Remediating Democracy: Irreverent Composition and the Vernacular Rhetorics of Web 2.0

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Introduction

While the use of the Internet to support political agendas is not a new practice, the recent development and widespread popularity of Web 2.0 applications has led to greater conceptualization of the Internet as a public sphere, particularly in the wake of 9/11 (Albrecht, 2006); Barton, 2005; Calhoun, 2004; Carlin, et al., 2005; Pickard, 2006; Warnick 2007). Proponents claim that Web 2.0 applications enact democratic principles by bringing previously marginalized voices into the public arena, by encouraging active participation, and by fostering among citizens a shared responsibility in the knowledge-building and dissemination process; the popularity of these "democratized" technologies has given way to more commercial ventures, such as YouTube and other social networking sites, which draw upon Web 2.0 principles of user-generated content, participation, and community (while also, as we shall see, limiting user participation in certain ways). As social networking sites and other Web 2.0 incarnations continue to grow, national media outlets, major corporations, and political figures seek ways to capitalize upon and control the public discourse within these highly networked Web spaces. Ironically, the involvement of these formal institutions threatens to undermine that which has made the Web 2.0 movement so exciting in the first place (Calhoun, 2004; Barton, 2005). Therefore, as scholars like Barbara Warnick (2007) have noted, greater attention to the rhetorical elements of online resistive discourse alongside the study of institutionalized discourse is needed to highlight the contested nature of these spaces. Attention to the discursive practices and tensions at work in these spaces may help rhetoricians theorize new models of democratic engagement and argumentation within digital environments. Such theorizing may help the field move toward what Gerard

Hauser (1999) terms a "vernacular rhetorical model" by asking rhetoricians and students of composition to reconsider what "counts" as legitimate participation in a digital public sphere.

In response, this article will examine the use of irreverence as a rhetorical trope that challenges official, institutionalized discourses as they attempt to colonize Web 2.0 spaces. For the purposes of this discussion, I define "irreverent" compositions as texts that ignore or mock the authority or character of a person, event, or text, with the effect of offering commentary on those entities. Irreverent compositions may employ acts of imitation, such as parody or satire; additionally, these compositions may modify or stray from the standard conventions of a genre (be it a literary genre or the "genre" of an event or arena) in service of a rhetorical purpose. These strategies work as rhetorical tropes – commonly understood as being artful deviations from the norm – by disrupting audience expectations and institutionalized conventions in order to make a larger political statement.

To illustrate the ways in which irreverence operates as an important rhetorical trope in a digital public sphere, I will focus on the CNN-YouTube debates, held July 23 and November 28 of 2007, respectively. The tensions surrounding this event – tensions between YouTube users and institutional gatekeepers – highlight the contested nature of social networking spaces, as well as highlighting the importance of providing legitimate space for "ordinary," "common," or, to borrow Hauser's term again, "vernacular" rhetoric in order to preserve the democratic principles of Web 2.0. The discourse surrounding the debates highlights Web 2.0's lingering potential as a complex site of engaged, partisan, vernacular rhetorics from citizens, particularly as users employed irreverence for

rhetorical effect. As we shall see, many event skeptics were quick to dismiss the irreverence of some user questions and commentary, despite the fact that such strategies work as compelling modes of critique in public arenas, allowing users to "create a speaking space in the crowded World Wide Web and to contest the monopoly of institutional voices in 'serious' public discourse" (Killoran, 2001, p.127). In short, the response to the use of irreverent compositions highlights an important tension between the "vernacular" and "official" voices of politics.

The article will conclude by suggesting that, to help students navigate the discursive functions of Web 2.0 in their personal, academic, and civic lives, teachers of composition should consider providing students with opportunities to experiment with irreverence as a composition strategy. In addition to advancing students' media literacy through the interpretation of parody (Warnick, 2007), irreverent composition provides opportunities for students to begin composing vernacular rhetorics in new media formats at the same time that they critique the appropriation and remediation that many Web 2.0 applications encourage. In what Lawrence Lessig (2005) and other scholars have termed a "remix culture ,"appropriation and integration work as some of the most powerful means of discursive knowledge construction and political commentary, and it is essential that we prepare students to participate in digital arenas in order to articulate their voices and possibly resist dominant discourses of power. Experimenting with the rhetorical trope of irreverence may advance students' rhetorical competency while also encouraging discussions of the possibilities and limitations of the democratic promise of Web 2.0, particularly as spaces such as YouTube and other social networking sites face continued assault by capitalism and institutional colonization.

The Internet as Public Sphere: Contesting Social Networks

The concept of the "public sphere" – a network for influencing political action through the communication of information and points of view – has its roots in the work of Jürgen Habermas. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1995), Habermas defines and discusses the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere, noting the problematic effects of commercialization, capitalism, and the rise of mass media on rational-critical debate. Although undoubtedly influential, Habermas' argument has been subject to many critiques, particularly since his idealized conception of the public sphere centers on the principle of universal access (which, as we shall see later, is also a notable limitation to the Internet's potential as a public sphere). Indeed, since even the bourgeois public sphere Habermas champions required education and property ownership, thereby restricting access to those who were in positions of some degree of privilege, it may be that the public sphere never existed at all, or at least not in the form presented by Habermas.

In response, some scholars have attempted to extend or reimagine this concept of the public sphere. In *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres, Gerard Hauser* (1999) offers a uniquely rhetorical take on the public sphere by "explor[ing] the discursive dimensions of publics, public spheres, and public opinions" (p. 11), the result being a model of the public sphere that is discourse-based. Rhetoric, then, is central to this concept of the public sphere, and, in contrast to the idealized public sphere posited by Habermas, Hauser suggests a "vernacular rhetorical model" that allows for partisan rhetoric; therefore, this model does not attempt to conceal multiple publics and marginalized voices.

In recent decades, scholars have begun to consider the extent to which online spaces may reinvigorate an agonistic, partisan, "vernacular" public sphere. Craig Calhoun (2004) has called for more research into the implications of new media technologies for the global public sphere (p. 249), and other scholars have begun to consider the extent to which Internet spaces may foster rational-critical debate and decision-making. Barbara Warnick (2007), Diana Carlin et al. (2005), Victor Pickard (2006), Steffen Albrecht (2006), and Richard Khan & Douglas Kellner (2004) are just some of the scholars who have researched the use of the Internet for activism and deliberation – political activities which have increased significantly since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Khan & Kellner, 2004, p. 88).

The majority of this scholarship focuses on sites articulating overt political agendas, such as Indymedia and MoveOn.org; however, a few scholars, like Matthew Barton (2005), are beginning to see the need for evaluating the political possibilities of more "neutral" sites of discursive practice: social networking sites like YouTube, for example, typically do not assert a distinct political agenda or affiliation, but individuals may nevertheless use these sites for exchanging information and perspectives in an effort to influence public opinion and, by extension, provide an important "check" on the state and other systems of power. Like Calhoun, Barton recognizes the democratic spirit of open-source initiatives and the potential for these technologies to enact a sense of agency in the minds of citizens. Further, Barton acknowledges the danger of corporate interests, which, as discussed above, continues to be an important cautionary note when attempting to actualize a truly democratic space: "The Internet is losing its democraticizing features and is becoming everyday more like our newspapers and television, controlled from

above by powerful multinational corporations, who demand passivity from an audience of total consumers" (p. 177). While Web 2.0 applications such as blogs continue to give users the power to publish their thoughts for a large audience with minimal financial resources and technological training, some arenas of the Internet that initially embraced the Web 2.0 ethos – such as social networking sites – are installing more gatekeeping features that mimic the editorial and publishing control typical of traditional media. The CNN-YouTube Debates, which I will discuss in the next section, reflect this movement away from the true democratization of a digital public sphere and instead mark significant attempts by political stakeholders to install gatekeeping mechanisms that interfere with the democratizing features of Web 2.0. As we shall also see, however, users may find irreverent approaches to "acceptable" modes of participating to be a powerful way of expressing dissent and resistance to this colonization.

In the past, politicians have been reluctant to take full advantage of the interactive potential of web technologies, for fear of losing control of their campaign discourse. The goal of this discourse, as scholars like Jennifer Stromer-Galley (2000) and Barbara Warnick (2007) have noted, is simply to get the candidate elected, not necessarily to invigorate democracy. A true democracy would require that citizens have input in the agenda-setting process (Stromer-Galley, 2000, p. 128-9), but the current climate of strategic ambiguity leads candidates to avoid interacting with audiences that may compromise the candidate's ability to stay on message. With this in mind, the simple fact that the CNN-YouTube Debates took place at all is noteworthy, as candidates were voluntarily giving up their control of the campaign discourse to some extent in order to show their willingness to dialogue with members with the public. In the first debate (held

July 23, 2007), eight presidential hopefuls from the Democratic Party fielded video questions submitted by YouTube users, and more than 2.6 million viewers tuned in (Seelye, 2007, July 24). Despite some initial reluctance, Republican candidates agreed to participate in their own CNN-YouTube debate a few months later (November 28, 2007), generating even more public response and international publicity. The weeks leading up to the first debate were filled with optimism about the event, with some predicting it would be the "most democratic presidential debate ever" (O'Brien, 2007, June 14). However, the degree to which users were actually setting the agenda of the event is highly questionable.

In fact, a major theme emerging from the discourse surrounding the CNN-YouTube debates was one of distrust; specifically, discussions leading up to, during, and following the debate illustrated the tension between pervasive distrust of the public opinion on one hand and rising distrust of big media corporations on the other. Much of this discussion centered on the editorial processes utilized to select roughly 40 questions from the several thousand submitted by YouTube users. Instead of airing the most viewed or most highly rated video questions (which would be more consistent with the values of Web 2.0), CNN officials sifted through thousands of video submissions and decided which ones would be presented to the candidates during the debate. On the eve of the Republican debate, CNN senior vice president David Bohrman justified his decision to leave selection processes in the hands of journalists by arguing that "the web is still too immature a medium to set an agenda for a national debate" (Stirland, 2007, November 27). He went on to express his distrust of popular opinion, a sentiment shared throughout blogs, discussion boards, and news articles: "If you would have taken the most-viewed

questions [for the first debate], the top question would have been whether Arnold Schwarzenegger was a cyborg sent to save the planet Earth [note: see commentary in next section]. The second-most-viewed video question was: Will you convene a national meeting on UFOs?." For an event that claimed to be a revolutionary moment for democracy, the agenda-setting was placed almost exclusively in the hands of CNN – a large, mainstream news source owned by Time Warner – which, as Habermas and others would surely note, is itself a threat to the Internet as a public sphere.

In fact, not only were YouTube users unable to decide which questions were used, but they were also refused a means for rating or offering feedback to questions at all, thereby cutting popular opinion out of the editorial process entirely. As Bohrman's above comment highlights, debate officials – like the candidates themselves – were set on maintaining the appearance of a democratic process by virtue of presenting the event in a different media format, while also taking steps to remove the very functions of the social networking space that empower individual users to participate in collective decisions on matters of public importance. CNN's assertions reflect a dominant ideology that tries to convince the public that ordinary people are unable to make informed editorial decisions, which may have come as a shock to the thousands of people who took the time to craft video questions for the candidates on issues of collective importance. This attitude toward citizens is consistent with observations made by Michelle Simmons & Jeffrey Grabill (2007), who note that “citizen participants at a public meeting are often characterized (by government officials, industry representatives, and university researchers) as people who often know nothing and who rant emotionally about irrelevant issues” (p. 422). Instead of claiming a privileged position within the process, citizen

participants in the CNN-YouTube Debates were being used as mere gimmicks to sell the event.

Irreverent Composition as Resistance

Much of the skepticism about users' ability to set a serious agenda for the debate revolved around issues of rhetorical delivery, particularly since the key difference between this debate and other town hall debates was the central role of user-generated video content. At the beginning of the Democratic debate, CNN journalist and event moderator Anderson Cooper briefly reviewed some questions that were not selected, citing such justifications as “distracting” costumes and the use of children to ask adult questions. Although many of the most irreverent or “irrelevant” questions were cut (such as the aforementioned “cyborg” question – see below), viewers and candidates were still treated to some songs, costumes, and seemingly flippant remarks on the part of question-askers. In fact, the unconventional strategies employed by some of the users is part of what caused many of the Republicans so much discomfort about taking part in the debate at all.

A surprise celebrity from the Democratic debate, for example, was Billiam the Snowman (“A snowman’s biggest question,” 2007, July 23) – a snowman who, with a dubbed-over voice and animated carrot lips, posed a question about global warming. The rhetorical strategy of using a snowman as a mouthpiece for a serious question about global warming generated a great deal of attention for both the issue and the composers; however, this unconventional and irreverent approach to posing a serious question about environmental policies to presidential candidates was also scorned by many in positions

of power and was pointed to as justification for distrusting public opinion and participation. Both former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani and former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, for example, expressed skepticism about participating in a Republican YouTube debate, remarking that such irreverent displays as the snowman question upset the dignity and serious nature of a televised presidential debate (Distaso, 2007, July 26).

Indeed, many skeptics were quick to dismiss the irreverence of some user questions and commentary, despite – or perhaps because of – the fact that such strategies often function as compelling modes of critique in public arenas. John Killoran (2001) argues that the "irreverent work" common to many online websites can be read as "a strategy both to create a speaking space in the crowded World Wide Web and to contest the monopoly of institutional voices in 'serious' public discourse" (p. 127). Consistent with Killoran's observations, many of the questions submitted for consideration in the CNN-YouTube debates used irreverence in the form of seemingly absurd, mocking questions in order to critique the debate question genre and/or offer a statement on ongoing national and international policy. One question depicted a masked "killer" who, identifying the candidates as "killers" themselves, asked them to share their "personal philosophy of killing" so that viewers could make informed voting decisions[1]. Another question, created by a user who has a large following on YouTube (more than 14,000 subscribers at the time of this writing), and which was used by CNN as justification for installing gatekeeping mechanisms during the selection process, worked to mock the

[1] Note: The "personal philosophy of killing" video (originally submitted as entry #4839 to the Republican CNN-YouTube Debates) can no longer be located on the YouTube site. Previously, all submitted questions were archived here, but YouTube has not responded to my error report. Thus, I am unable to provide complete citation information for the originally published video.

event in a different way. In this video, the questioner incorporates several key elements that make him look and sound like a "legitimate" political commentator; yet his ridiculous question serves as a deviation: "What are your thoughts on a poll suggesting that 88 percent of Californians elected governor Schwarzenegger in hopes that a cyborg of his nature could stop a future nuclear war?" ("The wine kone," 2007, June 16). The clearly satirical question deviates significantly from the expectations set up by the other rhetorical choices enacted in the video (businesslike attire, music and graphics akin to those of a news program, the diction of a news anchor, etc.). In doing so, this self-proclaimed "trouble maker" mocks the process of the town hall debate itself – the rhetorical question is not meant to garner an actual response from the candidates, but to create a reaction in the minds of other users about the CNN-YouTube Debate format to begin with. The question may not have been appropriate for the "official" debate discourse, but it absolutely is consistent with the vernacular discourse of YouTube and Web 2.0 as a whole, thereby illuminating yet again the contested nature of this digital public sphere.

Not surprisingly, these and similar questions did not pass the cut to be aired on the televised debate, and it's likely that the composers of these questions knew quite well that the likelihood of having their compositions selected would be slim. While it is difficult to determine conclusively what motivated these users' turn toward irreverence, the effect is that these videos open up a new discursive space for users to participate within the parameters established by the event while also critiquing and challenging those parameters, as well as the candidates themselves. In other words, irreverence allows users to critique the political process *and* the politicians. As Killoran (2001) argues, parody

(and, I would add, other irreverent strategies that mock people or events) is often used in virtual environments to challenge established media power, giving online rhetors "the means to occupy positions made available by the new medium and simultaneously…contest their lack of authentic franchise in that medium" (p. 131). In other words, users who submitted questions that were unlikely to be chosen because of their irreverent rhetorical strategies were offering a critique of the selection process and the institutionalization of the virtual space to begin with. By dismissing irreverent arguments from users, CNN and the candidates were essentially dismissing one of the most powerful modes of political critique in the online environments these officials wished to exploit. By attempting to silence the politics of irreverence, political and corporate institutions were furthering their efforts to maintain the status quo at the same time that they claimed to be doing the opposite – and irreverent videos that emerged in response to this dismissal (such as the ones discussed above) work to illuminate and resist this paradox.

I use the CNN-YouTube debates as an example of an event that typifies the ways in which the Internet has lingering potential as a public sphere, at the same time that its potential is threatened by capitalism and political institutions. For researchers, the event provides a somewhat tidy, more contained rhetorical space from which to evaluate the tensions between institutionalized discourse and the vernacular rhetorics of irreverence. However, it is important to note that these rhetorical strategies are not limited to formal events such as the CNN-YouTube debates, and resistive discourse on the Web is anything but tidy. What is clear, however, is that much of YouTube, other social networking sites, and the Web 2.0 ethos as a whole revolve around rituals of

appropriation, parody, satire, and other irreverent modes of composing. Users often post their own versions of favorite videos as responses to the original, thereby engaging themselves (and other viewers) in a ritual of familiarity that promotes critical spectatorship and participation: "Such familiarity leads to anticipation, reflection and reaction on the part of the audience, wherein the principle of the audience as spectators of the discourse transcends to a principle of the audience as potential participants in the discourse" (McKenzie, 2000, p. 196). "Mash-up" compositions that integrate recognizable footage from existing videos into new, "original" new media texts typically rely on the audience's understanding of the original footage in order to make a new statement. This kind of bricolage "incorporates practices and notions like borrowing, hybridity, mixture, and plagiarism. Most scholars in media and cultural studies invoke bricolage when describing the remixing, reconstructing, and reusing of separate artifacts, actions, ideas, signs, symbols, and styles in order to create new insights or meanings" (Deuze, 2006, p. 70).

An example of this can be seen with the now infamous "Vote Different" (also known as "Hillary 1984") video, which uses footage from the famous 1984 Apple advertisement that introduced Macintosh to the world (the Apple advertisement, of course, being itself a revision of a famous scene of the Orwell classic, "1984"). The Apple advertisement depicts an athletic woman, dressed in a Macintosh T-shirt and armed with a sledgehammer, running through a crowd of drone-like citizens whose collective attention is glued to a massive television screen. The screen features a bureaucratic "Big Brother" figure and is climactically destroyed when the athletic heroine heaves her sledgehammer into it. The original advertisement then closes with narrated

text that says “On January 24, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you’ll see why 1984 won’t be like ‘1984.’” The “Vote Different” video is virtually identical to the Apple advertisement, with two major changes: the “Big Brother” face is replaced with campaign advertisement footage of Hillary Clinton speaking, and the closing text now reads: “On Jan. 14, the Democratic primary will begin. And you’ll see why 2008 won’t be like ‘1984.’” The advertisement closes with the logo for Barack Obama’s presidential campaign (a logo that is also included on the sledgehammer-wielding woman’s shirt, in place of the Macintosh symbol while preserving the original “Apple” color scheme and shape).

While the initial “Vote Different” video modified an existing visual formula to make a political statement, the variations that were created in response served to shift the rhetoric from being about the political campaign to being about the construction of the video itself – the video's creator even offered commentary on how to go about constructing a “viral video” that would achieve the same kind of widespread appeal as the “Vote Different” mash-up. In this way, irreverent strategies such as parody in the “Vote Different” advertisement, as well as other mocking strategies employed by videos submitted to the CNN-YouTube Debates, give way not only to discussion about the implied arguments supplied by those texts, but also to discussion of the rhetorical strategies used to convey the irreverence of those arguments. Thus, as I will discuss in the next section, composition students have much to gain from critiquing and composing irreverent texts.

Remixing Politics and Pedagogy

Irreverent texts such as the "Hillary 1984" video represent compelling modes of political critique leveled by "ordinary" citizens and offer a discursive platform that is simply not available in other forms of media. Print continues to be displaced by the image (Bezemer & Kress, 2008) as readers/viewers seek greater "immediacy": the interface becomes more transparent in an attempt to more accurately reflect reality (Bolter & Grusin, 1998, p. 30), and many Web 2.0 applications and practices let users experiment with still and moving images as composers as well as consumers; in other words, the greater availability of images on the web, as well as software that let users download and manipulate existing video clips, allow users to produce their own representations of reality in visually-oriented arenas. Sites such as Google Images provide easily searchable databases of images that users may easily save and use without obtaining permission; consequently, the appropriation of images, audio, video, and other multimedia elements has become widespread, with considerable ramifications for composing practices. Recent scholarship, such as that done by Lawrence Lessig (2005) and Johndan Johnson-Eilola & Stuart Selber (2007), has demonstrated that contemporary students live, think, and compose in a "remix culture," blurring the line between invented and borrowed texts (Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2007, p. 375). But "official" institutions, such as schools, corporate institutions, and political entities, are rarely comfortable with such seemingly irreverent assemblages between existing and "original" texts. In this section, I will attempt to sketch how, as Johnson-Eiola and Selber note, irreverent compositions "offer important new ways for thinking critically and productively about what it means to write, about what it means to read, and about what we value as texts in rhetoric in composition" (p. 376). Furthermore, I argue that irreverence as a rhetorical trope (which often relies on

some variety of "remixing" pre-existing content) may constitute a vernacular rhetoric that can challenge institutionalized, dominant forms of discourse.

In "Toward a Civic Rhetoric for Technologically and Scientifically Complex Places," Michele Simmons and Jeffrey Grabill note that, if composition instructors wish to equip their students for citizenship beyond the academy, then we should consider integrating the rhetorical practices of those working for community change into our composition classrooms (p. 440-442). Irreverent composition in its various forms – pastiche, mash-up, bricolage, etc. – may be just such a strategy that enables "transgressive acts of the least powerful" (p. 442), or the "vernacular rhetoric" that Hauser envisions. Further, composition instructors "must also acknowledge that productive participation involves appropriation and re-appropriation of the familiar often in ways that accommodate audiences by speaking to shared values and working with discourse conventions" (p. 381). Thus, engaging students in the practice of composing irreverence immerses them in an epideictic ritual of drawing from established conventions, value systems, and literacies to invent new knowledge.

Since irreverent composition ignores or mocks authority, it seems appropriate that most texts of this caliber (including the ones I observed in the CNN-YouTube Debates) would rely on humor to some degree for their rhetorical effectiveness, and this may be one place to begin conceptualizing ways to integrate the rhetorical trope of irreverence into the contemporary writing classroom. While comedy continues to be used for dispatching political and social commentary (current examples include The Onion, South Park, and The Daily Show, to name a few), instruction in this rhetorical strategy appears to be absent from contemporary college composition curricula. Meanwhile, as other

venues for composition – such as social networking sites – continue to revolutionize the ways in which people access information and communicate with each other, parody and other irreverent strategies continue to emerge as a privileged mode of argumentation in digital venues. As was noted in the above discussion of the CNN-YouTube Debates, many political figures and cultural gatekeepers are quick to dismiss such irreverent compositions in an effort to preserve the norms of discourses of power. In this way, irreverent strategies may exemplify the spirit of Hauser's "vernacular rhetoric" by highlighting the tension between official, institutionalized forms of discourses and the commentary produced by every day citizens.

Despite the current lack of classroom practice in this area, history shows that humor is no stranger to the composition classroom. Early lectures in composition, such as the ones developed by Hugh Blair, point to the rhetorical, political, and civic value of comedy. In his lecture XLVII: Comedy—Greek and Roman—French—English Comedy, Blair discusses the social value of ridicule, arguing that it is "the chief instrument of comedy" and that satirical exploitations of human folly are "very moral and useful" (p. 542). Referring to ancient Athenian plays, Blair identifies parody as a tool for political satire, while also pointing out the importance of cultural literacy. Namely, Blair points out how these Athenian plays "are so full of political allegories and allusions, that it is impossible to understand them without a considerable knowledge of the history of those times" (p. 546). In other words, in order to understand the parody, audience members must draw from their knowledge of previous cultural texts and rely on multiple intelligences to inform their understanding.

Contemporary authors are also noting the importance of cultural literacy to parody. In *Rhetoric Online*, Barbara Warnick (2007) uses the anti-consumerist spoof ads from Adbusters and the ever-changing Google logo as examples of how a parody's effectiveness depends on the audience's understanding of other texts. In this way, it seems that parody functions as an enthymeme: part of the argument is left unstated, with the understanding that audience members will be able to fill in the rest of the argument with knowledge gained from previous readings and experiences. Evidently, the Athenians – and Hugh Blair – recognized this literacy, as well

As the most vibrant rhetorical arenas continue to be contested, it is essential that composition instructors aid students in developing these skills so that they might be better prepared to identify and critique discourses of power and resistance and to compose new forms of democratic engagement in offline and online arenas. The possibilities for such integration range from short, in-class activities to more complex, semester-long projects. One assignment might take the form of a writing prompt that asks students to analyze the use of irreverence in a specific text (such as an episode of South Park, an article by The Onion, or a viral video on YouTube that employs strategies such as the ones discussed earlier) and the extent to which irreverence as a rhetorical trope enhances the text's overall impact: What is the overall impact of the text? Who or what is being mocked, and by whom? What kind of argument or commentary is being made through that mockery? How does the argument resist existing power relationships? How does the text change or break the rules about who is allowed to speak and what topics are allowed to be spoken about?

Such analyses need not be limited to people and events, however; experimentation with irreverence may provide an entrypoint into student reflection on particular genres of composition – especially, perhaps, those genres that are unique to digital composing. An activity such as one provided by a new media writing course at the University of Minnesota Duluth ("Parody") might use parody activities to engage students in critique of digital genres such as MySpace and Facebook profiles, eBay listings, blogs, and even Powerpoint presentations. Other activities may ask students to compose their own texts using irreverence as a rhetorical trope; a major project for an intermediate or advanced writing course, for example, could ask students to construct a parody for the purpose of critiquing a person, place, event, trend, or other topic. Linking these projects to a current event or controversy (such as an election, local scandal, or on-campus trend) would encourage students to become critical observers, composers, and community participants.

Of course, encouraging students to engage in irreverent work – particularly that which draws from existing texts – is a practice that brings with it many ethical challenges. Teachers must learn to "balance cultural expectations of use with legal pressures of copyright in our classrooms" (McKee, 2008, p. 119). Thus, instruction in the use of parody in a remix culture will require instruction on the sometimes murky Fair Use Doctrine of U.S. Copyright Law. Unfortunately, this ethical responsibility to uphold intellectual property guidelines also may threaten students' ability to critique the most dominant, institutionalized forms of discourse through the practice of appropriation and remix. As Danielle DeVoss & Suzanne Webb (2008) note, "If we teach students to ask for permission to fairly use media work in their educational endeavors, we risk pushing them into a wall—a wall that they likely will not be able to climb and conquer within the

15-week semesters in which we typically teach. It is phenomenally difficult—and deliberately so—to find out who actually holds the copyright to a work" (p. 95). Daunting as these challenges may be, they are issues that transcend the walls of the classroom; students must learn to interrogate the boundaries of intellectual property so that they might make informed choices about when and where to use irreverence in service of a vernacular rhetoric that resists dominant discourses of power.

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