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Toward a Theory of the World Wide Web Vernacular: The Case for Pet Cloning

ON AUGUST 3, 2005, South Korean scientists announced they had successfully cloned a dog for the first time. While this might seem anticlimactic after the same team successfully cloned thirty human embryos in February of 2004 (CNN 2005), the news was disappointing for me. Since the late 1990s, I had been following the research of a small United States company as it attempted to develop a commercial pet cloning service. In 2004, I had the opportunity to interview Lou, the CEO of Genetic Savings and Clone Incorporated, face-to-face. I found Lou to be a compassionate man and a dog lover like myself. I had hoped his team would win the race to produce the first dog clone.

Initially, I was not interested in researching what might be an ethically problematic practice of harvesting and experimenting on dog ova. Instead, I was locating, cataloging, and collecting examples of Web pages that seemed to be part of what I suspected was a new vernacular genre: the pet vanity Web page. While collecting examples of these Web pages in 1999, I discovered Missyplicity.com. At first, the site seemed to be dedicated to a personally owned dog named Missy. However, upon closer examination, I realized it was an advertisement for a commercial service that offered to store or “bank” the DNA of pets so that, for a further fee, individuals could purchase a pet-clone when cloning technologies became available. As a dog lover, it was unnerving to think that I could buy a clone of my beloved pet sometime soon. As a student of everyday human communication, it was unnerving that

such a brutally commercial interest had co-opted a genre of personal discourse even before I had fully documented and categorized it.

Soon, however, I came to realize I had overreacted on both counts. First, it would be over a half-decade before anyone was able to surmount the particular difficulties of canine cloning. More importantly for this article, I slowly realized that when Lou deployed the generic expectations of the pet vanity page in Missyplicity, he was communicating just as authentically as any other online dog lover. Now, and as a result of my close examination of Lou's Web site, I have come to realize that locating the genre of the pet vanity page only scratches the surface of what I have come to term "the World Wide Web vernacular."

In this article, I show that the genre of the vanity page in general (and the pet vanity page in particular) does exist on the World Wide Web. The distinguishing feature of the pet vanity page is its content. However, because of technologies that arose as a result of growing commercial interest in Web-based communication during the 1990s, that content has come to be associated with particular aesthetic features of personal Web pages. While some individuals may have the resources to make more institutional-looking pages, Missyplicity presents an example of a professional Web designer deploying an amateur aesthetic in order to convey a particular persuasive message.

But what could possibly be persuasive about a pet vanity page? In the case of commercial pet cloning, as it turns out, something nearly as old as public discourse itself. In the ancient Roman Republic, formal political speeches were the primary medium of public discourse. The most famous theorist of public speaking was Marcus Tullius Cicero. Though Cicero believed that the primary skills of rhetoric should be learned through a rigorous formal education, he also recognized that some speakers mastered a certain "local" quality in their discourse. He termed this quality after the Latin word *verna*, a word that can be translated "home-born slave."

In his dialogue *Brutus*, Cicero notes that a successful orator named Tinca "was completely worsted by Granius through some indescribable vernacular flavor" (Cicero 1971, 147). For Cicero, a "vernacular flavor," when exhibited outside of its specific native location, could be recognized by the elites of the Roman Republic. Linked to membership in a particular community, Cicero understood the vernacular as emerging in distinction from what he and other Roman politicians saw as the universalized and institutional elements

of persuasive communication codified in the rhetorical handbooks of the time (Howard 2005). Learned through informal social interaction, this “flavor” in public discourse could emerge as distinct. In the more than two thousand years since Cicero’s *Brutus*, persuasive public discourse has spread from speeches to publications to radio and television broadcasts to network media—and this vernacular “flavor” has spread with it.

In the early 1990s, personal pages of computer hobbyists, programmers, engineers, and researchers dominated the nascent World Wide Web. In the mid-1990s, commercial content on the World Wide Web surged. As it did, institutional norms emerged that were distinct from those of the hobbyists who were the first Web page builders. New technologies gave rise to new technical skills and new modes of formal training for those skills. Professional Web designers created a complicated Web page style that demands skills and time typically not available to amateur Web site builders. At first, it seemed that the qualities of early online discourse might have been submerged in this rush of commercialism. But, just as in the grand Latin of Roman politics, a vernacular lilt can still be heard on the World Wide Web precisely because it was the emergence of the “institutional” that gave the vernacular its power to enact meaning.

The vernacular needs the institutional to render its distinction meaningful. But, in another way, the vernacular is always at risk of emerging out of its subordination precisely because it is “native” to the institution that subordinates it. From one perspective, every “institutional” expression is really the vernacular construct of a natively derived and context-bound individual perspective (see Primiano 1995). However, to deny the distinction would be to deny the power to give voice to that which is not supported by the institutional. It would be to deny the alien voice its chance to be heard. This voice may rise up in protest or in support of the institution from which it is distinct, but either way, its very distinction gives that voice the power to mean. Once the institutional Web had developed the norms and forms necessary to demarcate its authority, the World Wide Web vernacular could also be recognized as meaningful precisely because its alternate norms and forms were distinct.

My research demonstrates how the vernacular emerges into meaning as a result of its distinction. The ability of this distinction to enact meaning becomes clear in the comparison of two very different Web

sites that marketed the “genetic banking services” of Genetic Savings and Clone Incorporated in 2002. The primary Web site for the corporation was Genetic Savings and Clone. Built by professional Web designers, this Web site emulated commercial banking sites. As a result, it is an example of institutionally empowered Web design, and that power manifests in the complexity of its computer coding. As an institutional expression, this Web site seeks to fulfill the same purpose as other institutionally empowered sites: it seeks to establish Genetic Savings and Clone Incorporated as a valid company by clearly emulating the Web sites of other reputable corporations. However, the second site funded by Genetic Savings and Clone Incorporated deliberately exhibited a “vernacular flavor.” Specifically, the Missy-licity Web site emulated a pet vanity page both in content and in arrangement.

The vanity or “home page” is one of the earliest Web page genres (Dillon and Gushrowski 2000, Asteroff 2001). Originally associated with computer hobbyists, such pages present personal information about the Web site builder and are directed at a generalized but small audience of friends or potential friends. The “pet vanity page” or “pet page” is a specific sub-genre of the vanity page. Looking at examples of Web pages dedicated to one’s living or deceased pet, it is clear that Missy-licity is modeled on that genre.

The conscious professional choice to engage a folk or quasi-folk style in commercial rhetoric is evidence that the vernacular has emerged in the World Wide Web medium. Because professionals are appealing to vernacular qualities, Web site builders seem to believe that their audience is either tacitly or consciously aware of the World Wide Web vernacular. By using the vernacular rhetorically, Web designers offer us evidence that the vernacular gives voice to some meaning not available from inside the institutional norms and forms of online discourse. By comparing features of the commercial cloning Web pages with a forty-two-site sample of dog vanity pages, I located defining elements of this vernacular at the levels of content, computer code, and arrangement. This examination revealed that these defining elements arose as a result of the more complex and less accessible Web design techniques that were made available to professional Web designers funded by the commercial interests of institutions. By deploying a style that does not use these more complex elements, the vernacular is able to voice its alien meaning even through the institutional din.

Methods

The data for this research is comprised of forty-seven individual Web sites, face-to-face interviews, and email-based interviews. Of these Web sites, the first two are the Genetic Savings and Clone Web site and a formerly separate site called Missyplicity. These two sites present the Web-based discourse of Genetic Savings and Clone Incorporated as it appeared in October of 2002. The third version of this corporation's site represents the assimilation of the two former sites into one as it appeared in November of 2003. A personal pet vanity page titled Nessa's Fish Tank was archived in October 2002 to present an example of a pet vanity page contemporary to the Missyplicity Web site. At the same time, archives of the Wells Fargo Bank Web site serve as an example of a contemporary institutional Web site. The remaining forty-two pages comprise the data set that was used to determine the basic characteristics of pet vanity pages.

These forty-two pet vanity pages were chosen using a commercial search engine that ranks its findings based on the number of non-local Web pages linked to the web page being ranked. Searching for Web sites containing the two-word phrase "my dog," I contacted the first fifty Web site page builders from the ranking that fulfilled the following two criteria: (1) the pages did not appear to be offering any products or services for sale and (2) they had an email address associated with the page and/or dog owner.

I emailed each page builder a short questionnaire to verify that the Web page was about a personally owned dog and did not offer any products for sale. I downloaded and archived Web pages of the first forty-two respondents as well as the surrounding pages that comprised a unified Web site based on a contiguous domain name or directory structure.

Next, I conducted face-to-face and on-line interviews with respondents in two groups. The first group was comprised of thirteen individuals who had built a Web page included in the sample of forty-two sites. The second group was comprised of forty-one individuals involved in professional Web design. Among this second group of respondents, I interviewed Lou, the builder of the original Missyplicity Web site. Lou is now the CEO of the corporation. I also interviewed his vice president of communications, Ben. In this case, Lou was trained in HTML and software design and had built commercial Web sites before he built

the Missyplicity site. Later Lou and Ben hired other programmers but continued to control the design of future Genetic Savings and Clone Web sites.

In analyzing these forty-two pages, basic shared traits emerged and were documented at the levels of content, computer programming code, and arrangement. Taken together, these basic traits define the vernacular in World Wide Web page design.

Vernacular as a Dialectical Term

Researchers in several fields have come to recognize that individuals strategically deploy language at a “folk” or “everyday” level (Abrahams 1968a and 1968b, Hauser 1999, Howard 2005, Nystrand and Duffy 2003, Ono and Sloop 1995). Many discursive norms and forms found in strategic discourse are learned through informal social interaction (Bascom 1965, Gage 1991, Toelken 1996). These norms and forms can be properly termed “vernacular” when they signal local or “home born” qualities of a particular human communication. The elements in any human behavior that are derived from “local communities” of shared knowledge are vernacular. In application, however, this simple definition quickly dissolves into shades of degree because vernacular is a dialectical term. The meaning of vernacular is emergent in context when human behaviors denote a distinction between that which is considered “institutional” and that which is not.

As an analytical category, vernacular appeared as early as 1960 in an *American Anthropologist* article entitled “Vernacular Culture,” in which Margaret Lantis uses the term to refer to “the commonplace” (202). After Lantis’ article, vernacular began to appear in other scholarly circles. It made its most notable impact in the study of architecture. Seeking to define forms of architectural design that were neither “primitive” nor representative of the highest technological advances or monumental efforts of a culture group, Amos Rapoport used the phrase “vernacular architecture.” For Rapoport, “the most successful way of describing [the vernacular] seems to be in terms of process—how it is ‘designed’ and built.” Rapoport argues that vernacular architectural forms are those that have a high degree of “individual variability” where it is the “*individual specimens* that are modified, not the *type*” (4, emphasis in original). Based on specific qualities including materials, techniques, and features, Rapoport offers many examples

of these “types,” ranging from the French farmhouse to the Arab tent, but the vernacular is generally characterized by individual variation from a shared form.

Applying this idea to religion, Leonard Primiano has argued that even institutions themselves emerge as vernacular because they always arise as a personal belief contextualized into the lived experience of an individual human (1995, see also Yoder 1974). From this perspective, any human religious expression is always already an individual variation from a shared ideal. Primiano cites as an example a group of homosexual Catholics who hold the belief that God created them to be homosexual and, thus, homosexuality must be acceptable to their vernacular God (51). In the sense that they are “officially” Catholics, these individuals locate themselves in relation to a shared understanding of a religious institution. In the tightened circumference of their own group, however, they adapt the “official” Catholic rejection of homosexuality based on their individual experiences of sexual desire.

Locating both vernacular and “official” elements in individual belief, Primiano’s conception of the vernacular seems sometimes on the verge of completely consuming its opposite. This danger is particularly clear when Primiano builds on Elliot Oring’s concept of “dyadic culture” to argue that all religious expression is vernacular insofar as it is manifest in the “uniculture” of individual creative experience (49). Primiano follows the logic of his argument to the conclusion that even the “official” statements of the Dalai Lama or the Pope are “vernacular” insofar they are held by the individual who is “Dalai Lama” or “Pope” (46). But if even the “official” statements of “institutions” are also the vernacular variations of individuals, how does “the vernacular” bear meaning at all?

One answer is that both the “official” and “institutional” *arise from the vernacular*. According to Primiano, “individuals feel their personal belief system as believers to be ‘official,’ and they also at the same time feel the belief system disseminated by the agencies of the institutional hierarchy to be ‘official religion’” (47). From this perspective, the “official” or institutional is an emic category that emerges in individual belief. From the “etic” or analytic perspective, those individual beliefs exist at the level of the vernacular. Thus, even the official is an expression of individual or vernacular belief. Seeing the institutional as arising from the vernacular encourages researchers to look at specific contextualized human expressions to locate what

signals the distinction for specific individuals as it is contextualized in specific communities.

Doing just this, Henry Glassie has argued that vernacular architecture should be conceptualized as embodying “values alien to the academy” (2000:20). From this perspective, the vernacular actually emerges into meaning as a result of an emic denotation of that which is *not* vernacular: what Glassie terms “the academy.” The “alien” is alien precisely because it is found alongside the native. This dialectical relationship urges us to consider the alien’s alternate genesis: “When the builder’s attention is narrowed by training, whether in the dusty shop of a master carpenter or the sleek classroom of a university, past experience is not obliterated. . . . Education adds a layer” (18). The vernacular, in this sense, is a layer of meaning that resides among others—even in the behaviors or products of institutions.

In what Robert Plant Armstrong has termed “affecting presence,” artifacts enact meaning through their material shape. But that shape, along with its subsequent meanings, is subject to layers of accreted meaning. This meaning emerges as a result of both the builder’s intentions in the construction of the artifact and the audience’s reception and interpretation of the artifact. The resultant layers include appeals to shared norms and forms, but, as manifest in a particular context, they are simultaneously expressions of individuality (Armstrong 1981). Personal photograph albums, for example, are a form, type, or genre in which highly personalized content can be expressed in ways that accrete meaning through arrangement of mechanically produced artifacts (Chalfen 1987, Musello 1980). Similarly, Michael Owen Jones has noted how the “folk” practices of “re-doing” already standing architectural structures enact personal meaning in a layer on top of commercially generated institutional architecture (1980).

Norms and forms, Rapoport’s “types” or more generally “genres,” express variation through the arrangement of layers of meaning; one of those layers of meaning is the vernacular itself. However, what becomes vernacular can only be resolved when another layer of meaning marks that which is not vernacular, the institutional. While both emerge in vernacular discourse, that-which-is-institutional emerges as an emic conception when that-which-is-not-official is invoked. Sometimes meaning is generated the other way around: the vernacular is emically invoked as “unofficial,” “folk,” or “informal.” When this occurs, the institutional is called into being in the vernacular by reference to an

emic conception of vernacular forms (e.g., at a museum of “folk life”). More often however, the emic vernacular is not overtly named. Because the vernacular refers to the vastly more abundant category of human expression, it is more often the unmarked member of the dialectical pair. Whether it is the vernacular or the institutional, the meaning of both resolves dialectically in the moment of human expression.

From this perspective, the vernacular can be understood to be an analytic category that refers to the layer of meaning that is emergent in human expression when an emic distinction is denoted between the institutional or “official” and that-which-is-not-institutional. In this sense, the vernacular is a dialectical term because its meaning emerges only when the institutional, its opposite, is conceived.

In any expressive act, meaning emerges as the accretion of personal experiences including informally and formally learned qualities. To term some qualities vernacular is to locate those qualities that seem to be allied with the locally and informally learned norms and forms the individual has placed into service. For the purposes of this research, to locate a “World Wide Web vernacular” necessitates locating a community in which informally shared norms emerge in forms that exhibit continuities and consistencies across a set of variants. The example of vanity pages represents just such a community.

The Emergence of the Vernacular Web

The vanity Web page can usefully be considered as a definitive genre of the World Wide Web vernacular. As Richard Bauman has noted, the contemporary conception of analytic categories or genres is as “a flexible communicative resource” that appeals to shared “generic expectations” (1992:58). Vanity Web pages are discursive expressions that individuals in the communities where they emerge expect will (1) serve content that is personal and descriptive and (2) locate their builder or author exclusively as an individual speaker or small group of speakers without reference to any larger authorizing institution. Because World Wide Web-based vanity pages are publicly accessible, they natively inhabit the same space as institutionally authorized Web discourse like government, banking, or newspaper Web sites. However, they are the expressions of individuals. As a genre, they are a recognizable form of Web page. Many of the characteristics that make up this type are related to the fact that these Web pages are not

funded or authorized by any institutions. For this reason, they can be considered forms of vernacular discourse.

As an emic genre, “personal,” “home,” or “vanity” pages have emerged out of the material limits and social norms that developed with network technologies. In the early 1990s, the emerging World Wide Web technology required a software application called a “browser” to access the data at a Web location or “server.” With this small piece of software, the same character-only, “ASCII,” or “text only” document could be read in very similar ways by different computers using different operating systems and software without losing non-character formatting characteristics.¹

Because character-only text format does not accommodate the display of most symbols and formatting such as underlining, italics, and margins, the Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire (CERN) sponsored the creation of a very simple computer code called Hyper-Text Mark-Up Language or HTML. Reading HTML with a piece of software called a “browser,” computers can present more than unformatted text because HTML contains “tags” (themselves ASCII-based text) that structure the formatting of the readable text. The browser software on the local computer interprets these tags in similar ways regardless of the type of computer being used. HTML was kept very simple so it could be easily learned and deployed to create individual Web pages by those with little computer training. In 1991, an early browser was created at CERN and offered to physics researchers. In January of 1992, a newer version was made available for download by the public (CERN 2000, The World Wide Web Consortium 2000).

At this early stage, the motive for designing and then giving the original browser away to the public was to encourage the open and pluralist discourse that scientific professionals value as a mode for encouraging research and exploring new ideas (Castells 2001:23ff). However, as the popularity of the Web medium grew, commercial interests began to place pressure on the simple but functional capabilities of the early versions of HTML and browser software (Lessig 2001, Rheingold 1992, 2000, and 2001). Suddenly, a new category of Web sites emerged. While the norm of universal access to Web pages remained, the norm of simple Web-page creation was less important to commercial interests. Commercial sites began to exhibit far more complex HTML coding. The number of these commercial sites rapidly dwarfed the communities of simpler non-commercial Web sites.²

In 1994, Jim Clark raised 5 million dollars in venture capital for his fledgling company to offer a new and far more powerful browser: Netscape. As Clark put it, “I was supposed to be a businessman, and here I was starting a business in what everyone knew you couldn’t make money on—the Internet. That was what I was being told” (quoted in Segaller 1998:301). But the surge of interest in Web sites made Clark’s investment a wise one, and by August 9, 1995, the rush to the Internet had made the Netscape entrepreneurs multi-millionaires. This early success initiated a rush of commercial development in Internet-based technologies. By 1996, HTML, browsers, and encodings were being expanded from the early simple forms to the more complex forms necessary for conducting commerce online (302).

In early 1992, however, the Internet was prohibited from carrying commercial traffic due to fair-use restrictions placed on the federal funds used in its development. In June of that year Senator Rick Boucher from Virginia offered an amendment to the 1950 National Science Foundation Act. Known as the “Boucher Bill,” his amendment changed the meaning of “fair use” for NSF projects. Signed into law by President George H. W. Bush in November of 1992, it permitted the Internet to carry commerce (Segaller 1998:298ff). At that time, it is estimated that there were one million Internet “hosts”—loosely speaking, a million computers regularly connected to other computers through the Internet (Public Broadcasting System 2001). Most of these hosts were computers on government and university networks that had been linked together in the 1980s. Then, as a result of the newly created public access to the World Wide Web, the use of the Internet exploded. By 1996, the estimated numbers of Internet hosts ballooned to 9.5 million. The Web went from fewer than 100 Web sites in 1992 to over 10,000 in January of 1995. The Web was driving the overall Internet growth. In 1996, the Web is estimated to have had 650,000 Web sites. In 2001, the number of Web sites and hosts roughly doubled every six months (Gray 2001). On January 5, 2001, the communications software company Telcordia Technologies Incorporated announced that the number of Internet hosts had surpassed 100 million worldwide. As the Internet grew, new users were primarily “surfing” Web sites. For many, “The Web” became synonymous with the Internet. The vast majority of new Web-users did not create their own Web content. The rapid increase of Internet users was made possible because the Web interface was very easy to use. As a result, the new population

of Web users had significantly less computer skills than did the early Web community.

In 1994, only 11 percent of World Wide 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 percent, with the biggest increase among those with no high-level computer experience at all (from almost none to 16.78 percent) (GVU 2001b, 2001c). This trend away from a high degree of technology skills among Internet users would continue—a trend toward the vernacularization of Internet that was, for the most part, driven by the popular appeal of the World Wide Web.

For two main reasons, new Websites exhibiting the older and simpler Web design norms appeared far less rapidly than commercial Web sites. First, commercial Web sites entered the medium with the intention of gaining as wide an audience as possible; as a result, they could afford to professionalize Web design. Individuals could then build Web pages not just as a hobby or “on the side,” but as a full-time occupation. This created a far more time-consuming and technologically dependent generation of Web sites. The second reason for the rapid dichotomy that emerged in commercial versus amateur design lay with the new audience for these sites. As new Web-users came to the medium, they did so less as creators of Web communication and more as consumers of commercial Web content. This new audience came to expect a high level of professionalism in their Web pages. They expected a professional or institutional Web aesthetic that requires resources far beyond those of “on the side” Web designers. Few of these new users created their own Web pages. Instead, they engaged the medium unilaterally.

Today, the simpler design norms of the Web and its ethos of pluralistic communication still persist. However, this simplicity of design is no longer the dominant form of Web discourse. This change occurred so rapidly that it has already largely pushed vernacular Web pages out of the general public eye. In the sense of a broadly inclusive community that debates issues of shared interests, the grand age of the Internet never was. However, the Web vernacular can still be found, particularly in the genre of the personal vanity page.

As scholars of information science, Dillon and Gushrowski note that “personal home pages on the web seem to have evolved very quickly into a standard form that shares many common elements and features.” Even more, “this commonality is expected by users and

there is a broad agreement between users in this sample as to what a home page should contain.” Based on survey data, this research indicates not only that the vanity page is a valid analytic category, but it is also, as Dan Ben-Amos termed it, an “ethnic” or native genre. As a native genre, the vanity page was recognized as such by individuals in the Dillon and Gushrowski study. Further, those individuals shared expectations about the personal content of the vanity page (Ben-Amos 1976a and 1976b, Dillon and Gushrowski 2000:204).

My research corroborates and expands the survey data by exploring the expectations surrounding vanity pages in more qualitative detail among both professional and non-professional Web site builders. The overwhelmingly distinctive feature of the vanity page is its exclusively personal content. As my interview data show, this content is linked to the World Wide Web vernacular precisely because it serves no larger institutional purpose contributing to the material conditions that make the institutional style of Web design possible. Few individuals will pay very much for the production of exclusively personal content; therefore, that content most often exhibits a distinctively vernacular look in its arrangement.

With no institutional purpose or standardization, the vanity-page genre has developed primarily out of informal and non-institutional social practices. It is a genre because individuals both recognize it and expect it to have certain characteristics and features. These characteristics specifically include a particular arrangement. It is that arrangement that renders the World Wide Web vernacular recognizable, and, within that vernacular, new genres are emerging such as vacation pages, birth pages, Web logs (“blogs”), and many others. As social norms, these native genres offer an emergent Web language (a pidgin tongue) that gives voice to content specifically alien to institutional online discourse. And, in this voice, we can still hear Cicero’s “indescribable flavor” of the vernacular.

Nessa’s Fish Tank Versus Wells Fargo

As one of the first recognizable genres of the World Wide Web vernacular, vanity pages typically include personal pictures of the site builder or builders, pictures of family and pets, and/or pictures recycled from other sources that relate to the personal interests of the site builder or builders. Often included with those pictures are

political or critical statements, jokes, poetry, diary entrees, or other personal information. These pages typically also have a collection of links to other Web sites with content relating to the personal interests of the site builder or builders and/or links to the vanity pages of friends and family. Sites exhibiting personal content and dedicated to noncommercial interests of the individual or individuals who have built the sites are properly termed “vanity pages.” Based on this definition, “Pet vanity pages” are a sub-genre of vanity pages which are dedicated specifically to an individually or family owned pet or pets. Though most typically dedicated to dogs, pages are dedicated to all sorts of pets. Nessa’s Fish Tank (fig. 1) is one example. On this site, the builder chronicles her ever-changing collection of marine animals.

Nessa’s Fish Tank exhibits all the characteristics of vernacular Web design and it is a clear example of a pet vanity page. The entire site is comprised of three pages: the fish tank page, a page dedicated to the Web site builder’s eleven-year-old cat Oliver, and a guest book. The site is housed on a commercial content provider that gives free server space in exchange for running a variety of popup-style advertisements. The guest book is part of the service and was not written by the Web-site designer. There is no commercial content on the pages other than the rotating popup ads that the commercial Web hosting service requires.

The rest of the content on the Web page is personal. There are thirteen pictures of Oliver the cat, a few professional cat pictures that were found on other Web sites, several professional pictures of crabs, and numerous simple and easily available cartoon graphics of fish, cats, and other common icons. The verbal content includes a description of the various contents of the “fish tank,” the sad news of the death of one crab, personal statements about the appropriateness of crabs as pets, descriptions of the crabs and their interaction with their owner, and links to other Web sites.

As is the case with all forty-two of the dog vanity pages collected in the data set, Nessa’s Fish Tank contains the basic two traits of pet vanity pages: first, names and/or pictures of specific pets and, second, a lack of any commercial content for goods or services related to the representations of the pet. Further, it contains all the basic elements that are typical of the genre: snapshots, links to the Web sites of friends, personal information and statements. Serving no commercial purpose, the site exists alongside the institutionally funded sites of the World Wide Web, but clearly stands apart, not authorized or funded by



Fig 1. Nessa's Fish Tank, April 1, 2002
<<http://www.angelfire.com/mn/paranormal/myfish.html>>

institutional powers and not driven by their interests. It can be seen as a “vanity page” because its content is personal. At the level of content at least, it is clearly vernacular.

As a result of its content, the site exhibits vernacular qualities at the level of the computer code itself. Nessa's Fish Tank begins, as do all standard HTML pages, with a header section that is marked off by a specific series of HTML tags. The HTML code for the header of this page is:

```
<html>
<!--Generated by Angelfire: L00S00-->
<head>
<title></title>
</head>
<body bgcolor="#ffffff" background="ocean3.gif" text="#000000"
link="#0000ff" alink="#0000ff" vlink="#0000ff">
<basefont size="3">
```

The first tag, <html>, informs the browser that the following text should be interpreted as HTML. The next line, “<!--Generated by Angelfire: L00S00-->,” is an automatically generated note. All HTML

tags begin with “<” and end with “>.” However, content between “<!--” and “-->” is, with certain exceptions, ignored by the browser. The content, in this case, is a note that is intended to inform an individual actually inspecting the code that it was generated by a commercial Web site’s HTML-generating software. The tags that follow in the header define various parameters that govern the entire page: the text color and background image.

The code itself is very simple because this automated method of generating HTML is very limited in the kinds of Web pages it can create. The entire page uses a total of eight general types of HTML tags. In fact, the entire page contains a total of only 1400 words, including both text and tags, that have been placed onto the page by the individual site creator. There are no server-side includes, form scripts, CGI scripts, Java, XHTML, PHP, or other more advanced HTML or scripting technologies regularly deployed by professional Web designers. In this way, Nessa’s Fish Tank is an example of a radically vernacular Web page both at the level of content and at the level of coding.

At the level of arrangement, the vernacular Web is characterized by a simplicity that emerges from the placement of discrete objects in the space of the Web page. When only simple HTML coding is used, specific graphic files and other elements appear on the Web page as visually discrete objects. While all HTML objects are discrete at the level of computer code, commercially financed and institutionally empowered Web sites have moved toward design characterized by a more visually integrated arrangement that requires a higher level of expertise and takes far longer to produce.

Typically, and when viewed on computers with fully capable screens and browsers, institutional Web sites tend to avoid the need to use the scroll bars to move down a Web page on pages that are not information-rich. Instead, they present what appears to be a unified single page. Buttons and graphics are placed on the page in ways that integrate the separate elements into what appears to be a single object. However, vernacular Web pages use more simple tags and far more viewable text. The vernacular Web typically presents extending textual passages oriented around discrete graphics that require the user to scroll down to see the entire page. The basic HTML tags present graphics and text as discrete objects placed in relation to one another on the Web page.

To see how simple HTML generates a specific Web page arrangement, the difference in the use of the *background* attribute serves as a good example. In simple HTML, the background of a page can be set either to a specific color or it can be defined as a graphic. If a graphic file is tagged for the background, the browser reads the graphic file and replicates the file in a repeating pattern throughout the Web page, often yielding what appears to be a paper-like surface on which discrete objects are placed. In the case of Nessa's Fish Tank, the background is set to a black and white stylized image of a crab with the text *background="ocean3.gif"*. The simple graphic is repeated through the background of the page. Then text, in graphical form and as plain text, is placed on top of the repeating image of the crab.

In more professional Web design, the visual background is often created using <table> tags and graphics in a way that allows discrete elements to be integrated into the page design, such that the background does not appear as if it were paper that the contents of the page are placed over. It takes far more time, forethought, skill, and software to create, modify, and place each graphic image so that its edges flow seamlessly onto the background. On many professional Web pages, all or nearly all of the page is comprised of multiple small graphic images (called *tiles*) that interlock like a jig-saw puzzle. Where links are necessary, some of these tiles are designated as buttons. On vernacular pages, on the other hand, the majority of both text and links are presented as viewable text rather than graphics.

In stark contrast to the eight general kinds of HTML tags used by Nessa's Fish Tank, the Wells Fargo page (fig. 2), for example, uses eight tags in just the first lines of code in its header. Although there are barely more than 150 actual readable words on the Well's Fargo page, the HTML source code for the page contains 31,501 characters. Nessa's Fish Tank, on the other hand, contains over 1,000 readable words but uses only 16,737 characters in its source code. The vernacular Web is characterized by a higher ratio of viewable text than is found in most institutional Web genres.

The Wells Fargo page is more complicated than a vernacular site in part because it functions as a starting point for its customers to access their account information. However, code used to access accounts is not contained on the actual HTML page. Other non-HTML-based coding is used for that purpose. With that in mind, the ratio between content served and HTML code used for the Wells Fargo page is roughly 210



Fig 2. Wells Fargo, 2003 (<http://www.wellsfargo.com>)

characters of code for each viewable word of content. Nessa's Fish Tank, on the other hand, uses roughly sixteen characters of code for each viewable word of content. In this sense, then, Nessa's Fish Tank is a far more efficient example of HTML coding than is the Wells Fargo page.

However, for its vastly less efficient HTML coding, Wells Fargo offers something more than Nessa's Fish Tank: it offers the professional Web presence of one of the largest financial institutions in the world. Thus, at the level of content, the Wells Fargo site is clearly far more institutional and commercial, while Nessa's Fish Tank is clearly far more vernacular and personal. This divergence in content is both highlighted by and intimately intertwined with the institutional versus vernacular qualities of the two Web sites, but these qualities are not just analytic. Instead, though they may not be articulated so specifically or objectively, these qualities result in an emically recognized difference. These two Web sites exemplify two very different design styles that emerged out of previously shared social norms as the medium grew in popularity and developed a commercial aspect. Dillon and Gushrowski have shown that in even the mostly broadly conceived community of Web surfers there is a clear difference in expectations for Web pages that are deemed "professional" versus those that are deemed "amateur" or "personal." My interview data corroborates this result. Further, by comparing interview data between individuals who

have made personal Web pages and individuals who are professional Web page designers, I have discovered that individuals involved in the community of amateur Web site builders tend to value content first while professionals focus on formal characteristics of Web design first. Using the terms “amateur,” “personal,” or “non-professional” as more emically recognizable terms than “vernacular,” individuals from both communities recognized the difference between the institutional and the vernacular World Wide Web.

The most commonly noted elements that appeared “amateurish” to professional Web designers were “overbearing” backgrounds, bright colors, large or variously sized fonts, the use of “cheap graphics” or clip art, animated GIFs, and needless or “cute” CGI, Java, or other simple scripting (graphical “hit counters” in particular). From the perspective of Web design professionals, these elements among others contribute to the appearance of an inexperienced hand in a Web page design. One respondent summed it up, saying that “[amateur Web site builders] get all excited about the possibilities the computers can provide such as image manipulation, all the colors and type faces. They pick and choose randomly like a young excited kid playing with all the tools in his dad’s workshop.” (e-mail from Rastin)

In the professional Web design community, the marker of amateur Web design is its unrestrained deployment of the “possibilities” of the medium. In the pet site community, this “embrace-the-possibilities” norm emerges as a result of a limited deployment of resources in both HTML production and Web page location. The amateur Web designer is most interested in putting content online. Because the deployment of less-than-subtle elements minimizes the expense of rendering content accessible in HTML, the Web vernacular is often more bold in its deployment of simple HTML features like backgrounds, typefaces, colors, and other elements. This results in a look that seems more “random” and less nuanced than that valued by the professional design community.

Though a few of the builders of amateur pet sites used commercial tools for generating Web pages, many avoided expending resources on software. It is possible to write pages in a word processor or simple text editor, and some made their pages “by hand.” Often individuals reported downloading already existing Web pages and opening them as text files. Individuals could then read the source file used to generate the Web page. Often, these individuals would begin to

learn HTML by “cutting and pasting” elements they liked from different pages they found online to create their own new page. Other respondents reported learning to make HTML pages “by hand” from books or through workshops offered at local community centers or state organizations. Others used free software that they found already installed on their computers. Only a few actually purchased their own full-featured software for Web design.

Among those amateur Web site builders not willing or able to invest the time necessary to learn HTML from books or cut and paste pages together, many posted content using online software offered to them as a free service for building Web pages. One respondent noted:

In 1997 after having a computer for a year and becoming familiar with the internet, chatting, gaming etc., I found a lot of people had websites, and . . . I wanted a website too. Having a rare breed, I chose to do a page about my dog, but it was a very simple, one pager website, severely limited by the ‘insert text here’ style website creator then offered with Geocities. (e-mail from Pat)

Several commercial services like Geocities that offer free email accounts and a small amount of Web server space have existed since the mid-1990s. In return for offering free web space, the service provider can include popup advertising in individual Web pages (as seen with Nessa’s Fish Tank). Many of these services offer the type of online script-based interface Pat describes. These interfaces allow individuals with no HTML skill to input some basic information, including text and graphics, in order to generate functioning Web pages. The complexity and subtlety of the pages generated in this way are radically limited. However, the desire of individuals to present their own content was enough motivation for them to put up “amateur”-looking HTML.

In many cases, my respondents actually cited the availability of “free” Web space itself as a reason for building pet vanity pages. Many commercial Internet service providers offer small amounts of Web server space as part of their Internet connection service. In other cases, respondents reported having been offered free server space through their school or work. For individuals not able or willing to invest the resources necessary to execute more complicated designs, inexpensive or easy HTML production and free (or otherwise already paid for) Web space encouraged them to design a simple page with purely personal content—in this instance, content about personally owned pets.

Among my respondents, Web sites devoted to personally owned dogs tended to be referred to as a “pet site,” a “dog site,” a “dog page,” or part of a “home page.” Although there was little agreement on the exact name of the page or site, the genre of both pet and human “personal pages” was still recognized. All individuals noted the same few basic elements typically found on personal Web sites. One respondent who had built a pet vanity page but was not a professional designer, described the expectations of a personal site well when she noted:

First of all, [a personal page] is about a person or group of people such as family or friends, where information is simply dumped into an Internet location for people to see. For example, descriptions of personalities, physical attributes and relationships may be included, and perhaps in a more advanced version of the said page, a section with lots of pictures. Such a website is usually maintained (in my opinion) for the purposes of the individuals involved, perhaps being kept much like a diary in the short-term or long-term lives of the people on the page, rather than the benefit of the general public. (e-mail from Pat)

Here, my respondent lists the basic content elements that Dillon and Gushrowski noted in their survey results. Overall, these elements can be said to be personal information offered not so much to a broad public but, instead, to some audience conceived as having a personal interest in the particular individual making the Web page or site. As such, the function or purpose of the site is an online location for personal content.

Several of my respondents noted that although they knew their personal pages were public, they did not expect to receive email about them from strangers. Theresa, a fulltime college student with only “a little” formal HTML training “in high school,” responded to my queries about her pet pages saying, “I guess I should take some time and spiff up my website if people actually are looking at it.” Most respondents stated that they put up their Web pages for an audience of friends and family. For example, a professional Web site builder named Blinky1894, had put up a personal pet page for his “Aunt . . . and maybe several friends” to view. Abhijit, a non-professional, said that he put up a page dedicated to his dog Bertie for the same sort of audience saying, “I often refer people to Bertie’s site (fellow animal-lovers, or people who ask ‘Who’s Bertie?’ after I refer to him in some conversation).”

A few respondents described a community of online correspondents as their primary audience. Martha, another non-professional, described a significant online social function as her motive for building personal Web sites. For her, being “silly” is part of social interactions that both give and get attention from others in an online community. As she phrases it, both she and her pets “look for love” online: “Of course it takes a certain kind of nut willing to be ‘silly’ but to the rest of us so besotted [by pets], there is no going overboard. I have a regular correspondent in the UK who writes about his pet people. Really a hoot.” For Martha, both her interpretation of other sites as well as her intentions in creating her own sites seem to have developed together as part of her social interaction within a community of pet site builders.

Randy, another respondent, expanded on this idea by mentioning several other vernacular Web page genres that he regularly locates and views. He is a librarian with no training in HTML design. He built a pet site for his “friends and co-workers.” I asked him about his habits in browsing other people’s vernacular pages. Although he expressed an affinity for personal content, Randy seemed to feel that “good” personal pages are rare:

I like travelogues, photos, and hobby pages (especially boardgames [*sic*] and the like). Travelogues are probably 10% excellent, 40% fair to boring, and 50% just plain bad. For example, photos of the Eifel [*sic*] Tower are bad/stock/been-done-to-death, unless they contain something like a fresh perspective or an amusing story (like my younger daughter finding it “un-American” to have to pay to use the toilet at the base of the Tower).

He went on to expand on what he tries to do in his own pages as well as what he values in the pages of others: “A page that simply describes a trip to a national park, with accompanying drivel about some chain hotel and chain restaurant are just boring. Unfortunately, the author should have something to say, and many web page authors simply don’t.” Though Randy and Martha seem to have highly developed aesthetics for both the interpretation and construction of vernacular Web forms, many respondents did not. Admitting that he did not visit other people’s pet pages at all, Lee, a teacher with no professional experience in building Web pages, offered the more typical reason for building a pet page: “Just for fun, really, and to add a lighter personal touch to an otherwise professional page.”

Another individual (who seemed aware of, but not highly invested in, the pet page as a genre) built a vernacular memorial that had powerful personal content and featured many attributes of the pet and pet memorial page genres, but cannot be cleanly classified as either (fig. 3). When I emailed to ask him about what I mistakenly thought was a “pet page,” he responded: “I surely would have thought that you and/or anyone else would have picked up on the site not being just a ‘pet’ site, just from the opening page. But, I could be wrong, I often am.” Though it was a memorial to a deeply loved dog, the page was not a “pet page” because the dog he memorialized was not a personally owned pet. An American veteran of the war in Vietnam with no professional Web site experience, this individual built a page describing a specific military dog he worked with during the war. He said the page was: “a tribute/dedication to my best friend, my entire life for one long year while patrolling in the jungles of Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War.”

As is typical of the vernacular in general, there is clearly a wide diversity in individual expressions of World Wide Web vernacular



Fig. 3. My Dog Pistol, 2005

<<http://www.fortunecity.com/skyscraper/backspace/1818/pistol.htm>>

genres. Further, there is a wide variety of motives and expectations when producing and consuming these genres. As the last example makes clear, there are even borderline cases in generic classification. Thus, genres must be thought of more like Rapoport's "types" than as definitive cultural rules. Or, to cite Bauman again, the genre is "a flexible communicative resource" that enables the creation of meaningful human expression based on shared expectations in form and content. Both professionals and amateurs consume and produce these genres and, as the case of Missypublicity below will make clear, there are clearly examples where individuals have chosen to engage a vernacular aesthetic by invoking the norms of a particular genre because they intend to communicate meaning through that invocation.

More generally, however, the pet site community's understanding of its genre is based more on content than form. In fact, the technical difficulties of HTML and server space were often overcome by amateur Web site builders as a result of their desire to place personal pet content online. Less interested in the technology used than in the content being made available, resources were deployed in a limited fashion for use in generating the formal qualities of Web pages. As a result, these pages are recognizable not just because of their content but also because of the lower expectations for the expenditure of resources on the presentation of that content. This is not to say, however, that all pet pages are amateur looking. Nor is it to deny that sometimes professionals deploy an amateur look to communicate their message: some individuals may engage this look as an aesthetic preference. Nonetheless, because personal content does not garner the resources available for commercial content, a particular look has become associated with pages that serve content that is not authorized or financed by institutional powers. As I have shown, this look is a by-product of the less demanding technologies used to serve more personal content, and it is a look that is emically recognized.

In this way, the personal content of the vanity page links its arrangement to its means of production because personal content attracts a limited audience and hence does not command the high level of resources in terms of software, training, or expertise that the institutional Web requires. In turn, the community norms about formal characteristics of pet Web sites formed at a time when there were far fewer demands on the resources of the individuals producing

the Web pages that comprise that community. Thus, the content-based definition of the vanity or home page is materially linked to its emergence in the vernacular rather than institutional mode of the World Wide Web. In return, the audiences of these pages interpret their appearance in ways that engender expectations congruent with the World Wide Web vernacular.

In this sense, the accreted meaning of the World Wide Web vernacular necessarily emerges from the underlying factors of limited resources and points toward the valuation of personal content. The comparison of two very different Web sites, Nessa's Fish Tank and the Wells Fargo site, makes this relationship between content and norms of presentation dramatically clear. The case of Genetic Savings and Clone and Missyplicity, on the other hand, is clear evidence that these generic expectations have now become another avenue or "layer" through which content producers, amateur or professional, can express meaning.

Missyplicity and the Marketing of Pet Cloning

If the stark contrasts in content, arrangement, and code between the Wells Fargo site and Nessa's Fish Tank exemplify the vernacular and institutional as radically distinct, the comparison of Genetic Savings and Clone and Missyplicity exemplify the vernacular and institutional as complexly intertwined layers. The interplay of these layers on the Missyplicity site indicates that the distinction between the vernacular and institutional is something that at least one professional Web-site designer assumes his audience recognizes. As such, this Web site dramatically illustrates both the very real nature of the Web vernacular and the way it emerges in dialectical paradox: both distinct from and integral to the institutional.

Originally, Lou, the CEO of Genetic Savings and Clone Inc., built Missyplicity as way to "drum up interest" in cloning the dog of a close family friend who, at the time, chose to remain anonymous. Lou built the original version of the site in 1997 so that he could send interested scientists to look at it after he gave a talk at a research conference. Primarily, Lou wanted potential researchers to know that "they were not going to be allowed to do whatever the Hell they wanted on this project in terms of reaching their goal" (interview with Lou and Ben 2004).

Missy was the real and beloved dog of a close family friend. What Lou feels might pass as “normal” levels of ethical procedure in the scientific community would not be enough to satisfy the owner/funder of the new cloning project. Lou has volunteered his time for PETA and is a strong believer in the sanctity of life or, as he says, the sanctity of “sentience.” The very first version of Missyplcity served as a warning and as an informational tool in Lou’s search for the appropriate researchers to carry out the cloning project.

After Lou located scientists for the academic side of the project, the first version of the apparently separate site for Genetic Savings and Clone was built by a design team under Lou’s direction. This second site functioned as the official face of the corporate side of the project while Missyplcity served as the face of the academic research project the corporation funded. Lou had the Genetic Savings and Clone site built because he needed a “commercial context” that Missyplcity did not provide: “We knew we needed a separate but related concept and that became ‘Genetic Savings and Clone.’ And we kept them linked because Missyplcity already had thousands of fans” (interview with Lou and Ben 2004).



Fig. 4. Genetic Savings and Clone, 2002
 <<http://www.geneticsavingsandclone.com>>

The Genetic Savings and Clone Web site modeled itself on the conventions of banking sites. The Missyplicity site portrayed itself as a site dedicated to a personally owned dog: “Missy.” Missyplicity presented itself as pet vanity page. While Genetic Savings and Clone deployed humor and a sense of institutionally authorized professionalism, Missyplicity deployed humor and a carefully crafted sense of amateurism. While Genetic Savings and Clone appealed to the norms of institutional Web arrangement, Missyplicity appealed to the norms of the vernacular Web.

Deploying institutional norms in its arrangement, Genetic Savings and Clone’s front page was a single frame with a graphics banner running across its top.

The page (fig. 4) included institutional qualities such as a white background, multiple graphic buttons that appear integrated as a “banner,” text entry fields, and tiled images that mixed seamlessly with the text and graphics contents of the rest of the page. The entire page fit easily onto most computer screens without scrolling down, and its integration of graphics and text presented a single seamless Web page.

Exhibiting more vernacular qualities in its arrangement, the front page of the Missyplicity Web site (fig. 5) had no banners across its top.

While the side did technically have a side banner, it was comprised of a small graphic of Missy the dog followed by a simple text list of links arranged vertically. Instead of seeking to present the page as a seamless unit with a white background, this side banner was emphasized by a change in the background. Unlike the institutional Web site, this site was dominated by a vertical arrangement. On the average computer screen, the user had to scroll down through the page in order to see all its content. Further, the page was focused on a large portrait of Missy. Not only was no attempt made to “flow” the picture-edges into the background of the page, but the graphics image also had an obvious border placed around the photograph of Missy. In this way, the main image on the page was radically demarcated from the background and the rest of the page. Underneath this picture, several hundred words of text described Missy. The page began: “Missy, the dog who inspired the Missyplicity Project has died.” Beneath the picture and announcement of Missy’s death, the page goes on to announce the successful cloning of a cat by the project, a link to the Genetic Savings



Fig. 5. Missyplicity, 2002 <<http://www.missyplicity.com>>

and Clone Incorporated Web site proper, as well as links to other pages on Missyplicity including press releases and a “code of bioethics.”

Beneath this text, the page overtly stated its intended purpose: “The main purpose of this site is bi-directional communication.” Specifically asking its audience to “PLEASE review all sections of this site” before emailing them about concerns or ethics involving animal cloning, the text presented the personal content typical of a pet vanity page: “Most people who met Missy felt she was a special dog, and another purpose of this site is to share stories and pictures of her.” Here, the text on the site clearly shifts from its business purpose to one that is “vain” in that it claimed its secondary purpose was merely to “share” content about Missy the dog. In fact, the site did include links to stories about Missy, pictures of Missy, and even a section of “Missy’s Friends” with links to the vanity pages of other dogs. Further, on its pages related to “adoption,” “bioethics,” “FAQ,” “goals,” “MissyMedia,” and “press,” the site offered various counterarguments against individuals who might feel that cloning animals is inhumane. From one perspective, the Missyplicity Web site attempted to render the idea of cloning one’s pet more appealing by deceptively deploying vernacular qualities of the genre

of the pet vanity page. This conclusion, however, would fail to capture the subtle way that Missyplicity had come to accrete meaning.

The Missyplicity site exhibits the arrangement and content elements of the vernacular Web. At the same time, it was produced professionally and funded by Genetic Savings and Clone Incorporated. It was housed on the same server as Genetic Savings and Clone, and it offered its audience several opportunities to move through links from the apparently separate Missyplicity site to the business-oriented and institutional Genetic Savings and Clone. When I interviewed him, Lou noted specifically that the Missyplicity site was meant to be “simpler” than the Genetic Savings and Clone. To that end, he made Missy herself the primary feature of the Web site. During our interview, Lou told me that he deployed Missy in a playful way to address the very serious ethical issues raised by the project. “When I got into writing the site (which was all done in PageMill) I ended up having a lot of fun with it. I wanted to kinda mute ethical concerns. It was obvious with just a little bit of research that there would be ethical concerns.”

Lou is trained in HTML and Missyplicity was generated with commercial resources; yet it still exhibits that “indescribable flavor” of the vernacular. Asking Lou about the production of the Web site, it becomes clear that he learned the techniques that give Missyplicity a vernacular quality by interacting directly with the pet-site community.

When Lou first began to work on Missyplicity, he did Web searches for information about dogs and dog biology. He was attempting to locate scientists who might be interested in working on the project. However, in doing those searches, he also located many examples of pet-vanity pages. As Lou recalls,

There’s a lot of vanity pages; honoring, celebrating, the mutt they have. And it wasn’t just that I realized that was a pretty decent model for the Missyplicity site; because the whole project began with love of Missy. That’s the core impetus for spending millions of dollars to clone Missy . . . which led to the company. It began with the fetishizing of Missy.

Building Missyplicity as a vernacular genre was a persuasive commercial strategy, but it was also the result of a desire to display the love for a family friend’s mutt, Missy. In Missyplicity, the commercial interests of the institutional became enmeshed with the definitive mark of the World Wide Web vernacular: the desire to serve personal content. In this sense, Lou’s deployment of vernacular qualities on a commercial

Web site does not render them any less “vernacular.” Instead, those qualities simply overlay the deeper institutional means of production. For Lou, the love for Missy and the desire to run a successful business in an ethical fashion merge, and so do the institutional and vernacular qualities of his Web site, or as Lou puts it, “it also made sense from a customer outreach standpoint. To have the site fetishize Missy mirrors the way people think about their own pets; creates an analog in media. It draws them in because they resonate with it.”

While Lou designed the Genetic Savings and Clone Web site to carry with it the necessary authority that an institutional design implies, Missyplicity remained separate precisely because its vernacular arrangement and personal content drew people to identify with Missy and thus be attracted to the site. When the BBC did a story on Missyplicity, Lou was inundated with emails. Even though most of these emails were hostile, Lou found the dialogue with the public invigorating and he expanded the site to suit the needs of his growing audience: “It became a fun thing to do, to dialogue with people. Even the ones that were really *really* closed-minded about it.” With this first media success, Lou devised a “skunk works” plan to increase his company’s profile without purchasing extensive advertising.

In an effort to maximize research funds, the tiny corporation had purchased only two magazine ads. Instead of paying for advertising, Lou took advantage of the controversy cloning seemed to inspire in order to draw individuals to look at his Web sites. Lou recognized what he termed a “Frankenstein-factor” in the research. At the time, cloning of any kind created an adverse emotional response in many potential customers. Though this could be debilitating for any business, Lou used Missyplicity to attempt to turn this response into a benefit: “The strategy is, I think, pretty simple: to work the controversy while managing it in our favor. If we could eliminate all controversy, we wouldn’t do it because controversy is what keeps us on the front page. But fortunately, controversy is inherent in what we are doing.” From Lou’s perspective, a good business marketing strategy has a “story” that drives its interest. For Lou, the central feature of a story is its dramatic “tension”:

I believe that a business is about story just like a story is about story, and therefore it has the same fundamental element that makes an interesting story and, if you want to boil it down to one word, that word would be: tension. A good story has tension. Tension between some

element and some other element . . . One of the tensions is between the Frankensteinian elements inherent in cloning and a strict binding code of bioethics.

For Lou, “story” as marketing is *not* a deceptive frame. Instead, the personalizing of Missy points to the necessary ethical difference of cloning personal pets and scientific research into cloning. For Lou, this vernacular quality in the midst of his commercial enterprise is “subversive.” From his experience with pet-vanity pages, Lou recognized the non-institutional voice made possible by the distinction between the vernacular and institutional World Wide Web. Then he deployed a layer of vernacular meaning in Missyplicity. Lou added the rather obvious picture frame around the portrait of Missy. When I asked him about the frame, he said he did it to “emphasize how special she was to her owners.” And then he added with a grin: “I was giggling while I was doing it just because I know how dogs are treated in an academic setting which is very much an industrial approach.” Lou was highly aware of the conflict between the personal-content orientation of pet sites and the commercial orientation of research on bioengineering:

The norm is to kill them [the dogs] when the research is done; even if it isn't lethal research. They're just a disposable commodity. The idea is that whatever you've done to them you've probably tainted future research. So you kill the dogs. So I did think of it as a subversive act: to put Missy inside a picture frame.

Lou purposely built Missyplicity to look vernacular based on his own informal experience of numerous pet vanity pages. As a result, his Web sites indicate the clearly recognizable distinctions between vernacular and institutional World Wide Web design, and they do this on two levels. First, his deployment of them as meaningful suggests that the vernacular does in fact express a layer of meaning in Web pages. As I have noted in detail, Lou expected individuals to recognize and be affected by the vernacular qualities of Missyplicity. At a second level, Lou expressed his own opposition to the institutions as he saw them by rejecting institutional norms in their very midst. Lou's deployment of the vernacular does not indicate that his use is “inauthentic,” but rather that he is able to authentically mean by enacting the distinction between vernacular and institutional.

The Paradox of the Vernacular

To imagine Missyplicity as deceptive would be unfairly to discount Lou's claims to the centrality of Missy in the cloning effort. Even at its inception, the institutional and personal merged in a way made possible by the wealthy donor. Missyplicity was both vernacular and institutional because both are layered in the single site. Its vernacular qualities emerged from community interaction and in relation to the shared norms of the genre of the pet vanity page. Its institutional qualities were made possible by institutional resources. At the level of overall marketing strategy and HTML coding, Missyplicity was institutional, but much of its content was clearly vernacular. Missyplicity was hybrid; and in so being, it exemplifies the dialectical paradox of the vernacular.

The World Wide Web vernacular is a dialectical term. That is to say: the vernacular is defined as that which is distinct from the institutional. At the same time, however, there is a paradox, because trying to draw a hard and fast distinction between the two always seems to devolve into a matter of degree. Because there is no clear line, Lou cannot be thought of as displacing some "authentic" vernacular. Instead, Missyplicity was a conscious attempt to invoke particular affective responses by manipulating formal features. Missyplicity conjured the vernacular because it was purposefully made distinct from Genetic Savings and Clone. Each site relied on generic expectations associated respectively with pet vanity pages and banking pages. One layer of meaning in Missyplicity emerged only when its audiences had expectations we can now properly associate with an early genre of the World Wide Web vernacular.

As I have shown, the vernacular comes to have meaning when it is (in Glassie's term) "alien" to some institution. For it to speak from that alien position however, it must imagine an institution from which to be alien. Missyplicity is an extreme example of such imagination: it speaks with a vernacular "lilt" from within the comfortable location of a well-funded institutional research endeavor defined by its parallel site, Genetic Savings and Clone. Its lilt bears meaning precisely because an audience can recognize that this lilt is distinctly *not* institutional.

As online communities have grown and matured over the last decade, the vernacular has emerged in Web site design as a result of the interaction between material and social factors. A desire to serve

personal content yields a community with norms and genres that emphasize content over formal aspects of Web-page design. Because this personal content garners few material resources, the computer-programming code and arrangement qualities of this vernacular are distinct and easily recognizable. However, these qualities could only be recognized as such in an environment where the institutional expresses its power through the deployment of greater resources.

Since the advent of the World Wide Web in 1991, the growing complexity of HTML code is at least partially the result of commercially empowered Web-site designers with the resources to build Web sites far more complex than those made by amateurs. A real distinction in the arrangement of Web sites marks an equally real distinction in the modes through which those Web sites are built. However, that distinction could only arise once institutional forces had altered earlier expectations for Web pages. The vernacular relies for its very existence on the institutional. Without it, the vernacular would be meaningless. To recognize this symbiosis might tempt us to collapse the institutional, or “official,” into the vernacular and say that only the vernacular exists. However, without the institutional, the vernacular would hold no meaning. Clearly it does. To regard the distinction as meaningless would be inaccurate because vernacular qualities *do* (by their very distinction from the institutional) bear a distinct layer of meaning.

This leaves us with the paradox. The vernacular is both the place from which the institutional emerges, and yet (for its meaning to emerge) it relies on the institutional to precede it. While one might be tempted to disregard this problem as mere theoretical double-speak, people in the world are using this distinction to express themselves. As researchers of communication, we are compelled to seek to understand how meaning emerges even when real human behavior presents complexity and paradox. At the very least, the paradox of the vernacular reminds us of the limited nature of our theoretical apparatus for apprehending the vast diversity of everyday human expression. With the recent development of technologies that make global communication accessible to more people and for more kinds of communication, this fact is even more important.

Until the recent emergence of the genre of the “blog” or “web-log,” the Worldwide Web vernacular seemed to be disappearing into a sea of commercial content. It seemed that everyday individuals might be

denied the social resource of the Worldwide Web vernacular because the community expectations for Web pages would require more financial resources than most people would be able or want to commit to the production of Web pages. Things appeared to be going the way broadcast media went decades before, with the few CB and HAM radio operators only able to transmit from the boundaries of society, and they still may go that way.

But Missyplicity's deployment of vernacular qualities reminds us that wherever there are institutional modes of production, the vernacular can rise up to express its meaning. Subordinated to the Roman culture as a slave, the original *verna* was a living paradox: a native to Rome, but with that very nativity pointing to the slave's alien genesis. This is not to say that the vernacular is always "opposed" to the institutional. Instead, it is to recognize that institutional power will always call for a vernacular response (either in affirmation or denial) just as every vernacular response assumes an institution. The two emerge together in the moment they invoke each other. As long as the idea of an institutional expression still bears meaning, the vernacular can still offer its resource of shared expectations.

Maybe the Worldwide Web vernacular will never quite be submerged, and maybe this symbiosis is a happy one. Vernacular voices might always be at least faintly heard amongst the din of the institutionally empowered clamorings as much because the two cannot be separated as because the two convey meaning through their distinction.

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Notes

1. "ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange) encoding" is, strictly speaking, a method of "text encoding" that represents characters on computers and other communication equipment. Almost all encodings currently in use are compatible extensions or "supersets" of ASCII. These methods of text encoding conform to the character set first established as standard by ASCII in 1963. This is an important issue technically because the sharing of the ASCII code as a subset of other encoding made it possible to rely on ASCII to create the "plain text" that rendered HTML Web pages compatible with nearly all computers platforms. Even though few computer or communication systems use strictly ASCII encoding today, most newer encoding systems comply with the ASCII standard. As a result, the word "ASCII" is often associated with its standardized character set in popular parlance. This meaning-shift can lead to confusion. In this article, I have used "text encoding" or "plain text" to refer more properly to the variety of ASCII-compatible subsets used by modern encoding systems.

2. Here, I refer to numbers of "sites" as defined by base domains and not individual Web pages. Even with this definitional choice, however, it is difficult to know for sure how many "sites" or "pages" might be properly counted as "commercial" or "non-commercial" at any given moment in the development of the Internet. Before the November 1992 Boucher Bill, commercial activity was prohibited on the Internet. Hence it is safe to assume that the first Web pages did not contain commercial content. From that early stage, commercial content has clearly exploded on the Internet. A broad discussion of this process of commercialization is beyond the scope of this article. However, several discussions of this commercialization and some of its many related issues do exist, including Segaller 1998, Lessig 2001 and 2004, and Vaidhyathan 2001 and 2004.

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