogue. It is only within this
broader ceremonial or proceeding that we can properly understand vlogging as a rhetorical mode of address, one that is at once monologic and dialogic, at once expressive, rhetorical, and dialectical.

Genre theorist Anne Freadman uses the concept of a “ceremonial” to emphasize, first, the manifest interconnectedness of texts and genres. Not unlike the concepts of the “genre set” (Devitt), “genre system” (Bazerman), or “genre ecology” (Spinuzzi and Zachry), Freadman’s “ceremonial” suggests that genres are inherently relational, taking on meanings and social actions only in relation to other genres. To be fully understood, then, genres must be situated within the larger complex of genres and activities, or the ceremonial, in which they take part. What exactly is a ceremonial? While Freadman keeps the concept fairly fluid, we can safely say that a ceremonial is the broader “place,” “setting,” or perhaps more accurately the proceeding, within which genres are used or put into play.

According to Freadman, for example, the “warm-up, the toss, and at the end, the declaration of the winner and closing down rituals—showers, presentations, or the drink at the bar” are genres within the ceremonial of a tennis match. Likewise, “swearing in” and “cross-examination” are genres within the ceremonial of court proceedings. While each of these individual genres can be isolated for various purposes, including scholarly study, to do so would be “misleading,” according to Freadman, for it is only within their broader ceremonial that the meanings and purposes of individual genres becomes clear (59).

Much of the scholarship on YouTube, including many of the insightful studies taken up in this chapter, concentrates exclusively on a single genre native
to YouTube. Some focus on vids or parodies, others on remixes, still others on comment threads, playlists, tags, and so on. This chapter suggests that considering texts or genres in isolation (for instance, treating the confession video as a bounded, complete, and finished message) seriously distorts how we understand them. While some scholars and commentators have accused vlogs, including the video confessions of African-American atheists, of being emptily self-expressive, this chapter reveals that vlogs, while monologic in form, can nonetheless be dialogic in both intent and effect. In this chapter, I reveal the dialogism of vlogs by approaching them not as genres, but as ceremonials, demonstrating how they create a stage or scene for the interplay of many genres, including videos, channels, playlists, tags, and especially comment threads. Understood as a ceremonial (as a proceeding rather than a complete and bounded text or genre) it becomes much clearer how vloggers including African-American atheists hope and expect to relate to their viewers—or perhaps more accurately, their interlocutors.

In addition to emphasizing the interconnectedness of genres, Freadman’s concept of the ceremonial has the added benefit of clarifying how texts, and especially their contexts, strategically position interlocutors in relation to one another. Again, it might seem odd that an atheist would “come out” to the public on YouTube, when they believe it impossible to come out in an intimate setting with friends and family. However, the concept of the ceremonial, in foregrounding the importance of “setting” and “place,” sheds light on this seeming contradiction. Freadman proposes that ceremonials determine “interlocutory positions” in profound and often invisible ways, both defining and
delimiting possible roles for participants in any and every exchange (63). The power of the ceremonial is such that even the same individuals may take up different roles and relations depending on the ceremonial they find themselves in. To illustrate how ceremonials establish roles or positions, Freadman develops the following example:

A discussion between two executives, one slightly superior in the company hierarchy to the other, will work differently, depending on whether the piece of furniture between them is a desk or a lunch table, and depending on whether the desk is the superior’s or his subordinate’s. The piece of furniture together with the other ‘props’ define a space and the ceremonial appropriate to it. It may well be that the participants might try to have ‘the same’ discussion in both places, but the choice of one or another ceremonial alters the conditions of speech and understanding.

These days, our hypothetical executives might try to have the “same discussion” over e-mail or Skype, but this too would shift interlocutory positions and possibilities, perhaps subtly, but inevitably. For example, if the setting were a lunch table, or a Skype video call, maybe the subordinate would be more likely to ask for a raise, or complain about his working conditions, than he would during a more formal meeting.

Similarly, for an African-American atheist, confessing or coming out may seem impossible at the dinner table, with say a devoutly Christian matriarch at its head. Nonetheless, even if that matriarch has a YouTube account, and happens across a confession vlog uploaded by her son or daughter, her position as an
interlocutor within that ceremonial is radically different. Within the ceremonial of the vlog, she becomes another viewer, another possible commenter, another potential troll or hater. What happens the next evening at dinner is another story, but nevertheless the ceremonial of YouTube creates a social and psychological setting, and a corresponding set of interlocutory positions, wherein otherwise impossible confessions become, for the space of a moment, possible.

In the pages that follow, I suggest that confessions and other moments of vulnerability characteristic of YouTube vlogs are made possible by the unique ceremonial in which vlogging is embedded. While vlogs take on the character of soliloquys (monologues addressed to no one) they nonetheless are embedded in, and usually explicitly encourage, ongoing dialogue in the form of comment threads, response videos, and the like. In the first section, “Vlogs as Inner Monologue,” I draw on the work of new media anthropologists Michael Wesch and Patricia G. Lange to explain how the idiosyncratic composing process of vlogging invites an intimate, personal, and frank mode of address, despite the possibility or intention of a vlog’s gaining a wide public audience. Then, borrowing from scholars of online rhetoric, I demonstrate how, seen as a ceremonial, the seemingly solipsistic self-expression of vlogs actually invites vibrant and constructive dialogue—and, most of the time, formally requests that dialogue. By making possible this idiosyncratic, monologue-within-dialogue, the vlogging ceremonial also makes possible the sorts of unexpected disclosures and connections we see happening in and around the confession vlogs of African-American atheists.

Vlogging as Monologue
I was dating a girl last year. She was pretty much as religious as you can be. [. . . ] So she was trying to force Christianity on me, she was trying to get me to go to church, and I just wasn’t feeling it. [. . . ] So, I told her no, I’m not going to church, I don’t like it. [. . . ] So she told me, John, if you’re not going to church, if you’re not going to go to church, then at least tell me what you believe in. [. . . ] It got to the point where I knew I had to end it with her when she told me she would rather date a murderer than an atheist. And she wasn’t goofing off; she was dead serious. And I mean she’s not the only one saying stuff like this; I hear crazy claims like this all the time from Christians. (JohnBeezy3)

Few African-American atheists directly explain, or even claim to fully understand, why they have turned to YouTube and the vlog to publicly declare their nonbelief. Most, however, drop a clue or two along the way. Consider the story told by JohnBeezy3, perhaps the most widely viewed confession of all (fig. 2.2). Here JohnBeezy3 recounts an earlier attempt at a confession. In a conversation with his then-girlfriend, JohnBeezy3 is invited to share what he believes. When he does, the result is breakage. The couple breaks up. Their conversation breaks down. Furthermore, this seems to be only one of many, similarly broken conversations JohnBeezy3 has suffered through, as he explains that “she’s not the only one saying things like this.” In a stark contrast, the same kind of intimate confession that earns him a deeply traumatic excommunication, subsequently earns JohnBeezy3 tens of thousands of views and hundreds of supportive
comments on YouTube. Though he invokes the same genre, the “confession,” in two different settings JohnBeezy3 receives two very different responses.

This story is echoed in video after video, as African-Americans share how intimate confessions of nonbelief have wounded them deeply and alienated them from friends and family. Another atheist, cutemama007, suggests her friends and family have smothered any attempts at an intimate confession (Figure 2.3). Explaining her motivation for making the video, she says, “this is just one of my videos to let other people know in the world that are black, we do not have to be quiet about our nonbeliefs.” Before this bold public confession, however, she suffered years of private suffocation:
And I was [quiet about my nonbelief] for a while. For a long time. I was afraid to say I didn’t believe, and when I hinted, I got those looks. You know those looks black people give you, or other people. I got those side-eyes. “What?!” [imitates side-eyes] I got those.

Through words and especially nonverbal cues (those “side-eyes”), cutemama007 received the message that her friends, her family, and her community would react with hostility, or even reject, an intimate confession of nonbelief.

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3 Throughout this dissertation, I set aside the convention of noting errors in spelling, grammar, and so on with [sic]. This is a practical consideration, since the texts I analyze (vlogs, comment threads, and so on) have such a volume of errors that noting them would clutter the page and distract from my discussion. Furthermore, for the purposes of my analysis, I prefer that these so-called “errors” stand without correction, since they reveal something about the character and rhetorical conventions of vlogging.
Both cpiercej and cutemama007 explain that they were motivated to produce their YouTube confessions by watching other YouTube confessions. “I decided to come out as a black atheist today after spending like the weekend looking at all the different YouTube videos about the black atheist experience,” explains cpiercej. Cutemama007, in explaining the motivation behind her video, contrasts the suffocation she experiences in her everyday life with the sense of openness and connection she discovers online:

> I decided that I can’t go around muffling or stifling that part of me and so when I got online and I found out there was other groups and other people that looked like me, who were black, and who don’t believe, I got excited! So I’m here to say that I’m one of you black atheists.

Clearly, the gathering “chorus of voices” described by cpiercej has taken on momentum, as video confessions yield further video confessions. This, however, does not fully explain why YouTube and the vlog seem to accommodate and welcome this sort of expression in the first place, when it has been so stifled elsewhere. Nor does it explain why certain vloggers risk publicly confessing what they cannot or will not confess privately—a puzzling phenomenon that is by no means limited to the confessions of African-American atheists. In his study of vlogging, anthropologist Michael Wesch calls the “confessional” the “most surprising form of YouTube vlog,” observing that “vloggers sometimes reveal secrets on YouTube that they have not yet revealed to their closest friends and family.” (26)
Wesch explains the idiosyncratic power of the YouTube confession, and the vlog more generally, by describing the perplexities and paradoxes that vloggers wrestle with during the composing process. Specifically, he suggests that vloggers wrestle with “context collapse,” as they confront all possible audiences and all possible contexts at once, even as they sit, alone, before a silent blinking webcam:

Now look carefully at a webcam. That’s there. That’s somewhere else. That could be anybody. On the other side of that little glass lens is almost everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you have ever heard of, and even those you have never heard of. In more specific terms, it is everyone who has or will have access to the Internet—billions of potential viewers, and your future self among them. Some have called it at once the biggest and the smallest stage—the most public space in the world, entered from the privacy of our own homes. [. . . .] That seemingly innocuous and insignificant glass dot is the eyes of the world and the future. (22)

Context collapse, described so poetically here by Wesch, paralyzes many would-be vloggers. But for others, context collapse cultivates powerful introspection, self-examination, and reflection, as this universal gaze (“the eyes of the world and the future”) collapses in on itself entropically (22). Faced with the impossible task of “address[ing] anybody, everybody, and maybe even nobody all at once,” vloggers seem to abandon context and audience altogether, and just speak to themselves. As a result, the vlog, in Wesch’s view, is an inherently expressive form, a video diary composed of “uninterrupted introspective inner dialogue”
This for Wesch explains the puzzling aspects of the YouTube confessional. Vloggers confess things to YouTube because “context collapse” along with the “perceived privacy of the webcam experience” situate vloggers, psychologically, in a kind of superamplified echo chamber, where, unsure whom to address, they just begin talking to themselves.

Wesch’s concept of context collapse helps explain why some vloggers, who might be reserved in other contexts, become so frank, open, personal and even provocative on YouTube. Equally valuable is Wesch’s analysis of the physical setting in which vlogs are conventionally recorded. Surrounded by family and friends around the dinner table, the vlogger cutemama007 recognizes or anticipates the “looks” that will suffocate her confession. Alone before a webcam, she can dismiss or at least defer the anxieties of suppression and consequence. While recording, she can tell herself that she won’t upload the video. While uploading, she can tell herself her friends and family will never discover it. She can speak openly and worry about the social consequences later. (Interestingly enough, since I began this research, several confessors have made their videos private or removed them from YouTube).

However, Wesch’s claim that vlogs are wholly self-expressive and “unaddressed” (that is, nonrhetorical) stretches the thread too far. While the frank confessions of African-American atheists may be, in part, encouraged by context collapse and the privacy of the webcam, many of these videos, including all the ones I have reviewed, deliberately invoke and address others. It is true that most confessions are not explicitly persuasive. In other words, they aren’t looking to make an argument, to change hearts or minds, or (anti?)evangelize. Indeed,
many African-American atheists on YouTube include in their videos a kind of disclaimer explaining that their vlogs are not intended to persuade. Experience has shown them that arguing about beliefs is futile. Cptercej seems resigned and a bit tired as he explains,

I don’t really debate with theists anymore because there’s no point to it. I can’t debate your beliefs. Your beliefs are your beliefs. The only thing that I can do is talk about what I believe. My beliefs are based on evidence and my beliefs aren’t based on faith anymore…So it’s really difficult for—and almost impossible—for me to debate with a theist because it pretty much just winds up as a circular argument.

Cutemama007 echoes this sense of resignation, turning explicitly away from the possibility of argumentation, and turning back to self-expression, to the personal:

I’m not going to debate with you on scriptures and debate with you on evolution and debate with you period. My whole simple point is this. It doesn’t have a connection here. [places her hand on her heart]

Though many video confessions and other vlogs are explicitly nonpersuasive, we needn’t conclude with Wesch that they are wholly “unaddressed,” emptily expressive, nonrhetorical, or monologic. By looking at vlogging as a ceremonial, and mapping how videos interact with their surrounding genres, we see that, though vlogging is monologic in form, it is nonetheless dialogic in intent and effect. What may sound like a soliloquy is usually just the opening statement in an open-ended multimodal conversation.
Vlogging as Dialogue

Patricia G. Lange, another anthropologist of new media, emphasizes the dialogism of vlogging in a 2006 study of women’s video blogs, illustrating how (despite context collapse and the isolation demanded by their composing process) vlogging can promote dynamic and productive exchange. Citing examples of particular vlogs that inspired spirited online discussion, Lange contends that by sharing “intimate moments” and expressing themselves openly before a webcam, vloggers can and do effect “social change,” causing critical self-reflection and productive public discussion of issues. Lange concludes that precisely because vlogs are inherently self-expressive, the mode of address holds an interpersonal and public significance:

The sharing of these intimate moments is not self-indulgent, solipsistic obsession. Rather, it provides a means to connect with others and raise awareness in ways that are less overt than acts such as public marches but are nevertheless quite important.

Lange’s discussion of female vloggers helps explain why the “vulnerability” characteristic of the vlog, the self-expressive intimacy produced by context collapse and the privacy of solo recording can attract and matter to viewers. Equally important, Lange illustrates that vlogs are, counter to Wesch’s suggestion, inherently addressed. While vlogs themselves may not directly present an argument, distribute information, or relate happenings of explicit public interest, vloggers do in fact assume and engage with audiences.

Furthermore, unlike mass media pundits and other figures whose arguments are clearly and sharply “addressed,” vloggers frequently encourage
direct and ongoing dialogue with their audiences. In other words, one reason that vlogs seem “unaddressed” to Wesch is that his analysis focuses so closely on the original text that he overlooks its contexts, failing to recognize that the vlog, though it might appear to be a monologue, is generally just the first act or event in an ongoing ceremonial, a dance of rhetorical interaction that transpires both onsite (through comment threads, video responses, and so on) as well as offsite (wherever the video might be embedded and discussed).

The addressed and dialogic nature of vlogs is apparent in Lange’s analysis of a vlog by Micki Krimmel about her own atheism. Lange reveals the dialogism of this vlog in two ways. First, Lange chronicles her own personal reactions to Krimmel’s atheism vlog: “I am not an atheist, but what struck me about the video was that it led to a reconsideration of my behavior and attitudes toward atheists.” Second, and perhaps more importantly, Lange reveals the dialogism of the vlog by documenting the online exchanges this vlog inspired:

People who are atheist and agnostic left comments on Micki’s blog and on other Web sites thanking her for making the video. They were grateful that it expressed views they had held for a long time. Not all of the comments she received on her blog agreed with her position, but she expressed gratitude that people used the video blog to explore these issues in a frank and public manner.

While the composing scene described by Wesch may account for the characteristic vulnerability and intimacy of the vlog genre, it is the vlog’s embeddedness in this larger rhetorical ceremonial, its interconnectedness with
other genres and utterances, onsite and, that more fully explains the continuing popularity and relevance of the genre.

The confession vlogs of African-American atheists affirm this. While the vulnerability and frankness of these confessors might suggest that vloggers are talking only to themselves, in Wesch’s superamplified echo chamber, the impression that these confessors are simply soliloquizing is overturned when, near the conclusion of nearly every confession vlog, the confessor explicitly invites viewers to respond. One confessor, decaturbsrowneyes, instructs viewers, “If you have any comments, you can leave your comment. Bad ones, good ones. It doesn’t really matter.” Cpiercej closes, “If you have any comments, drop em down. If you don’t, don’t worry about it. Thanks for watching.” Even the somewhat combative JohnBeezy3 concludes by saying, “Um, I appreciate any comments. Just get at me.” This conventional request for comments, for continuing dialogue, suggests that while confession videos may appear self-expressive, they nevertheless function dialogically, calling forth and activating other genres within the larger vlogging ceremonial. Indeed, each of the confession vlogs discussed this far has attracted hundreds or even thousands of comments. Furthermore, in nearly all cases, the vlogger responds to commenters with comments of his or her own, continuing to participate in the ensuing dialogue, underscoring that all parties involved seem to understand vlogging not as “uninterrupted introspective inner dialogue” (Wesch), but as dialogue that manages to be at once inner and outer, momentary and ongoing, solipsistic and social.

*Vlogging Channels Personal Address*
While not exclusively concerned with vlogs, argumentation theorist Galia Yanoshevsky offers insight into this mode of address (and its productive paradoxes) in her study of internet activity by presidential campaigns. Revisiting concepts of audience articulated by Chaim Perelman prior to the advent of the internet, Yanoshevsky argues somewhat surprisingly that Perelman’s notion of “argumentation before a single hearer” best explains how rhetors on the internet address their audiences, including by implication vloggers (409). Argumentation before a single hearer, in contrast to ancient oratory or the newspaper opinion piece, must anticipate response and prepare for dialogue. Explaining the concept further, Yanoshevsky writes,

The long, sustained speech to which Rhetoric is typically confined may seem ridiculous and ineffective before a single hearer. Thus, in dealing with a single interlocutor, the rhetorical speech should transform itself into dialogue where the reactions of the interlocutor are supposed to be taken into consideration by the speaker. (414)

Notably, Perelman seems particularly keen on argumentation before a single hearer, suggesting it produces better results than monologic genres like oratory:

There is no doubt that the single hearer, having the opportunity to ask questions and raise objections, gets the impression that the arguments he eventually accepts are more solidly supported than the conclusion of a speaker who unfolds his arguments in sustained discourse. (36)
Yanoshevsky is not arguing that internet rhetors literally target one single individual, of course; only that internet address, in some ways, resembles this older, face-to-face mode. Specifically, internet address mimics the single-hearer mode in 1) its virtualization of intimacy or “proximity” and 2) its appeal to audience participation. Yanoshevsky explains that on the internet, and specifically within online presidential campaigns,

Perelman’s concept of “arguing before a single hearer” is thus stretched beyond a dialogue where the candidate reasons before an interlocutor and responds to the latter’s questions and objections. Rather, it becomes a sort of personal plea, where the surfer/voter is asked to participate in an activity with the candidate, an activity that will yield proximity, enabling the potential voter to express his opinions directly to the candidate. (414)

Internet address, then, is like “argumentation before a single hearer” but is probably more accurately described as a “personal plea for participation yielding (virtual) proximity.” The desired outcome of internet address is what Yanoshevsky calls “connivance,” a sense of psychological connection experienced by the addressee toward the addressor, a Burkean “identification” causing the addressee to believe that they share common interests, values, and goals, and are perhaps even involved in joint projects—in Yanoshevsky’s case study, for example, the project of getting a candidate elected.

Though she brilliantly articulates its dynamics, Yanoshevsky’s conclusions about internet address and virtual connivance are rather gloomy, as she presents internet address as an impoverished version of Perelman’s single-hearer mode.
She claims that the dialogue inspired on candidates’ websites is weak and “do[es] not allow for a genuine exchange of ideas between the candidate and the voter” (417). In closing, she suggests that these appeals to proximity and participation on the internet are little more than pretense:

> We therefore remain with an “as if” conversation, [ . . . ] that is, a mechanism producing a fiction shared by both the candidate and the potential voter using the Internet, concerning their proximity. [. . . ] Dialogue in this context is thus merely a technique designed to achieve involvement on the part of the voter in order to induce him to perform tasks for the candidate (417).

These grim conclusions, however, seem more the product of Yanoshevsky’s case study, than of her theories of internet address. Transported from presidential campaigns to confession vlogs, the concepts of proximity, participation, and connivance become not only useful but also enlivening.

Like the videos of presidential candidates who ask YouTube viewers to join them for dinner (416), vloggers appeal to proximity, encouraging viewers to “get closer” by including them within their “intimate sphere.” Like most vlogs, the confessions of African-American atheists have domestic settings—living rooms (cpiercej), bedrooms (MykeSorrel), even bathrooms (cutemama007, “confessional”)—and feature close-ups on confessors and their faces, creating a sense of intimacy between vlogger and viewer. Confessions and other vlogs do in this sense create what Yanoshevsky calls an “as if” conversation. It is “as if” we were sitting chatting one-on-one with vloggers in their home. While this so-called “fiction” might seem duplicitous, artificial, or manipulative in the context of
Yanoshevsky’s presidential campaigns, this hardly seems the case in the context of vlogging, since vloggers usually demand or request nothing of their viewers besides a hearing—and maybe a comment.

Furthermore, like Yanoshevsky’s campaign videos, confession vlogs appeal to participation; as we have seen, nearly every vlog ends with an invitation for the viewer to comment. Unlike campaign videos, however, vlogs can and do lead to the “genuine exchange of ideas” as well as emotions. In short, vlogs appeal to a proximity and a participation that may be virtual but is no less real.

In her confession vlog, “why i am not a christian,” missdynasty33 explains how the proximity and participation of one of her viewers inspired her to keep making videos (fig. 2.4):

Figure 2.4: Another vlogger shares her experiences as an African-American atheist. From missdynasty33. “why i am not a christian.” YouTube. 8 January 2011. Web. 16 April 2012.
Hi YouTube. Okay. First, um, before I start the video I want to give a shoutout to...I think his name is Dr. Popery? [...] He watched my first video that I made saying that I was an atheist. And I got a lot of support from him. And he says he’s an old white man who’s been an atheist for a long time, and he was proud of me for coming out. And he gave me a lot of support. And then I ended up [laughter] deleting the video, and I think he got mad at me for doing—not mad at me, but he was upset that I did that. But I just want to give a shoutout to you, thank you for your support.

(missdynasty33)

While vlogger and viewer have never actually met, and while they have considerable differences (he is an “old white man” and she is a young African-American woman), missdynasty33’s earlier vlog opened up a space for dialogue, empathy, connection, and identification between these two otherwise distant and very distinct people. Like other African-American atheist vloggers, missdynasty33 explains that any attempt to express her nonbeliefs in her everyday life is inevitably suffocated.

I’m going to keep on making more videos because I feel that I have no one to talk to like...All this stuff has been in me for so long, I have so much stuff built up, so many things that I want to say, but I can’t say it to the people around me because they shut me off—or they will shut me off. I have no one to talk to about this stuff, and that’s why I wanted to start making videos to talk to other people. So, I don’t know. If you want to, leave me a comment, or whatever.
Missdynasty33 here belies the idea that vloggers merely talk to themselves monologically (Wesch), along with the idea that vloggers’ appeals to proximity and participation are always fictional or manipulative (Yanoshevsky), showing that online address generally and vlogs specifically can be genuinely and transformatively dialogic.

Missdynasty33 makes videos because she simply wants to “talk to other people”—desperately, achingly so—and her reported exchange with fellow YouTuber Dr. Popery shows that this kind of talk is indeed possible, productive, and, in cases like this, even empowering.

**Dialogism’s Challenges and Rewards**

While not concerned with vlogs specifically, compositionists Brian Jackson and Jon Wallin recognize and celebrate YouTube’s cultivation of dialogue in their article “Rediscovering the ‘Back-and-Forthness’ of Rhetoric in the Age of YouTube.” Jackson and Wallin insist that the “back-and-forth” exchanges that happen online, particularly in YouTube comment threads, can be incredibly constructive. Moreso than delivering oratorical speeches, penning editorials, or composing essays for first-year writing courses—all one-sided rhetorical exercises that either defer or simply leave no room for exchange or response—participating in YouTube exchanges rhetorically challenges, strengthens, and enlightens its participants by demanding that they dialogue actively with others. Linking back-and-forthness on YouTube to classical dialectic, along with Perelman’s “argument before a single hearer,” Jackson and Wallin suggest three ways in which the back-and-forth exchange characteristic of YouTube challenges and rewards participants. Specifically, back-and-forth exchanges challenge interlocutors, first,
to be constantly answerable to one another, second, to test the strength of their arguments, and perhaps most importantly, to learn from the exchange.

Expanding on this last benefit, Jackson and Wallin write, “The back-and-forthness of rhetoric can be progressive in ways that the traditional essay cannot be” (383). For one thing, committed interlocutors can reach consensus—but even when consensus fails, interlocutors can walk away from a back-and-forth exchange enlightened, having improved and broadened their understanding. “In other words,” the authors explain, “progress, in terms of an argument, does not need to be measured by whether one interlocutor KO’d the other or whether they finally agreed [. . . . ] The value of an argument is what we learn about ourselves, our interlocutors, the topic, and reasoning itself through back-and-forth rhetoric” (382).

Jackson and Wallin support these theorizations through a content analysis of the comment thread on a controversial YouTube clip (popularly known as “Don’t tase me bro!”) showing a student being (unjustly?) arrested and tasered at a 2007 presidential campaign event for John Kerry. Acknowledging that many YouTube comments, including many of the 500 they analyzed, are shallow, crude, and involve ad hominem attacks, the researchers nonetheless concluded that most comments on the video are rhetorically literate and constructive, with 66% of comments “exhibiting a claim with reasons,” 53% responding directly to a previous comment, and 40% “exhibiting an argument at stasis,” or, in other words, attempting to establish a baseline consensus on which further argumentation could be based. Hinting at the study’s implications for teaching composition, Jackson and Wallin express excitement (and perhaps a bit of
surprise?) at the dialogue they discovered in this comment thread, noting its constructiveness and vibrancy:

[...] we find much in this debate to be excited about. We discovered a writing venue, converged with other developing media, that invites strangers to engage in the back-and-forthness of rhetoric with a vitality often missing from the argumentative writing our students participate in. Users took turns reading each other’s arguments, writing their own in response, and reading and responding to further counterarguments that challenged their position. In spite of their flaws, users demonstrated a surprising degree of rhetorical literacy in the way they made claims, responded to claims, and established stasis with other users in an informal dialectic that has rolled on for months now, and may (for all we know) keep rolling on indefinitely as a cyber-Burkean parlor of back-and-forthness.

The comment thread for missdynasty33’s “why i am not a christian” further confirms Jackson and Wallin’s conclusions about the back-and-forthness of YouTube and extends them to vlogging, showing that vlogs too are, or at least can be, deeply and constructively dialogic. One early exchange between a commenter and missdynasty33 compels the vlogger to refine how she articulates her (non)belief. In the original video, missdynasty33 only briefly and hesitantly tries to explain what she, in fact, believes. There is sadness and confusion in her face and voice as she says:
So I want to do another video because I wanted to let you guys know how I came to my decision of not believing in the Christian god or [pauses and sighs] I don’t know, I’m confused about the whole thing, but I know I’m not a Christian.

Responding to her video, the commenter luciano9009 attempts to affirm and echo the vlogger’s confession, writing that she too is a “black female atheist” and in coming out has committed “social suicide in the black community.” The vlogger’s subsequent comment reveals a much more specific, nuanced, and confident articulation of her (non)belief.

well, i don't consider myself an atheist because i don't necessarily believe that there is no deity nor do i believe that there is. i simply don't know and i leave it at that. i hate when people make you think that you have to choose, you know. also, there is no clear or universal definition of god so how can i say that i believe or not believe. i don't believe in the christian god or gods from any abrahamic religion because their god of contradictions.

Here, as predicted by Jackson and Wallin, the back-and-forth of vlogging leads to greater understanding—in this case, of the vlogger’s own beliefs. A later exchange in this same comment thread leads the vlogger to critically examine her own behavior toward Christians, and uncover there a bit of hypocrisy. Toward the end of the original video, missdynasty33 tells how, in her desperation to talk to somebody about her crisis of faith, she attempted a conversation with a cousin who is a “devout Christian”:
I started questioning her beliefs and she just ‘lalala’ [covers her ears and laughs] and she shut me off. I did call her closed-minded and I told her that she was in a box which is Christianity and that she stayed in this little Christianity box and she got mad and left.

The commenter mischatal responds by accusing the vlogger of being, essentially, an evangelist, trying to impose her own beliefs on another person, in a similar way that others had done to her:

I think you were wrong to challenge her beliefs - her personal identity. Some bridges can only be crossed by the individual, or that crossing is not their own. You yourself fell victim to a stronger personality, someone else's view of how are things. YouTube is full of video's by people who become what they claim to hate, please do not fall into that same trap.

Despite the somewhat scolding tone of this comment, the vlogger acknowledges its insight, and is shaken into self-realization:

I agree. I don't thing [sic] I challenged her beliefs. I just laid out points in the bible that didn't make sense to me. Maybe I shouldn't have done that. Good post.

However incremental, this back-and-forth rhetoric leads the vlogger not only to better understand herself and what she believes, but also to better understand the nature of belief, the ethics of evangelism, and her relations to the religious people in her life.

**Conclusion: Vlogging as Identification**
This sort of dialogue confirms not only that vlogging is more than monologue, but also that vlogging is a more than an isolated “genre.” Rather, it is a ceremonial or proceeding, an interwoven set or system of genres that feed upon and feed back to one another. Interestingly, while missdynasty33 eagerly engages in dialogue with many who disagree with her viewpoint and behavior, the one thing she seems completely unwilling to negotiate is her mode of address. Several commenters, claiming also to be atheists, criticize missdynasty33’s video for being too casual and too long-winded: “You are taking too long to get to the point young lady. Come on over to my video forums to Atheists if you like and learn what Atheism is,” writes MegaSage007. Another equally blunt commenter claiming to be atheist likewise calls on missdynasty33 to be more formal and more explicitly rhetorical—or is it evangelical?:

this long and rambling video never explained why you thought the pastor was a pimp. practice, get your talking points, and deliver them succinctly, sitting through this was like watching an older person tell a story about their youth, slowly speaking trying to remember shit and not making a lot of sense. (theherdmentality)

Commenters like these are clearly looking for vlogs to be less personal, less confessional, and more argumentative. Missdynasty33, however, strongly resists the suggestion that she change her mode of address. Responding directly to commenter theherdmentality, she writes:

Thats the great thing about youtube and having my own channel. I don't have to practice, I can do whatever I want to do and speak as slow as I want. don't watch the video if you don't like the way I
present it. I don’t have to have talking points and I will continue to make videos like this. Just don’t watch them. Thanx.

This comment reveals the seed of solipsism and self-expression that gives birth to vlogging, as described by Wesch and Lange. Indeed, many vloggers like missdynasty33 claim YouTube as a space where one “can do whatever [one wants] to do” and speak to an audience of no one: “don’t watch the video if you don’t like the way I present it.” At the same time, the comment affirms that it is the vlogging ceremonial, the rhetorical proceedings made possible by its intersecting genres, its videos and comments and channels and playlists, that enables this hybrid monologic-dialogic mode of expression, this reaching out to distant others by talking about oneself: “Thats the great thing about youtube,” she explains, emphasizing the importance and power of the setting, of the vlogging ceremonial.

In contrasting vlogging with other ceremonials like the dinner table or the business meeting, I do not mean to suggest that vlogging offers an escape or a way out of social settings, a place in which the vlogger and his or her interlocutors can simply “be themselves” without constraint. As Anne Freadman cautions in her discussion of ceremonials, “We never leave a space of rituals for a space of non-rituals: we choose one ritual instead of another” (61). African-American atheists come out on YouTube not because it is a rhetorical free-for-all, but because they choose to make their confessions within the context of its specific rituals, its hybrid monologic-dialogic ceremonial, instead of choosing to confess within the ceremonials that make up their everyday life with friends, acquaintances, family, and so on.
Though the tone of confession vlogs can differ radically, the motive seems to be always the same: to reach out, to discover and connect with others, to achieve identification, and to form communities, whether in-person or online. Even missdynasty33, who insists that her vlogs belong to her alone, cries out for connection with others like herself, sincerely thanking those who have supported her, and begging for someone, or anyone, to dialogue with: “I have no one to talk to about this stuff, and that’s why I wanted to start making videos to talk to other people. So, I don’t know. If you want to, leave me a comment, or whatever.” Another vlogger, narrating how he came out to a relative, suddenly spins the story into a plea for identification, for more African-American atheists to make themselves known:

That was like the first breaking out and he asked me, you know, so what do you believe, and I was like you know something I’m an atheist. And it felt so good just coming out and telling him. And that’s the reason why I’m making these videos. I want more people to be able to come out who don’t feel scared. And it’s crazy because a lot of my friend on Facebook I never would have thought. And it’s crazy because the people you don’t think is atheist is atheist. And you know a few of my female friends came out and was just like ‘I’m atheist’ and I’m just like ‘Really? You?’ [. . .] So I’m just doing this to bring out more people.

Even Ayanna18vcu, whose vlog on African-American atheism is more argumentative than confessional in tone, admits that the primary value of such vlogs is identification or connection, not persuasion or conversion:
Now I will say that the situation has been somewhat mitigated through social sites, such as MySpace, and Facebook, and obviously YouTube where we have been able to communicate with others who have had similar experiences on their path to atheism.

Likewise, even the seemingly confrontational sundiatasoulbefree admits that his video is not intended to change hearts or minds. Despite his provocative title, “Fuck God,” he opens his video with a disclaimer, cautioning viewers that “You shouldn’t go around on YouTube looking for videos about subjects you dislike, that means any hate mail will be ignored.” Later, despite his argumentative tone, he affirms that argumentation about religion, or at least Christianity, is pointless: “And I don’t want to have any debates with you people because you guys don’t even make any sense. You can’t justify your arguments with quotes from the bible because I believe the bible is false in the first place.” Even in this chest-thumping video, the motive is not to argue with, but rather to connect and identify with others. Indeed, in the description of his video, he writes “this video is for my atheist brothers and sisters who are to timid to voice there opinions so im doing it for them.” Indeed, each and every confession vlog that allows comments attracts responses from other African-American atheists, responses that simply but powerfully confirm that there are others out there like them, others who identify and empathize with the vlogger. Responding to cutemama007’s vlog, christalh24 writes, “You aren’t alone, Cutemama! I’m a black female atheist, too. It can be difficult sometimes, but I’ve never been ashame of it.” Responding to cpiercej’s vlog, commenter klmbaby6 writes:
Wassup bruh. I'm an atheist as well from the motor city. I just wanted to welcome you in and say thanks for the video. It feels good to see other brothas & sistas coming in from the brainwashing of religion. I know it's more of us, we just gotta get the courage to step forward.

In vlogs, comments, and other genres, African-American atheists seem genuinely heartened that they are able to connect and identify with distant others online. The sense of connection and compassion is palpable in each of these exchanges, but it may be naïve to conclude that the virtual community African-American atheists find online could replace a local, long-term, community grounded in face-to-face interaction. As Ayanna18vcu acknowledges, the social isolation of African-American atheists has been “somewhat mitigated through social sites,” but only somewhat. She may connect with dozens of others like herself online, but when she socializes, even at local atheist events, she feels profoundly alone: “In my experience, I have always been the only black person at these events. I have talked to a couple of other black atheists who obviously don’t reside in my area who said that they have had similar experiences.” Similarly, the perhaps-thirtysomething JohnBeezy3 laments that, in his entire life, he has only met one other African-American atheist.

As with other vlogs, the confessions of African-American atheists produce identification and empathy, but their larger and long-term social effects remain unclear. As Wesch explains, vlogging and other forms of online interaction encourage connections that are at once “deep” and “loose.” Describing connections among YouTubers, he cautions that “many of these experiences of
deep connection are experiences only, never manifesting into tight relationships with the kinds of responsibilities we associate with face-to-face relations” and therefore entail “connection without constraint” (27). For example, while missdynasty33 may feel empowered, to some extent, by the support of her pseudonymous patron Dr. Popery, it seems highly unlikely that Dr. Popery would host her in his home, should her family exile her for her nonbelief, or that he would be willing and able to drive her to the hospital, should she be physically abused. This, clearly, is a limitation inherent in the vlogging ceremonial: that however deep a sense of connection, and however constructive a dialogue it creates, vlogging seems relatively impotent to actually bond people to one another on a lasting basis. African-American atheists may confess on YouTube because they cannot confess to their family and friends, but they do not turn to YouTube to replace those family and friends.

Nevertheless, as Wesch insightfully observes, it is this same “connection without constraint” dynamic that grants vlogging its idiosyncratic rhetorical magnetism. In other words, African-American atheists and other vloggers turn to the YouTube ceremonial not despite, but because it is deep but loose, because it creates connection without constraint. As Wesch explains,

Although these terms seem to contradict each other logically, they in fact enhance each other in practice. YouTubers can feel free to create or experience deep relationships because they are loose, and they may choose to keep them loose precisely because they are deep (27).
It is Wesch’s vocabulary here, “deep and loose” and “connection without constraint,” that perhaps best describe the interlocutory positions posited by the YouTube ceremonial, and best explain why someone would confess to YouTube, what they would not confess to friends or family. Furthermore, to describe vlogging as deep but loose is not to dismiss the genre’s importance or power, but rather to acknowledge the specific powers of the relations and rhetorics it produces.

I want to close, also, by noting that, although online interactions like vlogging can and do have their own proper meanings and uses, they can also, in some cases, actually give rise to, or enhance, the sort of tight, mutually responsible face-to-face relationships that some technophobes fear online interactions will replace. Lange, for instance, has shown how young people use YouTube to enrich their local interactions (“Fostering”). Cpiercej, the vlogger whom we met at the beginning of this chapter, expresses hope that he can use YouTube not to bypass his stifling social scene but also to create new, local and lasting, social relationships:

My main thing for coming out like this is to like I said to form community [. . .] I hope to form a meetup group in the Washington D.C. area for black atheists. And I’ve joined some atheist groups in the area but I’d like to start something with more of people that have had my experience so that we can talk about you know how we can reach out to our community and show the black community that you know atheists aren’t out to eat babies and party all day. It
seemed like I used to party more when I was in the church than now
that I’m out of the church.

Here cpiercej expresses hope that, through his confession vlog, he will create not
only those deep but loose online connections described by Wesch, but will also
create lasting, face-to-face relationships—and, more than that, new ceremonials,
new ways of relating, new ways of “partying” outside of the church.

Through its exploration of confession vlogs, this chapter has shown how
online video sharing has fostered new and vibrant ceremonials, new ways of
connecting and configuring relationships among interlocutors. However, the
chapter has only touched on questions about medium, about digital video and its
affordances. The next chapter directly takes up questions about medium,
examining video and especially its ability to capture bodily emotion displays.
Through a case study of “reaction videos” uploaded by Twilight fans, it articulates
what has been implicit in this chapter’s discussion of confession vlogs—that
vlogging can transform personal emotion into public spectacle, and even into
powerful public statements.
Chapter 3

The Reaction Video: Vlogging and Emotion Display

The image below displays a frame from a popular and controversial vlog shared on YouTube (Fig. 3.1). Titled “full length twilight trailer reaction!!!!” the video captures a young woman’s intense emotional reaction as she watches, for the very first time, the trailer for the much-anticipated movie *Twilight*.

![YouTube Video Screenshot](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Figure 3.1: A vlogger shares her reaction to the trailer for the movie *Twilight*. From Nuttymadam3575. “full length twilight trailer reaction!!!!!” *YouTube*. 10 October 2008. Web. 8 October 2011.
For ten minutes, this woman, who calls herself NuttyMadam3575, squeals, hyperventilates, and seemingly even speaks in tongues as she haltingly makes her way through the trailer, stopping several times to start over, and crying out that “Nothing will ever be the same again!”

The video has attracted attention from Twilight fans and haters alike, as well as viewers who have no investment in Twilight either way. The video still draws a steady stream of viewers, several years after it first appeared in October 2008, but the comments posted in response to the vlog reveal that many of these viewers have trouble understanding why it exists on a public video-sharing site:

I’ll admit that I can be a bit over-exited about some things and squeal and be completely insane — but seriously? [ . . . ] At least I don’t fucking publish it for the world to see. Are you trying to embarrass yourself in front of the entire world? If so — good job.

(Frediepin)

Another commenter expresses the similar sense of puzzlement:

What I don’t understand is why anyone would bother posting this on the internet? Is it madness or loneliness? (Cartman4550)

Over 10,000 comments have been posted on the video, many of them asking similar questions about the motives behind its creation, publication, and circulation. The answer, many of these commenters suggest, lies in NuttyMadam3575’s individual eccentricity: her “freak[ishness],” her “insanity,” her “madness.” More than 80 similar videos, however, in which other fans (and a few anti-fans) capture their reactions to the Twilight trailer, were uploaded to YouTube during October 2008 alone. While her reaction may be unusually
dramatic, in terms of genre, it is by no means an anomaly—within the context of *Twilight* fandom, or of YouTube generally.

Indeed, well before NuttyMadam3575 appeared, the “reaction video” was already a well-established vlogging genre, having thousands of instantiations and its own Wikipedia entry. The reaction video is a vlog that captures the reaction of an individual (or group of individuals) as they encounter a particular text, usually a short media clip. The genre’s Wikipedia entry and general internet lore suggest that the reaction video became an established genre in mid-2007, when thousands of YouTubers uploaded their reactions (often, a combination of laughter and retching) to a trailer for a particularly graphic adult film called “Two Girls One Cup.” In 2008, another batch of reaction videos emerged around the viral video “Scarlet Takes a Tumble,” a clip in which a woman sings and dances on, then falls off of, a coffee table. That same year, *Twilight* fans like NuttyMadam3575 turned to the reaction video genre to communicate their emotions after reading the final novel in the series *Breaking Dawn* and, again a few months later, after seeing the trailer for the forthcoming film adaptation.

While the reaction video might seem empty or ephemeral, this vlogging genre illustrates how emotion displays, circulated via public video sharing sites like YouTube, come to do vital rhetorical work, providing a venue through which ordinary people participate in public controversies using only a webcam, a computer, and their bodies. The theoretical section of this chapter, below, explores in greater depth the social and rhetorical dimensions of emotion displays, both online and off. I then offer an account of a 2008 controversy that played out, in large part, in the reaction video genre. Here I analyze a flurry of
vlogs composed by readers of the controversial *Twilight* novel *Breaking Dawn*. I contend that the genre of the reaction video allowed discontented fans to make compelling public statements about *Breaking Dawn* through emotion displays. However, the reaction video genre also framed those emotions in such a way that they could be easily dismissed as impulsive and ephemeral, somewhat undermining their effectiveness.

**Vlogging and Emotion**

Public video sharing, as rhetoric scholars and popular commentators alike are beginning to recognize, may be changing the way that ideas, attitudes, and even energies spread. Thanks to increasingly affordable, portable, and share-friendly video cameras, and the rise of platforms like YouTube, video sharing is playing increasingly important roles within public spheres. Just this year, video sharing has been praised for helping spread revolutionary fervor across the Middle East during the Arab Spring—and blamed for helping spread belligerence and bacchanalianism during the London riots in August. Behind all the praise and blame lies an unspoken assumption that video sharing somehow communicates differently than other media, and even other electronic media—particularly in how it relays emotion.

Psychologist Paul Ekman’s research has confirmed that the human face, for instance, has a powerful vocabulary for communicating emotion, one that can convey complex emotional information. Some of this information can be translated into alphabetic text (in descriptions of the face or the emotion itself, or indirectly through affectively-loaded language, punctuation, etc.) or it can be captured in a still image. But since most facial expressions involve minute,
unconscious muscle movements lasting roughly two to four seconds (Ekman 143), facial expression is at present most thoroughly captured through video recording. And it is only recently, with the widespread availability of the webcam and digital video sharing sites like YouTube, that the technology for recording emotion display and circulating it widely has come into the possession of everyday people, people like *Twilight* fan NuttyMadam3575. Michelle, another vlogger, in an interview with anthropologist Patricia G. Lange, describes the face and its emotional expressivity as the key to vlogging’s power and popularity:

[I] mean people just connect more emotionally with somebody's face than maybe with text, [that's] the simplistic version of it. And I noticed that when I started doing the video blogs because I had been writing about personal stuff for years. [. . . ] But as soon as I started doing video blogs, people were like [wow]. It kind of surprised me because I thought who wants to see me sitting around talking about my feelings? But they do. I don't know why, but they do. (“Vulnerable”)

Emphasizing its difference from disembodied “writing,” Michelle explains the power and popularity of vlogging by stressing its capacity for relaying emotion, and particularly emotion displayed on “somebody’s face.” Like other vloggers interviewed by Lange, Michelle acknowledges “that the video image, rather than text alone, promotes a key connection”—a connection that happens through the body and through the emotions.

However, while technological development explains how the capture and circulation of emotion displays is possible, it does not explain why such displays
are so popular with producers and viewers, or what rhetorical work these emotion displays are capable of doing. To explore these more challenging questions, we might turn to affect studies and their recent insights into the social and rhetorical workings of emotion.

*The Rhetoric of Emotion*

Interest in emotion and affect and their role in communication has grown significantly in recent years within rhetorical studies and related fields, including political science, literary studies, anthropology, and philosophy, to name just a few. The theories and research methods associated with the “affective turn” or “affect studies” are quite diverse (and at times contradictory) but share some common features. Inspired by and borrowing concepts from scientific studies of emotion, affect scholars have identified significant (and often frankly surprising) affective layers within the weave of society, culture, and communication. Motivated by a perceived overemphasis on “the role of reason and rationality in politics, ethics, and aesthetics,” affect studies, according to Ruth Leys, seek to complicate “flat or ‘unlayered’ or disembodied” accounts of “the ways in which people actually form their political opinions and judgments” (436). In short, the scholarship on affect rejects logocentrism, the assumption that humans act, or should aspire to act, according to pure reason or logic. It proposes instead that humans participate meaningfully in social, cultural, and public spheres through affect—through feelings, sensations, intensities, emotions, passions, etc.

Emotion has been central to rhetorical theory at least since Aristotle articulated the concept of *pathos* or “emotional appeal.” In Book II of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle insists that rhetors must understand the various types of
emotion and how each emotion might be aroused in the service of persuasion. On the whole, however, Aristotle grants emotion a limited role within the enterprise of rhetoric. Rhetoric, in Aristotle’s view, is nothing more than the practical art of persuasion, and depending on the particular case, emotional appeals may or may not be necessary. Indeed, in the first few lines of *Rhetoric*, long before his discussion of the emotions, Aristotle warns rhetors not to call upon the emotions when emotions are inappropriate, distracting, or misleading. Lambasting other contemporary teachers of rhetoric, Aristotle cautions that the “arousing of prejudice, pity, anger, and similar emotions has nothing to do with the essential facts, but is merely a personal appeal to the man who is judging the case.” Emotions, in the Aristotelian view, are often necessary to rhetoric (as a means to some other persuasive end) but they are not absolutely essential to the enterprise of rhetoric itself.

The new affect studies, however, suggests that emotion plays a more fundamental role in rhetoric than Aristotle and his adherents have imagined. More than a means to some external end, more than an arbitrary vehicle leading audiences to the “essential facts,” emotion is present in all rhetoric—and is indeed a rhetorical enterprise itself.

Understanding how emotions are rhetorical may first require an exploration of how emotions are social. Emotions are often imagined to be exclusively “internal” or “personal,” as essentially private phenomena that arise and fade within the self alone, within the hard psychological boundaries of the individual. However, as Jenny Edbauer Rice explains, emotions, even if they are experienced as powerfully internal and individual, are also inescapably social.
Reviewing recent studies of affect by Sara Ahmed, Denise Riley, and Theresa Brennan, Edbauer Rice illuminates how emotion can be at once “inside out” and “outside in” (“New”). Rice praises affect theorists including Ahmed for breaking away from the “inside out” model (where I express my internally felt emotions to those outside of my own skin) as well as the “outside in” model. The “outside in” model may be more recognizable as a rhetorical take on emotions, since this model assumes that emotion resides in the social sphere and is later learned, or internalized, by an individual. Instead, Ahmed proposes that emotions are the acts of orientation between bodies. (206)

As social “acts of orientation” (which are neither fully internal nor fully external), emotions do more than reveal existing internal processes. Emotions—or to adopt a more precise term, emotion displays—drive social interactions. They prompt audiences to think, feel, act, orient themselves, and respond in certain ways. A smile, for example, is more than a signal of inner happiness, it is a sign that welcomes others to approach and suggests something about the smiler’s character. Like words, then, emotion displays do things, signaling inner states, but also producing illocutionary and perlocutionary effects (to borrow the vocabulary of J.L. Austin) that prompt actions and influence orientations. Emotions, in this sense, are “moves” or “turns” within the game of human social interaction, though these “moves” may be made intentionally or unintentionally, or may even originate beyond the boundaries of conscious intention (for instance, when we “cannot help being angry” with someone who has wronged us).
It is perhaps obvious that emotions are social acts within intimate spheres: any parent who has dealt with a child who isn’t getting his or her way can testify to this. But emotions are rhetorical within public spheres as well, as rhetoric scholar Daniel Gross affirms in *The Secret History of Emotion*. For Gross, emotions are “deeply social” and, contrary to the claims of modern brain science, are “constituted not in the biology [. . .] of all humans [. . .] but rather in relationships” (2). While the Aztecs believed that emotion originates in the liver, Descartes in the pineal gland, and modern science in the brain, Gross insists that emotion originates in social relations (1). Classical thinkers like Aristotle got it right, according to Gross, when they represented emotions like anger, for example, as being fundamentally “psychosocial”:

“Great is the rage of Zeus-nurtured kings,” muses Aristotle after the *Iliad* 2.196. For Aristotle, the king does not fly into a rage simply because his human dignity suffers, or even because his power allows him to express a universal emotion others suppress. The king is overcome by rage because he suffers a concrete insult despite belonging to the class of people who “think they are entitled with respect by those inferior in birth, in power, in virtue,” which in the king’s case means practically everybody. (3)

For Gross, following Aristotle and Homer, anger “presumes a public stage rather than private feelings” (3). Like all emotions, anger is an act of orientation, making or re-making or un-making social relations, including relations of power. Gross goes so far as to suggest that emotion, much like verbal language, would have no meaning or existence outside of social relations: “Alone on a desert
island, the king would not be subject to anger, because he would lack any social standing that could be concretely challenged” (3). Indeed, the very existence of the reaction video, a genre that centers on the public sharing of emotion displays, seems to confirm that emotions are fundamentally social, and sometimes fundamentally public. Why would someone post a video of himself or herself freaking out to the Twilight trailer, or being disgusted by pornography, or laughing along with a pratfall? The short answer seems to be this: because, as Gross reveals, emotions demand an audience.

Kenneth Burke acknowledges the communicative nature of emotion in his discussion of the “rhetoric of hysteria,” early in A Rhetoric of Motives. Here Burke clarifies how exactly it is that emotion displays communicate and persuade—even when there isn’t any conscious intent to communicate on the part of the emoting subject. Drawing on his readings in anthropology, Burke describes what is, at first, a seemingly alien form of communication practiced among the Tanala people of Madagascar. This is the “tromba,” a “neurotic seizure indicated by an extreme desire to dance” (39). “Such seizures,” Burke explains, “are said to be a device that makes the possessed person ‘the center of all the attention.’” The seized individual, according to Burke’s source, is granted extreme respect and even the status of an oracle. In this way, even though the individual experiences the tromba involuntarily, as a kind of attack, it nonetheless holds communicative power. Burke echoes his source’s suggestive conclusion that the tromba, “like most hysterical seizures, [ . . . ] requires an audience” (39).4 We might equally

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4 We should, of course, be skeptical of this early anthropological source Burke is drawing from, particularly its troubling account of its subject’s (lack of) agency.
apply his insights into the “rhetoric of hysteria” to the *Twilight* reaction video with which this chapter began:

> For here too are expressions which are addressed—and we confront an ultimate irony, in glimpsing how even a catatonic lapse into sheer automatism, beyond the reach of all normally linguistic communication, is in its origins communicative, addressed, though it be a paralogical appeal—that-ends-all-appeals. (39)

Though Burke’s discussion of the tromba is brief, it nevertheless proposes a radical understanding of emotion—namely, a rhetorical one. Burke suggests that even when their underlying intentions are hidden from us (whether as witnesses to emotion displays or as authors of them), emotions have social and rhetorical “origins.” Emotions hold suasive power and begin with suasive motives, whether these motives are conscious, unconscious, preconscious, or otherwise.

To clarify how and what it is that emotion displays communicate, we might borrow a spatial metaphor from verbal argumentation: the concept of position. Emotion displays establish “positions” in at least two senses. In the first, and most obvious sense, an emotion display communicates *a position toward an object*. By capturing and circulating a reaction on YouTube, the *Twilight* fan displays a certain “position” on the movie to a public audience. Put another way, the display connects a certain referent (the *Twilight* movie) to a certain emotion (amazement or disgust). Potentially, that display can move audiences to adopt

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After all, even in its title, the source describes its subjects as “primitive” (Kardiner). Burke’s blithe use of the deeply gendered term “hysteria” to indicate extreme emotion displays is also troubling. Nonetheless, Burke’s larger point about emotion and communication, even if the particular illustration has some problems, is still a powerful one.
new or changed attitudes of their own, just as pointed verbal analyses and commentaries can.

That emotions establish positions can be clearly illustrated by juxtaposing NuttyMadam3575’s euphoric reaction, described at the outset of this chapter, with any number of oppositional videos posted in direct response. For instance, one YouTuber calling himself PhysicalMonster responded with his own “full length twilight trailer reaction!!!!!” (Figure 2.2). PhysicalMonster articulates a wholly different position on *Twilight* simply by retuning the emotion. PhysicalMonster begins his video by flatly intoning, in Spanish, “oh my god. i can’t believe i’m going to watch the full-length twilight trailer. oh, how emotional i am. let’s watch it.” Throughout the 8-minute clip, his intonation and facial expression remain comically, and pointedly, slack. Through this reaction,
PhysicalMonster takes a position, strategically and meaningfully responding to NuttyMadam3575 simply by re-articulating the same referent to an opposing emotion.

Emotion displays also involve “position” in another, perhaps even more fundamental, sense: emotion displays at once reveal and re-arrange social positions. Just as the anger of Aristotle’s “Zeus-nurtured king” rearticulates relations between himself and his subjects (if successful, presumably, restoring the previous order) so does the Twilight reaction video rearticulate relations between its composer, the movie’s producers, other fans, and so on. Emotion’s ability to rearticulate social relations is perhaps the most vital source of its power, and what makes emotion displays capable of transforming, or reinscribing, the social order. To alter the emotional landscape, in other words, is to change the social landscape, is to change relations of power. If the king’s subjects find a medium and audience for their own anger, big changes are likely on the horizon. This is perhaps one reason that video sharing, a web-bound medium that does not extend the reach of the internet, per se, but simply changes the terms on which already-connected individuals communicate with one another, is so often viewed as revolutionary—namely, because video sharing allows ordinary people to capture and circulate emotion displays to a mass audience.

Further, because emotions are tied to social relations, they evolve as social relations evolve. Certain traditions in the scientific study of emotion claim that human emotions have universal types, unchanging across history and across culture. From this perspective, emotion is (paradoxically) both a biologically encoded phenomena that is universal in humans across cultures, as well as an
expressive phenomena that belongs to the individual-outside-society. According to this tradition, emotions and their expression in the human voice and especially the human face are not at all conventional—or even, in any meaningful sense, contextual. For decades, psychologist Paul Ekman has argued that there are “basic emotions” (such as anger, fear, happiness, sadness, disgust, and surprise) that exist across all cultures and, furthermore, are legible across all cultures, never needing translation. According to the universalist model popularized by Ekman, both an American businessman and a Maori tribesman, though they lack any common language or culture, should not only experience identical emotions, but also recognize those emotions through one another’s facial, vocal, and gestural expression. This universalist model of emotion has influenced not only a generation of scientists but also public policy and even popular culture. Nevertheless, because it divorces emotion from context and culture entirely, the universalist model of emotion is incompatible with a social and rhetorical understanding of emotion.

As Edbauer-Rice, Ahmed, Gross, and Burke reveal, there is much more to emotion than internal physiological processes. Viewed as social interactions, rather than isolated internal or bodily experiences, we can see that the forms and meanings of emotion are, contrary to the claims of Ekman, historically and culturally variable. While emotions may have a universal biological basis, types of emotion display and their meanings develop their characteristic forms and

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5 Ekman, for example, has been interviewed by Oprah Winfrey, has inspired a popular primetime network television drama, and has consulted with the U.S. Transportation Security Administration, training TSA staff to identify emotional irregularities in airline passengers.
currencies only within particular environments and social relations. When was the last time, for instance, someone you knew experienced a tromba? Could a member of the Tanala, in turn, experience a modern panic attack? Could an ancient Roman “freak out”? Where have all the sufferers of nineteenth-century neurasthenia or “Americanitis” gone? Whence the spells of Victorian invalidism? Drawing on the vocabulary and assumptions of rhetorical genre theory, we might call these culturally situated types of emotion display *pathetic genres*.

Pathetic genres, then, are recognizable types of emotion display, what might, from a psychological point of view, be called “episodes.” Some contemporary examples of pathetic genres would include the rant, the plea, the collapse, the lament, the panic attack, the rapture—and, of course, the reaction. To borrow Carolyn R. Miller’s vocabulary, pathetic genres are “typified utterances” that articulate emotion in conventional ways through a performance composed in any number of simultaneous languages: words, facial expressions, vocal intonations, and/or other forms of bodily expression (“Genre” 69).

Pathetic genres, as I see them, are the molds that we pour emotion into—or more accurately, the templates that we use to shape our emotional displays and to interpret the emotional displays of others. Emotion displays need not conform to one particular genre-template. Technically, this is impossible, because the genre does not reside in the emotion display itself. We might say, for instance, that the emotion displayed by NuttyMadam3575’s video is not inherently a “reaction.” Rather, reaction is the genre-template that informed NuttyMadam3575’s emotional experience and display, and the genre-label she offered to her viewers when she uploaded the video. Viewers were free to, and did,
apply other genre-templates (“seizure,” “orgasm”)—and do so strategically, since different genre templates inherently alter the interpretation of the same emotion display. Genre, in other words, does not reside in the emotion display itself; rather, it emerges in the minds and hearts of those present to the emotion. Genre is not embedded in the display (how could it be? where could it be?) but rather enters only into acts of production and interpretation. Pathetic genres then are perhaps best described as learned templates for producing and interpreting emotion displays, templates that make those emotions socially recognizable or readable—and thereby equip those emotions with the ability to carry out social actions. Displays of anger can only compel others to change their behavior when that anger is recognizable, and displays of pleasure can only compel others to continue their behavior if pleasure is readable, whether that pleasure is communicated through facial, vocal, or gestural expression, or simply through words.

To be clear, in proposing the concept of pathetic genres, I do not mean to suggest that some genres are emotional, and others unemotional. I do not claim that pathetic genres are an undiscovered continent—a class of utterances that stands apart from all other known classes, or even a subset of genres that is clearly distinct from others. I acknowledge that, in a sense, all genres are pathetic genres. Take, for example, the oral declamation and the written polemic. These genres may be templates for assembling words, but they are also templates for assembling emotions—and so too are the personal e-mail, the business memo, and the postcard. Clearly, all genres involve emotional expression, though depending on the genre that emotion may be expressed by facial cues or words,
sounds or icons, touches or gestures, and so on. Throughout this chapter and this dissertation, then, the concept of “pathetic genres” is simply meant to emphasize that emotion is one of the materials from which utterances and genres, as learned templates for coding and decoding those utterances, are made. Again, I do not insist upon any hard distinction between verbal and nonverbal genres, or emotional and nonemotional genres. Rather, following the work of M.M. Bakhtin, I insist on their continuity and consubstantiality.

Genre and Emotion

The correspondence between genre and emotion has frequently been hinted at, though never explored at length, by genre theorists. This section revisits the work of genre theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and extrapolates from this theorist’s insightful, but somewhat cursory, discussions of genre and emotion. Interfacing Bakhtin’s work with that of contemporary affect theorists including Brian Massumi, I conclude that Bakhtin recognized that genres, no matter how staid or flat they might seem, always come along with characteristic emotions, and second, that emotion displays themselves are expressed and received within generic frameworks—in other words, as genres.

Bakhtin, widely identified as the architect of genre theory, offers an insightful, although imperfect, framework for understanding the complex relations between genre and emotion. Late in his landmark essay, “The Problem of Speech Genres,” Bakhtin implies that speech genres, his umbrella term that unites both oral and written language, have at least two streams of transmission. Adapting Bakhtin’s vocabulary, we might label these streams content and expression. The content stream transmits “referentially semantic content”—that
is, references to particular, indexable entities that can be either perceived or imaged in the mind: grapes, vampires, virtue (84). Meanwhile, the expression stream transmits the speaker’s “evaluative attitude toward the subject of his speech” (84).

Here Bakhtin steps into an area of inquiry that would be later be re-mapped by affect theorists like Brian Massumi and Theresa Brennan. Though he adopts a different vocabulary from Bakhtin, Massumi posits a related distinction between content and “intensity.” Massumi explains what he means by “content” in this way: “What is meant here by the content of the image is its indexing to conventional meanings in an intersubjective context, its socio-linguistic qualification” (24). An image (to use Massumi’s vocabulary) or utterance (to use Bakhtin’s) has various referents, insofar as it refers to various things, qualities, actions, and relationships. Referents are real or imagined entities that are called to mind by words or other images. For example, the simple utterance “I like books” refers a type of thing (books generally) and several particular things (“I” and my “liking”). These—referents—are what moves through our content stream.

What, then, moves through the expression stream? Bakhtin proposes every utterance, whether oral or written, includes what he calls an “expressive aspect,” a term that is more or less synonymous with what I’m calling emotion in that it refers to a feeling that emerges alongside but independently from referents (84). Expression, he suggests, is always present: “There can be no such thing as an absolutely neutral utterance,” Bakhtin explains. The speaker’s “evaluative attitude toward the subject of his speech” always necessarily informs the process
of composition, influencing the many choices the speaker makes, lexically, grammatically, structurally, and otherwise (84). All utterances, then, are “expressive” in that they reflect the speaker’s “subjective emotional evaluation of the referentially semantic content of his utterance” (84). They reveal, whether intentionally or unintentionally, how the speaker or writer feels about the subject—what might be termed an emotional orientation, or attitude. "When selecting words we proceed from the planned whole of our utterance,” Bakhtin affirms, “and this whole that we have planned and created is always expressive” (86). Expression for Bakhtin, then, may come through the words that the speaker uses to call up referents (books, I, liking), but is qualitatively distinct from those referents. Rather, expression is the emotion that emerges alongside but somewhat independently from whatever referents it calls up. (These two streams of content and expression, it turns out, are not like the streams that run from hot- and cold- water faucets, which can be run independently or in isolation. They are more like natural streams whose paths and currents interweave.)

This helps us begin to understand what emotion is and how it enters into an individual utterance, but what relations if any exist between emotion and genre? This is a more difficult question, and one which neither Bakhtin nor Massumi takes up directly. For Bakhtin, expressivity reveals only “the relation of the utterance to the speaker himself” (84). Initially, in passages like these, Bakhtin seems to propose that expressivity is not generic but is rather a kind of idiosyncratic emotional imprint left by the speaking individual. Bakhtin’s discussion here suggests, in other words, that expressivity is not a feature of genre, but arises only at the level of the concrete utterance. It is not typified, but
rather individual—a phenomenon that is not built into genres but reflects only the “evaluative attitude” of the speaker him or herself. From this perspective, the expressivity of a book review, for example, would have little or nothing to do with the book review genre itself: it would only reveal the attitude of the individual writer toward whatever individual book is being reviewed, toward his or her audience, and so on.

Nonetheless, behind Bakhtin’s explicit treatment of expressivity, there remain unexplored depths. When mapped onto his overall argument about language, genre, and agency, certain of Bakhtin’s comments suggest that he recognized not only a connection between emotion and the individual speaker, but also between emotion and genre. For our purposes, Bakhtin’s overarching argument might be summed up in Carolyn R. Miller’s line that “genre mediates between private intentions and social exigency; it motivates by connecting the private with the public, the singular with the recurrent” (“Genre” 163). Genre, in other words, is never fully internal, but rather connects the internal to the external, the individual to the social, by channeling personal expression through socially conventional forms. In his discussion of “evaluative genres,” Bakhtin implies that emotion can take on generic forms, and thereby mediate between the private and the public. Bakhtin acknowledges that in everyday speech, there exist what he calls “evaluative genres”—that is, genres keyed to certain types of feeling:

Fairly standard types of evaluative utterances are very widespread in speech communication, that is, evaluative speech genres that express praise, approval, rapture, reproof, or abuse: 'Excellent!'
“Good for you!” “Charming!” “Shame!” “Revolting!” “Blockhead!”
and so forth. (85)

In my reading of Bakhtin, the concept of “evaluative genres” opens the door to a
more expansive theorization of genre and emotion—one that the Russian theorist,
who before his death had hoped to expand the essay on genre into a large book,
ever had opportunity to explore (Holquist xv). In proposing the concept of
evaluative genres, I believe that Bakhtin is suggesting that emotion is to some
extent conventional. While it may be attributed to the individual composer,
emotion is also enabled and constrained by genre. Emotion in this sense is
generic, genre-ic. To return to my previous example, this means that the book
review genre comes along with certain expectations about not only content and
structure, but also certain expectations about emotion—about attitude,
expectations connected to but distinct from these “formal” or “content”
expectations. Stepping into the role of book reviewer, an individual might take on
certain emotions, but not others: a lighthearted contempt would seem
appropriate, or perhaps a vigorous enthusiasm. Adopting a belligerent or bored
emotion, however, would seem to violate the genre. (Though we can imagine that,
in certain cases, this violation might be productive, for the purposes of polemic
and parody. Nonetheless, this is an exception that proves the rule.) Embedded in
genres, then, are certain typified emotions—or more accurately, a range or array
of typified emotions the composer might adopt.

The emotionality of a genre is crucial because it is tuned to the social
action that genre is designed to carry out. Emotion is what prompts the audience
to respond and lobbies it to respond in certain ways. For some genres (the book
review, the dissertation, the instruction manual) emotion is pervasive but perhaps best described as “complementary.” Emotion in these discursive genres helps carry the social action, but the burden seems to fall primarily on content: on information, concepts, ideas, and other sorts of referents. For other genres, however, the reverse seems to be true. This is the case with Bakhtin’s evaluative genres. Here, emotion does not complement content; rather, content complements emotion. Bakhtin’s evaluative utterances (“‘Excellent!’ ‘Good for you!’ ‘Charming!’ ‘Shame!’ ‘Revolting!’ ‘Blockhead!’”) do not relay information: they relay emotion. Indeed, the social action of these particular utterances could be carried out quite easily (in some cases, more easily) without any “semantic content” whatsoever, but rather through facial expression, vocal signals (grunts, sighs, scoffs), or other bodily signals. This is not true for all utterances or genres, of course; no one would attempt to compose a dissertation in the medium of facial expression. But few would scold a child using a discursive essay, either.

What is more, social actions themselves necessarily have emotional dimensions. Bakhtin, in his all-too-brief treatment of affectivity, catalogues not only possible evaluative utterances but also possible social actions for his evaluative genres. Evaluative genres can do the following: “express praise, approval, rapture, reproof, or abuse” (85). Importantly, these social actions are primarily emotional in nature; there is little transmission of referents here, mostly just a dynamic interplay of emotions.

Evaluative genres are of course a special case, but they illustrate a larger point: emotion is present, pervasive, and potent in all genres. Emotion is as important, and often more so, than content in carrying a genre’s social action,
just as the emotionality of a book review is calibrated to prompt readers to read (or not read), writers to write (or stop writing), and to evoke feelings of confidence and respect for the reviewer’s opinions.

Recognizing the emotionality of genre is important not only theoretically, but also for understanding what makes vlogging generally, and reaction videos specifically, meaningful to composers and viewers. Building on Bakhtin’s insights, the next section proposes that the reaction video genre is just one, newly remediated instantiation of a broader species I call pathetic genres.

Approaching “reaction” as a pathetic genre or emotion template, with a history and cluster of meanings and rhetorical applications, can help us to understand what exactly producers assume they are communicating, and viewers assume they are witnessing, when they view a reaction video—and therefore, why the genre became so important during the Breaking Dawn controversy.

**Reaction as Genre**

From a historical perspective, the concept of “reaction” as a type of personal emotional behavior, “something done, felt, or thought in response to a situation, statement, etc.,” seems to have emerged only recently, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Though this is now “the principal general sense,” the OED’s first recorded uses of reaction to signal personal emotional behavior date to the turn of the twentieth century. These early examples (such as, “Did Bloom discover common factors of similarity between their respective like and unlike reactions to experience?” and “Although in anger I feel very bitter and full of burning hate toward all mankind, my reaction is intense remorse.”) seem to bear a certain burden of abstractness and technicality, perhaps a marking of their
import from the scientific, medical, political, and other intellectual-professional spheres where the term was first popularized. (Interestingly, many of the usages documented by the OED directly quote from or channel Isaac Newton’s foundational, and frankly catchy, Third Law of Motion: “For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.”)

If reaction was popularized as a technical description of motion, it is now much more likely to be used as a description of emotion—that is, as a pathetic genre. Today, a simple Google search of news items that include the word “reaction” returns tens of thousands of results. These include accounts of medical reactions, particularly of the allergic variety; systemic reactions, particularly in reference to financial markets; and organizational reactions, including especially government actions taken in response to shifting conditions. However, if these prove that reaction is true to its etymological origins in the abstract and the technical, there are plenty of items this very hour to suggest that reaction has also become a powerful description of emotion. These news items include many accounts of “fan reactions” to sports happenings (wins and losses, trades and free agent signings) and other developments in popular culture (the casting and cancellation of television programs, for instance). They also explore the emotional behavior of public figures, including one of the most controversial (non?)reactions in recent public memory.

Nearly ten years after the moment in question, the international news agency Reuters distributes a story about George W. Bush’s “apparent lack of reaction” to the first news of the September 11th attacks. The Washington Post, National Public Radio, The New York Daily News, and others pick up this story.
Perhaps unsurprisingly, several copies of the video displaying Bush’s reaction to the hurriedly whispered news, as he sat in front of an oblivious elementary school class, have been uploaded to YouTube, with many of the YouTube user comments and framing suggesting that Bush’s flat reaction is “evidence” that he had conspiratorial “advanced knowledge” of the attacks (“Evidence that George W. Bush had advanced knowledge of 9-11”). In the Reuters piece, Bush of course produces a competing account of his reaction: “So I made the decision not to jump up immediately and leave the classroom. I didn’t want to rattle the kids. I wanted to project a sense of calm” (qtd. in Serjeant). What matters here, for this inquiry, is not determining which interpretation of Bush’s emotion display is correct, but rather recognizing that all interpreters past and present approach reaction generally, and Bush’s reaction in particular, as a communicative act, with audiences local, national, and even historical. What matters here is the urgency accorded to Bush’s so-called reaction, how it signifies, and to whom.

“Reactions” in our cultural moment are emotional and sometimes verbal displays that, we suppose, have bypassed or preempted their otherwise constraining contexts: mediations, decorums, power relations, personal reflection, and so on. Reactions, we believe, communicate a spontaneous (and perhaps incomplete) act of affective processing—a kind of emotional reflex. It is because of this chronology, because reactions so closely follow their catalysts, that reactions are assumed to escape from constraints and contexts, and it is for this same reason that we assume reactions offer important emotional information.

Exactly what sort of emotional information do reactions provide? Ironically, this depends upon the thing that reaction is supposed to escape:
context. Despite explicit or implicit claims that reaction sidesteps context entirely, context and framing play important roles in what reaction means for both its producers and interpreters.

In some contexts, reaction might register as “authentic” insofar as it is apparently unstaged and unconstrained. In others, it might be interpreted as the emotional equivalent of a “tell”: a display that reveals inappropriate emotion, flawed character, concealed truth, and so on. This is precisely what seems to be at stake, for instance, in the revived debate about Bush’s 9/11 (non)reaction: the contextual framing that would answer once and for all what Bush’s emotions really meant. Nonetheless, it is not despite, but rather because of reaction’s supposed escape from constraining contexts that reactions are considered so important within various spheres of communication, from the intimate to the public.

Consider reality television, where these spheres interestingly blur. Many reality series like The Bachelorette (in which an attractive woman breaks up with a series of potential romantic partners before an international TV audience) seem to be designed around the capture and circulation of privately-coded emotional reactions. Unsurprisingly, a bulk of the media coverage and online discussion following the 2011 Bachelorette star’s final breakup centered upon the intensely emotional “reaction” of the castoff Ben, and what it revealed about him, her, their relationship, the series itself, and reality TV generally. “As heartbreaking as it is, Ben is being so real with his reaction,” Helena Zhang posted on Twitter. “Hated ben all season until his reaction to being dumped by Ashley,” posted one Lizzie Sheehan. And hellohew tweeted, “I’m glad Ben had a real reaction to being
dumped by Ashley. I hate the usual BS. It makes sense to b pissed.” The rejected Ben’s reaction here is presented as a “real” or authentic emotion display that escaped any number of constraining contexts—what hellohew describes as the “usual BS.” Escaped constraints here seem to include not only the decorum of a personal romantic breakup but also the artificiality of “reality” television. These discussions of reality television clearly demonstrate that reaction is commonly understood to be a genre of emotion display that sneaks out from underneath or overwhems its would-be constraints. Commentators recognized, and praised, Ben’s emotion display as a “reaction” because that display, in their view, bypassed the constraints that would otherwise force Ben to conceal what he was feeling internally. Ben, they suggest, displayed a reaction insofar as he allowed his emotion, in its intensity and immediacy, to break free of these otherwise controlling contexts.

Reactions, as a genre, are also commonly associated with a particular recurrent rhetorical situation. Often, reactions are coded as interventions into something that is or was outside the emoting subject’s control. Ben’s reaction to the breakup on The Bachelorette, for instance, was variously understood as a strategic response to the rejection, to his manipulation at the hands of the show’s producers, and so on. Bush’s 9/11 reaction came at a kairotic moment of opportunity, where he was seemingly expected to display a more strategically effective emotion (disgust? rage? surprise?) and in doing so begin to exert control on an out-of-control situation. The reaction videos of Twilight fans, explored in the next section, similarly present themselves as interventions into a situation that is either out-of-hand or that has been sullied by others. Reaction, then, can
register as an attempt to strategically introduce one’s voice, whether literally or metaphorically, into a situation that is not of one’s own making. Reactions in this sense are deeply connected to power relations. Specifically, reactions are commonly understood as attempts to seize or take back power, to upend, disrupt, reestablish, or just momentarily interrupt, existing power relations.

Reaction, as a pathetic genre, appears across media. Reactions do appear in, and as, verbal texts, texts composed of words. However, as the Bush and Bachelorette examples show, reaction is also composed and read in the languages of the body, including facial, vocal, and gestural expression. This means that different media inscribe reaction differently, perhaps even unequally. While verbal text can report or mimic body languages, video captures them more or less directly. With video, bodily expression can be reproduced and circulated across time and space. In the medium of video, bodily expression can become an image or even a whole text. Frequently, in the YouTube reaction video, this is precisely what happens.

This does not mean that video is a superior medium than writing or image or speech, or that vlogs are inherently more “emotional” than texts in these media. It means only that vlogging allows rhetors to capture and (infinitely) reproduce bodily expressions of emotion—a unique affordance, perhaps, but one that is gained at the cost of others. As the Twilight reactions discussed below reveal, rhetors do employ the vlog, the reaction video, and emotion displays rhetorically, to intervene in public conversations. However, the reactions also demonstrate that these rhetorical choices (choosing the vlogging ceremonial, choosing the reaction genre, and choosing a highly emotional register) have consequences for
how their messages are interpreted and received, consequences that do not always square with the rhetors’ hopes and intentions. Emotion displays are produced and interpreted within generic frameworks, within pathetic genres that both create and constrain their meanings. If Twilight fans hoped that the newfound ability to emote publicly and spectacularly would bring them whatever they wanted, they were mistaken. While the emotion displays made possible by vlogging do in a sense enfranchise these reader/rhetors, giving them a public stage that they would otherwise lack, their emotion displays were still created and constrained by genre—specifically, the genre of the reaction, which at once gave these vlogs their power and reach, and diminished their potential rhetorical currency, by framing these emotions as impulsive and therefore potentially fleeting—at least for some viewers, viewers that included the novel’s author, Stephenie Meyer.

**Emotion as Intervention: Vlogging about Twilight**

On August 9, 2008, the *Entertainment Weekly* website posted a video interview with Meyer, the woman who created the *Twilight* saga. The interview aired shortly after the release of the bestselling author’s latest *Twilight* novel, *Breaking Dawn*. The interviewer opens by asking Meyer about the impassioned early response to the novel (Zuly89).

“It’s been a really busy week,” Meyer responds, smiling. “You know, we didn’t get to be there for the midnight parties or all of that but I watched a lot of it on YouTube, just to see what was going on.”

The interviewer laughs, perhaps a bit uncomfortably, and says, “You’re following everything on the internet?” Here, less than a minute into the
conversation, the modulation of the interviewer’s voice flattens out, goes quasi-
robotic, suggesting that despite the light tone, they’ve already entered into
rougher waters, and she’s going to navigate carefully. Meyer’s eye contact
momentarily breaks and her smile tightens, belying her nonchalance as she
replies, in a cheerful cadence, “Oh yeah.”

“Fan reaction to Breaking Dawn has been...” the interviewer pauses, as if
searching for the right word. “wild. In both directions. There have been, like, I
love this book, and some people who are like, you know, I have some questions
about this book.” When describing the positive reaction, the interviewer seems to
melt into her seat, her voice rising and falling as if to convey the affect of
someone swooning. When she describes the negative reaction, her body and her
voice tense up. The interviewer’s words tell us that there is a controversy
surrounding the novel, but her affect—her body, her face, her voice—tells us more.
It isn’t just that readers have different ideas about the novel, they also have
different feelings about it. When the interviewer asks Meyer how she herself
“feel[s]” about “some of the more unkind comments about the book,” it’s clear
that they aren’t talking about critical reception, or really any particular ideas or
claims or critiques about the book. Reviews here are not nearly as important as
reactions.

Despite its imposing length (756 pages in the hardcover first edition),
reaction videos responding to the novel appeared incredibly quickly. Released at
midnight on August 2, by the end of the day, many readers had already devoured
the novel and were crowding the internet, sharing their thoughts and feelings
about it. Rather quickly, it became clear that reaction to the novel was, at best,
mixed. Perhaps conflicted, or even confused, would be a better word: as one young fan put it, “there’s been some uproars, good and bad uproars, all over the Internet” (ActualxReality22). The controversy was indeed spread “all over” the fandom and its established digital gathering-places: message board forums, blogs, social media, and so on. But although though there were many rhetorical genres open to them, many of these readers elected to express themselves on the video-sharing site YouTube, through extempore vlogs that they titled “review” or “opinion” pieces, as in “Breaking Dawn: My Feelings” or “*GASP* A Positive Breaking Dawn Review!!”—or “reaction” pieces, as in “Breaking Dawn Reactions” and “My reaction to a certain part of Breaking Dawn (No Spoilers).”

Titles aside, these vlogs share a number of conventional features (fig 3.3). They display an individual or small group of individuals, usually girls or young women. The camera’s gaze centers on the face and upper body of the subject, allowing the viewer full access to his or her facial and gestural expression. The setting is domestic (almost exclusively so) and frequently a bedroom. The videos can be rather long, featuring detailed, point-by-point exploration of the novel. Finally, most videos explicitly respond to other videos and commentary on the novel, framing themselves as an intervention in an ongoing dissensus—a term I am using to describe something that resembles a controversy, but is actually centered on feelings rather than ideas or claims.

That this a dissensus, rather than a controversy, is clear in how it is described in Breaking Dawn reaction videos:
• “I don’t know why people didn’t like it...I hope you weren’t disappointed, as most people were” (Lailso8)
• “Hey guys...I thought since you know the whole commotion with Breaking Dawn is in the air I’d add my two cents in.” (howeverchill)
• “I can’t believe it. I was gone for a week and I got on all these forums and YouTube videos and they’re all so negative and then there’s a video of Stephenie Meyer who is so hurt by this. I just feel bad for her” (Howeverchill)

Each subject’s description of the rhetorical situation is described in terms associated with emotion. Readers are “disappointed,” either with the book or their fellow fans. What needs to be addressed, according to these exigency-statements, is not so much the book itself (its merits as literature or entertainment) but the turbulent currents of emotion it has set loose: the “commotion” and “uproars,” the disappointment and “feel[ing] bad,” ”the “complaining” and the “hurt” among not only fans or readers generally, but also Twilight producers such as author Stephenie Meyer.6

Did this dissensus emerge because readers were making emotionally charged reaction videos? Or did readers make reaction videos because of the emotionally charged dissensus? Seemingly, both. What matters is that as the dissensus took shape, rhetors seemed to recognize that vlogging and specifically the reaction video genre, which some rhetors explicitly acknowledged and played

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6 Howeverchill’s notion that Meyer is “hurt” apparently comes from the Entertainment Weekly interview mentioned earlier. Tellingly, at the height of the dissensus, a YouTube user Zuly89 uploads this nearly hour-long interview to YouTube in six parts, retitling it “Stephenie Meyer’s Reaction to Breaking Dawn Complaints.” This reframes the interview, making it another emotion display in the ongoing dissensus that is playing itself out on the Internet. Before long, it has accrued thousands of user comments—and inspired reaction videos of its own!
with, provided affordances for the bodily display of emotion that other genres did not.

Readers of course had a wide variety of established rhetorical genres available to them, including formal reviews, blog and message board posts, letters to the author or publisher, fan fiction, vids,\textsuperscript{7} letters to newspaper editors, and more. Readers of \textit{Breaking Dawn}, in fact, expressed themselves in all of these genres. Like any large-scale controversy, the uproar over \textit{Breaking Dawn} did not confine itself to a single genre, platform, or medium. However, vlogging became particularly important in this controversy because it was able to capture and circulate the languages of the body—because, in other words, it allowed rhetors to capture instantaneously bodily emotion displays that otherwise would have to be filtered through visual or textual representations.

Vlogging and the reaction video genre, in other words, became kairotic because this emotional exigency seemed to demand an emotional response. Specifically, they offered special affordances that became more and more attractive to would-be rhetors as the \textit{Breaking Dawn} dissensus took shape, namely their ability to capture and circulate emotion displays, through facial, vocal, and gestural action. This, seemingly, was why so many readers seeking to intervene in the dissensus turned to vlogging: because it allowed rhetors to readily communicate their own emotions to a larger public that, they believed,

\textsuperscript{7} Vids are fan-produced videos that expand upon or otherwise interpret a canonical text by remixing images and audio from other pop culture texts: though they are often posted on YouTube, such videos do not usually involve webcams or any photographic image of the uploader.
weren’t thinking properly—and more importantly, weren’t feeling properly about the novel.

Another reason many readers expressed themselves through the reaction video was that the rhetorical situation seemed to demand emotional immediacy. Other genres of response (letters to the author or publisher, or even YouTube mash-ups and vids) take considerable time to produce, but vlogs can be composed and published within minutes. This immediacy seems crucial to those who created *Breaking Dawn* reaction videos. For example, Maggiehanna opens her vlog by emphasizing its (rushed) timing: “August 3rd, 2008,” she begins, “It’s 2pm Eastern Standard Time and about an hour ago I finished this book [holds up a hardcover of *Breaking Dawn*].” Chattering with the breakneck pace and wandering course of a teenager who barely slept the previous night, Maggiehanna shares her thoughts and emotions about various happenings in the novel, gesturing wildly throughout (refer back to Figure 3.3) and alternately expressing concern, disgust, shock, puzzlement, and pleasure. Like Maggiehanna’s frenetic clip, most *Breaking Dawn* reaction videos begin by stressing their own rhetorical and emotional immediacy. Readers not only sought to broadcast their reactions right away, so that they could address an urgent exigence, they also sought to capture those reactions while they were still fresh and unprocessed. “Just got the book! Just got the book!” jessihhcuhh shrieks at the opening of her reaction video. “Okay, so I just finished *Breaking Dawn,*” begins JebpyHP, who also stresses in the uploader description that this is her “initial” or immediate reaction. Another young woman prefaces her reaction, “I just finished the book” (karamaraih). The vlogger here, Mariah, explains that while she usually vlogs with a friend named
Kara, she isn’t sure Kara has finished the book yet—and she wanted to share her reaction right away. Another vlogger calling herself Tuesday captures two reactions in all their immediacy (FantasticTwiHards). First, we witness the thrill of anticipation as Tuesday opens a box from Amazon.com. You can almost see the butterflies as she unwraps the novel from its packaging, breathy and giggling: “I’m freaking out a little bit,” she says, before cracking the spine and indulgently smelling its contents. “I’ve been dying for this book for a year.” At 2:00, the video cuts to a radically different scene, and a radically different reaction. Holding her now visibly worn copy of the novel, Tuesday addresses author Stephenie Meyer directly: “This book really sucks. [. . . . ] You disappointed me.” Tuesday’s comments, along with the sadness and frustration apparent in her affect, illustrate once again that readers created reaction videos to address a dissensus, a misalignment of emotions. They also illustrate how producers of reaction videos hope to achieve rhetorical and emotional immediacy; as Tuesday later admits, she has captured and published her reaction video even before she has finished reading the book. Readers of Breaking Dawn composed reaction videos, then, so that they could address a public dissensus through emotion display, and so that they could capture those emotions quickly, publishing their vlogs while both the dissensus, and their own emotions, were still fresh.

Online video sharing’s affordances for emotion display help explain why potential rhetors would turn to vlogging and the reaction to intervene in this or any dissensus, but cannot explain this response fully. Affordances are only part of the story: for the other half, we must attend to genre. Affordances may make an utterance possible, but it is genre that makes an utterance meaningful to others.
Without the templates of the “reaction” and “reaction video,” and the inventive and interpretive powers they grant, all of these videos would be incomprehensible to viewers. Of course, these videos perplex and even anger many of their viewers, as the page comments clearly demonstrate. However, the fact that so many of these videos appeared, that they garnered so many views, that they constantly cite and respond to one another, and that they created enough of a stir that they would be discussed in a mass media interview with the novel’s author suggests that many did indeed find them meaningful, even persuasive. What meaning did producers and viewers find in these videos, then? Why did so many Breaking Dawn readers share and seek out “reactions” in particular?

As my earlier analysis showed, reaction is a pathetic genre, a genre of emotional and sometimes verbal display that, we assume, has escaped or overwhelmed its constraining contexts. The Bachelorette’s Ben, for example, was believed to show a “reaction” insofar as his display of anger broke through the constraints otherwise imposed by politeness, by the conventions of reality TV, and so on. Breaking Dawn reaction videos present themselves as similarly unconstrained. This is particularly evident in the videos’ sometimes-excessive length (TechNBAiley uploads her video in no less than eleven clips, each lasting ten minutes), their informal tone (many of them begin with the cozy greeting “Hey guys!”), their wandering course, and their utter lack of editing.

One could argue that the immediacy and unrehearsedness of these reaction videos are more products of laziness or technical inexpertise than they are products of deliberate rhetorical artistry. Even if they are unpolished,
however, isn’t this still part of what gives these videos their meaning? What gives them, for many viewers, their sense of unfilteredness, of rawness or authenticity? Perhaps these are shoddy pieces of work, but the fact remains that what we might look for in a reaction video is very different from what we might look for in a published book review in a newspaper, or even a polished book review prepared for school, even if that review were composed by one of these same young women. Just as viewers look to Bush’s reaction for his “true” feelings about 9/11, viewers look to reaction videos for “true” feelings about the novel, for emotion displays unconcealed by decorum and uneroded by time or thoughtful reflection.

The unconstrained character of reaction videos is also apparent in vloggers’ comments, and particularly their apologies and retractions. Tuesday, for example, apologizes again and again for expressing her disappointment: “Um, I’m sorry, Stephenie, I feel like I’m disappointing you by saying that it sucks, but I kinda feel like you disappointed me, in a way” (FantasticTwihards). By apologizing, Tuesday presents her own emotion as inappropriate and excessive. By apologizing, Tuesday admits that she probably shouldn’t be sharing her response publicly, but that she couldn’t help herself. Her emotion, she implies, has overflowed the dam of constraint.

Other vloggers show that their emotions are unconstrained by issuing retractions. In the description of her YouTube video (in text that appears just below the video frame), the fiercely disappointed JebpyHP stresses that this is her “initial” reaction only—and that her feelings later shifted. “Okay so I DID like some parts of the book. This [video] is my initial reaction.” Retractions like these, however, seem a bit halfhearted. After all, despite the vlogger’s change of heart,
she did not remove her video from YouTube. We are left to conclude that retractions like these are rhetorical, designed to present the emotions expressed as immediate and unconstrained, rather than to nullify them. JepbyHP wants viewers to know that her feelings have shifted, not so much to alter the emotional message of her video, but rather to reinforce it, by presenting that emotion as wholly unconstrained, and therefore genuine.

Here we begin to see how the rhetorical logic of the reaction video (which derives its force from emotional immediacy and rawness) also provides an opportunity for viewers to critique and dismiss the emotional messages transmitted by those videos. In a seeming paradox, JepbyHP’s retraction reinforces the emotions displayed by suggesting they later dissipated. This a potential fault line in the reaction video’s rhetorical logic—a weakness that Twilight author Stephenie Meyer would later use to dismiss readers’ reactions to her novel.

In my earlier discussion of reaction, I explained that, as a pathetic genre, “reaction” can imply certain power relations. In short, reactions are often coded as interventions into something that is or was outside the emoting subject’s control, registering as attempts to strategically introduce one’s voice, literally or metaphorically, into a situation that is not of one’s own making. (This is one reason, seemingly, that they are re-actions, we might say, rather than simply actions.) Specifically, reactions are commonly understood as attempts to seize or take back power, to upend, disrupt, reestablish, or just momentarily interrupt existing power relations. For this reason, the remediation of reaction into the
reaction video raises questions about the distribution of power and voice among media producers and consumers.

Much has been made, of course, of the democratizing potential of YouTube, and its ability to “broadcast” the ideas and attitudes of everyday people. The view of YouTube as progressive force was perhaps best illustrated when Time Magazine chose to celebrate “You” as their Person of the Year for 2006, a recognition normally given to celebrities, politicians, and other public figures. With a cover that mimicked the YouTube interface, Time editor Lev Grossman declared that it and other Web 2.0 platforms would provide an “opportunity to build a new kind of international understanding, not politician to politician, great man to great man, but citizen to citizen, person to person.”

And it is true that online video sharing gave ordinary readers of Breaking Dawn a way to circulate their feelings about the novel. In this sense, the technologies that allowed readers to remediate reaction into the reaction video are progressive, giving voice (or screentime) to rhetors who previously may have lacked any reasonable access to the public sphere. Looking at these videos in terms of genre, however, complicates this emancipation narrative. Just because Breaking Dawn readers were able to circulate webcam videos of themselves, doesn’t mean that they radically transformed their subjectivities, that is, the positions from which they speak, or the kinds of things that they are able to communicate. After all, these readers did not choose to upload “critique” videos: they chose to upload reaction videos. Why reactions? Because even before online video sharing made the reaction video possible, fan reactions already held meanings and significances for any number of audiences: for the media
producers who desired information on their target markets, for publics with longstanding fascinations with the emotive excesses of fans, and for other *Twilight* fans already drawn into intense emotional relationships with local and digital peers. In this sense, the reaction video seems to reproduce existing mediated power relationships within a new technological frame—one in which producers still produce, fans still react, and publics still watch fan frenzies with a mixture of perplexity, disgust, and delight.

In her interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Stephenie Meyer dismisses the negative “reaction” broadcast by readers online by safely positioning that reaction squarely within those existing power relationships. Rather than recognizing the authenticity and legitimacy of readers’ negative emotional reactions, and reaction videos, Meyer re-casts these emotions as the fleeting frenzies or “freak out[s]” of hysterical “fans.” When the interviewer asks Meyer about these negative reactions, the author responds by predicting they will be short-lived:

> Well, I’ve actually named it the “Rob effect.” For some reason, I don’t know, it just takes the fans a couple days to get used to something. And it was most obvious when they announced who was going to be playing [the central character in *Twilight*] Edward, and everyone freaked out, and there was all this online controversy, and now everyone completely loves [the actor who was cast,] Rob[ert] Pattinson. [ . . . ] So I was expecting it. (Zuly89)

The immediacy and unconstrained character of “reaction,” as a genre of emotion display, here allows Meyer to completely disregard her readers’ disappointment
and angst, portraying these emotions as ephemeral and even predictable. While delivered more courteously, Meyer’s snub echoes many of the dismissive comments on reaction videos, comments like the ones quoted at the beginning of this chapter, questioning NuttyMadam3575’s sanity. Like these cruder commenters, Meyer dismisses reactions as impulsive, short-lived, and ultimately irrelevant. It is important to note, however, that Meyer is able to dismiss reactions for the very same reason that readers believed that reaction would be rhetorically effective—because, as a pathetic genre, reaction registers as immediate and unconstrained.

Perhaps understandably, many *Breaking Dawn* readers felt insulted and demeaned by Meyer’s words here—so much so that many readers subsequently signed an online petition titled, simply, “Legitimate Concerns About *Breaking Dawn*.” The petition demands that Meyer and her publishers respectfully acknowledge readers’ grievances:

> The thing that has upset me the very most is Meyer's reactions to her fans. "The Rob Effect" comment was insulting and belittling. We just don't "get" it yet, but we'll like it once we come around? Meyer, do you realize that The Rob Effect is most certainly taking place, but in the opposite direction? Once the hype and midnight delirium began to wear off, many former fans began to have more and more issues with your final chapter in this series. You are dismissing real, legitimate concerns instead of really listening to your fans and answering them in a respectful way. No, you can’t please everyone, but when such a large percentage of your fanbase
is crying "Foul!" it’s time to reevaluate what you have done. We are not a fringe few that have unrealistic complaints. We were your faithful fans who loved to sneak off into the Twilight world. [. . . ] We are the people that you asked to come along with you on this journey, and we are disappointed. Will you please answer us in a respectful manner?

Interestingly, the petition uses the term “reaction” not only to describe the emotions of readers, but also Meyer’s dismissal of readers’ emotions. In both usages, the petition attempts to give weight and significance to what Meyer has diminished, insisting that reactions do matter, that for good or ill they have purpose and rhetorical weight. It attempts to illustrate that, however unmindful or impulsive, reactions tell us something. Though her comments were brief, Meyer’s reaction had an impact on her readers. Likewise, the petition insists, readers’ reactions ought to have had an impact on Meyer and others behind the novel. Ultimately, the petition illustrates how the reaction genre can become the grounds for a rhetorical tug-of-war, with one side insisting that reaction’s immediacy and lack of constraint give this pathetic genre authenticity and weight, and the opposite side suggesting that these same properties render it fleeting and irrelevant.

In the end, neither those who created reaction videos, nor those who dismissed them, earned a clear rhetorical victory. However, it is clear that the reaction video’s emergence did alter the rhetorical landscape of the Twilight fandom, however subtly. Even if it did not produce tangible change, it is all too apparent that the intensity and accessibility of readers’ reactions to Breaking
*Dawn* on YouTube did produce a good deal of unease, both for the author herself, and for the fans, who seemed to sense something shifting in their relationship to the series, its producers, and to other fans. Rather ironically, it was the fan who would become most (in)famous for her reaction videos who sensed this shift most acutely.

At the height of the dissensus, NuttyMadam3575 uploaded her five-minute webcam jeremiad, “im getting really sick of all the breaking dawn haters!!!”, a vlog that lambasts fellow fans, not only for upsetting the author but also for shaking up the emotional circuitry of the fandom:

> I am very, very disappointed. How can you act like this? After reading that amazing book—not shit, not boring, not glorified fiction...A-maz-ing boooook. I’m gonna say it real clear. AMAZING BOOK. You’ve been waiting for, for what, a year? And you’ve been thinking about how wonderful it’s going to be, and you’re dying to get your hands on it, because it’s gonna be so good. ...And then you complain about it? Because it’s not what you wanted? Since when do you get what you want by complaining? (NuttyMadam3575)

Here, NuttyMadam3575, the queen of the reaction video, berates her fellow fans for sharing their impulsive, un-thought-out emotions on YouTube: “Your brain obviously isn’t working right now,” she accuses. These reactions, she senses, aren’t proper within the established order of things. Upset fans here are “ungrateful,” and their expressions of dislike are not legitimate concerns or grievances but unwelcome and inappropriate “complaints.” Here, NuttyMadam3575, in an attempt to dismiss the emotions of her fellow fans, gives
them a different genre-label. Reframed as complaints, rather than reactions, the emotion displays of her fellow fans take on different, and less subversive meanings. While the petition discussed earlier presents readers’ “reactions” as raw and authentic emotions, arising out of “legitimate concerns” about the novel, NuttyMadam3575 reclassifies those emotions as unworthy illegitimate “complaints,” as bellyaching. With this subtle rhetorical move, NuttyMadam3575 once again illustrates the power of genre to shape how we create and interpret those displays. Simply by switching their genre-label, the vlogger casts readers’ emotions in a radically different, and much harsher, light.

Like the previous chapter, which revealed how vlogging can be deceptively dialogic, promoting back-and-forth exchange between vloggers and viewers, this chapter’s exploration of emotion affirms that vlogging is an inherently interactive or participatory form, whose meanings and uses are never fully determined by the original vlogger, but rather are created collectively by those who produce, view, comment on, embed, and share these videos. NuttyMadam3575’s rhetorical relabeling of readers’ emotions as complaints, rather than reactions, is only one example of how vlogs get continually reframed and reinterpreted. The contemptuous comments posted to NuttyMadam3575’s own reaction videos provide another example, as they dismissively relabel her “reaction” as a “seizure” or “orgasm.” The following chapter extends this discussion of vlogging’s participatory character, examining how the ethos or credibility of more informational vlogs is assessed, and indeed co-created, by their viewers. Like confession and reaction videos, witness videos suggest that vlogging, despite
appearances to the contrary, is a profoundly collaborative and distributed rhetorical practice.
Chapter 4

The Witness Video: Vlogging and the Problem of Online Credibility

Introduction

The 2010 Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill was an incomprehensible disaster, one whose massive scope and complexity perplexed all involved: the corporation that caused it, the governments that were slow to intervene, the Gulf residents who suffered its effects, and the broader publics who struggled to understand just what was happening and how they might respond—rhetorically and otherwise. Because the spill flowed unchecked for so long (nearly three months) and spewed forth such a spectacular volume of pollutants (about five million gallons of crude oil), many called the disaster “unprecedented,” as it devastated the ecosystem and the regional economy like no manmade disaster before it (“Times Topics”). Equally unprecedented was the scope and complexity of the disaster as a media event. Earlier oil disasters like the 1989 Exxon Valdez earned attention from the national and international press, along with discussion on an earlier incarnation of the internet. And in 2005 the drama of Hurricane Katrina played out across a broad range of media. Nonetheless, for many the 2010 Gulf spill was the first disaster to play out in a significant way via new media and online video. Much more so than the Exxon Valdez and even Hurricane Katrina, the public witnessed
the Gulf spill through the media kaleidoscope of the internet and its decentralized architecture—a shift that created an array of rhetorical opportunities and challenges for disaster victims, witnesses, concerned citizens, and the like, along with a host of interpretive challenges for those who sought to learn about and make sense of the disaster as they gazed into this online kaleidoscope.

Online video proved particularly central as many turned to YouTube both to follow the disaster and to circulate their own messages about its unfolding. For example, millions watched the live “spillcam” posted to the internet by British Petroleum (BP), the oil company responsible for the disaster (Jansen and Keilar). Broadcasting twenty-four hours a day, underwater cameras streamed video of jet-black oil surging relentlessly into the Gulf. The spillcam helped make the Gulf spill, in the words of environmental historian Brian Black, “the first real-time environmental disaster on record” (743). Discussion surrounding the spillcam revealed just how important the internet and online video had become to the disaster as media event. Eventually, the spillcam proved so popular and so powerful that BP reversed course and attempted to shut it down, perhaps recognizing that its release had backfired and galvanized public sentiment against them. In an unprecedented acknowledgement of the internet’s importance to public discourse and democracy, the White House and Congress intervened, pressuring BP to keep the spillcam going. In a statement, Congressman Edward Markey wrote, “This may be BP’s footage, but it’s America’s ocean. Now anyone will be able to see the real-time effects the BP spill is having on our ocean” (qtd. in Black). In doing so, Markey affirmed the perceived importance of the internet
and online video to the public’s understanding of and emotional engagement with the ongoing disaster.

Though the spillcam became the most influential online video of the disaster, many found additional rhetorical uses for online video. For example, many who were unhappy with press coverage of the disaster turned to vlogging to circulate their own messages about the spill’s progress and effects, presenting themselves as witnesses to the ongoing disaster. However, those who hoped that the YouTube platform would provide a safe haven from commercial spin and corporate PR were to be sorely disappointed, for quick to join disaffected and disenfranchised vloggers on YouTube was BP itself. About a month after the initial explosion, BP introduced its own YouTube channel and began promoting it heavily. Featured on the channel were BP-produced witness videos that mimicked the format and features of witness vlogs created by the disaffected, but which contradicted their messages, speaking of hope and progress and a quick return to normalcy.

While the credibility of the “spillcam” seemed beyond question, this jumbled stream of witness vlogs presented both viewers and would-be composers with a serious challenge—the challenge of credibility. In a field crowded with claims and claimants, how could composers create an effective public ethos? How could they work to persuade the public they were trustworthy? From a viewer’s perspective, conversely, how could witness vlogs be evaluated? How could viewers decide which would-be witnesses they could and could not trust? Addressing these and other questions, this chapter examines how YouTube users handled the problem of credibility as they composed and viewed video.
testimonials related to the 2010 Gulf disaster. In this particular rhetorical situation, composers and viewers alike faced, in crystallized form, a challenge that YouTube and internet users face every day—the problem of online credibility.

The Witness Video Genre

Portable and relatively inexpensive cameras, along with video sharing platforms like YouTube, are allowing everyday people to videorecord events of public interest that they believe are being overlooked or neglected by professional media, and to present those events to audiences large and small, more or less instantly. In this “witness video” genre, the YouTuber becomes a kind of amateur reporter, broadcasting to the public events and stories that they believe aren’t getting the attention they need or deserve.

New media scholar Anandam Kavoori identifies the “Witness” video as one of YouTube’s most important genres, carefully differentiating the witness vlog from other shared recordings of daily life: “Properly delineated from other more selective, random, and often trivial recordings of daily life, the Witness is characterized [. . . ] by the recording of public experience” (154). While what is private and what is public is subjective and ever shifting, to condition Kavoori’s definition, we might say that witness videos are those that make a claim (explicitly or implicitly) that what they record is of public interest.

As Kavoori, along with Mary Grace Antony and Ryan J. Thomas, have shown, the witness video is a well-established genre of user-generated public video, one with rich variations. Some witness videos are simply “raw” footage of stunning or tragic events: videos of tsunami waves tearing through Japanese cities (RussiaToday), videos of supposed UFO sightings (Sheilaaliens), videos of
traffic accidents (cfm4life), and of college students being unjustly tasered. Antony and Thomas base their study on one particularly disturbing witness video, a well-known and controversial videorecording of a man being shot and killed by Bay Area Rail Transit Officers. Kavoori describes similar witness videos that chronicle the demolition of buildings, executions (including that of Saddam Hussein) and psychological breakdowns.

These sorts of witness videos offer the event as a pure spectacle, but other witness videos, like the vlogs I analyze in this chapter, are more narrative in nature. Rather than (or sometimes in addition to) the audiovisual spectacle of events, these vlogs offer personal accounts or testimonials of those events. We can differentiate between the two varieties of witness video by identifying who, in a given video, the implied witness is. In the first variety of witness video, the viewer of the video is the implied witness (seeing the event “firsthand” in the viewing window). In the second variety of witness video, the witness vlog, the individual onscreen is the witness, as they share what they have seen or heard or experienced with a public who, they believe, needs to know. These videos are not about witnessing, but rather about witnesses.

**Witness Videos and Media Convergence**

Witness videos like these have been held up as prime examples of the power of the internet, YouTube, and other Web 2.0 platforms to give voice to the masses, to democratize media, and generally to introduce into the public sphere concerns and questions that professional media, in their supposed thrall to corporate and political interests, would otherwise overlook or ignore. The 2005 arrival of Web 2.0, for example, was heralded as a new stage in the evolution of
the web in which users supplanted producers (authors, designers, webmasters, etc.) as the primary creators of online content, making the internet more interactive, collaborative, and democratic (O’Reilly). Online video sharing and YouTube, its largest platform, were widely praised as transformative Web 2.0 technologies. *Time Magazine* placed YouTube at the center of its celebration of Web 2.0 in 2006, when they recognized “You” as their “Person of the Year.” Editor Lev Grossman, calling YouTube the “million-channel people’s network,” claimed that this and other Web 2.0 platforms would democratize media, “bringing together the small contributions of millions of people and making them matter.” Going further, he presented YouTube and Web 2.0 as vehicles for bottom-up social revolution: “It’s about the many wrestling power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes.”

For some, the witness video represents, in its purest form, video sharing’s potential to transform media and even “the world.” Antony and Thomas express hope that what they call “participatory media technologies” might counteract the omissions, misrepresentations, and homogenizations of “mainstream mass media,” which they claim exert too powerful an influence over the public sphere, influencing “what issues may be deemed newsworthy and the corresponding level of importance they are afforded” (1283). The internet including online video offer, for these scholars, the possibility of a more open and diversified public sphere, one in which everyday individuals, rather than media corporations, help set the agenda. Thanks to new media, they explain,
Participatory media technologies that allow for the creation and distribution of user-generated content overturn traditional notions of all-powerful news media that define and restrict a largely passive audience. In other words, traditional power dynamics that separate sender and receiver are shifting and blurring. [ . . . ] New communication technologies have made it possible for members of the public to take on the responsibility of representing common (i.e., non-elite) interests and actively participate in the creation and dissemination of information. (1283-1284)

While it may be true that the internet, YouTube, and the witness video have made it “possible” for media to take on a more democratic character, this does not mean that democratization is inevitable. In his study of witness videos uploaded to iReport.com, the more skeptical Farooq A. Kperogi argues that corporate media will not cede control over the public sphere so easily. Specifically, Kperogi claims that, while “the flowering and proliferation of web-based citizen journalism” has indeed expanded and diversified the public sphere, citizen media is being aggressively coopted by “corporate media hegemons” (315). In short, Kperogi argues that by controlling the platforms themselves, that is, sites like iReport and YouTube, corporate media are still effectively setting the agenda for the public sphere, still determining what is important and what is newsworthy, albeit through subtler means. By manipulating interfaces and controlling sorting algorithms, these so-called hegemons still exercise considerable influence over what viewers will see—and not see. Through these insidious means, according to Kperogi, the process of democratization is being perversely reversed: “online
citizen media are actually being coopted into the culture and conventions of mainstream media practices” (315), effectively providing free labor and free content for corporate media. Rather than creating awareness of marginalized issues, witness videos, Kperogi suggests, may simply be providing fodder (or more accurately, footage) for the same old corporate media mills and their self-interested narratives.

Bringing together these two schools of thought on new media paints a complex and admittedly confusing picture. On the one hand, there is agreement that the internet is opening new avenues to the public sphere, avenues that serve as alternatives to mass media. On the other hand, there is the claim that mass media is quickly learning how to capitalize on or even control these seemingly democratized avenues for expression. Taking a broader view, Henry Jenkins, in *Convergence Culture*, reminds us that we needn’t choose between these two, seemingly competing narratives. Jenkins describes the current media landscape as one of “convergence,” in which the roles played by media producers and media consumers blur and break down.

Convergence, as we can see, is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process. Corporate convergence coexists with grassroots convergence. Media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to [ . . . ] reinforce viewer commitments. Consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other consumers. [ . . . ] Sometimes,
corporate and grassroots convergence reinforce each other, creating closer, more rewarding relations between media producers and consumers. Sometimes, these two forces are at war.\(^{(18)}\)

Media convergence, in which the messages and motives of disparate rhetorical actors effectively dissolve into one another, adds new layers to an old puzzle, the puzzle facing those who turned to online video sharing to learn about the BP oil spill—namely, the puzzle of credibility. Specifically, those who turned to YouTube to learn about what was happening in the Gulf encountered a morass of witnesses and claims, one further muddied by media convergence and specifically the convergence of the witness vlog with BP’s corporate crisis management. This chapter performs an intertextual analysis of witness vlogs and comments on those vlogs in order to explore how YouTube users construct and assess the credibility of informational videos generally and witness videos specifically.

**Credibility and Vlogging**

YouTube advertises itself as a platform to “broadcast yourself.” Those of us who remember earlier media epochs might associate the notion of “broadcasting” with the spread of news or information. However, YouTube’s “broadcast” architecture hosts information-based content (like our witness video) a bit uncomfortably. While the YouTube interface provides ample equipment for spreading videos (through its handy linking and embedding tools, for instance) the interface provides few options for assessing the credibility of videos and the claims they present. Instead of encouraging assessment, the YouTube interface instead encourages movement (the movement of videos from viewer to video, as well as the movement of the viewer from video-to-video). In doing so, it
discourages activities like assessing or dwelling, frustrating viewers’ abilities to evaluate the credibility of any information or claims a video might offer.

With certain videos whose information claims seem especially important to the public interest, however, YouTube users do cobble together ways to evaluate credibility, particularly using the site’s (hotly debated) “comment” function. In this way, credibility on YouTube emerges not from the author or even the video itself, but rather out of their interplay with the interpretive activity of viewers—that is, out of the larger vlogging ceremonial (see Chapter Two). The ethos of any given video, then, is created in large part by the framing of viewer-commenters, who resist the interface’s call to constant movement, and who instead stay to assess and contextualize the video, and to share their findings with other viewers via comments.

The difficulty of credibility assessment on YouTube and other video-sharing sites is a new incarnation of an old problem—the problem of online credibility. From the mid-nineties, scholars of online communication including Nicholas Burbules, Barbara Warnick, and Laura Gurak have frequently described online credibility as a “problem” (Burbules 442, Gurak 93). The credibility of online communications is a “problematic” matter for any number of reasons (Warnick 46). For one thing, as Burbules and Warnick emphasize, the authorship of web content is so often diffuse or indeterminate. For instance, as Warnick points out, websites are frequently “coproduced,” their authorship “distributed” among any number of persons or entities, from designers to copywriters to commenters, advertisers, and so on (45). As Burbules recognizes, “how to differentiate credible from fraudulent information is not a new problem, but
unraveling these in the context of a vast rapidly changing networked system is” (442). This is perhaps especially true as media convergence continues to blur the boundaries between commercial and amateur web content and muddy the process of authorship generally.

At first glance, the authorship of YouTube videos seems much clearer and less diffuse than the earlier, text-and-image, pre-social media web content analyzed by Warnick and Burbules. Incorporating features usually associated with social media like Facebook and Twitter, YouTube videos have clearly identifiable authors, or, to use the site’s vocabulary, identifiable “uploaders,” as we can see in Figure 4.1.

At the time of this writing, in summer 2012, the interface surrounding any given video displays the identity of the uploader rather prominently, and, through an array of links, allows viewers to learn more about the uploader, or at least watch more of his or her videos. On the webpage that frames any given video, the uploader’s username is included above the viewing window, alongside a link enabling the viewer to “subscribe” to that uploader’s videos. Beside the username and subscribe link, the interface prominently displays a number; this is a count of how many videos the uploader has shared on the site. The count also doubles as a drop-down menu offering quick access to those videos. Below the viewing window, the uploader’s username is repeated in a boilerplate phrase repeating the username of the uploader as well as dating the video, as in “Uploaded by HistoryTours on Jun 22, 2010.” In this way, markers of authorship (uploadership?) frame the video, in a literal, visual sense, surrounding it from above and from below.
While it would be a stretch to claim that YouTube’s interface attempts to establish the “expertise” of uploaders, it does seem designed to establish some flavor of credibility, a credibility that seems tagged to an individual uploader. Specifically, it suggests that the uploader’s history of activity on the site, the longevity and volume of his or her participation, might give the viewer a read on the reliability, or at least the currency, of the video being watched. Through its array of uploader-related links, it encourages the interested viewer to watch more of the uploader’s videos, creating a path that viewers can follow to learn more.

Figure 4.1: A witness video claiming that it was raining oil due to the Gulf spill. From HistoryTours. “Oil Rain in Louisiana?” YouTube. 22 Jun 2010. Web. 31 Mar 2012.
about the uploader longitudinally. Certainly, not all viewers will follow the paths that YouTube has laid out for investigating user histories, and perhaps some will never look at the uploader’s username at all. Nonetheless, the interface (as currently designed) does allow viewers to make a limited assessment of the video’s and uploader’s credibility, with credibility here being limited to a measure of the uploader’s participation on the site itself.

A history of the user’s activity on the site, however, seems a very imperfect source for assessing credibility, and can only take a viewer so far in evaluating the trustworthiness or untrustworthiness of informational content. Indeed, the mechanisms I have described are all movement-mechanisms, and can just as easily move a viewer’s attention farther and farther away from the video they originally hoped to evaluate. Further, while YouTube foregrounds the uploader’s user- or account name, these names usually reveal little to nothing about the uploader beyond his or her participation on the site. This means that when, for example, a witness stands before a camera and shows his or her face, he or she can nonetheless remain effectively anonymous. Even if users click their way to an uploader’s main page or “channel,” the information presented there about the uploader tends to be quite minimal. Figure 4.2 shows the channel page for user “HistoryTours,” who during the 2010 BP spill uploaded a witness video claiming that it was raining oil in Louisiana. Again, the user’s participation on the site is foregrounded. Here, the user chooses to share his real name and profession at top-left, but this is optional, and actually quite unusual. Beyond his name, we might look to the “About” section to assess the uploader’s credentials, but here we find only that he claims to be an “actor, journalist, cajun chef and youtube legend.”
This text emphasizes again how YouTube’s systems for assessing credibility (if they can be called that) are largely self-referential. Just as the design of the channel page foregrounds the volume and velocity of the user’s participation, especially the number of his views, subscribers, and videos, here in the “About” section the user establishes credibility by reference to his own “legendary” participation in the site. In short, YouTube’s formal systems for assessing the credibility of videos, at least those systems that allow us to investigate the identity or credentials of the author, offer only closed loops that refer viewers back to the platform itself.

However, as Warnick reminds us, credibility is about more than authorship and credentials—or, at least, can be. Writing in 2007, Warnick places online credibility within an enlightening historical frame, reminding us that the
changes in communication and credibility we are currently seeing are far from unprecedented. Credibility varies over time and across cultures, she argues, becoming constructed and assessed differently across different cultural moments, and even across different media and genres within the same moment. From Warnick’s broadened perspective, if there is in fact a “problem” with online credibility, it is not a problem inherent in the medium itself, but rather a problem within our perception and understanding of that medium. The true problem, Warnick insists, is that users and scholars alike remain clinging to a notion of credibility that is diminishing in its relevance and utility, an outdated notion of credibility that might be called “source credibility” or “credentialism.”

According to Warnick, credentialism is the “modernist” notion that a message’s credibility should be assessed by referencing the established reputation or expertise of the author or entity producing the message, whether that producer is Walter Cronkite, Dr. Phil, the BBC, or our supposed oil rain witness, YouTube’s HistoryTours. When we assess a message’s credibility according to its credentials, we look not at the message, but rather behind it. Credentialism, Warnick writes, came into vogue during the nineteenth and twentieth-century dominance of the commercial media industries, which tended to produce branded messages with “readily identifiable authorship” (45). For any number of reasons, however, credentialist assessments online become difficult if not impossible, as our analysis of the YouTube interface has shown. For one thing, web content is frequently coproduced and/or produced (psuedo)anonymously. For another, even when information about authorship is provided (as it is on YouTube) that information is rarely included to establish the expertise or reliability of the author,
as it might be for an article in a trade journal, a newspaper column, or a pamphlet. Instead, paths to learning more about the author(s) of content are usually hyperlinked slides propelling the viewer to consume more and more of the author’s content, not to learn about his or her “credentials,” in Warnick’s modernist sense.

So how do we create and assess credibility online? Warnick argues that online credibility is “field dependent.” Borrowing this term from the philosopher Stephen Toulmin and his work, The Uses of Argument, Warnick claims that credibility is constructed and assessed quite differently from field to field, so that internet users approach websites about film and websites about health and medicine with very different assumptions about what determines their credibility, even though both types of sites exist within the same web medium.

Further, and more importantly for our discussion of the witness video, Warnick and Gurak suggest that credibility online is far less about credentials—about who is behind the text—and far more about ethos, about how the author creates a sense of credibility and character within the text itself. In this way, credibility online works more like credibility in ancient rhetorical theory, and less like credibility on the CBS Evening News. As Warnick explains, credibility in the time of Aristotle was primarily a textual construction:

In Athens in the fourth century BCE, for example, ethos was tied to the speaker’s character as portrayed in the speech itself (ethos) rather than to any external knowledge of the speaker’s position and education (source credibility). [. . .] Audience perceptions were based on how the speaker constructed a view of himself as
possessing such traits as courage, self-control, prudence, and liberality that were in accord with the values of Athenian culture.

(46)

In other words, in discussing credibility, ancient rhetorical theory downplays the social position of the speaker (source credibility), and instead emphasizes the credibility that is created within the rhetorical performance itself (*ethos*).

My discussion of the YouTube interface affirms that credibility is indeed field dependent, differing considerably not only from credibility in professional media, but also from credibility on the sort of HTML-based, text-and-image web that Warnick’s study concentrates on. Online video sharing sites like YouTube, while still hosted on the HTML-based web, differ significantly in two ways. First, and most obviously, they introduce the element of video, previously alien to (or awkward on) the web, but eventually pushed through HTML-based sites using browser plug-ins, especially Adobe’s Flash. Second, but equally important, online video sharing sites also include social media structures that make issues of authorship and credibility look much different than they did on Warnick’s more dispersed and faceless web.

The participatory architecture of YouTube, as well as the culture of dialogue surrounding the vlogging ceremonial, makes the credibility of informational online videos an intertextual and interactive construction. Credibility here involves the dynamic interplay of the video itself with the subsequent rhetorical activities of its viewers and commenters along with their interactions with the uploader. While Warnick and Gurak argue that credibility on the pre-social web resembles the classical notion of *ethos*, I argue that
credibility in a social media environment is a profoundly collaborative and always-ongoing activity. On YouTube specifically, videomakers attempt to construct textual credibility or *ethos* using various techniques; viewers as they comment and embed the video reframe it in ways that affirm, change, or undermine its credibility; uploaders then sometimes respond to viewers comments in attempting to regain credibility, and so on. What emerges from all this rhetorical activity is a kind of *distributive credibility* that viewers can then assess, intertextually, by consulting the video and its various comments and contexts. But it doesn’t stop there. Viewers can then, if they so choose, participate in this ongoing credibility-making process, by commenting, embedding, or otherwise sharing the video in ways that reframe the message’s legitimacy. This distributed credibility does not reside exclusively in the author or the text itself but rather gathers or accretes around online videos, and is always potentially ongoing.

While it may be especially visible and important on YouTube, credibility is interactive and distributed in all rhetorical transactions including online texts of all kinds. Kristie Fleckenstein articulates the interactive and distributed nature of credibility in her exploration of digital poetry, “Who’s Writing: Aristotelian Ethos and the Author Position in Digital Poetics.” Like Warnick, Fleckenstein returns to Aristotle’s discussions of *ethos* to articulate her theory of online credibility. The difference between their engagement with Aristotle is that, while Warnick uses Aristotle to emphasize the textual nature of credibility (in other words, how it is constructed in the text), Fleckenstein uses Aristotle to emphasize the *interactive* and *distributed* nature of credibility; in other words, how it is constructed across
texts and contexts. In Fleckenstein’s reading, “Aristotle constructs a concept of ethos that emphasizes the liquid movement among speaker, audience, scene, and context, offering a powerful lens for re-seeing author positions in digital poetics”—and also, I would add, for understanding the credibility of video sharing and other online rhetorics. Like the interactive digital poems described by Fleckenstein, YouTube’s participatory architecture allow users to interact with and impact the text. While opportunities for users to modify the original video are limited, the YouTube interface allows viewers to comment on and re-embed videos and in the process reframe their meaning and credibility. Fleckenstein explains that this sort of digital interactivity only formalizes the intrinsically distributed, ecological, or networked nature of ethos, which even in classical-style oratory “circulates throughout the network of bodies, communities, and moments” and becomes “a product of the ecology of rhetor, audience, scene, and city-state.” Fleckenstein here reminds us that credibility, even in texts that aren’t functionally interactive, is always the product of a negotiation between rhetors and audiences/communities, a negotiation that, despite being sometimes invisible or implicit, is no less real. While Warnick is right to point out that credibility is constructed within-the-text, and that credibility online is field dependent, differing from context to context, Fleckenstein adds another layer of insight, showing that the author can never create credibility unilaterally. In the classical agora and on YouTube, the author in constructing their credibility must take into account their audiences and their values, expectations, and tastes. Furthermore, in online environments, the author must relinquish the text into a formally interactive environment where viewers can comment on, re-embed, and
otherwise reframe the information presented, each participating in an ongoing process of distributed credibility.

We can see this construction of distributed credibility in (and around) two witness videos: the first uploaded by a concerned citizen, and the second uploaded by BP. Even texts that use nearly identical textual strategies for constructing *ethos*, for projecting authority and good character, nonetheless accrue quite different credibility, thanks to the collective efforts of their viewers. As they share their own assessments of videos, viewers help construct distributed credibility. They offer their fellow viewers valuable context as well as possible ways to assess the information presented in the video.

The following study illustrates how viewers contribute to the distributed credibility of videos by posting comments through the YouTube interface. My analysis suggests that YouTube’s current interface makes collective credibility assessments possible, but admittedly somewhat difficult. Specifically, I suggest that YouTube’s interface (as of summer 2012) provides an imperfect environment for collective assessment efforts, for two reasons. First, the interface promotes constant movement and discourages viewers from dwelling on individual videos. Second, YouTube’s comment system lacks organization and currently offers no good method for sorting or navigating through comments, which on popular videos number in the hundreds or thousands and vary widely in quality and relevance. Nonetheless, I conclude that distributed credibility remains a reality, since viewers continue to assess videos’ credibility well beyond the YouTube interface. Viewers also share credibility assessments wherever they embed, link to, or discuss videos online: in blogs, through social media, on news sites, and so
on. Each assessment becomes available to fellow viewers through searches or hyperlinked wanderings, and thereby adds to the distributed credibility of online videos.

**Distributed Credibility and the Witness Video**

Jennifer Rexford was an oil cleanup worker for BP. In the months following the cleanup, she began posting an emotionally gripping series of YouTube videos that document the intensifying of her illness and despair. This illness she claims was caused by her participation in BP’s Gulf cleanup program. Specifically, she claims that during the cleanup she was exposed to harmful dispersant chemicals used irresponsibly and inappropriately by BP. Holding a shaking camera at an awkward angle, in an early video titled “Sick P2S worker.wmv,” she tells the story of her illness in fits and starts.

Haltingly, her voice full of sadness, Rexford explains that she is suffering from “multiple boils, staph infections, and other things,” blaming her deteriorating health on BP, its cleanup contractor P2S, and their disregard of safety regulations: “P2S many times ignored OSHA regulations, telling us we would be safe in the conditions that we worked in. And, unfortunately, we weren’t.” Rexford not only describes but visually documents her symptoms on camera. Acknowledging that her symptoms are grotesque, she brings the camera close to her body, all the while apologizing for exposing herself in this way.

Now I’m going to try to PC as possible show you...if I can get into the light...[ heavy breathing ] I’m sorry I’m trying to get into the light here and get a decent picture...um, I actually don’t want to show my butt cheeks...I’m trying not to show my butt itself...but um
these are scars from previous boils...These are scars that are continuing to pop up, pop down...and I hate showing this but it drives me crazy because I have to get my word out somehow.

(jmrexford, “Sick P2S Worker.wmv”)

Rexford closes her video with an intense emotional appeal (Figure 4.3) that is not only a plea for personal help, but a public outcry, urging viewers to pass on her story and raise awareness that she, Rexford, is only one among many suffering:

All I gotta say is people are sick here [. . . .] We are suffering, and we are suffering bad. And if anyone can help, or if anyone out there hears our story, please, please [. . . .] Please, don’t kill off the Gulf. Just don’t kill off the Gulf. Genocide. Genocide is not right. And this is chemical genocide. And it will no longer be tolerated. [. . . .]

Please, take back the Gulf.

In a video posted a month later, Rexford displays her continuing deterioration and desperation (“BEFORE GOING IN OAK HILL”).

I am now losing feeling in my right arm. And this twitch that you guys see in my face constantly—my face has just been moving on its own. By the end of the day I can’t control my lips and uh I can barely hold fluid into my mouth. My left pupil is always dilated and they’re saying that I’m having neurological damage. [. . . ] I want to document my illness and our situation. We need help. I don’t know what else to do. They’re going to let us die. They’re going to let us die.
The 339 comments posted on the page for this vlog offer a window into how viewers assess its credibility—and into how they participate in the creation of that credibility. Reviewing these comments, it becomes clear that Rexford’s intense displays of emotion, as well as the graphic displays of her physical symptoms, create for many viewers a strong sense of credibility, even though she is a complete stranger making provocative claims and offering little in the way of context or background information.

Most comments express sympathy for Rexford and/or promise to share the video to bring attention to the plight of her and other BP cleanup workers. “My heart and prayers go out to you and your family,” writes a typical
sympathetic commenter. “I’ve shared this on my Facebook. As a resident of
Lafourche Parish here in Louisiana, I’ve been trying to get the word out as much
as possible. I hope and pray that something can be done…” (CrimsonVelvet1).

Another sympathetic commenter, clearly affected by Rexford’s emotional address,
writes: “I’m praying for you sweetheart and I’ve shared this video with people I
know...crying for you dear one…” (axolotlmafia). Clearly, many viewers saw the
video as credible because they perceived Rexford’s emotions as authentic, raw,
and real. Other commenters affirmed Rexford’s credibility and emotional
authenticity, not by expressing sympathy with Rexford, but by directing outrage
toward BP and other perceived culprits:

BP is so full of shit. Their approach to the disaster has been to use
dispersants to hide the oil, and not to clean it. This method of doing
it on the cheap is just so typical of corporate America. I can’t think
of anything poignant to say, because this video speaks for itself...
It’s times like these I wish I had faith so that I could pray for these
people. Unfortunately the way that we must fix this is through
policy. End Corporate Government. End the Capitalist scam.
(alextob)

Whether they expressed sympathy or outrage, these sorts of emotional comments
tended to affirm and extend the video’s credibility, as well as its emotional tenor.
This last commenter’s statement that the “video speaks for itself” perhaps best
sums up how these viewers assessed its credibility: arrested by Rexford’s
emotional and physical displays, they cannot doubt that her story is credible.
Other sympathetic commenters were more purposeful, stressing the importance of spreading the video widely and getting attention for Rexford’s and her co-workers’ plight both on the internet and in mainstream media. As one fairly representative “spreader” wrote,

[... ] You should e-mail about your plight to CNN or BBC, heck, ALL OF US should e-mail your plight to CNN or BBC. Reblogging/retweeting/posting on Facebook spreads awareness but we can do much, much more. Send it to your local newspaper, your blog, anything as long it’s a source of media that can help spread all the BP worker’s plight. (RandomEpicUsername)

Spreader comments like these don’t always explicitly affirm the legitimacy of the video’s claims. Nonetheless, they express conviction that her story could use more attention and further investigation, extending her what might be called provisional credibility. This comment, for instance, affirms the “plight” of Rexford and other BP workers and emphasizes the importance of “spread[ing] awareness.” Most comments on the video, in fact, emphasized “spreading” above all else, revealing these users’ assumptions about the power of social media to draw public attention, and give credibility to, issues and stories ignored by mainstream media. In these hundreds of calls to “share” Rexford’s video, viewers clearly hoped to build up its (distributed) credibility.

A few responses, perhaps a dozen of the 339 comments, question Rexford’s claims or express frank skepticism. “More evidence required please,” writes StargateMunky with cold directness. Some of the skeptical commenters, despite their questioning, show sympathy for Rexford’s apparent suffering. “The
twitch might only be Bell's Palsy, which is not a big deal,” writes one sympathetic skeptic, alternating between expressions of compassion and incredulity. “A friend of mine had it and it ended up going away. Have you had your blood tested for any of the material in the the dispersant? Best of luck, my thought and heartfelt wishes are with you and the other workers” (zavatone). Other skeptical commenters show little or no sympathy. One simply comments, “fake” (danogizmoprophet). Others go further in their accusations. “Just another american nut job looking for some money. I am so fucking sick of american and its people,” spits jordanjcm.

Not all skeptics, though, are full of bile. A few offer intense close readings of the video, looking for evidence to call Rexford’s claims into question:

i'm sorry about inquiring about your symptoms, but you have me curious as to why your entire face muscle is pulling up for your eye twitch. if your eye had nerve damage, the twitches in the eye are from the brow to the fold below your eye, why is your face muscle pulling up from your mouth? i can't see that being involuntary unless you had parkinson's or there was electricity involved considering how the muscles are pulling or being pulled. (qube)

Skeptical commenters like these call into question the video’s larger claims by examining small inconsistencies or possible factual errors. Even when offered with a touch of sympathy, questions raised by skeptics tend to give rise to debates, often heated, in which the video’s credibility is more deeply debated in the comment thread:
Easy to fake facial twitch? Let's see you do it. I can't. You viewed propaganda so you think reality is faked? There's LOTS of chemicals that cause nerve damage that don't TELL you that...like formaldehyde. 5 years in a formaldehyde soaked FEMA camper left me disabled with neurological problems amongst others....you want to say that's faked, too? (NoirAngelique)

This last comment affirms the video’s credibility by offering additional context, a rhetorical move practiced by both the sympathetic and the skeptical. Here, the context offered is the commenter’s personal experience with harmful chemicals and their effects, a context that backs the original video’s claims. Another, cruder commenter offers a similar context, in sharing his or her personal experience with “raunchy chemicals.” In this case, however, the personal experience is intended to undermine rather than undergird Rexford’s claims:

[... ] I've worked around raunchy chemicals and other than having the urge to eviscerate politicians and other lying sacks of shit, am fine. [ ... ] don't post that you're sick unless you learn how to lie better. (DoDilly188)

Personal experience is one context that YouTube commenters bring to assess the credibility of videos; another context they bring is information. In the comments on “BEFORE GOING IN TO OAK HILL,” believers and skeptics alike posted contextual information to back or belie Rexford’s claims. Here is one exchange between two commenters, the skeptic qubeh and the sympathetic carahert, about the possible effects of the chemical dispersants in question.
the harmful component of corexit 9500 is 2-butoxyethanol, which can, in really high concentrations, get as bad as pulmonary edema and hemolysis, but as far as i know it dissipates into the air into reasonable enough amounts within days. (qubeh)

Replies carahert:

Humm. Now look up the INGREDIENTS: Propylene Glycol:
Potential Chronic Health Effects: Slightly hazardous in case of skin contact (sensitizer). CARCINOGENIC EFFECTS: Not available. MUTAGENIC EFFECTS: Not available. TERATOGENIC EFFECTS: Not available. DEVELOPMENTAL TOXICITY: Not available. The substance may be toxic to central nervous system (CNS). Repeated or prolonged exposure to the substance can produce target organs damage. (carahert)

It is in this activity, this sharing and debating of contextual information, that viewers contribute most clearly to the distributed credibility of the video. In posting this contextual information in comments, viewers take what would otherwise be an internal or private process of assessing credibility, and share it with other viewers. In this way, they participate in the ongoing process of framing the video and constructing its credibility. Subsequent viewers, when they visit the page for Rexford’s video, not only have access to her claims and appeals, they also have access to the collective credibility-assessments of previous viewers, posted in the form of comments. If they are unsure whether to believe what Rexford is saying, they can turn to the contexts (information and personal experience) offered by commenters to support or subvert her claims. They can consult the
close readings offered by both believers and skeptics to look deeper into the video. They can scan the expressions of sympathy and cynicism to get a feel for how the video is resonating with other viewers. In short, the comments posted to a witness video or other informational video on YouTube can potentially influence a viewer’s assessment of that video’s credibility.

This is not to say, however, that a YouTube viewer’s assessment of a video’s credibility is objective. Again, despite having little to no evidence to back up her claims, Rexford’s video garnered comments that were overwhelmingly supportive, sympathetic, and largely unquestioning, with the skeptical and hostile comments I have quoted representing only a small minority of the 339 comments. Interestingly, the reverse is true of witness videos uploaded by BPplc, the public relations YouTube account created and promoted heavily by BP in the wake of the Gulf spill. The overall rhetoric of BP’s witness videos is strikingly similar to the rhetoric of Rexford’s videos. Like the witness videos of Rexford and Craig’s, BP’s witness videos present themselves as provocative “countermessages,” messages calling for attention to issues being overlooked or misunderstood. Specifically, BP uploaded two series of videos featuring Gulf residents who bear witness to “what is really going on” down there: one, “Voices from the Gulf,” mimics many features of amateur witness videos, but with slicker production values. In addition to being posted to YouTube, “Voices from the Gulf” videos were also aired as commercials on television.

The second series, “Gulf Snapshots,” were uploaded to YouTube only, and more closely approximate the amateur cinematography (or lack thereof) characteristic of other witness vlogs. Shot with a single, low-resolution camera,
seemingly unrehearsed, and recorded in a take or two (with the stumbles and pauses to show for it), “Gulf Snapshots” present themselves squarely within the witness vlog genre. Consider "Gulf Snapshots: Nicole Scott, Emerald Coast, Florida” (Figure 4.4) This cheery but grainy video (uploaded, significantly, around the same time that Jennifer Rexford began uploading her witness vlogs claiming that the Gulf’s beaches were poisoned) features a monologue by Gulf resident Nicole Scott and her upbeat assessment of the state of the Gulf. After praising the virtues of nearby beaches and claiming that “the beaches are looking packed,” Scott sums up her testimony in a closing sound bite: “Clean. Ready for

business. Excited for business.”

The 23 comments posted on this vlog’s page, however, mostly attack and undermine its credibility. Here, we see the same sorts of credibility assessments being made of Rexford’s vlog, but with their polarity largely reversed. While many posted promises to share or pass on Rexford’s video and get it the attention it deserved, here many commenters express hope that through their participation they can squash the video and gag BP:

hey youtubers help me report and "dislike" every bp video on youtube maybe we can get them removed for a day:D!! (xalicaix)

Though the sentiment is turned upside down, comments about squashing a video, like comments about spreading a video, reveal a belief that viewers have the power to uplift or undermine the credibility of a video through their collective rhetorical action. Some commenters, like this one, clearly overestimate or overstate their power over the site’s content or the credibility of that content; despite xalicaix’s efforts, the video remains publicly available nearly a year after its uploading. Nonetheless, comments like these do hint at a subtler but very real power available to viewers: the power to comment and in doing so reframe a video and affirm or call into question its credibility.

Commenters on the “Snapshots” video, like commenters on Rexford’s video, also expressed skepticism, but here skepticism (and bile) became the norm rather than the exception. Some commenters simply scoffed at the video:

“HAHAHAHAHAHAHA! Keep these vids coming BP. No ones buying into this PR crap LOL” (OceanRide1). Many other commenters extended skepticism through close analysis of the video, recalling commenters’ questions about Rexford’s
twitching eye and other symptoms. Responding to Scott’s statement that “the beaches are looking packed,” many commenters point out that despite the video’s being set on a beach, few beachgoers are visible in the background: “sweetie Miami Beach is more packed on dead season, I think iv seen 12 people on the beach [ . . . ] The beaches are looking dead” (ak6081). One skeptical commenter closely analyzes Scott’s body language, believing he’s found evidence that she is conflicting or lying: “while shaking her head no she proclaims the beaches are packed....” (howardalexrice).

As with Rexford’s video, other commenters assessed the video’s credibility by bringing in context. Here, too, some offered context by bringing in personal experience:

I was standing RIGHT where this was filmed earlier this year. The CHEMICAL stench in the air was horrible at night. I talked to some local about what it was I smelled. They won't go in the water. Yes, the sand is white. The water is a beautiful coke bottle green & crystal clear. It's absolutely beautiful. I heard the impact from the blowout was minimal there; however, given the chemical smell at night and the fact the locals I talked to refused to go in, I'd think twice before swimming in it. (Search4TruthReality)

As with the Rexford video, others offered context in the form of information:

BP and the GCCF have no intention of "making it right" for people in the Gulf.

Gulf Coast Claims Facility (GCCF) is aiding in downplaying BP connection of chemical illnesses and other medical issues stemming
from the BP oil disaster while over 130,000-plus claimants have
filed lawsuits countering these egregious claims, now consolidated
in Louisiana federal court. (junk1111111)

In short, commenters who assessed the credibility of witness videos tend to
employ similar strategies, including

- offering support or skepticism,
- vowing to share or squash the video,
- performing close analysis of the video to test it claims, and
- contributing context in the form of relevant personal experience or factual
  information.

No matter which strategy they use, when they comment, viewers do more than
simply reveal their own personal assessments. Certainly, the comments analyzed
above offer a window onto the individual assessment processes of YouTube
viewers. Equally important, these commenters formally participate in crediting
and discrediting videos, contributing to videos’ distributed credibility or
interactive ethos, in a way anticipated by Fleckenstein. Commenters offer fellow
viewers possible ways to approach and contextualize the information offered.
Thanks to YouTube’s social media architecture, viewers who happen upon either
of these videos now have abundant commentary that they can consult in forming
their own judgments about the video’s credibility.

Limitations of the YouTube Interface for Assessing Credibility

As the above analysis demonstrates, YouTube’s comment system allows
videomakers and viewers to collectively negotiate the credibility of informational
videos including “witness videos.” However, that credibility-negotiation is not
always orderly and accessible, at least within YouTube’s current interface. To categorize the types of comments related to credibility, and to put them in dialogue with one another, requires a long and laborious process, one that I doubt any YouTube user would bother to undertake outside of formal study. As most who even dabble in YouTube know, YouTube comments are infamous for being chaotic, capricious, and sometimes viciously crude. The concept map in Figure 4.5, by online cartoonist Jessica Hagy, illustrates a typical attitude towards YouTube comments. It suggests that Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of the Species* and YouTube comments offer equal proof that “people are animals.” Scott Monty, the head of social media for Ford Motor Company, expresses a similar attitude in his blog:

![Concept Map](image)

*Figure 4.5: Illustration by Jessica Hagy of Indexed, poking fun at the crudity and incivility of YouTube comments. From Hagy, Jessica. “Our true natures.” Indexed. 8 August 2011. Web. 10 April 2012.*
How many sensible and well-reasoned comment threads have you seen on YouTube? [...] The number you're looking for is ZERO. All too often the threads devolve into inane commentary, not to mention hateful or offensive language. There's a definite lack of civility going on there.

Despite his otherwise sanguine attitude towards the “million-channel people’s network,” *Time Magazine* editor Lev Grossman expresses revulsion towards its comments and their crudity: “Some of the comments on YouTube make you weep for the future of humanity just for the spelling alone, never mind the obscenity and the naked hatred.”

To be frank, the comments I have presented in my analysis above have tended be those that are most civil, while I have left out of my analysis those that spew hostility, including many comments for example that simply harass the ailing Rexford about her weight and appearance. The truth is that civil, well-meaning, and well-informed comments on YouTube videos, the type that would help other viewers make judgments about a video’s credibility, are frequently in the minority. Many have speculated about why YouTube comments tend to be so crude, but the simplest answer is that the platform has no effective system in place, whether top-down or crowdsourced, for moderating comments. Certain comments can be hidden or deleted if enough users report them as being hateful or irrelevant, but this is far from a systematic way to address the problem of incivility and fly-by-night commenting. The continuing prevalence of crudity in YouTube comments makes the sort of distributed credibility I have described more of an ideal or possibility than an everyday reality. While it is true that
others, like this scholar, can sit down for hours to separate the wheat from the chaff, it seems unlikely that many will dwell long enough to piece together the sort of distributed credibility I have described above.

Helpful comments are not only scarce on YouTube, they are also difficult to find. In its 2012 interface, YouTube displays comments simply chronologically, with the newest first and the oldest last. Granted, YouTube offers some limited mechanisms for foregrounding popular comments; by pressing a “thumbs up” icon, users can help promote certain comments, with the most popular appearing directly underneath the video. Besides this, however, comments simply appear in a chronological list, as in an antique guest book, with no way for users to reorganize or sort through the sometimes-overwhelming mass of comments. This lack of organization is clearly an impediment to the ideal of distributed credibility I have described above.

Even to access the corpus of comments on a particular video, if they number more than a few, requires clicking through several, hard-to-locate links. YouTube’s interface, with its flashy sidebar offering related videos, makes it much easier and more attractive to move on to the next clip, than it does to dwell on a single video or dive into the depths of its comments. The implications of YouTube’s push-forward interface, encouraging constant movement from video to video, become serious when videos present competing informational claims. While researching this chapter, several times I visited the page for a witness video making claims against BP, only to find that YouTube had allowed BP to place a highlighted ad for a countermessage, a counter-witness, in the top-right corner, as recommended viewing (Figure 4.6).
Here we encounter what Jenkins calls “media convergence” in one of its most corrupt and confusing forms, as the edges between amateur and professional content, and citizen and corporate messages begin to blur. Here we also see how the idealistic “democratization” envisioned by the likes of Grossman comes up against the “hegemonic cooptation” envisioned by Kperogi. While a generous onlooker, observing this crossroads of the citizen and the corporate, might conclude simply that opposing sides are being allowed to voice their perspectives, nonetheless, we can see how this kind of convergence, abetted by YouTube’s heavily lubricated interface, along with its advertising-hungry business model, makes assessing or even considering the credibility of informational videos a problem.

Furthermore, as my comparative analysis of the two witness videos shows, viewers’ credibility assessments are far from objective. Instead, they are bent or

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**Figure 4.6:** An anti-BP video featuring ad for a BP-sponsored video. From gulfoilspill. “Proving Corexit Poisoning—Civil Engineer Marco Kaltofen-Gulf Oil Spill.” *YouTube*. 3 September 2010. Web. 1 May 2012.
biased by the values of the (online) community. Though nobody had ever heard of Jennifer Rexford before she started making provocative videos and claims, most commenters seemed to believe her, and contributed comments that buttressed her credibility. Conversely, because Nicole Scott’s video was uploaded by BP, essentially all commenters expressed extreme skepticism and distrust, with one going so far as to contradict the visual evidence presented, claiming that the clean-looking water had been doctored: “i bet that was a lot of working photoshopping frame by frame. though, i guess it was worth it because as a result, you didn't actually have to clean the gulf coast to make this video” (aschaevitz).

As Gurak notes in her early study of “cyberspaces,” online communities like “any community of shared values” tend to give credibility to messages that already fit their value system. Noting this distortion of perception and evaluation, Gurak laments that

“truth” does not always prevail, especially in the highly specialized spaces of the Internet. [. . . ] communities often become self-selecting and may not challenge the information they obtain in cyberspace forums. Instead, they choose to believe it because certain messages appeal to their shared values. [. . . ] The current structure of the Internet is thus the classic double-edged sword: while it allows for many people to connect with each other across space and time, it may also, especially in the discrete communities of Usenet groups and discussion lists, promote insularity and offer fertile ground for unchecked information. (85)
Guided by Gurak’s insights, we see that the credibility assessments of Rexford’s and Scott’s videos seem to center less on the claims themselves and more on the values behind those claims. Rexford’s claims are believed because of the values held by those who participate in the YouTube community, which has strong strains of anticorporatism and distrust of mainstream media. For much the same reasons, Scott’s claims are disbelieved more or less automatically, even though there is no evidence that BP compensated her for her statements.

Despite YouTube’s problematic commenting interface, and despite the community biases apparent in comments, distributed credibility remains a useful concept for understanding how we construct and assess the credibility of YouTube videos and other online content. Perhaps it is asking too much of YouTube to provide better mechanisms for collectively assessing credibility, when it already provides a complex architecture for hosting and sharing video content. Whether YouTube ever becomes a place where users can construct and assess credibility more effectively, distributed credibility nonetheless remains a reality, and not only for the patient YouTuber willing to dive into the murky and unsightly depths of a video’s comment thread. Happily, distributed credibility is a reality that flows well beyond the bounds of the comment thread on a given video, extending out into the wider web, crossing through various online communities and their distinct values, and coursing through all those places where videos are embedded, linked to, and mentioned. For example, a quick search pinpoints a blogger who has been diligently (perhaps obsessively) investigating Rexford’s claims and publishing the results, calling it “inconsistent” and concluding that it is a “fiction” and a “fraud” (Fat Lester). Furthermore, on the social news site
Reddit, we find an in-depth, factually based, and comparatively civil discussion of Rexford’s videos and claims (FluoCantus). A few excerpts from the 430 comments on the page devoted to her video should give the flavor of the exchange, which differs considerably from the YouTube comment thread. Here, one commenter provides informational context:

Neurological damage is a known effect of hexane exposure. Hexane, a hydrocarbon, is a common component in crude oil. It's very likely that oil cleanup workers were exposed to hydrocarbons (you know, since that's what they're cleaning up), which are sufficient to explain all the symptoms that people describe. (Reductive)

Another Reddit user comments, closely analyzing the video:

Breaking down the youtube video: the author of the video claimed numbness and tingling that she had numbness in her right arm which could be an atypical presentation of n-hexane poisoning. She also has some sort of efferent oculomotor nerve problem that is keeping her from constricting her left pupil, and she is also have facial fasciculations which is indicative of a few different things on a differential diagnosis. These are all atypical presentations of n-hexane poisoning as far as the literature shows, so her problems could be compounded by something else. She could also have myasthenia gravis which explains her lip muscle weakening throughout the day, fasciculations in her face, and nasal voice.

In short, all the types of credibility assessment present in YouTube comments can also be found here on Reddit, though in a more accessible and organizeable
interface. This is because Reddit’s interface is carefully designed to spark intensive discussion, and reward positive contributions to that discussion. Every user has the ability to “upvote” or “downvote” a comment, pushing the most helpful, well-informed, and civil comments to rise to the top. This bottom-up editorial process makes distributed or “crowdsourced” credibility an everyday reality—and makes sites like Reddit far better theatres than YouTube for assessing the credibility of online information.

All this suggests that the YouTube and vlogging, as a ceremonial, are far better suited to promoting emotional exchange among participants (Chapter Two), and to circulating pathetic appeals (Chapter Three), than they are at distributing information. Vlogs, it seems, are vessels equipped to transport not information but rather emotion.

Along with emotion, this study of witness vlogs has hinted at the importance of speed to vlogging, suggesting for instance that viewers interpreted witnesses’ reactions as either authentic and inauthentic, in part, because of the speed with which they appeared online. The following chapter takes a closer look at the speed or, more precisely, the speeds of vlogging. Acknowledging but moving beyond the fact that vlogging is “fast” (that is, capable of being composed and circulated rapidly), the chapter shows that vlogging runs at many complex and unpredictable speeds. This chapter also begins a discussion that will continue into my sixth and final chapter, a more practical discussion of how this research might inform composing as well as the teaching of composition.
Chapter 5

The Rant Video: Vlogging’s Many Complex Speeds

On the afternoon of Friday, March 11th, 2011, a UCLA junior named Alexandra Wallace returned to her apartment, annoyed. It was the week of final exams, and Wallace had hoped to do some studying in a campus library.

Unfortunately, the studying hadn’t gone particularly well—especially, Wallace felt, because her work had been repeatedly and rudely interrupted by other students. Once at home, Wallace decided she would express her frustration through the webcam attached to her computer. She dashed off a three-minute vlog and shared it with her friends online (Figure 5.1). By the end of this clip, Wallace seems much less annoyed. Her expression seems relieved, even cheerful. With a smile and a polite but playful cadence, she concludes: “So, thanks for listening! That was my rant!”

Seventy-two hours later, Wallace’s vlog, along with her name and face, were at the center of a controversy that had become international in scope, one covered by newspapers including *The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times* and the U.K.’s *The Daily Mail*; network TV news programs on CBS and ABC, as well as blogs with global readership like *The Huffington Post*. It became a trending topic on social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and Digg. Several of these re-posts drew hundreds of thousands of views and tens of thousands of comments, most of them angry or outright hostile. Many claimed
that Wallace’s video, which she titled “Asians in the Library,” was deeply racist, because Wallace had directed her rant not towards specific individual students behaving badly in the library, but rather towards “Asian people” generally.

The problem is these hordes of Asian people that UCLA accepts into our school every single year, which is fine. But if you’re going to come to UCLA then use American manners. [ . . . ] Hi, in America we do not talk on our cell phones in the library. I swear every five minutes I will be [ . . . ] like deep into my studying, into my political science theories and arguments and all that stuff, getting it all down, like typing away furiously, blah blah, blah, and then all of a sudden when I’m about to like reach an epiphany... Over here from somewhere, “Ooooh Ching Chong Ling Long Ting Tong, Ooohhhhh.”
Many online communities, including some thriving on YouTube, adopt a “postracial” character, tolerating and even encouraging members to play with issues of race and racism. Still, most commenters on YouTube and beyond agreed that Wallace had taken her “play” (if this was play at all) several steps across the line.

Wallace was stunned by the immediate global reaction to her vlog. She deleted the video, even took down her Facebook account, but others had archived the video and quickly re-posted it to YouTube. On Friday, March 18th, just a week after she uploaded her vlog, Wallace released a letter to the campus newspaper. Besides her original video, this would be her only public statement. She wrote:

   In an attempt to produce a humorous YouTube video, I have offended the UCLA community and the entire Asian culture. I am truly sorry for the hurtful words I said and the pain it caused to anyone who watched the video. Especially in the wake of the ongoing disaster in Japan, I would do anything to take back my insensitive words. I could write apology letters all day and night, but I know they wouldn’t erase the video from your memory, nor would they act to reverse my inappropriate action. (qtd. in Parkinson-Morgan)

Wallace’s apology emphasizes, above all, the vlog’s temporality or speeds—in other words, its poor timing. For one thing, the video’s circulation intentionally but rather unfortunately coincided with another “disaster”: the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, which killed thousands and impacted millions of Japanese. Aided and abetted by YouTube’s immediate and global reach, Wallace’s
“humor” clearly found its audiences “too soon” to play for laughs. Equally unfortunate, temporally, is the acknowledged reality that the video will endure, persisting not only in the individual and collective “memory” of its viewers but also in the physical memory of the YouTube archive. Within days, Wallace had completely lost control of her video’s meaning, circulation, and legacy. She had fallen victim to the very thing that had attracted her and thousands of other composers to YouTube and the internet: its many complex and unpredictable speeds.

This chapter uses this notorious rant, and the rant genre more broadly, to explore online rhetorical practices, and especially to examine how these rhetorical practices structure, and are structured by, time. The story of Alexandra Wallace can be told many ways: as a story about ignorance, about race and privilege, about the failures of higher education, and so on. For the record, I agree wholeheartedly with those who have condemned Wallace’s remarks as ignorant, hateful, and disturbing, particularly considering the casual and carefree manner in which she delivered them. Moving forward, however, I leave all critique of Wallace’s vlog to those who participated in the public controversy that brewed around it. In this chapter, I choose to tell Wallace’s story as a tale of precarious and unpredictable speeds, a story about a young person’s naïve and disastrous experiment in vlogging, despite working within one of the vlogging’s most established and beloved genres—the rant. In short, I present Wallace’s story as a cautionary tale that encourages composers and composition teachers to become more sensitive to the many and varying speeds at which texts are created and circulated online.
Tracking Speeds Online

If composers hope to carry out their rhetorical purposes online, and to prevent rhetorical accidents like Wallace’s, they need to be highly attuned to the internet’s rhetorical speeds. Throughout this chapter, I pluralize speed(s) to counter the notion that the speed of online communication can be tracked simplistically, using any single measure or concept. Many scholars, pundits, and other mythmakers have described the speed of the internet as one of homogeneous quickness or rapidity. From this perspective, the internet is simply “fast,” constantly “accelerating,” and perhaps approaching “immediacy.” This, however, is a simplification that potentially narrows our understanding of online communication and compromises our ability to meaningfully participate in it. Thankfully, in recent years, scholars of communication and culture have begun to recognize what computer scientists and others have known all along—that the internet runs at many fluctuating speeds. While these speeds can never be fully measured or predicted, composers who attune themselves to online speeds are much more likely to succeed rhetorically in electronic environments.

Cultural theorists like David Harvey, Anthony Giddens, and Paul Virilio usefully call our attention to the “speediness” of modern communication, including online communication. According to these and other cultural theorists, the internet is only the latest development in a larger story of social, cultural, and political acceleration, a speeding-up with far-reaching (and perhaps dire) consequences. Thanks to the internet and other technologies of speed, we are experiencing what Harvey calls “time-space compression,” what Giddens calls “time-space distanciation,” or what Virilio calls “dromological” intensification. In
short, the speed of communication is picking up in a big way, an acceleration that impacts how we live and relate to one another. For Virilio especially, the consequences of acceleration are grave, as technologies cause us to become more and more disoriented in time and space, and increase the frequency of “accidents.” Accidents are in Virilio’s view integral to technologies, which separate us from the realities of space and time. Just as the invention of the automobile was also the invention of the car crash, we might say that the invention of the rant video was also the invention of viral ruin. While advertisers and other technological mythmakers might paint the acceleration of technology as progress, Virilio and other theorists call our attention to the darker complications and consequences of speeds.

These accounts of cultural acceleration compel us to think critically about rhetorical speeds. However, they are far more concerned with forecasting the broad effects of speed (its impact on big-picture culture, society, and psyche) than with examining speeds themselves in their specificity and complexity. For those looking for more nuanced and practical theories of rhetorical speed, these theorists probably paint with too broad a brush. Furthermore, as compositionist Kate Eichhorn points out, cultural theories like these tend to be “trapped by a bleak streak of technological determinism” (299). For Eichhorn, Virilio’s theorizing in particular leaves “little hope that individual users could shape and redirect technologies in liberatory ways” (299). In short, these theorists can provide a broad framework and rationale for attending to rhetorical speeds, but, because of their wide scope, speculative methods, and deterministic bent, they provide few if any practical insights into rhetorical speeds.
In *Cyberliteracy*, Laura Gurak takes a more practical and liberatory approach to rhetorical speeds. To become cyberliterate, Gurak argues, participants need to grapple with the special properties of “cyberspace,” including its singular speed (29). To participate effectively and meaningfully in online communication, composers should understand how “cyberspace” operates, appreciating the characteristics that distinguish it from other media, including its “interactivity,” its “anonymity,” its “reach,” and of course its “speed.” While Gurak usefully moves the discussion of speed toward questions of practical literacy, rather than deterministic effects, she still grounds her analysis in deterministic assumptions about the internet’s supposed “speediness”:

The Internet inspires speediness. We sit poised at our keyboards, waiting for the next email message and replying as quickly as possible. People regularly apologize for not answering an e-mail message quickly enough, and most of us have wondered if a person might be sick or out of town simply because that person did not reply right away. Speed also changes how we think about social relationships. Professors who teach online courses often mention the large amount of email they receive from students and the speed with which they feel compelled to respond. As the epigraph to this chapter suggests, speed and reach invite us to “compress time” [...](30)

Gurak here presents the speed of cyberspace as unified and inescapable, determined by the affordances of the technology at hand. When Gurak speaks of the “speed” of cyberspace, she is referring only to its “top speed,” thereby
overlooking the possibility of multiple or flexible speeds. But just as we rarely
drive our cars or bicycles at top speed, we also rarely communicate at top speed.
For example, most of us have left an e-mail in the inbox for days or even weeks
while we considered how best to respond. Many of us have also spent an evening
looking back at a friends’ old posts or photos on social media sites, reflecting on
how things have changed over the years. These temporally complex activities
remind us that online communication doesn’t always move at “top speed.” To
attain true cyberliteracy, then, internet users need to track not the “speed” but
rather the plural “speeds” of online communication.

In his study of the composing methods of DJs, James J. Brown Jr. affirms
the importance of tracking speeds to composing online. Specifically, he presents
the speed-sensitive composition methods of the DJ girl talk as a model for
“dromological writing,” or writing that is “attuned to the problem of speed” (83).
Importantly, speed-sensitive composing is not composing that maxes out
technological affordances, but rather composing that takes advantage of the
rhetorical possibilities inherent in the many available speeds, recognizing the
nuances and complexities of each. Brown explains that dromological or speed-
sensitive composing is “nimble” and

not necessarily fast. It may very well be, and the results may be so
fast that they appear, in Ulmer’s words, ‘schizophrenic.’ However,
the dromological writer is not merely stepping on the gas. S/he is
attuned to the speeds of various rhetorical environments, and able
to slow down or speed up as necessary. (83)
Brown’s account illustrates that speeds can vary considerably in rhetorical environments both online and off. No matter how “fast” the technology, different speeds are available and have different rhetorical effects. Still, Brown’s conceptualization of speed remains somewhat fluid. In some places, the term seems to refer to the speed of the composing process and, elsewhere, to the pacing of the text or finished composition. Nevertheless, Brown’s study provides a theoretical foundation for a more textured and specific mapping of the speeds of rhetoric online.

As Brown acknowledges, there are a multitude of rhetorical speeds, speeds that vary considerably according to the genres and technologies and cultural practices involved. To help composers begin tracking speeds, I offer the schema in Table 5.1, a taxonomy of rhetorical speeds designed to prompt reflection, invention, and critical inquiry. This taxonomy is not intended to be exhaustive or authoritative, only suggestive, since multiple and alternative taxonomies are always possible. The hope is that this taxonomy will give internet observers a better understanding of online communication as a multitude of rhetorical practices, and also give composers a better shot at creating texts that will carry out (and not exceed) their intentions, helping prevent rhetorical “accidents” like Wallace’s.

Would-be composers can learn a great deal about online media and genres by tracking these speeds, or other types of speed, depending on their relevance to the genre at hand. Consider, for example, an apprentice vlogger. Practically speaking, composers can study and imitate the speeds of a vlogging genre they hope to compose in—confessions, reactions, rants, and so on. They can imitate
the pacing and duration of texts, the tempo of their composing process, the kairotic timing of its public uploading, the frequencies of updates or new

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speed type</th>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tempo</strong></td>
<td>Composition</td>
<td>The temporal orchestration of the composing process, conventional to a given genre. Tempo suggests how the creation of the text should be paced chronologically.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequency</strong></td>
<td>“</td>
<td>The temporal spacing between successive texts. Especially important for genres like vlogs, blogs, social media posts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pacing</strong></td>
<td>“</td>
<td>The temporal arrangement of elements within a given composition. Especially important for video.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Duration</strong></td>
<td>“</td>
<td>The temporal length of a composition. Especially important for video.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Timing (kairos)</strong></td>
<td>Publication</td>
<td>Temporal coordination. The strategy of aligning publication with various contexts and conditions identified as an exigency or “rhetorical situation.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Velocity</strong></td>
<td>Circulation</td>
<td>The rapidity or slowness with which online compositions move from audience to audience within or across spheres.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Continuance</strong></td>
<td>“</td>
<td>The rhetorical lifespan of an online composition, the brevity or protractedness of its presence online.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
installments, and so on. In tracking and imitating these speeds, composers learn both how genres are made as well as how they make meaning. For, as John Hartley explains, speeds are a “a major determinant of what a given piece of writing means”—more important, even, than the piece’s “ostensible content.” Attending to speeds helps composers create effective and meaningful online compositions that will resonate properly to viewers. Equally important, attending to speeds helps composers understand the risks and rewards inherent in a given genre or platform, recognizing that, within the multiverses of the internet and YouTube, compositions may take on speeds we never anticipated, desired—or dared to hope for.

In addition, when composers track speeds, they can also earn a critical perspective on a medium and its genres. As Catherine F. Schryer, Deborah Mutnick, and Jordynn Jack have illustrated, the distinctive speeds of a given utterance, genre, or medium have consequences including profound ideological implications. Every utterance structures time and space in a certain characteristic way, not only through its external or material speeds (of composition, circulation, etc.) but also through its internal or symbolic representations of time and space. Borrowing a concept from the literary theory of M. M. Bakhtin, these scholars call a text’s characteristic arrangement of time and space a “chronotope.” Bakhtin describes the chronotope concept in *The Dialogic Imagination*:

> We will give the name chronotope (literally, "time space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. [... ] In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one
carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. (84)

Bakhtin discusses how literary genres, in particular, imply a certain characteristic arrangement of time and space. Chivalric romances like those of Chretien de Troyes, for example, present a characteristic “adventure-time” that emphasizes chance, fate, and the random. In the chivalric romance, Bakhtin explains, things always happen “suddenly” (151-152). For the chivalric adventurer—as well as the reader of the chivalric romance—“the world exists exclusively under the sign of the miraculous ‘suddenly’; it is the normal condition of his world” (152). For Bakhtin, in short, each literary genre posits a “world” in which space is arranged and time flows in certain characteristic ways. Genres, in other words, possess chronotopes because they construct the “normal condition[s]” of the world and its arrangement of time-space.

While Bakhtin restricts his discussion of chronotopes to literary genres, rhetorical scholars have extended and expanded upon the chronotope concept, demonstrating that chronotopes are as present (and as powerful) in nonliterary genres as they are in literary ones. Rhetorical scholars have shown that all texts have chronotopes to the extent that they emphasize certain movements, meanings, and intervals of time while conversely but necessarily sideling alternatives. In doing so, texts as well as genres regulate “the placement and actions of human individuals in space and time” (Schryer 84). Schryer demonstrates as much in her study of “bad news” insurance letters, showing how
these letters discourage their recipients from responding by presenting timelines that are vague and confusing (Schryer 84).

Jordynn Jack echoes Schryer in insisting that representations of time enable and constrain possibilities for action, and, therefore, serve ideological interests. In her case study, Jack illustrates how, among others, the commonplace of “time-space compression” impacted discussions on the regulation of genetically modified foods in Canada. “If Canada does not act quickly, work on these biotechnology applications will not take place in Canada”: in reasoning like this, rhetors employed time-space compression to frame the debate in terms of the here and now, and to sideline other possible time-space framings, especially those that would emphasize wider and longer-term concerns (66). As Jack demonstrates, chronotopes can be powerfully persuasive, perhaps especially because they are often tacit or invisible.

The internet’s chronotopes likewise influence users’ understanding and experience of time. For example, is YouTube eroding the nation’s attention spans? Giving added significance to “gut reactions”? These sorts of claims are hard to prove. Nevertheless, their ubiquity in public debates about YouTube suggests that the site’s chronotopes do have psychological and perhaps even societal impacts.

However powerful, chronotopes like these are almost always unarticulated and unacknowledged. Paying attention to the speeds of rhetoric online and on YouTube, therefore, can help students to compose not only more effectively, but also more critically. Specifically, it can help students to recognize not only how speeds enable and constrain possibilities for composing, but also how speeds can
carry their own messages, messages composers may or may not be willing to spread. Composers, however, need not reproduce chronotopes blindly. Chronotopes may be powerful and often invisible, but, as Jack’s study reminds us, conventions never fully determine how an individual utterance will arrange time and space. Even when time and space constrain us, possibilities always exist for chronotopic improvisation, hybridity, and resistance. Before they can improvise or resist chronotopes, however, composers must first recognize and understand their implications.

To illustrate how tracking speeds can inform how we compose (or avoid composing) online, the next section offers a case study of the “rant video” genre and its uptake by Alexandra Wallace. My analysis contrasts this genre’s characteristic composing tempo—a high-risk, high-reward rhythm that prompts composers to capture intense momentary emotions and share them immediately online—with its potential for intense velocity and long-term continuance (in other words, “virality”) in online spheres.

As a number of scholars have noted, YouTube itself moves at many complex speeds, accelerating or decelerating as it takes on various rhetorical roles (Grainge, Davies). Sometimes, and for some people, YouTube is a virtual agora, promoting immediate back-and-forth conversation and allowing users to compose and share and respond to videos more or less instantly (Jackson & Wallin, Lange, Juhasz). Speedwise, YouTube-as-agora tends to be quick in tempo and frequency, brief in duration and continuance, loose in pacing, and attains minimal in its velocity. Meanwhile, YouTube also plays the role of interactive archive, allowing users to create enduring records or exhibits of video material
that will remain open to public audiences indefinitely (Snickars & Vondreau, Skinnell). Speedwise, YouTube-as-archive has a fairly constant velocity and prolonged continuance, with tempo, frequency, pacing, and duration varying considerably.

The kicker is that YouTube can operate as agora and archive at the same time, as Alexandra Wallace discovered when her conversational video became archived indefinitely and exhibited globally by YouTube users with rhetorical intentions far different from her own. To borrow Paul Grainge’s language, Wallace experienced firsthand the tension between “YouTube’s dual function as video streaming platform and archival interface,” a time-tension that can be creative as well as destructive (4).

**The Speeds of the Rant**

When she composed “Asians in the Library,” Wallace clearly believed that she had successfully coordinated her performance to the speeds of the internet, YouTube, and the rant video. Through her video Wallace clearly hoped and expected to reach like-minded people who shared her particular perspective: people, in other words, on her frequency or wavelength. In this metaphorical sense of frequency, Wallace proved spectacularly unsuccessful. While a minority of viewers affirmed Wallace’s explicit observations and attitudes, the overwhelming majority did not, returning only contempt and even outright hostility. In terms of composing speed or tempo, however, Wallace was quite successful. In explicitly labeling her video a rant, and drawing implicitly on conventions associated with the genre, Wallace linked her vlog to one of YouTube’s most established, even beloved forms.
As of September 2011, a search for “rant” returned over 30,000 videos on YouTube alone: rants on politics, rants on Shark Week, rants on stereotypes, rants on “fatties at the grocery store,” rants about YouTube itself, rants on haters, rants on *Twilight* and Miley Cyrus, rants on restaurants (in general and specifically), rants on Macs and PCs, rants on sports and music, rants on infanticide, Wikipedia, nosy people, “girl gamers,” natural hair products, and hundreds of other topics. More than a few YouTubers hang their entire online identities on the rant genre, and several include rant in their user or channel names: Rev Rant rants on video games; RantTank and Stripper Rant on seemingly random aggravations. Most rants are vlogs, produced quickly by ordinary people with their webcams. However, users have also clipped and shared rants from TV shows, movies, politics, etc.: football coaches “exploding” during press conferences; public meltdowns by celebrities like Charlie Sheen, Christian Bale, Alec Baldwin, and Mel Gibson. YouTube also hosts literally thousands of “Hitler rants”: in this absurdly comic subgenre, composers borrow a scene from the 2004 German drama *Downfall* in which Adolf Hitler madly berates his military advisors in his native language, and then layer over the scene anachronistic subtitles that make it seem Hitler is ranting about the iPad, or President Bush, or Germany’s defeat in the 2010 FIFA World Cup, or, in a postmodern turn, about the proliferation of “Hitler rants” videos. Apparently, however, even this heady flow of video rants can’t satisfy viewer demand. Project: Rant, whose YouTube channel hosts nearly 150 rant videos, is a major initiative by Pitch Productions to remediate text rants that they cull from Craig’s List and
other public sources, then dramatize and film them using professional actors, transforming them, effectively, into dramatized vlogs.

The genre of the rant vlog, of course, builds on traditions that extend deep into history and reach across many different media (Table 5.2 offers a temporal comparison of the verbal rant and the rant video). The Oxford English Dictionary lists usages of “rant” as far back as the seventeenth century. The term has seemingly always been associated with excessive displays of emotion; suggestively, “rant” has also served as a name for exuberant gatherings and “lively, noisy, or irregular” musical numbers. Daniel Seidel of Slate offers a brief, celebratory history of the rant in his article “The Lost Art of the Rant: How the Web Revived a Storied Tradition of Expletive-Laced Tirades.” Published in 2007, just before the rise of public video sharing, Seidel’s piece chronicles the remediated reemergence of rants on public websites like blogs and craigslist, tracing their history to an “oral tradition” of ranting “perfected in taverns and street corners and smoke-filled comedy clubs.” And it is true that rants continue to thrive in any number of media. In recent years, however, rants have

Table 5.2: Oral Rants vs. Rant Vlogs, a Comparison of Rhetorical Speeds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Verbal rant</th>
<th>Rant vlog</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tempo</td>
<td>Instant, improvised?</td>
<td>Frenetic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Single or serial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacing</td>
<td>feverish</td>
<td>feverish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Long/Excessive</td>
<td>Long/Excessive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing (kairos)</td>
<td>Intentionally inappropriate</td>
<td>Intentionally inappropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Velocity</td>
<td>None, save by word of mouth.</td>
<td>Unpredictable. Possibly zero, possibly viral.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuance</td>
<td>None, save by word of mouth.</td>
<td>Unpredictable. Possibly none, possibly indefinite.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
experienced something of a renaissance with the emergence of public video sharing. Text-based web genres like the blog and the message board offer anonymity, immediate access to a public, and freedom of form—affordances that together make environments in which rants can be fruitful and multiply.

Public video sharing, however, offers similar affordances, while also offering special affordances for the display of emotion. As the previous chapters illustrate, the audiovisual medium of digital video is able capture and circulate not only verbal language but also facial and gestural expression, vocal rhythm and intonation, eye movement, and other physical languages that carry emotional information. Because rants involve intense, even excessive emotion, this makes public video a more or less ideal platform for a new generation of rants, remediated for online video sharing and transplanted into the dialogic vlogging ceremonial (see Chapter Three).

Rants, in short, are videos in which an individual expresses intense negative emotions toward a person, an idea, a thing, etc. Significantly, rants are rarely addressed or directed toward their object, even when the rant-object is a person: see, for instance, JennaMarbles’s “I fucking hate my roommate“ series of rant vlogs. Instead, rants are performed for an audience of (hopefully) sympathetic others. Rants offer a (seemingly) safe space for one to express emotions that have been frustrated within other contexts. Video rants range from the wholly earnest to the wholly facetious, with most videos occupying some uncertain space in-between these poles. For many videos the question of whether the rant is meant in earnest remains ambiguous (the videos seeming one moment
grave and the next tongue-in-cheek) but this ambiguity is part of what makes rants compelling, and, as Wallace discovered, dangerous.

Like all genres, the rant is associated with a specific composing speed or, to use a term from my taxonomy, a \textit{tempo}. The rant’s composing tempo specifies a particular interval between the composing act and the emotion that inspired it—or, more precisely, the generative \textit{absence} of such an interval. In the rant genre, distinctions between invention and delivery, inspiration and expression, are reduced as composers move to a frantic composing tempo. This tempo is alluded to in the openings of many rant videos. Consider the opening of “People That Piss Me Off at the Gym,” a rant uploaded only ten days before Wallace’s:

\begin{quote}
All right, so I’m making this video—this isn’t even going to be content—this is going to be like an unedited \textit{rant}, about something that needs to be said. [ . . . ] Well, I might edit it if it gets out of control, but…” (JennaMarbles)
\end{quote}

The subject of JennaMarbles’s rant video is of course strikingly similar to Wallace’s, namely, the inappropriate and exasperating behavior of others in a public space. In fact, by the time Wallace created her video, this theme had already become something of a commonplace in rant videos (see also “Facebook rant” by ImMrTeddy, “Drive-Thru Rant” by FLuffeeTalks, and countless others).

Beyond the parallels in subject matter, however, there are equally important parallels in tempo. JennaMarbles’s opening lays out the speeds of her composing and publishing process. She will simply “make” a video without any “content,” plan, or structure. If there is a plan, it is to lose control, or come dangerously close to it. She composes in one, frenetic spike of activity. This
composing tempo gives the product, the rant video itself, its characteristic, feverish *pacing*. Effectively, the *duration* of the composing process and the duration of the finished product become, essentially, one and the same.

Importantly, neither producers nor viewers seem to believe that the looseness and impulsiveness of the composition and publishing process (if indeed it can be called a “process”) in any way inhibit rant vlogs. Rather, it is this impulsive tempo that gives the genre its characteristic meaning and allure. In fact, the impulsiveness of the composition is so important to the genre that, if video-makers have prepared for the performance at all, they are eager to hide it. The more ill thought out the rant, it seems, the better.

Wallace’s video seems perfectly tuned to the “one-click” composing tempo of the rant: its tempo, pacing, timing, and duration keyed skillfully to this vlogging genre. Like JennaMarbles and many other rantmakers, she begins *en medias res* (“Okay, so here at UCLA it’s finals week...”) and similarly offers disclaimers about what will be a reckless approach to composing: “So we know I’m not the most politically correct person, so don’t take this offensively.” This sort of disclaimer, in which the ranter brackets his or her own statements and emotions as being overly impetuous, exaggerated, or otherwise skewed, is a well-established convention of the rant, appearing at either end of the vlog, or sometimes within the uploader’s description. Such disclaimers suggest that both speaker and viewer recognize that this is not really the best time or forum to express one’s anger, but that the rant will proceed nonetheless. In this sense, the rant vlog can be described as intentionally mistimed or *akairotic*.
Other rant vlogs, instead of highlighting the tempo of the composing process itself, call attention to the foreshortened interval between the composing act and the distress that inspired it: “Now, I’ve just arrived home from work,” begins an exasperated brianinnis in “Retail Rant,” an employee’s diatribe against customers who arrive as stores are closing. In another vlog, “RANT-MALLS!” supricky06 explains, “So today I had a mall experience, and I’d really like to share why malls are pretty much the worst place to go on the face of this planet.”

In terms of tempo, then, rant vlogs are composed at an oddly specific and especially loaded point on the speaker’s emotional timeline:

• after a distress has occurred,

• following a period during which the distress went unexpressed (so that it intensifies), and

• before the distress finds appropriate and effective expression, capable of bringing about change or redress.

Of course, the ranter may not ever find, or even seek out, effective genres or forums for expression. In some cases, unfortunately, such forums might not exist (as seems to be the case with rants against school bullies) or because the rant itself is sufficiently cathartic. Either way, the characteristic emotion of the rant is not anger (negative emotion addressed effectively) but rather frustration, negative emotion misdirected and mistimed. This is not to say that rants lack purpose: on the contrary, it is their ineffectiveness, misdirection, and untimeliness that makes rants so compelling for producers and viewers. As Seidel phrases this, “A good rant [. . .] expresses a real passion, and it is often a passion that has been enflamed by powerlessness.” If the ranter were able to address their
distress in an appropriate or timely manner, Seidel observes, “there would have been no need for the rant in the first place.”

In terms of timing or kairos, then, the rant vlog is rather complex. Rants are not timely or kairotic in any straightforward sense, as they intentionally fail to address the right audiences or seize the right moments to bring about change or redress. Instead, rant videos that are timely or kairotic are those that reach equally enraged or frustrated viewers, with whom they experience a kind of virtual catharsis. The importance of mistiming to the rant is perhaps best articulated by Project: Rant, the genre’s leading patron. Their mission statement provides a colorful description of the rant’s allure:

People bitch about a lot of sh*t. A lot of that random bitching about said random sh*t is funny. When those people go online and take the time to type out that rage it’s hilarious. [. . . ] We curate the weird, the angry, the bizarre, the obvious, the ugly truth, the anonymous and we love it. It gives you a brief glimpse into someone that would most likely never flip out like this in public.

Once we understand that the timing of the rant vlog is not accidentally but intentionally, and generatively, inappropriate and ineffective, performed by people who would “never flip out” in other “public” times and spaces, then we can better understand why it is that Wallace believed she had composed a successful rant vlog.

Though her explicit claims and assumptions offended many, it would be difficult to argue that Wallace hadn’t composed the sort of thing that people who
watch vlogs often find compelling. Wallace alludes to this in her apology letter, cited in the introduction. It is perhaps ironic that in her letter Wallace apologizes for the “inappropriate[ness]” of her video because she so clearly intended to be inappropriate, and because, in doing so, she was following the conventions of a vlogging genre that is by definition inappropriate, whose characteristic composing tempo and kairotic mistiming demands the explosion of frustrated emotion, and with it, overblown claims, sharp language, and other impieties. In short, while Wallace has been globally villainized for her rant video, she was actually quite perceptive in picking up the genre’s speeds of composition and publication.

**Ranting against the Rant**

Even though Wallace’s rant video offended so many so deeply, an examination of the wider controversy reveals why the genre remains popular, despite its risky composing speed. While the genre and its composing speed likely encouraged Wallace to express prejudiced ideas and attitudes she otherwise would never have admitted publicly, the controversy that played out over the following weeks demonstrate why so many still find the genre so valuable, as a tool for sending speedy and powerful messages loaded with emotion that defy decorum and other constraints.

Admittedly, many did use Wallace’s vlog to launch critiques of YouTube and its speeds, often implying that the speed of the platform is inappropriate, unhealthy, and simply “too fast.” This is especially true in mainstream journalism, perhaps because commonplaces about technology and adolescence (and the dangers that arise when these come together) have long been a staple in these
circles (Burgess and Green 17). For example, LA Weekly’s coverage of “Asians in the Library” highlighted the discrepancy between the hasty composing tempo of Wallace’s vlog, and the awesome scale and intensity of the controversy that followed. Characteristically for this publication, they played it for laughs: “Alexandra Wallace—equipped with a dorm room, a pushup bra, a webcam and two minutes fifty-two seconds too much free time—managed to ignite a ‘Kill the Beast’-caliber Internet mob in a matter of hours on Sunday afternoon.” Striking a similar, but more sober note, The Chicago Tribune titled its article about Wallace’s video “Post in haste...” True to its title, the article plays up the tension between the vlog’s harried composing tempo and its indefinite continuance, the length of its digital afterlife: “When you post something, it’s out there, and it’s forever.” In general, mainstream media’s coverage tended to be reactionary, framing Wallace’s video as a cautionary tale about the dangers of a reckless composing tempo.

Surprisingly, many of the video responses posted to YouTube adopted a similar position, critiquing the tempo and timing of Wallace’s rant, while essentially working within those very same composing and publication speeds. At the end of his rambling, unedited, emotional video response, popular vlogger craftnation offers Wallace the following advice:

We need to get rid of that. That’s stupid, you know. That is ridiculously the dumbest thing you can make videos about, cause you’re irritated [. . . .] If you just pissed off like that you should go count to ten—I’m pretty sure your teachers and your parents and
them told you to count to ten when you was younger, when you got pissed off about things. 

There is no way to know whether crafnation himself counted to ten before composing this video. Even if he did, however, he certainly styled the video so that it would seem like he hadn’t. Similarly, vlogger EbbyRo condemns Wallace’s video as a “racist rant” but also admits that she herself is “just ranting.” This ironic, fight-fire-with-fire approach was perhaps most clearly displayed itself in the comments posted on the video itself. While YouTube comments are notoriously coarse and ill thought out (see chapter four), the comments posted on “Asians in the Library” seem particularly unhinged:

I am white as well, as a white american I say that you are REALLY FCKIN RACIST AND ANNOYYING, MIND YOUR OWN BUISNESS, WHO CARES IF THEY TALK ON THE PHONE BE MATURE AND TELL THEM TO BE QUITE [. . .] I mean shit, who the hell wears a lowcut shirt and rants like a little bitch?

(namodrive777)

These comments confirm that, while Wallace clearly introduced unacceptable racial attitudes into the rant, she was otherwise tapping into genres and speeds that were accepted and even adored in online public spheres, including on YouTube—so much so that many if not most responses adopted the same rhetorical speeds they were critiquing.

Overall, while Wallace took heavy criticism for ranting, the “Asians in the Library” controversy proved a boon for the rant vlog. The genre’s popularity, meaningfulness, and entertainment value were only reaffirmed. This, it seems,
was not just hypocrisy: rather, commentators on “Asians in the Library” expressed or implied genuine conviction that displays of impulsive emotion, including the rant, performed important rhetorical work, especially within the ecology of YouTube. While some urged patience and reason, others argued that the appropriate response did in fact require harsher and more impulsive emotions, quicker composing tempos and provocative mistimings—and this was not only drive-by, bile-spewing YouTube commenters.

Even “official” responses, including a video response by UCLA Chancellor Gene Block, adopted an intentionally abrupt tempo and timing (fig. 4.2). Uploaded to the school’s official YouTube channel three days after “Asians in the Library” hit, the video was given a title that heavily emphasized emotion: “UCLA Chancellor appalled by student video” (emphasis mine). While it departs from the standard rant video genre in many ways, especially with its professional production, its scripted and rehearsed feel, and so on, it also shares some features: a close-up on an individual speaker; displays of intense emotion through facial expression, vocal intonation, and so on; emotionally loaded language and an emphasis on personal feelings (“This has been a sad day for UCLA, and a disappointing one for me personally, [. . .]”); and so on. Furthermore, by opening with temporal framing (“A video posted on YouTube this weekend [. . .]”) the video emphasizes the timing of Chancellor Block’s public emotional response. This official response video, then, draws on some of the emotional immediacy associated with the rant video genre (its composing tempo and therefore compressed emotional timeline) but with a key layer of temporal cushioning, however slim. “Regardless of how offended I am, or you
may be, about this video,” the Chancellor concludes, “I hope we can remain civil in our discourse.” Here, Block implies that while some patience and temperance is needed, intense, instantaneous emotional response is natural, even appropriate. The Chancellor’s swift-but-not-impulsive tempo, and his more purposeful timing, create an emotional response that is not hasty but still brisk.

Not everyone, however, was satisfied with the Chancellor’s video and its speeds. In comments posted on its YouTube page, some viewers expressed disappointment that the Chancellor responded with such untempered emotion. At least one commenter accused him of repeating Wallace’s sins—accused him, in other words, of posting a “rant”:

Instead of humiliating and kicking a very young person out for speaking her young, developing mind, try to change that person’s
mind with examples and logic. The Chancellor, instead of attempting to educate the very young student, gets on Youtube and *rants* against free speech and free thought at a university. (yohellojo, emphasis mine)

Other commenters expressed disappointment that the Chancellor failed to display more intense emotion—that, in other words, he *failed* to rant. The following commenter accuses the Chancellor of being emotionally blank:

> While his message may be positive, it's a bit off [. . .] Speeches like this don't have any emotion in them, so there's no real call to action or sympathy emitted, just a blank statement of disappointment.

(crazyartsyguy)

Another commenter explicitly criticizes the composing tempo and textual pacing, implying that a more impulsive, rant-like response would have been more effective:

> His eyes were moving like he was reading off a script. I wish he'd at least memorized it or said it improvisational so it would be more believable. (bluezooooo)

In short, many who were most concerned about Wallace’s rant nonetheless believed that the rhetorical situation demanded nothing less than a counter-rant, along with its characteristic tempo, pacing, duration, timing, and so on.

This means that, before we dismiss the rhetorical speeds of the rant vlog as reckless, we must recognize that it remains a popular and powerful form of public expression. While Wallace’s comments certainly deserve criticism, the rant vlog and its characteristic tempo have also given a public forum to everyday people
with worthwhile public messages, people like 22 year-old Ethan Sabo, a young conservative who earned national attention for a rant video condemning criticism of gay republicans (TGRethanSabo), and people like Joy Nash, whose rant against the stigmatization of obesity (“I’m fat, and it’s okay”) has to date earned nearly two million views. Viewers adore these rants because they express what others, or they themselves, dare not say in public, giving many a sense of empowerment, affirmation, and catharsis. Rant vlogs give a forum to everyday people who would otherwise lack the means or moxy to make bold public statements, to lose their cool, say the unsayable, and generally air grievances they would otherwise oppress. Key to the genre is its reckless composing tempo, which encourages videomakers to capture and share rants before they can think better of it: a risky rhythm that is nonetheless essential to the genre’s popularity and entertainment value as well as its rhetorical power and political relevance.

While composition teachers are right to hesitate before inviting their students to compose with such risky online genres and their complex speeds, the reality is that if we want to give students the option of composing online, we cannot simply assign students to create digital versions of conventional classroom genres. For example, if students really want to participate meaningfully on YouTube, a video literature review or video literary criticism simply doesn’t make sense; rather, students composing for YouTube should compose with its actual genres. If students believe the rhetorical situation calls for a rant, then rant they should, but only if they first fully appreciate the possibilities and pitfalls of the genre and its speeds, including its tempo and timing, but also the speeds at which the genre can circulate: its potential
velocities and continuance. This is an especially important consideration on YouTube, where a video might not only suddenly “go viral” but might also become a long-term exhibit in its archive.

**From Rant to Ruin: The Afterlife of Vlogging**

As “Asians in the Library” demonstrates, YouTube can indeed bring instant ruin. According to Wallace’s apology letter, the video instantly ruined her personal life, leading to “the harassment of [her] family, the publishing of [her] personal information, death threats, and being ostracized from an entire community,” all of which led to her voluntary withdrawal from UCLA, just days after the video’s posting.

Furthermore, thanks to the participatory architecture and culture of YouTube (Burgess and Green, Jenkins, Skinnell), the video itself became an instant “ruin,” in another sense of that word. In “The Frequencies of Public Writing,” John Hartley explains the nature and meaning, and speed, of the ruin as a piece of public writing:

> Paradoxically, the most enduring human creation is the ruin. The ruin may indeed be defined as public writing that has outlived its author’s intentions and even the language of public communication in which it was created. It sends what may be termed the "Ozymandias" message. Ruins speak to the unfolding present from "time immemorial," but the message is unintended, a text without an author. The ruin, together with other immemorial texts, such as prehistoric cave paintings and carvings, is the lowest-frequency of all forms of public address.
Like the inscription on Ozymandias’s pedestal, but within an incredibly compressed timeframe, “Asians in the Library” became a ruin insofar as it “outlived” its author’s intentions.

It is important to note here that YouTube videos don’t go viral because of their author’s tempo or sense of timing; rather, they go viral because of their social velocity, as YouTube users share them with other users, through embedding, e-mailing, social media sharing, and even of course old-fashioned word of mouth. The virus metaphor is apt because, like a virus, YouTube videos spread from person to person, but it is misleading insofar as it suggests that this spreading occurs unintentionally. A video’s velocity emerges not randomly but only from a gathering of intentions—the intent is just not solely the author’s. Rather, the intent belongs to a video’s audiences, individually and collectively. Nearly every time the “view count” on a video ticks upward it is because some YouTuber has shared the video with a friend or family member or colleague or online acquaintance. And with each act of passing the video in question is reframed, taking on new meanings and motives and contexts. It is no longer an isolated message, sealed and endorsed by the author, but rather something like an exhibit or display. Like Ozymandias’s pedestal, or like a diary found in a historical archive, or like a novel shared between friends, the utterances’ message is transformed and, to a point, made subordinate to its new contexts and rituals.

As Anne Freadman writes, “The same propositional content functions differently, and thus means something different, according to its performative setting. Meaning is not content; it is place and function” (59). To borrow Freadman’s term, the act of “sharing” a YouTube video is its own ceremonial with its own
meanings and functions. This clarifies why Wallace’s video spread so quickly and so globally even though (or because?) most viewers believed its explicit message to be false and distasteful. By the alchemy of sharing, the video circulated more or less *ironically*, not as a message from the original author, but as a display or exhibit with its own proper meanings, meanings that shifted with each exhibition or act of sharing, but which we can safely say largely opposed or parodied the original message. Through this alchemy of sharing, Wallace’s racist rant gained incredible rhetorical velocity, but not as a racial polemic; rather, as a message condemning and mocking racism. Like Ozymandias’s crumbling pedestal, the video’s transformative velocity within new contexts made its message highly ironic: “Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

It is significant that, by the time “Asians in the Library” had earned widespread attention, Wallace had already removed it from the site, in an attempt to bring its gathering velocity to an abrupt halt. However, a number of YouTube users had already recognized the video’s growing momentum and archived it, deliberately ensuring its continuance. The moment Wallace removed her video, other YouTubers uploaded fresh copies of it, allowing the velocity of its ironic circulation to continue and accelerate. Ultimately, while Wallace judged the composing tempo and timing of the rant genre quite perceptively, she judged YouTube’s velocities and potential for continuance remarkably poorly. While she proved capable of participating in YouTube as an agora, creating a piece that meshed well with the platform’s more conversational composing practices, Wallace seemed to overlook that YouTube also operated as an archive, serving as a collectively-curated video database. Indeed, almost everyone who encountered
“Asians in the Library” encountered it not as a conversational message-from-the-author, but as a popular exhibit in the YouTube archive, an exhibit whose infamy was spreading rapidly, but which, we knew, would also endure indefinitely. Most encountered the video, in short, as a ruin.

It is worth noting that not all of YouTube’s ruins come with tales of shame and woe. Consider Paul “Bear” Vasquez’s “Double Rainbow” video, a simple moment captured on camcorder, in which Vasquez witnesses a double rainbow in the wilderness and expresses over-the-top joy at its beauty. As an exhibit in YouTube’s archive, the video has earned over 32 million views, achieving incredible velocity and continuance and certainly, in Hartley’s words, “outliving its author’s intentions.” Through the alchemy of sharing, it has become more than a recording of natural beauty, it has become a parody and celebration of Vasquez’s “insane” “freak out.” Though he recognizes that he is not responsible for the video’s viral spread or place in the archive, Vasquez has embraced his video’s unexpected velocity and continuance, recognizing in his interview that the “double rainbow” video phenomenon is not about him, but about those who watch and pass it on:

The video is a mirror for people [. . .] There’s nobody in it. [. . .] They get to see themselves through it. The comments I get are really about them, what it makes them feel about themselves. “I loved it.” “You're an idiot.” Every comment I get, it's about the people, not about me. (Baker)

Not all of YouTube’s ruins are ruinous, in other words. Nonetheless, those who compose for YouTube need to be aware of its many speeds, each of which
interacts with and relies on the others. Those looking to make conversational videos like rants need to recognize that they might also become exhibits in the archive, might take on unintended velocities and suffer from unwanted continuance. Those who compose the archive need to recognize that videos only circulate through the conversational participation of YouTube users, its commenters, linkers, embedders, e-mailers, and sharers. Perhaps before they begin creating videos for YouTube, then, composers might spend some time participating in YouTube’s communities, performing for themselves the alchemy of sharing and participating in the collective curation of the archive, so that before they offer up a video, they first have a feel for vlogging’s many complex speeds.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

The Apology Video: Vlogging Remediates Expression

Over the years, YouTube has been the target of many lawsuits. More recently, it has also become a place for settling them. Many judges and attorneys are beginning to use vlogging as an avenue for legal redress, requiring offenders to publicly apologize for their actions on YouTube.

In 2008, a Florida judge sentenced two teenage pranksters to record and upload an apology on YouTube, a video in which they take responsibility and express regret for throwing a drink at a drive-thru employee (Manjoo). In 2009, a St. Louis police officer sued a local woman who falsely accused him of sexual misconduct. When she couldn’t pay the $100,000 in damages awarded by the judge, the parties settled on a YouTube apology (Garrison). In 2011, the legally mandated YouTube apology became national in scope. Following the terms of a settlement, Senate candidate Charlie Crist uploaded an apology for using music by David Byrne in campaign ads without the songwriter’s permission (Gordon). Following the lead of YouTube users, the legal system seems to be recognizing vlogging’s reach (chapter four), its paradoxical immediacy and permanence (chapter five), its affordances for emotion display (chapter three), and its sense of public vulnerability (chapter one), all of which combine to make vlogging a more
or less ideal 21st century version of the stocks—a space where wrongdoers can be publicly humbled.

I intentionally use this dated analogy to stress vlogging’s continuity with older forms of expression. Like many studies of new media, this dissertation has perhaps overemphasized the newness of its research object and overstated its potential to transform the art of rhetoric, and with it the public sphere. Reflecting on my four primary case studies, I am most struck by the continuity of vlogging with other, earlier forms of oral and emotional communication, that is, with earlier speech genres. All of the vlogging genres I have explored in these pages
carry familiar names and familiar purposes. The apology, like the confession, the reaction, the rant, or the eyewitness testimony, was not invented for YouTube. This dissertation, then, documents not the emergence of radically new forms of expression, but rather the remediation of existing forms of expression into new contexts and new ceremonials.

**Vlogging and Remediation**

A decade ago, J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin coined the term *remediation* to describe how new media composers, rather than revolutionizing or reinventing the ways texts are assembled, actually feed upon and repurpose earlier forms. Focusing on the visual, Bolter and Grusin argue that

New media are doing exactly what their predecessors have done: presenting themselves as refashioned and improved versions of other media, digital visual media can best be understood through the ways in which they honor, rival, and revise linear-perspective painting, photography, film, television, and print. (14)

Just as the webpages analyzed by Bolter and Grusin remediated print genres (encyclopedias, newspapers, and so on), vlogs remediate speech genres, including the heavily emotional ones I have called pathetic genres.

Vloggers remediate earlier genres not because they lack ingenuity. Rather, vloggers remediate earlier genres because in doing so they (re)appropriate the social actions associated with those genres. As my second chapter illustrates, *Twilight* readers composed reaction videos because “reaction” already carried meaning and purpose for the parties involved: for the media producers who desired information on their target markets, for publics with longstanding
fascinations with the emotive excesses of fans, and for *Twilight* fans already
drawn into intense emotional relationships with one another. Vlogging genres
remediate not only existing forms but also existing social structures—in the case
of *Twilight* reactions, structures in which producers still produce, fans still react,
and publics still watch fan frenzies with a mixture of perplexity, disgust, and
delight. Acts of remediation, in this sense, can also be acts of social reproduction.

This does not mean, however, that vlogging is a redundant, stagnant, or
vampiric form. Recognizing that one genre remediates another does not mean the
two are equivalent: reproduction, after all, is not the same as repetition. On the
contrary, as my “confessions” chapter demonstrates, parallel genres can function
very differently within different performative settings or ceremonials. The dinner
table confession, on the one hand, and the confession vlog, on the other, may
have similar rhetorical features, similar emotional registers, and so on. Within
two different ceremonials, however, the confession genre functions quite
differently. In one ceremonial, the confession may be a private act of defiance,
and in the other, a public cry for identification and an invitation to constructive
dialogue.

Remediation, then, transforms not only the text but also the “interlocutory
positions” it posits, distributing differing roles and relations among those present
to the text (Freadman 63). Consequently, remediation alters possibilities for
response and uptake. A politician’s public apology, on television or in a public
square, may draw scowls and shaking heads, but on YouTube, it draws remixes,
parodies, and of course comments both sympathetic and caustic. Remediation, in
short, is far more than simple repetition, more than reframing or repackaging,
more even than adaptation or translation. Remediation is an act of rhetorical transfer or reassignment; an act of social reproduction, yes, but one whose progeny may differ considerably from their parents. Transplanted to a changed environment, like a worker transferred to a different workplace, an athlete traded to a new team, or a piece of furniture moved to a different home, remediated genres take on new looks, new roles, and new purposes.

As my chapters have suggested, three affordances of vlogs clearly differentiate its genres from the speech genres they remediate: vlogging’s reach, replayability, and modularity.

Vlogging’s reach and replayability go hand-and-hand, as the medium of online video sharing allows utterances to be replayed across time and space. As the technology needed to vlog becomes more and more inexpensive and ubiquitous, rhetors gain new and wide-reaching access to public spheres. As my fourth chapter on witness videos illustrated, the reach and replayability of vlogging is allowing everyday people to broadly circulate information, ideas, and attitudes.

This rhetorical enfranchisement is complicated, however, by vlogging’s modularity. As my chapter on rants explains, because vlogs are digital, they can be easily duplicated, manipulated, and moved. They can be readily ripped apart, remixed, recontextualized, and redeployed for other rhetorical purposes (Manovich, Warnick). The “Asians in the Library” rant video demonstrated quite dramatically how vlogs can be rapidly reappropriated, as those who view and pass along these videos endow them with new meanings and purposes that the original vlogger likely never intended or even imagined. The modularity of
“Asians in the Library,” for example, allowed it to circulate more or less ironically, as a parody and nullification of its own explicit message. Through comments, blog posts, social media postings, e-mails, and so on, viewers of “Asians in the Library” thoroughly repackaged the video, situating it within new ceremonials and thereby investing it with new roles, meanings, and purposes. “Asians in the Library” might seem an extreme case, but other viral videos, like NuttyMadam3575’s reactions (Chapter Three), as well as rants like Paul “Bear” Vasquez’s “Double Rainbow” and Chris Crocker’s “Leave Britney Alone” follow similar patterns of ironic uptake. Furthermore, even when vlogs don’t go viral or suffer from ironic uptake, their easy modularity makes vlogs open to rapid recontextualizations and the transformations (wanted or unwanted, thrilling or chilling) that come along with these movements.

In short, it is not really vlogging’s content, not what we actually see or hear on video, that makes this mode of address potentially revolutionary. After all, we have all witnessed confessions, reactions, rants, testimonials, and apologies many times before. What makes vlogging different and potentially transformative is its reach, replayability, and modularity—and the participatory architecture and culture of online video sharing that makes all this possible. What is new and different about vlogging is not its genres, but rather how online video sharing allows these genres to move and to accrue meanings through the collective activities of their viewers.

**Vlogging’s Vital Expressivity**

The active participation of viewers is one thing that critics overlook when they condemn vlogging as emptily expressive, egoistic, and emotionally
overwrought. In “Top Tens Reasons YouTube Has Ruined Life for Good,” one
columnist insists that vlogging “encourages and rewards [ . . . ] self-promotion,
vanity, and compulsion to be seen/heard,” (Sweeney). I would wager that, like
many of vlogging’s critics, this columnist has never bothered to read the
comment threads on the vlogs he condemns, or considered how self-expression
and emotionality might be rhetorically constructive.

Whether they circulate in scholarly, popular, or other circles, claims about
the worthiness or unworthiness of vlogging as a rhetorical form often depend
upon a conceptual distinction that Barbara Couture identifies using the opposed
terms “public expression” and “public rhetoric” (“Reconciling Private Lives and
Public Rhetoric: What’s at Stake?”). In contemporary public discourse, Couture
argues, there is a lamentable trend away from “public rhetoric,” a community-
oriented communicative practice that “involve[s] a reciprocal exchange of views
in a charitable context” (2). Each step away from public rhetoric, she regrets, is a
step toward “public expression,” an egocentric communicative practice in which a
speaker with an already formed identity delivers already-formed content.
Couture’s essay associates public expression with the so-called "strong poet"
(think Henry David Thoreau) who seeks truth and a way forward in him or
herself rather than in communal exchange (10). Public expression is ethically
dubious because, Couture argues, “[it] demands that the audience absorb, deny,
refuse, or obliterate difference, specifically what is different from the identity of
the speaker”: in other words, in public expression views are not exchanged but
rather imposed (4). Online video sharing was still in the incubator when Couture
published this argument, but had she written just twelve months later, vlogging
might have supplied Couture with a lurid cornucopia of public expression to draw on for (negative) examples, including many of those discussed in the preceding chapters.

Nevertheless, as those chapters affirm, vlogging is a form in which these concepts (public expression, public rhetoric, and I would add, public dialectic) converge or collapse. My discussion of confession videos demonstrates how vlogs operate as both monologue and dialogue, as an address to oneself and an invitation to converse (Wesch, Yanoshevsky, Lange “Vulnerable”). Vlogging and its characteristic “back-and-forthness” seems, in many ways, a more challenging and more constructive alternative to what usually passes for “public rhetoric,” the lengthy essays and speeches that Jackson and Wallin playfully suggest leave audiences adrift on a “Sea of Rhetoric” (378). Importantly, what catalyzes vlogging’s back-and-forthness is the vlogger’s vulnerability—in other words, her willingness to publicly express herself, to share what she is thinking and feeling. Lange affirms and extends these insights. By sharing “intimate moments” and expressing themselves openly before a webcam, Lange suggests, vloggers can and do effect “social change,” evoking critical self-reflection and productive public discussion of issues. Lange concludes that, not despite, but because vlogs are inherently expressive, they hold public significance:

> The sharing of these intimate moments is not self-indulgent, solipsistic obsession. Rather, it provides a means to connect with others and raise awareness in ways that are less overt than acts such as public marches but are nevertheless quite important.

In my chapter on confessions, vloggers explicitly resisted calls to become less
expressive and more argumentative. When atheist commenters encouraged her to “practice, get your talking points, and deliver them succinctly” (theherdmentality), missdynasty33, an African-American agnostic, refused. In doing so, she acknowledged that what makes YouTube “great” is its expressiveness: “That’s the great thing about youtube and having my own channel. I don’t have to practice, I can do whatever I want to do.” In this vlogger’s comments, we see both the self-interestedness that Couture criticizes, as well as the openness and vulnerability that lead to constructive dialogue, which Lange celebrates. This, then, is the great paradox of vlogging: that its expressiveness is seemingly both its greatest rhetorical weakness as well as its greatest strength.

The pushback against vlogging frequently criticizes video ranters, reactors, and confessors for being egocentric, but it also criticizes them for displaying excessive emotion. It is true, as my chapter on reactions confirms, that emotion is central to vlogging. Part of what makes vlogging such a compelling forum for frank and vulnerable self-expression is its ability to capture and relay emotion, especially emotion displayed through facial, vocal, and gestural action. However, the chapter also affirms that emotion and its display are deeply social and rhetorical activities. Humans participate meaningfully in social, cultural, and public spheres through emotion: through feelings, sensations, intensities, affects, passions, etc. In rhetorical terms, emotion is sometimes simply what the rhetorical situation demands, is sometimes what audiences need and want from rhetors. One example of this would be the widespread public demand that President Obama display greater anger towards BP during the 2010 Gulf oil spill, a demand he finally met when he assured the public, in interviews with CNN and
the Today Show, that he was “furious” at BP and busy investigating “whose ass to kick” (Mail Foreign Service, Gabbatt). Another example would be the court-mandated YouTube apology. Whether it is fast-food pranksters, false accusers, or national politicians who are forced to apologize via vlog, the idea is essentially the same—to demand that wrongdoers publicly emote, to require that they publicly express remorse and humility. “I sincerely apologize to David Byrne for using his famous song and his unique voice in my campaign advertisement without his permission,” Crist confesses, his voice deep with regret. This is more than egoistic self-expression, more than personal emotion. The emotion here is Crist’s, but it is also Byrne’s, and the public’s. Like every apology in history, it is inherently addressed, inherently social and inherently rhetorical.

Remediated as a vlog, the apology retains many of its rhetorical features, but takes on new affordances: new reach, new replayability, and new modularity. The YouTube apology may look and sound like earlier apologies, but it also harbors new possibilities for meaning and movement. As one observer notes, forcing Crist to apologize via vlog (rather than via press release or televised statement) opens up infinite possibilities for viral penance: “by forcing Crist to make this fairly humiliating apology on YouTube,” the apology “can now be Auto-Tuned into a dance mix, mashed-up [. . . ] inserted into scenes from Charlie Sheen’s 20/20 interview, or whatever else that wacky Internet wants to do with it” (O’Neal). Like all vloggers, Crist must express himself, must make himself vulnerable, must reckon with his vlog’s response and uptake, must in short “throw himself at the mercy of YouTube” (O’Neal).

If my research has failed to prove that vlogging is a rhetorical act, then, at
the very least, I hope it has proven that vlogging is an act of incredible bravery. While critics like Couture might see vlogging’s bald self-expression as cowardly and self-centered, as an act meant to close down others, I choose to see vlogging from the other end, as a radical act of opening up, as an act of courage and vulnerability. Within the ceremonial of online video sharing (chapter two), vloggers make themselves vulnerable not only by exposing their private thoughts and emotions to public audiences, but also by exposing themselves to the complex and unpredictable rhetorical ecology of YouTube, by facing the possibilities of harsh criticism and profound connection, of indefinite stagnation and instant virality, of recontextualization and reappropriation. It is one thing to confess, rant, or react before friends and family. It is quite another to record and upload this kind of vulnerable expression, never knowing who may see it, or what will happen next.

**Implications for Composition Pedagogy**

Because successful vlogging demands that composers make themselves publicly vulnerable, and because vlogs can be always be remixed and recontextualized, composition teachers should probably never require students to vlog. In one of my own courses, a mention of a possible vlogging assignment prompted a mini-mutiny, causing students to shift uncomfortably in their seats as they contemplated the possibility of sitting before a blinking webcam, and opening themselves up to whatever lay behind it. Wesch, who enlisted undergraduate research assistants to study and produce vlogs, showed similar caution, allowing some student-researchers to withdraw from the second, participatory portion of the research. “Some students were unable or unwilling to
participate in this aspect of the research because of the deeply personal challenges of self-analysis the process requires” (21-22). Wesch’s study reminds us that vlogging is risky not only because it involves making ourselves vulnerable to publics—but also because vlogging makes us vulnerable to ourselves, forcing us into an intimate (and possibly uncomfortable) encounter with our own bodies and voices, our own ideas and emotions. Because of the vulnerability it demands, and because the possibility of undesired remix and virality is ever-present, assigned vlogging just doesn’t seem to fit within the composition course.

This does not mean, however, that instructors should always discourage students from vlogging. In courses that invite students to compose for public spheres, for example, composition teachers might offer students the option to compose vlogs, as long as vlogging remains one alternative among others (i.e., letters to the editor), and as long as the instructor helps student-vloggers appreciate vlogging’s characteristic vulnerabilities and risks.

As my fifth chapter on rants suggests, perhaps the best way to gradually introduce students to vlogging is to first invite them to participate in the broader vlogging ceremonial—to contribute comments, to create playlists, to embed and link to and discuss videos—before they produce their own vlogs. This kind of immersive participation will help students recognize the conventions of vlogging genres, but equally important, it will help them to recognize the consequences of vlogging—its risks as well as its rewards. Furthermore, when students participate immersively in the vlogging ceremonial, they will come to appreciate how its various components interrelate, witnessing the complex interactions that arise between genres and utterances. They will realize that what is said or shown in a
video is never the end of the story, at least not if that video is successful and finds itself some viewers. Rather, the video is only the opening statement in a complex and ongoing conversation. It is a starting point for discussion, dissection, and redaction. It is material supplied for generative reposting and remixing. Students may believe they already know how to rant or react, how to confess or bear witness or apologize. By participating immersively, however, they will learn that these seemingly familiar genres of speech and emotion, through the alchemy of remediation, take on new meanings and new movements within the vlogging ceremonial. Only once students understand this, once they have witnessed and participated in these broader rhetorical processes, will they will be adequately prepared to sit before their webcam and press record—a seemingly simple act that nonetheless carries so many unanticipated consequences and complexities.

I want to conclude this dissertation with a proposal, by suggesting that this concept of immersive participation might be more widely relevant, that it might inform the teaching and learning of composition, even when vlogging, or the internet, or even computers, do not appear on the syllabus. As Freadman shows us, genres always participate in broader ceremonials. Just as reaction videos are enmeshed in a rhetorical network of comments, playlists, social media postings, and so on, so too are letters to the editor enmeshed with opinion pieces and news articles, subscription cards and advertisements, submission guidelines and editorial style sheets. Conference presentations are likewise enmeshed with calls for papers and conference programs, published session reviews, Q&A sessions, and (more recently) conference-related social media posts. Inviting students to immersively participate in these broader rhetorical networks, these ceremonials,
would allow them to better understand and appreciate the genres we ask them to compose in. Participating immersively compels composers to chart the conventions of genres, to map their circulations, to witness their complex interrelationships, and to appreciate their possible consequences—all valuable experiences that will help students to create more effective and mature compositions, to avoid rhetorical “accidents,” and to understand exactly what it is they are sending out into the world. While vlogging might seem the most isolated and self-expressive of all genres, electronic or otherwise, when studied more closely, vlogging actually reminds us that genres—and the people who compose them—are profoundly interconnected. Vlogging reminds us that it is immersive participation, rather than imitation or rote memorization, that offers apprentice composers the most valuable path into the complex and dynamic realms of real-world rhetoric.
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