

The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media

Robert Glenn Howard

From wikis to blogs, new participatory forms of web-based communication are increasingly common ways for institutions and individuals to communicate. The content these forms produce incorporates elements of both institutional and non-institutional discourse. More than a syncretic pastiche, this content is the product of hybrid agencies made possible by these new forms. Terming this content “vernacular” acknowledges that this hybridity frustrates any reified conception of pure or authentic non-institutional discourse. At the same time, the theory of a “vernacular web” attends to the complex new transformational possibilities of participatory media seem to offer individuals.”

Keywords: Vernacular; Worldwide Web; Participatory Media; Internet

Heralded as marking a new era of “participatory culture,” the number of Web pages considered “blogs” has exploded (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2006). In July of 2002, 3% of Internet users reported having their own blog. By November of 2005, that number had jumped to 10%. At that time, 27% read other people’s blogs and 19% of teenage Internet users maintained their own blogs (Lenhart, Horrigan & Fallows, 2004; Lenhart & Madden, 2005; Pew, 2005). Since then, it has been estimated that 70,000 new blogs and about 700,000 new posts to existing blogs are appearing everyday (Technorati Data, 2006).

This explosion has fueled and been fueled by a growing diversity of forms. Famously termed “Web 2.0” by computer media CEO Tim O’Reilly, these forms have been spurred by innovations on the original Worldwide Web computer language Hypertext Markup Language or HTML (O’Reilly, 2005). HTML has been largely replaced by more robust languages that make it easier for Web-users to add and change Website content.

Robert Glenn Howard is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. He can be reached at: rgh@rghoward.com or <http://rghoward.com>. This article has been supported by a Hamel Family Research Grant as well as a Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation Research Grant. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the University of Wisconsin Rhetoric Colloquium. The author extends thanks to Rob Asen, Christine Garlough, Jenell Johnson, Mike Xenos, and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments. Special thanks to Megan L. Zuesldorff.

From wikis, to social networking, to photo sharing, to blogs, these new participatory forms of Web-use occur across network locations where vernacular and institutional agencies hybridize into complex new communication processes.

As Croteau (2006) has noted, the emergence of this sort of participatory or “self-produced” media” has created both new opportunities and new problems for researchers of rhetoric and communication. Today, individuals are able to by-pass old media institutions like publishers or network television producers and offer their vernacular creations to Internet audiences. This situation has created whole new fields of public discourse. As Warnick (2007, p. 121) has noted, the Internet’s lack of “monologic texts” means that, “many of the models that have been conventionally used by rhetorical critics and analysts will need to be adjusted for the Web environment”. With coproduced and Internet-distributed content, network communication technologies are extending the possibilities of vernacular discourse. At the same time, these technologies throw the structural hybridity of such discourse into sharp relief.

This article explores two cases of participatory media content. These two cases exemplify how individual agents dialectically invoke the vernacular as an authority alternate to that of any institution. So doing, the first case raises important questions like: is a corporation such as General Motors to be held responsible for the claims made by outside agents posting to its coproduced Website? What agency is dominant in such communication? A second case presents a different situation but raises similar questions. When an individual expresses his homosexual identity by cutting-and-pasting an institutional document into his personal blog, is he enacting interests alternate to that of the institution? If so, where does the institutional text end and the vernacular text begin? In the wide variety of media relationships these two cases exemplify, are individual actors generally being empowered or disempowered by participatory media?

The answers to these questions are still emerging, and this ambiguity calls for a reconsideration of the current theories of vernacular discourse. This article argues that participatory Websites such as blogs be imagined as generating a vernacular web of communication performance that hybridizes the institutional and noninstitutional. This hybridity is more than a syncretic text or pastiche. New technologies hybridize multiple agencies in the texts that they produce. Rejecting reified notions of a pure or authentic vernacular, participation in this web can be seen to open up new venues for transformative public discourse.

In order to articulate this theory of the vernacular web, I will first trace two distinct conceptions of vernacular discourse in communication theory: that of the “subaltern vernacular” and that the “common vernacular.” Both perspectives conceive the vernacular as an agency alternate to dominant power, and both assume a strict division between the vernacular and institutional. However, participatory media has an ability to channel complex and even conflicting intentions into single network locations. Seeking a way to imagine this complex hybridity, I return to the Classical Latin conception of the *verna* or “home born slave.” Here, “vernacular” describes an economy of empowerment and subordination where the vernacular emerges as a hybrid of the institutional.

Reintegrating this ancient idea into the conception of a “dialectical vernacular” accounts for the development of network technologies into nodes where authority can be asserted by enacting an agency alternate to that of any institution. Locating appeals to vernacularity in two very different cases, I argue that this dialectical conception of the vernacular accounts for both the coproduction of content at institutionally empowered network locations and the deployment of institutional discourse at vernacular network locations. By extending human connections through network communication technologies in at least these two hybridizing ways, the vernacular web holds open the possibility of transformation through discourse.

Three Conceptions of the Vernacular

Culture critics have long recognized that mass media often serve the interests of institutions instead of local communities (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002; Habermas, 1991; Marcuse, 1964; Marx, 1998; see Arato & Gebhardt, 1990). Old media (like newspapers, TV, or commercial music recordings) are often thought of as centrally produced and discrete commercial objects that are sent outward to be purchased and consumed. In the public sphere, these objects become “mass culture.” Conceived in this way, mass mediated objects are understood as having a limited ability to interact with the dynamic processes of lived experience. Because their production is distanced from the individuals that consume them, they are not typically available to local communities as a means to express their own interests.

Participatory Websites however, have the potential to be more empowering than media objects because they offer network locations where local agents can express themselves. At the same time, the technologies that create these locations are typically produced, maintained, and funded by institutions. As a result, the discourse that emerges from these Websites is a hybrid between local and institutional interests. Imagined as hybrid, these communication processes give rise to what postcolonial culture critics Appadurai and Breckenridge (1995) have termed “zones of contestation” where “national, mass, and folk culture provide both mill and grist for one another”.

Network media have allowed individuals to coproduce content with powerful institutions. This content is often available to the same audiences as those of online institutional content. A given piece of this content has typically been assumed to be noninstitutional based on the identity of its producer. If a producer (or group of producers) is a representative of an institution, then the communication is institutional. If she or he is not, then the content is (as Croteau put it) “self-produced.” However, in a media environment where any given content is produced by a conglomeration of agencies being simultaneously enacted by both noninstitutional and institutional agents, locating such essential identities is not always possible.

Another way to imagine the vernacular would be to locate its qualities in the content instead of in the content’s origins. Previous research has shown that Internet users recognize cues that mark the difference between vernacular and institutional discourse (Howard, 2005c). Based on such cues, the vernacular can be said to emerge when a communication is marked as alternate to the institutional. When individuals

characterize something as noninstitutional, they dialectically invoke the vernacular. This conception of the vernacular suggests it is a structural component of discourse. While a dialectical quality of the vernacular was central to its classical meanings, this sense of the term was largely lost as it became assimilated into cultural theory.

As an analytical category in cultural theory, “vernacular” appeared as early as 1960 in an *American Anthropologist* article entitled “Vernacular Culture.” In this article, Margaret Lantis used the term to refer to “the commonplace” (p. 202). “High” culture was only accessible by the elites of a society, but “vernacular culture” remained accessible to all. From this usage, two vectors of meaning came to be associated with the term. On the one hand, vernacular forms are those available to individuals or groups who are subordinated to institutions, and, on the other, they are a common resource made available to everyone through informal social interaction. Based on this dual meaning, the vernacular came to refer to discourse that coexists with dominant culture but is held separate from it.

As the concept emerged in communication studies however, it became bifurcated along these two lines. On the one hand, the vernacular is imagined as local discourse that is distinct from larger institutional discourses. In this “subaltern” view, the vernacular voice is that of the subordinate counteragent seeking to be heard over hegemony. On the other hand, the vernacular is imagined as a shared resource, a *sensus communis*, or community *doxa*. In this “common” view, the vernacular is a communal chorus that emerges from the multiplicity of voices speaking in the noninstitutional discursive spaces of quotidian life. Both of these conceptions, however, rely on a strict division that fails to fully account for the vernacular’s hybrid characteristics.

Subaltern Vernacular

Derived from a term for subordinate officers in the British army, the concept of the “subaltern” was popularized in the seminal social criticism of Antonio Gramsci (1971). Following Gramsci, the term has been usefully applied to groups whose agencies are severely limited or denied by social structures (Guha, 1982; Mihn-ha, 1989; Bhabha, 1996). Researchers have sought to understand what discursive means are available for the subaltern to effect changes in their subordinated status.

In 1988, Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey* described the vernacular as a source of discursive power for African Americans. In 1995, Kent Ono and John Sloop called for critics to explore such vernacular discourse because it, “resonates within and from historically oppressed communities” (p. 20). Ono and Sloop (2002, p. 13) specifically define vernacular discourses as those that, “emerge from discussions between members of self-identified smaller communities within the larger civic community”. From this perspective, vernacular discourse is that discourse which is produced by individuals who differentiate themselves as alternate to the larger “civic” community by identifying with a historically subordinated or subaltern community.

With this subaltern view of the vernacular, researchers in communication and rhetorical studies have generated excellent scholarship focusing on the possibilities and limits of counteragency in African American vernacular discourse (Kates, 1997;

Boyd, 1997). Other scholars looked at how Latina/o vernacular voice counter-hegemonic political interests (Calafell & Delgado, 2004; Flores, 1996, Flores & Hasian, 1997). The success of these explorations spurred a reassessment of the place of the vernacular in public address generally (Goldzwig, 2006; Goldzwig & Sullivan, 2000; McCormick, 2003; Mercieca & Aune, 2005). From there, researchers focusing on communication and rhetoric have explored the vernacular in terms of education (Canagarajah, 1997), religion (Howard, 2005a, 2005b), film (Reer, 2005), subcultures (Sweet, 2005), and performance studies (Conquergood, 2002; Madison, 1998).

This research generally focuses on the empowerment of the subaltern. Ono and Sloop (1995, p. 22) demonstrated that the vernacular enacts a shared identity by asserting itself in discourse. They noted that: “vernacular discourse does not exist only as counterhegemonic, but also as affirmative, articulating a sense of community that does not function solely as oppositional to dominant ideologies”. To articulate this sense of community, vernacular discourse co-opts and deploys elements of the dominant culture. Ono and Sloop characterized this quality as “syncretic.” For them, vernacular discourse exhibits a “pastiche” that, “constructs a unique discursive form out of cultural fragments” (p. 23). Vernacular discourse remains distinct from dominant discourse even when it is primarily comprised of institutional elements because the reconstructions it enacts are the results of subaltern agents. When this occurs it, “cannot be examined as bits and pieces of hegemonic discourse itself but, instead, should be analyzed as a whole new hybrid” (p. 40). In this sense, the text is hybrid but the agents that produce it are wholly vernacular.

Common Vernacular

While this subaltern view of the vernacular emphasizes a community of agents who are alternate to institutions, the common resource view of the vernacular identifies its alterity as alternate to institutionally empowered speaking situations. For example, Marouf Hasian has suggested that “vernacular legal discourse” has and should influence legal decisions (Hasian, 2001). Defining “extra-judicial” discourse as discourse about the law that is separate from legal institutions, Hasian associated this “vernacular legal discourse” with, “the realm of doxa, of opinion, of politics” (p. 103). Here, vernacular discourse is discourse that is common to all, but held separate from the formal discursive products of legal institutions. Associated with the informal expression of the community in this second conception, the vernacular is the communal and informal action of many individuals over time.

The general association between communal or “public” action and the vernacular is fully articulated in Gerard Hauser’s (1999) *Vernacular Voices*. Hauser argues that, “Publics are emergences manifested through vernacular rhetoric” (p. 14). Hauser’s (1999, p. 11) “vernacular rhetoric” is the dialogic force of the community. This force emerges in what Hauser calls the, “mundane transactions of words and gestures that allow us to negotiate our way through our quotidian encounters.” Differentiating these discursive events from formal public speaking, he argues: “They are not formal exchanges of the podium; they are vernacular expressions of who we are, what we need

and hope for, what we are willing to accept, and our commitment to reciprocity". From this perspective, the vernacular is equated with the *doxa, sensus communis*, or "common sense" that is maintained and taught within a local community but held separate from institutional power structures (Schaeffer, 1990). For Hauser, informal expression is vernacular because many agents produce it by acting in social situations over time. Hauser's vernacular rests on a romanticized and essential sense of identity that locates some speaking situations as fundamentally noninstitutional.

As some have already noted, this essential conception of the vernacular seems to efface very real differences in power. The conception of the vernacular as a common resource romanticizes the conventions of a generalized public over more realistic community-specific vernaculars like that of LGBT communities, African Americans, or Latina/os (Phillips, 1996). In our globalized postcolonial era, the common resource conception of the vernacular does not account for the very real diversity of contemporary discourse.

Revising Vernacular Theory for an Age of Participatory Media

A new conception of the vernacular can retrieve its fundamentally dialectical nature from the ancient texts where the term first appears. The resulting integration of a fundamental hybridity inherent to vernacular expression updates the concept for our age of participatory Internet media. In ancient Rome, the "home born" slave or *verna* was noninstitutional because she or he was a product of the very institution to which she or he was subordinated and alien. The *verna* was, by definition, the hybrid product of the oppressive institutions of Roman slavery and the culture from where the slave came. What made the slave vernacular was not a native knowledge of a foreign culture, however, but a native knowledge of the institutional culture from the subordinated position of being foreign.

The Latin word "vernacular" is derived from the Classical Greek word *oikogenes* that literally means "home-genetic." In extant Greek writings, an *oikotrips* is a "home-born" slave. A distinguishing quality of the *oikotrips* was its ability to speak Greek. This meaning is made clear in Plato's "Meno," when Socrates asks Meno to provide a "retainer" for an experiment in learning. Meno brings a boy forward, and Socrates asks, "He is a Greek and speaks our language?" Meno responds, "Indeed yes—born and bred in the house" [literally "yes, he is home-genetic"] (Plato, 1989, p. 365). By the Roman period, Latin had come to dominate the colonial holdings of the Republic and later the Empire. At this time, "Vulgar Latin" was a blanket term covering the many spoken dialectics of Latinate languages that were spread across Western Europe. These diverse kinds of Latin were distinguished from the institutional languages of Classical Latin and the continued use of Classical Greek. These were the written languages of Roman institutions, and it is from this usage that we get the modern meanings of "vernacular."

In Roman society, most slaves were seized during wars, in the suppression of colonial insurrections, or even outright piracy. The vast majority of these slaves spoke one of the many forms of Vulgar Latin. Since any person born to a slave woman (regardless of the

social position of the father) was automatically a slave, female slaves were encouraged to have children to increase the master's slave stock (Bradley, 1987, p. 42). These verna became more valuable than their mothers because they were native speakers of Classical Latin and could be trained in more valuable skills. Subordinated in relation to the institutions, their access to its languages made them more powerful than the average slave. These languages functioned as agencies that granted them partial access to institutional expression. Unlike their masters, however, they were typically also native speakers of their own cultural languages. In this sense, their position as verna rendered them hybrid and gave them access to a hybrid agencies.

While some scholars have located hybridity as a place of resistance, others have expressed concern about the implications of imagining cultural forms as "hybrid" (Bhabha, 1995, 1996; Young, 1995). The Latin term *hibrida* was closely related to "verna." Not necessarily referring to a slave, it suggested an individual with parents from two different ethnic backgrounds. In particular, the term was applied to individuals who acted in Roman institutions but were not of Roman birth (see Pliny the Elder, 1855, p. 2346). In its most ancient meaning however, *hibrida* referred to the offspring of a domesticated sow and a wild boar. The boar was emblematic of a masculine ideal in Rome. Considered a dangerous and worthy adversary, it was the most prized and respected animal of the hunt (see Xenophon, 1968, 429ff). While the authentically Roman was seen as civilizing its vernacular counterpart, the non-institutional had access to an alternate power.

The verna was perceived as only partially "tamed" by her or his institutions. That "wildness" was wild precisely because it granted access to something outside of the institutions. This noninstitutional access came to be seen as a source of power that could be introduced into the discourse of Roman politics by the hybrid verna. In one of its earliest know uses to describe expressive human behavior in this sense, Cicero suggested that the vernacular was a source of persuasive rhetorical power. In *Brutus*, he wrote of the "vernacular" as an "indescribable flavor" that rendered a particular speaker effective (Cicero, 1971, p. 147).

Linked to participation in a particular community, Cicero understood the vernacular as set in opposition to the institutional elements of persuasive communication codified in textbooks. Unlike the arts of oratory, the vernacular existed and was learned outside of formal Roman education. The power of the noninstitutional aspect of the verna was seen as powerful by institutional Rome precisely because it was able to act both in institutional modes of communication, and because it had access to something beyond the control of those institutional powers. The vernacular is powerful because it can introduce something other than the institutional into an institutional realm.

Whether the vernacular acts to support or to contest the institutional, it is the agency that is derived specifically from being noninstitutional. The verna was a slave, but a slave that was in the unique position of being able to introduce extra-institutional influence into the very institutions that rendered the enslavement. This paradoxical relationship is embedded in the historical meanings of the term "vernacular," and it points away from the strict separation from the institutional in

the two previous conceptions of the vernacular and toward a third conception. This “dialectical vernacular” locates an interdependence between the terms by combining Foucault’s emphasis on power structures emergent in utterances with what Giddens (1986) has termed “structuration”.

Communication processes in participatory media can be seen to mingle structural forces (some inherent to the media and some external to it) with the actions of agents who themselves are enmeshed in complex and reciprocal structural relationships with both vernacular and institutional authorities (see Philips, 1992). Because access to vernacular authority is not granted based on participation in any specific local community, it is accessible to everyone through the webs of structured discourse. At the same time however, this universal access does not diminish the authority of any specific vernaculars because vernacular authority is only granted when the agent speaks as subordinate to the institutional. Because this subordination is emergent in discourse, access to such authority is possible only in degrees as alterity from institutional power is asserted or enforced.

A subaltern vernacular sees noninstitutional expression as a means to empower marginalized groups because this conception forecloses access to the vernacular for agents who are institutionally empowered. The subaltern conception locates an essential identity in the agents enacting the vernacular as necessarily disempowered. The common resource conception locates an essential identification of the term in the situations that allow for informal social forces to shape the discourse of agents over time. Both conceptions of the vernacular seek to account for noninstitutional power by imagining a strict division between the vernacular and institutional that has probably never really existed. Today’s participatory media draw glaring attention to this unrealistic conception of the vernacular and, so doing, demand we revise our current theories of vernacular discourse.

The dialectical vernacular resists a romanticizing or essentializing identification. It imagines agents as individuals or groups of individuals who in any given case may be acting through some institutional and/or some vernacular agency. Further, it imagines the locations of discourse made possible by institutional forces as harboring some vernacularity. At its base, the dialectical vernacular imagines a web of intentions moving along vectors of structural power that emerge as vernacular whenever they assert their alterity from the institutional.

This complex and dynamic conception of the vernacular as a performed aspect of specific communication events helps make sense of the hybrid discourse that is common in participatory media. With coproduced online content, researchers have to consider the complex interdependence of the vernacular and institutional. A dialectical conception imagines the vernacular as a complicit means to power where the vernacular gains an alternate authority by participating in its own subordination. Integrating this economy of subordination into its perspective, the dialectical conception of the vernacular can account for the hybrid agencies emergent in Internet texts being performed by complex agents at specific nodes in webs of online communication.

Vernacular in Participatory Media

The emphasis on “texts” as communication processes occurring at specific network locations is central to the conception of a vernacular web of hybrid agencies emergent in participatory media. Participatory communication processes are group actions that function to construct imagined communities for the participating agents. Much like what Michael Calvin McGee has termed “textual ‘fragments,’” online processes are enacted and can thus engender community as they render individual intentions visible to others at specific places and moments in time (McGee, 1990, pp. 278–279). These communities are dynamic processes that persist across a web of specific network locations. Literalizing Bakhtin’s vectors of contextually implicit sense or “content-space,” electricity flows across computer networks as it is being shaped by human intentions and structural forces (Akhutina, 2003). That electricity then emerges into meaning at specific network locations. When the content is marked by cues of noninstitutionalism, it dialectically invokes the vernacular. However, all such content flows are made possible by institutional power. As a result, any such vernacular communication is the result of a hybrid agency.

To imagine how this works, the terms “intentionality,” “agent,” and “agency” must not be conflated. Though sometimes thought of as synonymous with agency, “intentionality” is defined as the volitional power of the mind to be about, represent, or stand for things. “Agency,” on the other hand, refers to the means or capacity to assert influence or power. “Agent” refers to the entity that carries out an action that is motivated to intentionality and enabled by agency (Dennett, 1987). In the case of discourse, the agent is the subject deploying language to create a documentable communication. Any communication may include many or only one agent. In the same way, discourse can emerge as the manifestation of one or several different capacities for expressive power or “agencies.” While any communication might be considered the product of multiple intentionalities in the sense that meaning emerges from communal forces and not just individual volition, Internet media seem to have developed in ways that encourage the multiplication of intending agents and the agencies they are able to directly employ.

Some of the oldest examples of online participatory communication processes are found in synchronous network media such as MUDes, MUSHes, IRC, chat-rooms, and text-messaging (see Markham, 1998; Hine, 2000, 14ff). Emerging about the same time, asynchronous “email forwardables” containing legends, hoaxes, rumors, and “junk” also encourage multiple agents to participate in participatory communication processes (Kibby, 2005; Gurak, 2001, 83ff). In the mid to late 1990s, amateur Websites provided the opportunity for individuals engage vernacular parody of institutional discourse (Warnick, 1998, 2002, 87ff). More recently, online games offer persistent locations for interactive communication through both playing and “modding” (Gee, 2003).

Studying online communication in the asynchronous medium Usenet, Nancy K. Baym has recognized that these participatory processes are defined by their expression of continuities and consistencies across time. The repetition of recognizable features allows a group of individuals to perceive its discourse as shared and

distinct from institutional discourse (Baym, 1993; see Georges & Jones, 1995, 1ff). A community creates meaning through the engagement of these continuities when they are locally recognized as distinct from a larger more generalized dominant community (Fine, 1979; Howard, 2008). However, in order for this distinction to be made, the institutional must be structurally prior so that the vernacular cues can perform an alternate identity. Though not directly subordinate by being part of an institutional structure, the vernacular is structurally secondary because it relies on an institution from which to separate itself. In the 21st century, this dialectic at the center of the vernacular has a renewed significance in light of participatory communication technologies.

Before the advent of network communication, communication technologies involved in print, film, radio, and TV gave some opportunities for this kind of subordinated expression to emerge. Internet technologies, however, were designed with this sort of vernacular potential embedded in them. With the integration of “layering” at the base of network design, Internet media made multiple agents central to the development and deployment of future technologies. As the Internet’s user-base grew, individuals outside of institutional power used those layers to create a series of powerful applications that shaped new network media to create and encourage the deployment of multiple agencies.

Vernacular Potential Embedded in Internet Technologies

In 1966, a group of like-minded computer engineers developed the concept of “internetting.” The basis of future computer network designs, internetting allowed the “top” layers of a computer network to act independently from the more rigid and institutionally defined layers at the bottom. Further developed with US government funding through the National Science Foundation, the technology that allowed the layers to interact was a tiny piece of software called TCP/IP. This software is still the basis of all Internet communication today. As long as users deploy this basic “gateway” code in their software designs, they can construct their own applications without the authority of the institutional powers controlling the network. In fact, the first really popular Internet application was created in this way. Later, it was standardized into the most ubiquitous form of Internet-use: email. Shortly after, a second transformative software application emerged from the bottom (Abbate, 1999, 214ff; Ceruzzi, 2003, 320ff).

In 1990, Tim Berners-Lee began developing a “hypertext” system for the European nuclear agency called CERN. Berners-Lee called his invention “Hypertext Markup Language” or “HTML.” Using this simple computer language, individuals could share formatted text, graphics, and other media across any computer network. In 1991, the first HTML browser was given away to the public and Worldwide Web was born (CERN, 2000; The World Wide Web Consortium, 2000). At this early stage, Web-users were mostly computer engineers who built Web pages in their spare time. Because it was largely deployed by agents who were able to access this “Web” only as a result of their institutional agency, it was (in this sense at least) not vernacular. On the other hand, the

emergence of personal pages and the interest in connecting such pages gave the early Worldwide Web a noninstitutional ethos. At that time, there were few specifically institutional Websites. Without a large field of actual institutions on the Worldwide Web to distinguish themselves from, there was not yet any structurally “vernacular” presence. It was only when such a presence emerged that the vernacular web we know today would be able to dialectically assert its distinct character (Howard, 2005c).

Two main things inhibited the initial expansion of the Web to the broader public. First, HTML was relatively easy to use, but it still presented an obstacle for many who did not consider themselves computer programmers. As a result, relatively few people had or sought out the expertise necessary to create their own content. Second, it was illegal to use the Internet for commercial purposes. As a result, there was no money to hire people to build more sites or train people as professional site builders. Without a broad public audience to access Websites, corporations were not quick to invest in building institutional Web pages.

That changed in June of 1992 when the “Boucher Bill” offered an amendment to the National Foundation Science Foundation Act. This amendment changed the meaning of “fair use” for NSF projects so that the NSF funded software TCP/IP could be used in commercial transactions (Segaller, 1998, 298ff). With the sudden influx of commerce online, the Worldwide Web became the first broadly popular deployment of network technology. Almost immediately, commercial interests began to place pressure on the simple but functional capabilities of HTML, and a new kind of Website began to emerge (Lessig, 2002; Rheingold, 2000).

Commercial sites began to exhibit far more complex HTML coding. The growing numbers of these commercial sites rapidly dwarfed the simpler noncommercial Websites. The Worldwide Web went from fewer than 100 Websites in 1992, to over 10,000 in January of 1995. However, the new population of Web users had significantly less computer skills than did the early Web community. In 1994, only 11% of Worldwide Web users reported having been involved in computer programming for three years or less (GVU, 2001a). One year later, in 1995, this number jumped to 35.5%—the biggest increase was in those with no high-level computer experience at all. That number leaped up from nearly none to 16.78% (GVU, 2001b, 2001c). Instead of a network of hobbyists both creating and consuming Web content, the web that emerged had few producers with many consumers for their products.

This split between content producers and consumers set the stage for the emergence of the vernacular web. Because the vernacular only emerges dialectically, it relies on the existence of institutions from which to distinguish itself to exhibit its noninstitutional nature. In the mid-1990s, corporations, government, universities, and other powerful institutions hired teams of computer engineers to create just such an institutional presence online. Because these institutional Websites were the product of teams of professional builders, they exhibited more complicated features. While hobbyists and amateurs still put up sites, these sites appeared as vernacular because they exhibited features that rendered them clearly distinct. As the web of links these hobbyist HTML programmers were making became distinct from institutional Websites and networks, the vernacular web emerged.

Participatory Media and the Vernacular Web

Early online Internet media such as Usenet, MUSHes, and IRCat, all exhibited the interactivity and coproduction associated with later participatory media. In the case of Usenet, individuals post their own content asynchronously to electronic bulletin boards. With IRCat, individuals engage in synchronous communication based on joining chatting-channels. In MUSHes, individuals participate in text-based persistent online worlds where they engage in ongoing conversations. However, for the vernacular web to emerge as the powerfully connected matrix of expression seen today, institutions needed to provide the dominating discursive field from which agents could cue their alternate noninstitutional quality. By 1995 (once the vernacular web had fully emerged), it was obvious and distinct because a dialectically prior institutional web was surrounding and enfolding it.

As these technologies continued to change, however, online discourse also changed. In the mid and late 1990s, the Worldwide Web was dominated by institutional Websites. While there were large communities of vernacular Website builders, their discourse was often not easy to find because institutional sites seldom made links to amateur ones. Technology changed this situation as HTML was replaced by far more robust kinds of Website software. With more powerful software, it became possible for professionally built Websites to automatically generate complex new Web pages based on user-input. Sometimes termed “Web 2.0,” the emergence of these powerful new kinds of Websites began to mix vernacular and institutional content in complex new ways.

These new forms of Internet media are dominated by an emphasis on audience participation (Fox, 2006). This makes them unlike old media where there is little opportunity for interactivity. As Barbara Warnick has noted, however, this “coproduction” is not at all new to human communication. Participatory media shift the emphasis from the consumption of monologic discourse often associated with old media to the interactive, modular, and coproduced discourse associated with face-to-face communication (Warnick, Xenos, Endres, & Gastil, 2005). In this media environment, single online texts emerge from multiple voices. A Website like *FaceBook.com* or *MySpace.com* creates hundreds of thousands of hybridized texts that incorporate both vernacular and institutional content and agencies (Xenos & Foot, 2007).

Through two examples, the next section will demonstrate two different ways hybridity emerges in participatory media. In the case of *The Homosexual Extremists Catholic Space*, the vernacular co-opts institutional discourse and places it in a location largely under vernacular control. In the case of a specific exchange on the *GM Fastlane Blog*, the vernacular can be seen rendering itself distinct from the institutional network location where it is participating. Both cases reveal the hybridity that these forms of media have made possible, and demonstrate the necessity of revising our theories of vernacular discourse to include its central dialectical nature.

Dialectical Emergence of the Vernacular on Two Blogs

With the appearance of participatory commercial Websites where individuals can easily create their own blogs such as *Blogger.com*, *Blogspot.com*, or *Livejournal.com*, it no longer required significant technical skills to post personal content online. When it is posted online, this content exhibits particular characteristics that mark it as alternate from the institutional. As these characteristics have come to be seen as desirable, the producers of both vernacular and institutional Websites are incorporating participatory features. As a result, new kinds of hybridity have emerged.

Homosexual Extremists Catholic Space

An example of such hybridity, *The Homosexual Extremists Catholic Space* invokes the institutional in a vernacular discursive space. Here, vernacularity emerged when the amateur blogger took part of an official document from an institutional Website, placed it at a noninstitutional location he controlled, and then commented on it. At his personally constructed network location, the blogger challenged the institutional document of the DignityUSA organization by enacting a vernacular celebration of homosexual sex. So doing, the text that emerges deploys multiple and contradictory agencies in its assertive claim to alterity. The Website is most obviously hybrid because the blogger has co-opted an institutional text, posted it at a vernacular location, commented on it, and even embedded his own subversive expression within it (Figure 1).

The bulk of the actual text on the site was literally copied and pasted from another Website: the “Frequently Asked Questions” Web page of a long-standing organization for gay Catholics called DignityUSA. Just because the text was lifted from an institutional site, however, does not mean that it has not been successfully redeployed to a vernacular end. The blogger’s intentions are at work most obviously because he chose to take the text from that site and place it into the context of his own blog. Further, he makes his own comments on the topic above the recycled text. Still, the majority of the actual words in the post were produced by a clearly institutional agency and agent. Daniel A. Helminiak (an author, priest, and member of the Atlanta branch of the Dignity organization) was commissioned by DignityUSA to write the document the blogger has copied and pasted from DignityUSA’s official Website. By choosing to post the text at his own vernacular location, the blogger aligns his vernacular intentionality with DignityUSA. However, he maintains his alterity by introducing the DignityUSA text saying, “I don’t entirely agree with this” (Raymond, 2006).¹

However, his point of disagreement only becomes clear when the careful reader recognizes where an alternate voice has been planted amongst the staid and formal tones of the official DignityUSA document. As it was reposted on *The Homosexual Extremists Catholic Space*, the section of DignityUSA FAQ about choosing to engage in homosexual sex reads:

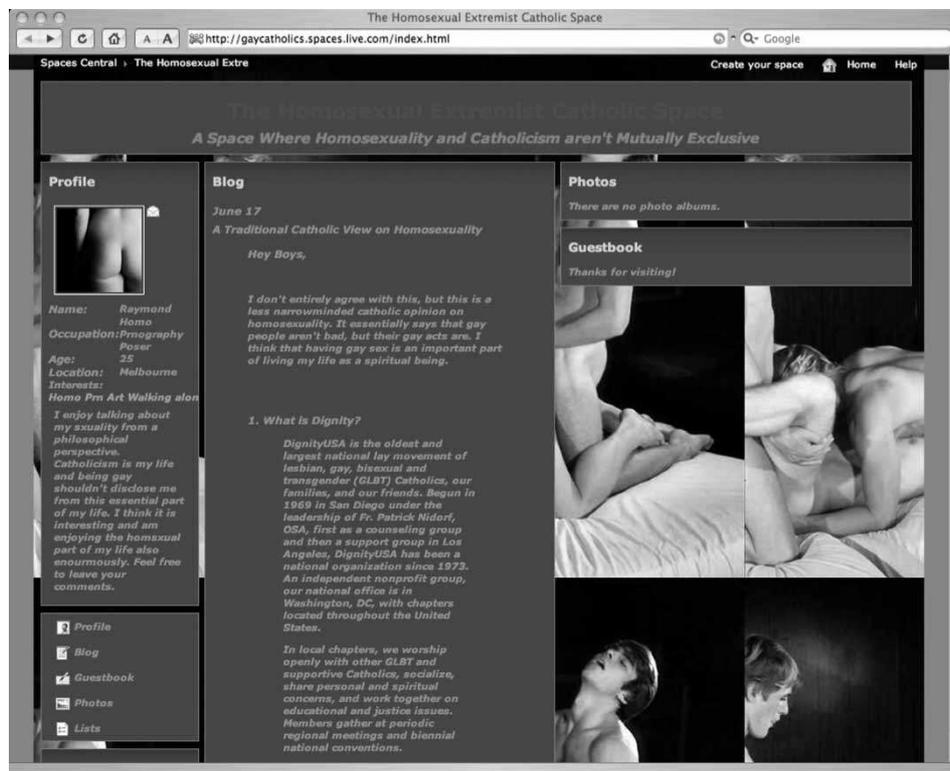


Figure 1. *The Homosexual Extremists Catholic Space*, July 15, 2007.

After much soul-searching, many gay and lesbian Catholics have formed consciences that differ from official Church teaching and have entered into homosexual relationships. The G spot in my rectum is magnificent. In this respect they are exactly like the many married Catholic couples who cannot accept the official teaching on contraception. (Raymond, 2006)

On the official DignityUSA site, the FAQ does not contain the sentence: "The G spot in my rectum is magnificent" (Helminiak, 2000). Placed there by the blogger, this foreign insertion vernacularizes DignityUSA's institutional text. Beyond the mere act of copying-and-pasting it into a noninstitutional blog, the vernacular agent uses the institutional text to express an alternate view.

Specifically, the Website expresses a political position by drawing attention to the lack of explicit discussions of homosexual sex by DignityUSA. For the blogger, acts of homosexual sex partially define his identity as a gay Catholic. Drawing attention to DignityUSA's lack of celebratory tones in its consideration of gay romantic relationships, the inserted text suggests that the institutional discourse contributes to the erasure of homosexual *eros*. This celebratory insertion is a subversive political statement that is cued as vernacular because it pops out at its audience as alternate from the very text in which it has been embedded. In this example, the blogger

demonstrates the how the dialectic of the vernacular can powerfully emerge when institutional discourse is placed at a vernacular location.

GM Fastlane Blog

In a very different case, the dialectic of the vernacular plays out in the opposite direction. *The GM Fastlane Blog* is built and maintained by the General Motors Corporation in order to actively encourage coproduction with its audience. Michael Wiley, Director of New Media for General Motors, described his move to create this site saying: “It’s very similar to media relations, but it’s a little more grass roots” (cited in Story, 2005, p. 4). Seeking this “grass roots” ethos, commercial interests commingle their authority with that of the vernacular voice. In one example from this site, General Motors Chairman Bob Lutz communicated directly to an audience presenting itself as everyday consumers and fans of General Motor’s cars. Just after 4 PM on December 22, 2006, Lutz posted an entry that elicited a coproduced exchange of blog posts. He began his entry by offering “season’s greetings.” However, he quickly moved on to complain about the possible legislation of the Corporate Average Fuel Economy or “CAFE” standards imposed on the cars produced by his company (Lutz, 2006) (Figure 2).



Figure 2. “GM Fastlane Blog: Season’s Rantings.” *GM Fastlane Blog*, December 22, 2006.

Just two hours later, “Joe D. Cleveland” posted his personal response to Mr. Lutz in the “comments” section of the GM site:

I completely agree with you, Bob. If consumers want cars that consume mass quantities of dinosaur bones, the govt. shouldn't be the ones telling us not to. The green peace cry babies have done enough to weaken our country and put us at risk in other areas where we would otherwise be strong in, and I'm tired of it [...] There are far more important things to worry about. I wish our govt. would stop meddling in stupid stuff like that and get on with serious terrorist a** kicking. (Cleveland, 2006)

In his response, Cleveland uses cues to his vernacular position to perform a noninstitutional identity. These cues emerge both in his stated identity as a “prospective customer” and in the informality cultivated by the misspelling of “meddling” and the use of “a**.” While Cleveland “agrees” with the institutional agent in Lutz, he makes it clear by stating his agreement that it is his choice (from outside of GM) to agree or not. Though concurring, he is clear that his expression is alternate to that of GM as enacted by Lutz. Expressing support for the institution from the position of the noninstitutional, his assertion of alterity from the institutional still renders his intentionality alternate.

As a result of his assertion of alterity, the expression emerges as hybrid. Structurally, the vernacular voice must construct the institutional as previous so that it can dialectically assert its alterity. In the case at hand, the priority of the institutional is literal in the sense that GM first created the site at which the vernacular voice was later able to speak. At the level of discursive structure, the vernacular imagines the institutional as prior in the sense that it is “noninstitutional.” In order to be “noninstitutional,” an institution must first exist from which to express distinction. In this sense, the institutional contributes to the creation of the agency that enables the expression of an alternate intentionality. This dialectic is very obvious in Cleveland's *Fastlane Blog* post not only because the claim of alterity is made in overt support of a powerful institution but also because that claim is made at a network location that has been created by and for that institution.

The *Fastlane Blog* is, however, only one scene in which these multiple agents can perform their coproduced discourse. In the comments section of a Website called *Autoblog.com*, a heated debate erupted about Bob Lutz's “Season's Rantings” post on the *GM Fastlane Blog*. The exchange began when the main blogger on this unaffiliated trade blog critiqued Lutz. In the comments section after this critique, one of the blog's readers expressed his agreement and wrote, “I noticed GM didn't post my argument against Mr. Lutz about Toyota and Honda on the *Fastlane blog*” (Andy, 2006). Though there is no way to tell for sure if the *GM Fastlane Blog* refuses to post some vernacular comments, the claim was met without any surprise by users of *Autoblog.com*.

The blogging community seemed quite aware of GM's dominating influence on the *Fastlane Blog*. However, the ease with which these bloggers can move to other network locations renders this reality less repressive than the hegemonic control cultural critics have located in traditional mass media. Because the vernacular web emerges not just through technology but also through people deploying that

technology, individual agents can extend its reach by simply shifting their participation from one network location to another (Figure 3).

Offering an example of this node switching, the staff writer of another auto blog, *The Truth About Cars*, Robert Farago posted an editorial about the now infamous “holiday greeting” by Lutz. Number 105 in his “GM Death Watch” series, Farago attacked Lutz, calling him an “an idiot.” A user then posted to the comments section of Farago’s blog post complaining, “I think it’s beneath you to resort to name calling. You can certainly say his position is idiotic. I just don’t want this to become like *Autoblog*, where it seems like the inmates run the asylum” (Farago, 2006). Here, the poster clearly demonstrates the interconnected nature of the audiences of the three auto blogs, and Farago extends the connection with his own response:

A highly paid corporate executive working for a public company who feels free to lambaste federal regulations without bothering to check his basic facts is certainly acting in an idiotic manner. Sorry, but the truth hurts. (PS TTAC [*The Truth About Cars*] rules for posting do not prohibit commentators from flaming third parties.) (Farago, 2006)

A brief debate ensues about the ethics, social consequences of calling someone an “idiot,” and the necessary conditions of claiming diminished mental capacity in others. This exchange results in a third interlocutor pondering: “[I] wonder if Bob



Figure 3. “General Motors Death Watch 105: Bob Lutz Screws the Pooch,” on *The Truth about Cars*, February 21, 2007.

will sue The Truth About Cars?” (Farago, 2006). Meanwhile, Farago makes his position lucid by posting a picture of Lutz recycled from still another Website, *Airportjournals.com* (Freeze, 2005). Adding a humorous caption to poke fun at Lutz, Farago’s content mingles his intentionality with that emergent on *Airportjournals.com* as well those of the interlocutors in his audience, Lutz, and the deeper levels structuration that channel them all to the nexus of this particular network location. Because these intentionalities can easily switch from one network location to another, institutional control over any single location cannot shut down the vernacular performance (Figure 4).

Hybrid Agencies

Unlike older media, participatory media operate at network locations where texts can emerge from a very literal intersection of multiple agents’ communication. Recognizing this embedded hybridity, the nodes that now emerge in participatory media cannot be seen as resources wholly separate from institutions. Instead, they emerge as hybrid agencies that bear complex relationships to individuals, groups, and institutions. The two examples in this article locate at least two different basic kinds of relationships. *The Homosexual Extremists Catholic Space* is a largely vernacular network location that co-opts institutional discourse to assert its alterity. The *GM Fastlane Blog* is a largely institutional network location where the vernacular is empowered to express its alterity to the institutional. Part of a large web of communication, vernacular voices can switch from one node in this web to another



Figure 4. Detail from “General Motors Death Watch 105: Bob Lutz Screws the Pooch,” on *The Truth about Cars*, February 21, 2007.

and thus frustrate any single authority that could exert control over a specific network location.

This conception of a web of vernacular discourse can conceive of the hybridity that emerges at a vernacular location as well as that which emerges from one or more institutional locations because it recognizes the dialectic performance necessary to vernacular expression. The vernacular is commonly available to any who express alterity to an institution. However, this alternate expression comes only by enacting a hybrid discourse that imagines the institutional as prior to the alternate voice. This dialectical conception of the vernacular resists romanticizing any discourse as pure.

Transformative Potential in the Vernacular Web

In this article, I have been arguing that a vernacular web of discursive performance forms through the participatory media of network communication. A dialectical conception of the vernacular helps account for the hybrid agencies in this web. Because the vernacular generates meaning by being rendered distinct from the institutional, it is inherently hybrid. This hybridity emerges as agents invoke its alien status because such invocations construct the institutional power that is necessarily prior to its alternate. In this way, the institutional is an agency for the performance of vernacular discourse, and deployments of this agency are necessarily structured by the intentionalities that have generated it. In participatory media, a vernacular web emerges between the nodes of located communication processes where this hybridizing dialectic of subordination is enacted. Here, technologically enabled human connections hold open the possibility for transformation with their potential for new interactivities.

In the 21st century, everyday discursive processes are facilitated by network technologies. However, the coproduction of discourse through interactivity is nothing new in human communication. Nor is it new to cultural theory. Long before the emergence of the Worldwide Web, cultural theorist Clifford Geertz imagined humans as, "an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). Today, these "webs of significance" extend with the aid of network media. Pushing them further out across space and time than ever before, network communication folds in on itself in the potential for connection. If the right path were located, any two nodes using TCP/IP (any two nodes anywhere on the Internet) can link to one another. Network communication technologies empower individual agents by transcending not just the essential identities of the purely institutional or purely vernacular but also the essential geography of any single location. In this situation, the individual agent's potential to exert transformative influence is held open by the ability to make new network connections.

The dispersed nature of the nodes in this web offer many redundant avenues for such influence to emerge, dissipate, and reemerge. Agents can shift and move between the network locations where they perform their alterity. Diffusing outward in undulating discursive performance, the vernacular is hard to isolate online and even harder to control. In ongoing processes of interaction at locations as diverse as

Airportjournals.com, *GM Fastlane Blog*, and *The Homosexual Extremists Catholic Space*, zones of contestation form constellations as discursive agents shift their attention from one network location to another.

In another era, Catholic authorities might have sought to silence vernacular voices that diverged too far from institutional doctrine by judging their discourse heretical and seeking to punish the heretics. In the media environment that dominated much of the 20th century, a corporation like General Motors might have sought to silence dissent by refusing to purchase advertising from a mass media outlet that voiced claims with which the corporation disagreed. In old media, institutional power could more easily have been deployed to silence alterity because the locations from where agents could speak were fewer and more concretely anchored in their geography.

In the vernacular web of the 21st century, however, alterity can emerge not just at one or even a few institutionally authorized locations. Instead, it emerges in a vast interconnected web. Here, discursive performance cannot be essentialized to a single specific intentionality, agency, or location. Instead, pulses of electricity dance in changing shapes rendered from digital bits imbued with significance. Among the network nodes where such shapes emerge, the possibility for transformation is held open because the vernacular web is not just a set of technologies. All its vectors originate from and return to the lives of real individuals, and these vectors carry the potential of transformation all the way from a myriad of everyday expressive moments into the official discourse of powerful institutions.

Note

- [1] All quotations from online texts include the original style, spelling, and formatting as much as possible. In many cases, this includes irregular grammar and spelling.

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