

THESIS

FROM FOUNTAIN PEN TO FACEBOOK POST: NETWORKING LITERACY AS  
THE INTERSECTION OF DIGITAL AND EPISTOLARY LITERACIES

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## ABSTRACT

### CONSTRUCTING THE SELF IN NETWORK ENVIRONMENTS: NETWORKING LITERACY AS THE INTERSECTION OF DIGITAL AND EPISTOLARY LITERACIES

This thesis examines the connections between 18<sup>th</sup> century epistolary literacy and 21<sup>st</sup> century digital literacy. I argue for the use of the phrase “networking literacy” as a term that captures the essential overlapping elements of the two other terms. A networking literacy is a literacy developed in a dialogic environment between two or more people who are too distant in proximity to communicate verbally, is strongly informed by audience, is typically discursive, and focuses on topics that are usually personal or addressed from a personal angle. Networking literacies transcend geographical location, historical moment, and especially technology. While the tools of technology change, the need writers have to engage in networking literacy and the impact it can potentially have upon their motivation to write and comfort with writing, remains the same regardless of whether they hold a pen or a smart phone in their hands. The tools of networking literacy will undoubtedly evolve within the next several decades into forms that may well be unrecognizable to us. However, whether it’s via Royal Post, Tweet, or status update, networking literacies will find a way into our new technologies. Although networking literacy will certainly shape and be shaped by technology, an essential set of principles about the writer and writing process will remain the same regardless of the writing tools used. I argue that the emergence of epistolary literacy in 18<sup>th</sup> century

England and its effect on both the individual and society bears striking similarity to the emergence of digital literacy in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, and that the points at which they intersect form the definition of networking literacy. Networking literacies help construct the identities of the users and share certain attributes regardless of technology, including being discursive, personal, narrative, and dialogic. Regardless of the technological tools writers use, the characteristics of networking literacy, including its dialogism, discursiveness, and the narrative template it provides for writers to lay over the events of their lives, remain the same in any era.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....1**  
    Definitions of Digital and Epistolary Literacy .....5  
    Argument.....8  
    Historical Background.....10

**CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR NETWORKING LITERACY .....18**  
    Identity Politics: the Role of the Individual in Society .....18  
    Signs and Signifiers in Networking Literacy .....20  
    Power and Struggle in the Context of Networking Literacy .....21  
    Complications of Authorship .....24  
    The Ways in Which Networking Literacy is Restructuring Thought .....26

**CHAPTER THREE: THE EFFECTS OF NETWORKING LITERACY UPON THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY .....30**  
    Networking Literacy as an Agent of Social Change .....30  
    Identity Performance in the Context of Networking Literacy.....35

**CHAPTER FOUR: CHARACTERISTICS OF NETWORKING LITERACY .....42**  
    Representational Tensions, Defamiliarization, and Resignification .....42  
    The Subversiveness of Networking Literacy’s Discursivity.....45

**CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION .....46**

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

One night in Olney, Buckinghamshire, in the year 1756, a young woman named Jane Johnson had a dream. She dreamed that she had metamorphosed into an immense spider—“as big as the full moon”—and was seated on a throne in the center of a vast web of her own spinning (Whyman 177). She described and then interpreted the dream in a letter to her friend, Mrs. Brompton. The threads were letters, she explained, the web was an epistolary network, and as a writer, she herself was the spider at the center.<sup>1</sup> Jane Johnson was a provincial woman with no formal education. Her family lived far from London and was part of the middle class; they were certainly not aristocratic, nor were they even wealthy enough to be considered members of the landed gentry. Yet Jane’s dream suggests that she derived a sense of power from her identity as a writer. The epistolary network in which she participated daily through letter writing imparted to her such a sense of enfranchisement that she felt herself at the center of a network rather than out on society’s fringes.

Fast forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. High school student Tyler excitedly showed his personal blog to National Writing Project researchers when they asked him what kind of writing he liked to do. He was daily involved in a process of adding new content about things that interested him, reading other people’s responses to his posts, reflecting on his writing, and then commenting on their responses, engaging in a broad, discursive discussion centered on his own writing. What did he enjoy the most about blogging?

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<sup>1</sup> In keeping with the self-deprecating ways in which many women used speech in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Jane Johnson also compared her efforts to that of the silk-worm, the product of which was far more valuable (Whyman 177). However, the position of power in which she imagined herself belies her self-deprecation and suggests that beneath the cloak of modesty mandated by her culture, Johnson felt more powerful than she felt she could admit.

“My words are everywhere,” he stated emphatically<sup>2</sup>. His voice was disseminated throughout cyberspace; his thoughts were available for everyone with Internet access to read. He was at the center of a network that gave him a wide audience and a confident voice.

What do Jane and Tyler, separated by hundreds of years and thousands of miles, have in common with each other? They each found themselves empowered by an explosion of a unique type of literacy. It was not the merely act of writing that was liberating for these two people; it was the act of writing within a network. The type of literacy that gave an 18<sup>th</sup> century middle class woman her voice has much in common with the literacy that is giving a 21<sup>st</sup> century teenage boy his voice.

We are currently witnessing the profound effects of digital literacy upon our society. Social networks no longer mere representations of real-world relationships, but are the virtual nerve centers of those relationships<sup>3</sup>. Occasionally, the social network is the only place where a relationship exists: the average SNS user has never met 7% of his or her friends (Hampton et al., 5). Facebook, the most popular social networking site at present<sup>4</sup>, has become a central feature of modern society. According to the 2011 Pew Internet and American Life Project, “the number of those using social networking sites has nearly doubled since 2008 and the population of SNS users has gotten older” (Hampton et al., 3). Obviously, people use social networking primarily for diverse social reasons, but they also use it to find jobs, generate business through advertising, create awareness about political issues, to teach, and to promote religious or ethical causes. For

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<sup>2</sup> DeVoss et al., 92

<sup>3</sup> It has been difficult to quantify the social value of networking sites in our society, but its monetary value very recently became apparent: on February 1, 2012, Facebook filed to sell shares of stock. Its estimated value is roughly \$100 billion, and it will begin public trading in May 2012 (Wyld).

<sup>4</sup> The Pew Internet project states that 92% of SNS users are on Facebook (Hampton et al., 3).

me as a high school teacher, Facebook is not only a means of keeping in touch with students who have graduated, but it has also become a surreptitious teaching tool. I frequently post videos, blog links, and articles that I want my students to see. Sometimes I will even tag my students in these posts. In this way, class discussion begins on Facebook through students posting comments, and then it continues the next day in the classroom. Students start to see learning as more closely connected with life outside of school. There have also been occasions in which my school's online school management program has failed to display an article or link, and Facebook has proved a more reliable way of getting information out to my students. I also use a more academic version of social networking in my composition classroom: In the Ning<sup>5</sup> I use in my composition classroom, students watch videos and follow links that I have posted. By watching, reading, and listening to this material, students get a feel for the current conversation on a particular topic and then have the chance to voice their own opinion. They comment on the links or videos they found most intriguing, add to and begin discussions in the forum, and reply to each other's comments. What happens is a lively, class-wide, discursive discussion that gets students writing in earnest dialogue with the sources and with each other<sup>6</sup>.

When people post content (text, image, video) in a digital environment, they are writing in community. They are following the unstated rules prescribed for interacting

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<sup>5</sup> Ning is a platform for creating social networks. Many teachers, myself included, set up private social networks for their classes so that they can take advantage of the benefits of social networking in a more consciously academic setting.

<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, while social networks are meant to be a tool of inclusion they can become a tool of alienation and exclusion if teachers fail to address issues of access. As ubiquitous as laptops and smart phones may seem in most teenagers' lives, not all teens have equal access to technology. In this respect, my own perspective is biased and privileged, because I teach in a private school where the average income of most families is higher than the national average income.



with that community, and they are constrained and compelled by a wide audience (Lunsford and Ede 814). They form their identities in the context of relationships with many other people. Social networking is changing the way we perceive ourselves and the world around us. While it is a relatively new phenomenon, the buzz created by writing for a network is nothing new at all.

Long before the first computer was ever dreamed up; long before the telephone made long-distance speech possible; long before people read by electric lights in the evening—there was letter writing. Written messages have existed in nearly all literate cultures throughout world history, but there were many specific attributes of letter writing in eighteenth century England that seem familiar to those who have witnessed the explosion of digital writing in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. When we focus less on the technologies and look more closely at the forms of writing, the motivation for writing, and the effects that the writing had upon the writers, we see that very little separates Regency-era Jane Johnson from modern American teenager Tyler. The magic happens when we see letter writing and writing for social media not as static entities bound by time and place but as *litteracies* that were acquired, developed, and shaped by writers in both centuries.

The type of literacy that evolved through an upsurge in letter writing among the middle classes has been termed epistolary literacy by Dr. Susan Whyman. It may seem that only reading and writing are necessary to write letters, but epistolary literacy goes beyond these basic abilities. Epistolary literacy refers to the skills required to

successfully<sup>7</sup> engage in the practice of letter writing, including knowledge of handwriting, forms of address, accepted modes of expression, and the ability to use the tools of writing (quill, ink, blotter, sealing wax, etc.). Dr. Whyman writes, “Epistolary literacy, as a level of expertise, involved far more than writing one’s name. Those who possessed it could read and write coherent sentences, like those in a simple letter...the writer was at ease with epistolary conventions, equipment, and language.” The skills necessary for epistolary literacy can therefore be divided into two categories: physical and intellectual. The writer must achieve a certain level of expertise with the tangible technologies of writing as well as fluency with the intangible aspects of literacy. Society could assess the level of a writer’s epistolary literacy by judging both types of skills. It was as necessary to possess beautiful handwriting as it was to write with beautiful language. To engage the higher echelons of society, a high level of proficiency was expected in both mental and physical letter-writing skills (Whyman 76).

### **Definitions of Digital and Epistolary Literacy**

While the technologies vary widely, the similarities between epistolary and digital literacy are evident even in the definitions. Digital literacy used to be somewhat narrowly defined as little more than computer skills; however, many scholars are expanding the definition of what it means to be digitally literate. In an article entitled “Defining Digital Literacy,” David Buckingham argues that it is inaccurate to perceive digital media as merely tools of technology and of information because that is not the

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<sup>7</sup> Success in this instance is defined as acceptance by the epistolary discourse community in which the writer wished to engage, and was of course dependent on the purpose, audience, and occasion of the letter.

way digital natives<sup>8</sup> are using these media. He asserts that “outside school, children are engaging with [digital] media, not as technologies but as cultural forms” experientially integrated into daily life (59). Digital literacy is therefore not merely about the computer skills necessary to interact in digital environments, but also “about these means of cultural understanding” (Buckingham 59). The World Wide Web is

...the product of two equally important layers: *code* and *collective human actions* taking advantage of the code. The first can be regulated by courts, government, and companies alike. The second, however, cannot be shaped by any single user or institution, because the Web...evolves from the individual actions of millions of users. As a result, the architecture is much richer than the sum of its parts.  
(Barabási 174)

Understanding digital literacy as a cultural artifact rather than merely a set of skills is critical to understanding the impact it is having upon writing and writers. Danielle DeVoss divides and classifies the skills necessary for fluency in digital literacy in a manner similar to the way Susan Whyman classifies the skills necessary for epistolary literacy. DeVoss argues that digital literacy requires the acquisition of a set of “functional, critical, and rhetorical skills” (13). Functional skills include the basics of computer literacy—typing, familiarity with applications, ability to save and transfer files, etc. Critical skills include the “understanding of both writing and technology as complex, socially situated, and political tools through which humans act and make meaning”

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<sup>8</sup> A digital native is someone who cannot remember a time when digital technologies were not an integral part of daily life. Born in the early 80s, I am not a digital native, but only marginally so. I can remember a time when there was no computer in my house and no cell phones. My youngest sister is a digital native. The digital world changed so quickly that the separation between digital natives and non-digital natives is less than one generation.

(DeVoss et al., 13). Rhetorical skills include the user's ability to make proper rhetorical choices regarding the content created in digital spaces, with special attention paid to both the known and unknown audiences which may view this material<sup>9</sup>. While DeVoss uses three categories, it is easy to see that the first category refers to physical skills while the second two categories refer to intellectual skills. Whyman's second category of intellectual skills could just as easily be broken down into the two categories of critical skills and rhetorical skills. Many eighteenth century letter writers demonstrated awareness of the fact that letter-writing and letter-sending technologies were complex, socially situated, and politically charged, showing that they possessed DeVoss's definition of "critical skills." Success with known and unknown audiences demonstrated writers' possession of DeVoss's "rhetorical skills." The formula for successful writing in the epistolary world is remarkably similar to the formula for success in digital writing environments. I will primarily be discussing writing for social network sites<sup>10</sup>; however, since many of my claims have wider implications and because digital writing has lately become so complex and interconnected, I will also frequently employ the term "digital literacy" to demonstrate that many features of writing for social media also apply to other types of digital writing<sup>11</sup>. It is also important to note that social media sites are increasingly the primary locations where digital literacy is practiced, and no truly

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<sup>9</sup> Being able to read the rhetorical situation accurately and establish one's credibility accordingly is closely connected to the concepts of *kairos* and *ethos*—in fact, James Kinneavy defines *kairos* as "the appropriateness of the discourse to the particular circumstances of the time, place, speaker, and audience involved" (224). Both critical and rhetorical skills are best measured in degrees of success rather than achievement versus failure.

<sup>10</sup> Dana Boyd and Nicole Ellison define social networking as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Internet).

<sup>11</sup> I would argue that most of the features of writing for social media apply to all digital writing that is visible to people other than the author. This includes blogging, microblogging, texting, E-mail, Instant Messaging, online discussion forums, comment forums, and chat rooms.

digitally literate person could be ignorant of social media. There is more than enough overlap to consider digital literacy a necessary function of the social media user.

A key difference between the definitions of epistolary and digital literacy is that digital literacy cannot be defined without reference to visual rhetoric, whereas visual rhetoric played a much smaller role in letter writing. Digital media includes a fusion of words, images, and video. Digital literacy now includes the ability to read visual rhetoric as a text. We are witnessing a shift from the “centuries-long dominance of writing to the relatively new dominance of the image” (Adams and Hamm 247). Letters were mostly static, although it could be argued that they were edited with ink blotters, changed as they were copied, and often censored either officially in London or censored by those who did not wish the contents of the letters to be preserved (Whyman 51). By contrast, digital writing is far more fluid. As Dennis Adams and Mary Hamm argue, “[digital] devices have become tools for writing; publishing; distributing; collaborating; interacting; and remixing and mashing together image, word, sound, motion, and more into something that goes far beyond our original vision of what they could do” (DeVoss et al., 4-5). These differences, while they are significant and while I will discuss their implications, are not the focus of my argument and they do not detract from the multitude of similarities between digital and epistolary literacy.

### **Argument**

In light of the similarities between these two literacies, I am arguing for the use of “networking literacy” as a term that captures the essential overlapping elements of the two other terms. A networking literacy is a literacy developed in a dialogic environment between two or more people who are too distant in proximity to communicate verbally, is

strongly informed by audience, is typically discursive, and focuses on topics that are usually personal or addressed from a personal angle. Networking literacies transcend geographical location, historical moment, and especially technology. While the tools of technology change, the need writers have to engage in networking literacy and the impact it can potentially have upon their motivation to write and comfort with writing, remains the same regardless of whether they hold a pen or a smart phone in their hands. The tools of networking literacy will undoubtedly evolve within the next several decades into forms that may well be unrecognizable to us. However, whether it's via Royal Post, Tweet, or status update, networking literacies will find a way into our new technologies. Although networking literacy will certainly shape and be shaped by technology, an essential set of principles about the writer and writing process will remain the same regardless of the writing tools used. It is true that at times in history, networking literacies have not been physically possible. They are suppressed during these times, and must await the right physical, political, technological, and economic conditions in order to emerge. I argue that the emergence of epistolary literacy in 18<sup>th</sup> century England and its effect on both the individual and society bears striking similarity to the emergence of digital literacy in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, and that the points at which they intersect form the definition of networking literacy. Networking literacies help construct the identities of the users and share certain attributes regardless of technology, including being discursive, personal, narrative, and dialogic.<sup>12 13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Many analyses of past and present networking literacies attempt to cast them in a particular light. Sometimes that light is positive, focusing primarily on the benefits society derives from having epistolary or digital literacy as a central feature of its makeup. Often that critical light is negative, ranging from a skepticism regarding the literacy's usefulness all the way to seeing it as a harbinger of society's imminent demise. My purpose is not to remain neutral but to fairly and closely examine both the positive and negative effects of these literacies upon society. While it is impossible to eliminate bias, I have sought to

## Historical Background

The first point of intersection between digital and epistolary literacy is the conditions which caused a sudden upsurge of interest in each of these networking literacies. While my argument's purpose is rhetorical rather than historical, a brief description of the historical conditions under which these two literacies arose will provide a necessary socio-cultural context for the argument. It will also reinforce the connection between the literacies, given the similar circumstances under which they emerged.

The sudden explosion of epistolary literacy in 18<sup>th</sup> century England can be explained primarily through three phenomena: improvements to roads, development of a more efficient postal system (which had ties to Imperialism), and increase in the literate populace (which had ties to individualism). In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, also considered the beginning of the long 18<sup>th</sup> century, the British government that had for so long been focused on overseas expansion began to turn its attention to matters at home. Many roads, especially the roads connecting rural locations with urban locations, had always

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avoid constructing my own narrative in which these literacies are cast as heroes or villains. My goal instead is to quantify and qualify the intersections of these literacies and propose a rational response, particularly from a pedagogical standpoint. This is the same stance adopted by scholar Christopher Flint, who states in *Family Fictions* that "previous critical accounts of eighteenth-century British fiction have often read its descriptions of the family either as part of progressive historical trends or as evidence of cultural decline, [but] my analysis of prose fiction narratives emphasizes complementary, and sometimes contradictory, transformations in eighteenth-century domestic practice and representation" (26). This pragmatic stance not only allows for greater objectivity in data analysis, but it also lays the necessary foundation for a practical application. In light of the fact that digital literacy is likely here to stay, scholars and educators must work to ameliorate the negative effects it could have upon writing while also harnessing the ways in which it benefits writing.

<sup>13</sup> I must also acknowledge my own pedagogical bias in addressing the subject of networking literacy. While this thesis does not allow space for making a direct pedagogical application, I have primarily approached my research in this field as a means of understanding how social media is influencing my high school students as writers. My research is biased toward understanding how networking literacy impacts writing and identity formation, because those topics are most applicable to my current career. Teaching at a small private school also biases my perception of how social networking is influencing teenagers. Because most of my students come from fairly affluent middle to upper-middle class backgrounds, almost all of them have access to the latest technologies. I am not as compelled to focus on issues of access and how means of connection and participation can become means of exclusion in environments where not all students have access to technology.

been ill-tended and could be treacherous depending on weather conditions.

“Urbanization, economic growth, and a swelling tide of trade and industry” necessitated better travel conditions (Whyman 13). As the first waves of the Industrial Revolution began to wash over Great Britain, they were initially stultified by an inadequate network of roads. Improvements to the Royal Post could not have been made without a widespread, concerted effort to repair and maintain existing roads while also constructing new roads that took into account country-wide transportation needs (Whyman 13).

Following quickly on the heels of road improvement came new measures to make the Royal Post more efficient and reliable than it had ever been before. Susan Whyman writes that “before 1600, the English postal system remained undeveloped...by 1800, high speed coaches crammed with letters and newspapers, sped to every corner of the land” (47). The optimization of England’s postal system arose from a certain set of ideological conditions, including Imperialism: “the rise of the Royal Mail was part of a wider movement to assert human control over space and time” (Whyman 13). Not only was it more necessary to write letters with the British empire sprawled out across the globe, but British nationalism demanded a country that was closely and efficiently connected, and therefore, more unified. Without these improvements, epistolary literacy could not have emerged in 18<sup>th</sup> century England.

Nor could epistolary literacy have emerged without an increase in basic literacy skills. There is some question regarding whether the possibility of engaging in letter writing caused more people to want to become literate or whether people began to be literate and demanded a more efficient means of communicating by letter. It is likely that these two causes worked in concert and that they are effectively inseparable. In any case,



by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, literacy movements were emerging even in rural and remote parts of the country. Susan Whyman discredits the notion that rural England remained largely illiterate until the rise of free public schools in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She argues that informal parochial schools and even instruction at home contributed to the rise of a literate populace, dissolving the stereotype of Britain's rural inhabitants as illiterate and ignorant (14). Evidence suggests that there was a massive democratization of letter writing in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Whyman 12). No longer merely the luxury of the upper classes, epistolary literacy became a means of agency. Throughout the course of the long 18<sup>th</sup> century, those who could not read and write were increasingly considered outsiders, unable to engage in many social and economic practices. Indeed, as the 17<sup>th</sup> century progressed, literacy skills were becoming an essential part of many jobs, so that by the century's end "most Londoners thought literacy was an essential skill" (Whyman 116). The social and economic necessity of epistolary literacy created both inclusion and exclusion. More people, especially women and people in the lower-middling classes, were given a voice, but the minority who remained illiterate were more disenfranchised than ever before.

The sudden rise in literacy in 18<sup>th</sup> century England also has its roots in the rise of individualism that began during Renaissance and expanded during the Enlightenment. Christopher Flint argues that during this time, there was a "growing cultural emphasis on 'individualism; and 'affective' relations" that created a "shift in family structure from a relatively porous one that stressed kinship, lineage, and economic concerns...to a more limited one that encouraged individual gratification and intense loyalty among the 'elementary' members of the family" (Flint 4). People used letter writing as a means of

reconceptualizing the family as well as their own place within it. Because letter writing is an isolated, individual act, its proliferation led to an emphasis on self-actualization. This is what Flint calls an “affective individualism” unique to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in which the “feeling subject” was elevated and centralized over and above the community (36). These historical changes to the position of the individual impacted the rhetorical situation of individuals as letter writers. Society was witnessing a “vexed relation between historicizing the subject—providing a linear account of a dominating fictional consciousness—and positioning the individual within a set of determining social contexts which by their very nature are nonlinear” (Flint 36). In other words, the role of the individual in society was shifting from a linear movement within a tightly stratified class structure to multi-directional movement within a network of people of varying socio-economic status. People had lived in lines; now they lived in the center of webs. Bruno Latour uses the concept of network to describe all social interactions: “More supple than the notion of system, more historical than the notion of structure, more empirical than the notion of complexity, the idea of network is the Ariadne’s thread of these interwoven stories” (3).

A similar set of circumstances preceded the explosion of digital literacy in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. The development of roads in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century corresponds to the development of smaller, faster computers in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and to the sudden widespread accessibility of technology. As technology became faster and less expensive, it became more widely available to people at every level of society, not simply computer technicians and researchers. Inevitably, technology began to influence the teaching of writing. In fact, “the widespread acceptance of personal computers (PCs) in the 1980s

led to their gradual implementation in composition classrooms, while government support for ‘computer literacy’ in the 1990s prompted political and economic support for more computer access across all levels of education (Sidler et al., 3). Access to computers began with the wealthier and more urban segments of society but spread quickly to the middle class and to rural settings. This may be considered a form of democratization, although the community that originally had the most access to the tools of technology was primarily comprised of researchers and “computer geeks” rather than a modern-day aristocracy. Computer hardware was the physical system that would eventually make virtual connections possible; they were the “roads” over which the “letters” would travel.

The development of the postal system corresponds to the development of the Internet and social networking sites. It was in the early days of computers that digital networks were first envisioned: “J.C.R. Licklider of MIT in August 1962 discuss[ed] his ‘Galactic Network’ concept...a globally interconnected set of computers through which everyone could quickly access data and programs from any site” (Leiner et al., Internet). Danah Boyd and Nicole Ellison claim that “first recognizable social network” called SixDegrees.com “allowed users to create profiles, list their Friends and beginning in 1998, surf the Friends lists” (Internet). Ahead of its time, SixDegrees closed down in 2000. It was followed by Friendster in 2002, but social networking did not really become mainstream until the emergence of MySpace in 2003. MySpace became extremely popular and remained dominant until September 2005, “when Facebook expanded to include high school students, professionals inside corporate networks, and, eventually, everyone” (Boyd and Ellison Internet).

The rise of the Royal Post had ties to Imperialism, and I argue that digital networks have ties to consumerism and globalism. As more jobs demand technological skills and as our world becomes increasingly connected through globalization, digital literacy becomes more and more of an imperative. Those who wish to be competitive and successful in the modern world must at the very least become aware of the place of social networks in culture. Fluency in using social networks is becoming a requirement for success in many jobs today. While America is not expanding its physical territories through conquest, some would argue that it is expanding virtual territories through establishing dominance via the Internet. As with epistolary literacy, this becomes a means of both inclusion and exclusion: more and more people have a voice, but the level of exclusion of the minority who do not have access to technology is more pronounced than ever before. Trying to exist in modern society without a computer, a cell phone with texting capability, Internet access, an E-mail account, and a Facebook is nearly impossible for the individual who wishes to network with potential employers and stay in touch with friends.

Finally, the explosion of writing for social networks is only possible through an increase in digital literacy. As people become more tech-savvy, they manifest an increasing desire to participate in social networks. Conversely, as social networks increase in popularity, social pressure is exerted upon computer users to acquire the digital literacy needed to participate in social networks that can connect them to friends, family, casual acquaintances, and even strangers with similar interests.

As with epistolary literacy, the upsurge in digital literacy can be tied to a rise in individualism. Our culture emphasizes instant gratification (as seen through the rise of

fast food restaurants, microwaves, increasingly fast Internet speeds, phones, etc.). Social media provides an environment in which the individual is the star attraction and everything happens in relationship to that individual: people interact on ‘my’ wall, I have my list of my friends, whom I can add and delete at will, I post my photos of myself, I list my interests, my accomplishments, my work history (but not the embarrassing jobs), my favorite books, music, movies, artists, and weekend activities. While its list of social and cultural benefits is long, people can still use it as a chance to wallow in unhappiness. Many choose a dark or depressing narrative for themselves, but they still maintain their position at the center of the social network. The perception that social media creates is that all of life orbits around the bright star of our own lives.

Unlike 18<sup>th</sup> century epistolary literacy, in which the rise of the individual corresponded to the walling off of the nuclear family, the rise of the 21<sup>st</sup> century individual corresponded to a renegotiation of the concept of family. Digital literacy is creating a reversal of the cultural trend of the nuclear family that began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and reached its zenith in 1950s America. It was letter writing that initially made the isolated nuclear family possible; people were often unwilling to separate from extended family before they had an effective means of communicating with them across distance. Paradoxically, a means of connection became, in part, a justification for familial separation. The idea that families could keep in touch through letters, especially via an efficient postal system, made them more amenable to the idea of being separated. Today, the walls of the nuclear family are crumbling as individuals choose a family for themselves based on mutual needs and interests. Social networks derive their popularity from their status as a place where individuals can express themselves and construct their

identities. It makes sense, therefore, that these networks would help foster individualism and gain popularity as individualism increased.

However, social network sites are not entirely about the individual; these sites were developed so that people could connect with each other. As with letter writing, the goal of social network sites is usually not to meet complete strangers but to create a different type of communication between people who are already connected “offline” (Boyd and Ellison). This why Boyd and Ellison draw a distinction between “social network sites,” which they claim refers to sites in which individuals who already have an existing connection may interact with each other and “social networking sites” in which persons previously unknown to one another may establish connections. I argue that these two terms are quickly becoming commingled as the line is blurred between blogs and social networks<sup>14</sup>. The interaction that occurs on blogs is primarily between strangers who are joined by a mutual interest, while the interaction that occurs on social networks is primarily between people already acquainted. As we witness the fusion of blogs and social networks, we are also witnessing the overlap of these two audiences: the audience to whom we are connected in “real life” and the audience to whom we are connected through similar needs and interests.

To summarize, the causes of the upsurge of cultural interest in both epistolary and digital literacy were similar in many different ways. Both times, these literacies drastically “altered the place of writing in society” (Michaelson 17). Regarding epistolary literacy, Patricia Michaelson argues,

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<sup>14</sup> For example, microblogs such as Tumblr are a fusion of social networks and blogs. The communities that develop within these spaces share attributes of both the blog world and the world of social media. The line is also becoming blurred as more people add “friends” who are hardly even casual acquaintances.

It was in the eighteenth century, hundreds of years after the European invention of the printing press, that print culture finally came into its own. [Many] scholars would point to a dramatic increase in literacy rates—at least as perceived by contemporaries—and an equally dramatic shift away from a system of literary patronage toward a more fully commercialized mode of supporting literary production. (17)

Now observe Michaelson's quote rewritten so that the 18<sup>th</sup> century terms are exchanged for 21<sup>st</sup> century terms:

It was in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, decades after the invention of the computer, that digital culture finally came into its own. These scholars would point to a dramatic increase in digital literacy rates—at least as perceived by contemporaries—and an equally dramatic shift away from a largely print-based culture toward a more fully commercialized mode of supporting digital text production.

By substituting updated terminology in Michaelson's quote, it becomes clear that many of the forces at work in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, the forces that generated such seismic shifts in writing's place in culture, are similar to the forces at work generating the same kinds of shifts in the place of writing in modern society.

## **CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR NETWORKING LITERACY**

In order to establish a framework for understanding how networking literacies impact society, it is critical that we first understand the nature of the relationship between the society and the individual. For networking literacy is, at its core, an establishment of agency, and few phenomena have had a greater impact upon society as a whole—

morally, socially, economically, and politically—than individuals exercising agency en masse. The tendency to view agency with suspicion makes the performance of networking literacies a subversive act even if the content created is not inherently subversive.

### **Identity Politics: the Role of the Individual in Society**

The realm of identity politics provides insight regarding the role of the individual in society. Judith Butler defended the idea that individual choice and assertion of identity was necessary to human freedom<sup>15</sup>. In making these propositions, she “surely places herself among those who challenge the illusions and longings that generate subjugation in the name of an impossible safety” (Shulman 228). What subversive acts do these “illusions and longings” generate that so endanger social norms that the acts themselves are discouraged in the name of safety? One such act is “resignifying,” which happens as language is performed and new meanings are given to signifiers (Shulman 229). The online-only “Urban Dictionary” provides numerous examples of how resignification occurs in digital spaces<sup>16</sup>. Communities of practice establish authority by determining

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<sup>15</sup> Some scholars have claimed that Butler denies agency and instead understands “the subject as produced through social discourse” (Magnus 81). However, in an article entitled “The Unaccountable Subject: Judith Butler and the Social Conditions of Intersubjective Agency,” Kathy Dow Magnus rescues Butler from this accusation by demonstrating that Butler’s “understanding of the subject as produced through social discourse does not preclude the possibility of agency, but merely *reconceives* it” (82).

<sup>16</sup> Urban Dictionary is an “online open source directory of slang phrases and neologisms” (Davis). Rapid resignification can only occur in online spaces; in order for a new word or phrase to become print-worthy, it requires such extensive evidence of the word’s cultural entrenchment that it could not possibly keep up with our language’s rapid changes. In an article entitled, “In Praise of Urban Dictionaries,” Guardian writer Johnny Davis states that “Until relatively recently a word wasn’t recognised as such until it was recorded in a proper dictionary. Now neologisms are pouring in the language like never before; our vocabulary is being reshaped by texters, tweeters, bloggers, marketers, and have-a-go contributors.” This is nothing new; slang dictionaries have been in existence since 1699, which the *Dictionary of the Canting Crew*. Just one of the myriad effects of Urban Dictionary is the globalization of English slang. Davis writes that “slang used to take decades to cross the Atlantic; now it takes minutes.” Another possible effect is the eventual death of the traditional print dictionary. Print dictionaries must deal with hard evidence when it comes to word inclusion, but “with slang there’s a strong element of ephemera” (Green, qtd. in Davis). These changes have many people asking, “does DIY spell RIP for the OED?” (Davis).



the diction and syntax acceptable for admission into the community, but networking literacies can undermine that authority by providing individuals with the opportunity to influence signifiers. Butler insists that the subversive power of resignification is not what we need to worry about; instead, the real danger exists in “the power of any figure to be the last word” (126). Other scholars have argued that “Specific communities become represented in new media compositions for the purposes of both delineating community identity and connecting with other communities” (Getto et al., 160). Within the forum created by networking literacies, the “last word” cannot exist. Regardless of the finality with which users often try to imbue their tone, there are always comments, questions, and discursive threads of discussion that are never finished, only abandoned. Even the most furious commentators eventually move on and if resolution appears to be achieved, it is often fleeting and illusory. The texts that emerge as the products of networking literacy are the kind of unresolved artifacts that “endorse an engagement that is anchored in and arises from acknowledgement (not disavowal) of human interdependence and incompleteness” (Shulman 232). Unresolved artifacts in such mass quantities as occur in digital spaces can deconstruct authority that rests on the claim to absolutes. Our participation in the creation of unresolved artifacts is sufficient to “implicate” us even if our content reinforces authority.

### **Signs and Signifiers in Networking Literacy**

Signs, rather than being completely arbitrary in essence, are instead “embedded...in lived experiences, local cultures, and criterial grammars that speakers actually must draw on and address” (Shulman 234). The embeddedness of signs in a networked environment in which experience, culture, and grammar are constantly

changed, suggests that networking literacies render all language, and specifically the language of power, open to (re)negotiation and (re)signification. Everett argues that “Digital media technologies are distinguished from their analog counterparts through a sort of phenomenological ‘click fetish’...presumably available simply, instantaneously, and pleurably with any one of several click apparatuses” (93). The practice of literacy is an inherently social act that inevitably deals with the norms established by society. As Butler puts it, “when the ‘I’ seeks to give an account of itself, [that] account must include the conditions of its own emergence...the ‘I’ has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation—or set of relations—to a set of norms” (*Account* 8). We tell the story of ourselves (the “I”) in relationship to others (the “you”) who have asked or demanded that we give an account of ourselves. The stage is therefore set for networking literacy when we discover ourselves as “self-narrating beings” (*Account* 11) only in reference to another’s request, which implies that identity is performed within a dialogic environment. If we choose not to respond to the request, “the silence articulates a resistance” (*Account* 12). Self-narration as a response to request also means that we begin our account of ourselves as rhetoric. We still tell our lives as story, but events are chosen and shaped to fit the audience and occasion; we use a “narrative voice” but “with the aim of persuasion” (*Account* 12). Or as Bruno Latour puts it, “The networks are simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like discourse, and collective, like society” (6).

### **Power and Struggle in the Context of Networking Literacy**

Epistolary and digital literacies also undermine hegemonic power structures by repositioning the individual in his or her society. Foucault argues that there are a variety of means by which humans are made subjects. The rise of the individual, which naturally

occurs as networking literacies emerge, works against the cultural forces that would seek to objectivize the individual. Foucault asserts that people are objectivized when they are divided from themselves or from others (“Subject and Power” 777); letter writing not only connects people with each other, but it also provides them with a space for constructing their own identities and therefore connecting them to themselves. Again we can see a mutually influential relationship as literacy empowers people and people seeking to be empowered become literate.

An examination of the commonalities Foucault identified within all struggles reveals how well social media fits the definition of an anti-authority struggle. Foucault writes that struggles are not limited to one country, and social media is certainly a global phenomenon (“Subject and Power” 781). He argues that struggles aim to take away control exercised by authority, and while there is usually no overt attempt to undermine authority, digital spaces contribute more to power’s dissemination than its centralization. Foucault asserts that struggles are “immediate,” looking for the closest enemy rather than the chief enemy (“Subject and Power” 781). Social media is almost always tied to current events, and when social media users mobilize against a perceived threat, it is usually the “closest enemy.”<sup>17</sup> He also argues that struggles are continuous; no one expects them to be resolved at a certain date, because the dialectic is always in process (“Subject and Power” 781). Digital literacy provides perfect examples of unresolved conflict and ongoing dialectic: of the numerous arguments that begin every day on the

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<sup>17</sup> A recent example of a defense against “the closest enemy” was the massive social media mobilization against the Stop Online Piracy Act and the Protect IP Act, both of which could have seriously impacted networking literacy in America. Those who might not have been inclined to view social media as a struggle were likely surprised by the highly vocal opposition that became ubiquitous within a few short days. It was proof that beneath the harmless façade of the Facebook home page or Wordpress’s “Freshly Pressed” blog page, lies a sleeping tiger capable of widespread and immediate action when provoked.

Internet, few if any are ever resolved. According to Foucault, struggles also “question the status of the individual” because they paradoxically “assert the right to be different” by highlighting individuals’ unique attributes while they also “attack everything which separates the individual, breaks his links with others, splits up community life, forces the individual back on himself, and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way” (“Subject and Power” 781). One paradox of social media is that digital writers highlight their own differences while also reinforcing their own place within the community. Foucault discusses the ways in which struggles oppose “the privileges of knowledge” by questioning the “knowledge, competence, and qualification of authority” (“Subject and Power” 781). Social media can act as an equalizer of both class status and knowledge, as it calls privilege into question and spreads information at a far more rapid rate than at any other time in human history. The potential for equalization does not amount to the eradication of ignorance or the total and immediate dismantling of power structures, but it does contribute to demystification. “Finally,” writes Foucault, “all these present struggles revolve around the question: who are we? They are a refusal of these abstractions, or economic and ideological state violence, which ignore who we are individually, and also a refusal of a scientific or administrative inquisition which determines who one is” (“Subject and Power” 781). At the center of struggle is the question of identity—who we are in relationship to ourselves, our society, and those in power over us. The centrality of identity in struggle is the most obvious connection between struggle itself and networking literacy. At the heart of both epistolary and digital literacy is the struggle to perform the self in a way that makes meaning within a given cultural context and extant power structures. Social networking can be constructed

as a struggle against authoritative centers of knowledge and power, a form of resistance against being made subjects.

The discourse of individual identity also contributed to the heated conversation regarding the author. Foucault's discussion of authorship has profound implications for both 18<sup>th</sup> century epistolary literacy and 21<sup>st</sup> century digital literacy. The importance society placed upon authorship became central along with the advent of widespread letter writing; copyright laws were being established by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Foucault 1482). Before 1500, texts were largely anonymous and assigning authorship was often the equivalent of assigning blame, because it usually meant that the text was controversial (Leitch et al., 1470). Foucault writes that "discourse was not originally a thing, a product, or a possession, but an action situated in a bipolar field of sacred and profane, lawful and unlawful, religious and blasphemous" (1482). The copyright laws that went into effect reflected society's beliefs about the text as a product tied to an author who possessed property rights to that text.

### **Complications of Authorship**

Today, the digital age has rendered question of authorship exponentially more complicated. Plagiarism, which is clearly defined in the syllabi of most high school and college courses, and which teachers painstakingly work to help students avoid, is as rampant as ever. Frustrated but undaunted, educational institutions try to eradicate plagiarism from students' writing in an ongoing, futile game of Whack-a-Mole. Then there is the issue of anonymity of writing in online spaces. Most comment sections under blogs, online articles, and videos provide the option of writing anonymously. Rather than using freedom for the articulation of challenging, provocative statements, anonymous

comments typically constitute the Internet's verbal sewer. Then of course, there is the problem of locating the author within pieces that become so collaborative that a single author is unidentifiable. Howard Rodman writes that "each technological change brings about a new confusion of the concept of authorship...Now, in the digital age, authorship is more and more diffuse. More fugitive. More difficult to locate." He cites the example of Stephen Colbert, who stood up in front of a green screen, swung a lightsaber, and challenged his audience to create something funny with this video clip. One of the more popular versions that appeared on YouTube just hours later depicted Colbert in a lightsaber battle with Dick Cheney. Howard writes, "Who is the author of these pieces? Is it Colbert? The writing staff of The Colbert Report? Comedy Central? The viewers who composited his image with new or found footage? George Lucas? Dick Cheney?" He also describes writing a film, which wound up "bookended by two statements of authorship ['a film by Tom Kalin' and 'the author of this work shall be considered to be TimeWarner Inc.'], neither of which is mine" (Internet). Despite increasingly complex copyright laws, discourse within digital spaces today looks more like the situated action that Foucault was describing than the static, possess-ible entity that the makers of copyright laws in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were trying to create.

Networking literacies bring to the forefront questions of authorship, which includes the concepts of ownership of ideas, copyright, collaboration, and agency. Both epistolary literacy and digital literacy created a massive upsurge in the volume of writing produced. The more writing was created, copied, revised, edited, and responded to, the more the question of authorship (and the issues of identity and ownership related to authorship) took central stage. The irony is that in both the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the

more emphasis was placed on authorship, the harder it became to authentically locate the author or the “original” text. Howard addresses the issue of original versus copy, arguing that since digital copies are often indistinguishable from originals, “Does it even make any sense, viewing two identical digital files, to speak of ‘the original’? In this digital age, can even the word ‘original’ retain its original meaning?” By bringing into question the language we use to identify created works, Howard calls into question the categories we use to describe authorship and textuality.

We are in the age of the shifting category and the blurred line when it comes to classifying texts and determining genre. As Foucault asserts, the pertinent questions are no longer “Who is the real author?” and “Have we proof of his authenticity and originality?” but instead, “What are the modes of existence of this discourse?” and “Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?” (1490). The occasion of a particular text will change every time that text is copied and pasted, quoted, (re)tweeted, and qualified by an endless string of discursive comments. Networking literacy is largely responsible for the fluidity of texts; it locates the text within a dialogic environment that keeps the text perpetually dynamic and open to question. Authority does not care for fluidity, which is partly why copyright laws emerged following the burst of popularity of epistolary literacy and why these laws are continuing to evolve into ever-more-detailed new versions, given the burst of popularity of digital literacy.

### **The Ways in Which Networking Literacy is Restructuring Thought**

As the issues within the world of literacy become increasingly complicated, society’s power structures become complicated as well. The strong connection between literacy and power implies that it is possible for networking literacies to influence

society. The basis for literacy's power is the central role it plays and has played in Western culture. Walter J. Ong writes that "high-technology cultures...are built on literacy of necessity and encourage the impression that literacy is an always to be expected and even natural state of affairs" (23). Our "high-tech" culture is built on a demand for many types of literacy; today, digital literacy could be considered just as important as basic reading and writing skills. Seeing digital literacy as a "natural state of affairs" creates a category that then produces exclusion and "othering." While this may seem like an extreme perspective, consider the social status of a person between the ages of 15 and 50 who does not participate in social networking: the application of the term "unnatural" may not seem so far-fetched.

Ong goes on to describe the ways in which writing structures thought and by extension, society. "We can now view in better perspective...what functionally literate human beings really are—that is, beings whose thought processes do not grow out of simply natural power but out of these powers as structured, directly or indirectly, by the technology of writing" (24). In other words, the way we think about ourselves, each other, and the world around us, the ways in which we conceive our identity and exert power over others, are directly impacted by the technology we use to express ourselves. Jean- François Lyotard captures this synergistic interplay between the human brain and language when he states that "philosophy is possible only because the material ensemble called 'man' is endowed with very sophisticated software. But also, this software, human language, is dependent on the condition of the hardware" (13). Speech structures thought in a distinctive way; when writing was invented, it restructured thought. Were it not for writing, "the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when



engaged in writing but even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form” (Ong 24). Writing has so ingrained itself on the pattern of our minds that we are unaware of its presence and its effect on us. Smoothly integrated into every facet of our normal lives, writing becomes for us a way of conceptualizing the world without our realization of its presence, like a pair of tinted glasses that the wearer no longer notices, but which color everything s/he sees. What our unawareness means is that “we have interiorized the technology of writing so deeply that without tremendous effort we cannot separate it from ourselves or even recognize its presence or influence” (24). As letter writing grew in popularity in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and was ubiquitous by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, it impacted the ways in which people perceived their worlds.

Likewise, the implications of this theory for high technology in general and for digital literacy in particular are multitudinous. Digital literacy is starting to become an “interiorized technology” that we hardly notice until the power goes out or the cell phone gets dropped. As we put more and more of our selves onto digital spaces, and we start to live more and more in online environments, digital literacy is increasingly affecting the shape of our thoughts.

Ironically, aspects of digital literacy are restoring some features of oral culture. Walter Ong writes that “primary oral culture...keeps its thinking close to the human life world, personalizing things and issues, and storing knowledge in stories” (25). The writing of social media not only resurrects the immediacy of oral culture, but also keeps its thinking much closer to human life than other types of writing. People are posting about events, relationships, political issues, and feelings in real time; pictures are included. The end product is an edited, synthesized version of reality in which

everything is personalized and shaped as a story. There remain, of course, several key differences between modern digital culture and oral culture, one of which is the place of memory. Story-shapes make things easier to remember, but we live in an age in which the role of memory is rapidly changing. With ready access to information, many people see no need to memorize what they could quickly look up on their phones or tablets. However, there is a need for a different type of memory, which I will explain shortly.

The ancients believed strongly in the superiority of the oral word to the written word and objected to the ways in which the technology of writing was reshaping thought. Interestingly, “Plato’s objections against writing are essentially the very same objections commonly urged today against computers by those who object to them” (Ong 27). Plato argued that writing was inhuman, “pretending to establish outside the mind what in reality can only be in the mind” (Ong 27), that written texts are unresponsive, that writing encourages intellectual laziness because the information is permanently and externally preserved, and that “the written word cannot defend itself as the natural spoken word can; real speech and thought always exist essentially in the context of struggle” (Ong 28). Digital literacy changes the game by presenting a different category of writing that partially renders at least three of these four objections invalid. First, the writing of digital literacy is deeply human and extremely personal, even controversially so. While it is still an external manifestation of what is in the mind, the form it takes more closely resembles human stream-of-consciousness than more formal types of writing do. Digital literacy is highly responsive and question-oriented. Search engines and wikis provide opportunities for explanation and discussion. And of course, digital spaces reinvent the “context of struggle” that Plato considered so essential to human language. A perfunctory search of

blogs and discussion threads reveals constant dialectic, constant argument, constant (re)forming of ideas in digital spaces in a highly participatory culture.<sup>18</sup>

### **CHAPTER THREE: THE EFFECTS OF NETWORKING LITERACIES UPON THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY**

#### **Networking Literacy as an Agent of Social Change**

Epistolary and digital literacies not only altered the place of writing in their respective societies, but also altered the fabric of those societies. Networking literacies alter society at the level of communities of practice.<sup>19</sup> Both epistolary and digital literacies capture communities of practice both as a function and as a space. Communities of practice are rendered far more fluid and negotiable by the existence of networking literacies. Epistolary and digital literacies both present us with “structural and semiotic patterns of narrative discourse” that manifest “complex social mechanisms” (Flint 16). Both provide a “cognitive as well as a descriptive framework” for understanding our society (Flint 17). Both types of literacy serve as their own communities of practice, which is why they are able to nurture and police social behavior without appearing legislative. This way, most writers do not balk at the normalization

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<sup>18</sup> While modern high technology does reduce the role of memorization of facts, I argue that it creates a new place for memory in recalling how to accurately access and synthesize information. Because of the vastness of information available, the need for prior knowledge that will allow the user to sift through mountains of data again requires the use of memory, although a different type of memory. Digital literacy does not necessarily encourage critical thinking, but critical thinkers are the most savvy technology users. One again, we find ourselves in a world in which interpersonal and intrapersonal struggles have taken center stage, and the dialogic nature of rhetoric has made writing come alive. Online environments have re-introduced the agonistic features of writing. Take that, Plato.

<sup>19</sup> A community of practice is defined as a group of people that develops a set of interests, activities, and speech patterns specific to their group, and they reinforce one another in these practices. Communities or practice come in many sizes, but they must be small enough to negatively or positively reinforce specific behaviors on an individual level. In a community of practice, social rewards are granted to those who adhere to the group’s rules, while deviants are ostracized in varying degrees. These rules are typically not constructed by a single leader, but by the group as a whole, and group members are themselves subject to the very rules that they create and enforce (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 185-186).

that takes place within these environments. Because SNS users feel free to express themselves, they sometimes do not notice the effect these environments are having upon the content and form of their expression. Yet normalization is at work nonetheless, translating values into formal precepts (Flint 19). The paradox of networking literacies is that they require conformity to a community along with a celebration of the individual, and the irony is strengthened in light of the fact that conformity requirements are disguised as opportunities for individualistic expression. The opposite dynamic is also at work, because the subversive acts of individual users not only influence (over time) what is considered acceptable in online spaces, but also, by extension, influence what is considered acceptable in society as a whole. Many users do not notice the extent to which epistolary and digital literacies transform individuals and society, and as technology speeds up, the effects upon society are accelerated.

Perhaps the most profound social effect that networking literacies have is upon the concept of family. Families are the most common communities of practice in most societies, but in the case of digital literacy, communities of practice are selected rather than genetically determined. Christopher Flint writes that we witnessed the “rise of the nuclear family at the birth of the modern, industrial, capitalist state in Britain” (10), and we have witnessed the rise of the social media family at the birth of the global networked state in America. Epistolary literature, which provides us with a window into epistolary culture in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, questions “the ideals of conventional family life,” scrutinizing the family in “fundamentally skeptical ways...submit[ting] traditional beliefs to an intense and often withering social scrutiny” (Flint 32). Social media often invokes traditional beliefs about the family and about society while subjecting them to the

severest implicit and explicit scrutiny. Because the tone of social media is casual and often humorous at times, the skepticism about social norms does not come across to users as cynical or deconstructive. Thus many of the effects networking literacies have upon society are often masked by the informal, dialogic nature of these media. Family relations, including the “familial” interactions that transpire within communities of practice via social media, “disrupt the representational field in which they are framed” as well as “imply a complex traffic in models, narratives, and behaviors that crisscross, and thus challenge, the boundaries set around that enclosed domestic space” (Flint 33). In the digital age, “circle of friends” has become an outmoded term. “Network” is the new buzzword, and its multi-functional purpose—describing everything from groups of friends to business strategies to computers—more accurately describes our place within digital writing spaces. Indeed, the “traffic” that crisscrosses and challenges boundaries is accentuated in digital environments.

Both epistolary and digital literacies also impacted literacy and writing in their respective societies. Because of the widespread popularity of first epistolary and then digital literacy, people from all levels of society were more motivated to pursue reading and writing skills than they ever were before. Susan Whyman writes that “Letter writing helped promote literacy further down the social structure than we have imagined” (6). Our society has all but created a cult of technology the way people created a cult around letter writing. The power of this cult-like obsession with networking literacy can hardly be overstated when it comes to quantifying the impact of networking literacies upon the increase in literate population. Letter writing and social media created unprecedented demands for education, and both served as entry points into wider cultural phenomena:

letter writing was the gateway to print culture, and social media is the gateway to digital culture.

Naturally, the fact that networking literacies cause more people at more stations of life to participate in reading and writing also means that networking literacies have a significant impact upon language. Again we witness a mutually influential relationship in which these literacies make the conventions of writing more standardized (Whyman 93), but trends in language also affect epistolary or digital expression. Epistolary literacy had a profound effect upon the English language: it was a time of “expanding vocabulary and experimental usage” (Whyman 114). This is one of the primary criticisms of digital writing, and specifically of texting, that people voice regarding digital literacy today. Purists of the English language assert that abbreviations and repurposed words are degrading, corrupting, and even bastardizing our language. There are few if any controls over the type of language used in digital environments. British radio journalist and English language purist John Humphreys declared in 2000 that “Hell is other people talking webspeak on mobile phones,” (Thurlow) and his sentiments are echoed in John Sutherland’s assertion that “as a dialect, text (‘textese’?) is thin and unimaginative. It is bleak, bald, sad shorthand” (Thurlow). Crispin Thurlow uses these assertions to support his argument that “Central to the hype and hysteria of popular media representations about new communication technologies are concerns about the way that conventional linguistic and communicative practices are affected.” However, I argue that language is a fluid, changeful entity; for example, reading Chaucer’s language demonstrates how drastically English has altered in the past few centuries. While there remains an academic discourse that must be taught to students to help them succeed in the discourse

community of their choosing, educators must acknowledge and seek to adapt to the changefulness of language. No one can control the extent to which or the manner in which English is modified in epistolary or digital environments; fighting for the standardization of something that has never been and never will be truly “standard” is a fruitless endeavor. More productive conversations focus on how the language is changing and how we can continue to communicate clearly and effectively within our language’s shifting parameters.

Another effect that networking literacies have upon society is that while they ostensibly connect people, they contribute to the distance people put between themselves and the people within their communities. Before the advent of a reliable postal system in England, people were not as willing to move away from kin and lifelong friends. When a reliable postal system was put in place, people could suddenly reconcile themselves to being separated from loved ones by long distances. Nuclear families were more willing than ever to put distance between themselves and their extended family, contributing to the “walling off of the nuclear family” (Flint 5). It was during this period in England’s history that the family moved from an “open lineage system” which was dominant from 1450 to 1630, to a “restricted patriarchal nuclear formation” and finally to a “closed domesticated nuclear grouping,” which lasted from 1640 to 1800 (Flint 5). Letter writing, which made families more willing to separate knowing that they would be able to stay in touch, contributed significantly to this process. Connecting people while simultaneously separating them is another important point of intersection of digital literacy with epistolary literacy. People may be in the same room together with the opportunity for face-to-face socialization, but may each be immersed in a digital world,

connecting via text message or social media with other people who are not physically present. This reinforces the familial aspect of the communities of practice, because each person may stay at all times in contact with the group of his/her choosing and may strengthen those quasi-familial bonds.

### **Identity Performance in the Context of Networking Literacy**

While aspects of group identity are compelled by networking literacies, we now turn our attention to the more immediate and profound effect that networking literacies have upon individual identity formation. Both epistolary and digital literacies restructure thought in such a way that we are occupied, if not consumed, by the present. Occupation with the present can potentially blind us to our own intersections with history. The irony is that “the ‘growth’ of the protagonist is linked to a social collapse and realignment—that is, to historical process” (Whyman 31). We are the protagonists of our stories, whether we write them in letters or on Facebook, and history is our story’s setting. Networking literacies can cause us to lose our sense of being a thread in the fabric of history and place us instead at history’s center. Self-obsession is not an exclusively modern phenomenon; 18th century letter writers could easily become blind to the historical process and turn inward. Christopher Flint writes, “Consumed by their own domestic obsessions, the family’s individuals are thus oblivious to the way in which their particular history intersects with the larger history of the family as a contested social structure” (2). However, getting lost in a disconnected world of self is not inevitable and is less likely in the world of digital literacy than in the world of epistolary literacy. Digital writers who conscientiously connect the events of their lives to events happening in real time at local, regional, national, and even global levels have the chance to see



themselves as a part of history in ways 18<sup>th</sup> century letter-writers never could have imagined. The choice is in the hands of the social media user.

In the context of networking literacy, whether in letters or in status updates, identity is constructed and performed. Networking literacy creates a space for performing and negotiating one's identity in a discursive dialogue, both expressing individual identity and also helping form it. The performance of our identities "can be as intentional or as unconscious as the creation of character by an author" (Michaelson 10). We choose who we want to be in online spaces, and what we present is a fictionalized version of ourselves.<sup>20</sup> What we choose not to say about our 'selves' is just as important as what we choose to say, and both epistolary and digital literacy employ this rhetoric of silence. As Pierre Macheray puts it, "the explicit requires the implicit: for in order to say anything, there are other things which must not be said" (qtd. in Flint 121). We make choices about how we wish to be perceived, and we are simultaneously making other choices about how we do not wish to be perceived. Choices regarding perception are obvious in the rhetoric of photographs on social media, especially the photograph an individual chooses as his or her "profile picture." Most social media users do not choose to post photos that depict them in unflattering ways—no broccoli between the teeth, ugly sweatshirts, or greasy ponytails, even though these elements are part of the individual's real life away from the computer. The profile picture itself is meant to create a defining image of a person, even though it is the most minute and carefully staged sliver of his or her life. We are our own publicists, frantically working to sanitize, enhance, and polish the façade of our own lives so that we always fit the persona we have chosen for

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<sup>20</sup> Even if we do not intend to present falsehoods or cast an unrealistic light on our lives, we cannot help but fictionalize. Because it is impossible to present every last detail of our lives, we are forced to choose what details to include and what to exclude. This editing is a form of fictionalizing.

ourselves. Most social media users are aware (if not directly conscious) of our own attempts to fictionalize, but often fail to recognize that other people do the same. SNS users can become frustrated with their lives and eager to portray life events as better than they really are in order to keep up with the perceived happiness of others. Exaggeration then becomes a rhetorical tactic people use to not only make other people believe the best about them, but also to improve their own outlook on life.

However, self-narration, which includes fictionalization, is not merely some epistolary or digital effort to “keep up with the Joneses” in terms of perceived happiness or fulfillment. People use the spaces created by networking literacy as an opportunity to authentically form their own identities in social contexts. Jones argues that young people today “view cell phones, instant messaging (IMing) and the Internet not so much as electronic conveniences as extensions of themselves” (207). In the endless dialectic of the self, letters, tweets, and status updates alike all present us with an opportunity for the public outworking of internal struggle. Both epistolary and digital literacy require a “quintessential example of a social act” (Whyman 22)—the decision to make public or semi-public a personal piece of writing. This may require more or less courage depending on the size of the audience, but it is still an act of personal agency. For the letter writer, this act occurs at the moment the letter is mailed; for the digital writer, this act occurs when the “send,” “reply,” “tweet,” or “update” button is clicked, which makes identity formation in digital spaces more rapid and immediate. Letter writers and social media users are constantly presenting pieces of themselves in networking spaces and then fretting over how well their offerings will be received. Feedback arrived in the 18<sup>th</sup>

century in the form of a reply letter, while feedback today arrives instantly in the form of negative comments, positive comments, “like” buttons, and silence.

The dialogic nature of networking literacy makes it particularly suitable as a tool of identity formation. Susan Whyman writes in regard to epistolary literacy that “long uninterrupted series with both sides of the conversation reveal two basic functions of every correspondence: the construction of a personal identity and the creation, not just reflection, of an interpersonal relationship. In every letter, a sense of self is conveyed for the benefit of writers and readers, who have contracted to share their thoughts...An ongoing correspondence is, by definition a social relationship that is created and transformed over time” (119). According to Whyman, identity formation is not a peripheral feature of epistolary literacy, but a “basic function” of back-and-forth rhetoric. Those who choose to engage in networking literacies cannot help but have their identities shaped and reshaped, questioned, affirmed, and transformed as they express themselves in networked spaces. As inherently social beings, humans are hard-wired to change and adapt in response to feedback received from others and to constantly achieve higher social status among the people whose opinions matter most to them.

However, while some renegotiation of status does occur, people who use social media today are often not deliberately negotiating social status. They are instead negotiating their conceptions of self before an audience, but they do so for their own understanding. Susan Whyman writes that 18<sup>th</sup> century letters were “part of an ongoing narrative we compose about ourselves that ensures us that we are knowable persons” (131). Putting a narrative template over the events of our lives is an act of personal reassurance before it is anything else.

What networking literacy allows us to do is perform a range of different identities. Maintaining a number of different e-mail accounts for different purposes (one for work, one for school, one for social life) and social media profiles cements the demarcation of our various identities and makes us more aware of our multiple selves.<sup>21</sup> In her article entitled “Dealing with Gender Identity,” Miriam Meyerhoff argues that “speakers possess many different identities, some personal, some group (or social).” Identities take on different importance depending on the social situation, and both interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence is required in order for individuals to access the appropriate identity in a given setting. According to Meyerhoff, “Identities vary in salience in different communicative events, but all of a speaker’s different identities are always present and are all available to the speaker in every communicative event” (203). What determines the salience of a particular identity in a given situation includes the “topic, interlocutor, and affective goals of the speaker” (203). Meyerhoff writes about the complexity of negotiating multiple identities in an oral setting, a problem which is compounded in either a written or digital environment in which identities are recorded and may be accessed by an unintended audience. The possibility of the unintended audience means that those who practice networking literacies are (or ought to be) constrained in the practice of the full range of their identities and must consider the

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<sup>21</sup> Google-Plus, which has not yet become a widely used networking tool, allows users to divide the people with whom they network into groups. In this way, the language and expression deemed acceptable in one community of practice need not be seen by members of the other communities. What is considered appropriate among members of an individual’s poker-playing group might not be considered appropriate by the PTA moms. Digital tools like Google Plus point strongly to the multiplicity of individual identities and to the fact that “all Google search is becoming social” and that before long “social search will be the only type of search available” (Shamaeva). Even now, “Bing search is integrated with Facebook and does have the power of being ‘social’ ...[search] results will show multiple references to your Facebook friends.”

consequences of a more private identity being recorded and accessed.<sup>22</sup> While the dangers of maintaining multiple identities ought to be considered, the freedom to express oneself through performing a range of identities cannot be ignored. Networking literacies provide writers with the freedom to explore and define diverse versions of the self. Particularly in digital spaces, increased opportunities for performing a wider range of identity have demonstrated the intricacy and depth of human nature in an unprecedented fashion. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “text and speech were conceived of as closely intertwined” (Michaelson 2). However, this simply meant that speech was formal and elevated. In past decades, there has been a significant gap between writing and speaking. However, texting has closed this gap; we now write in online spaces in a manner very similar to the way we talk. In this instance, writing has been brought “down” to the level of speech.

The fact that identity is formed within a dialogic environment is also a key feature of both epistolary and digital literacy. Networking literacies employ a unique dialogism that includes the important factor of distance. Christopher Flint writes that “The letter, as a symbol of personal identity is, furthermore, both a sign of separation and an emblem of reciprocity” (169). A paradox of alienation and connection exists within the dialogic worlds of networking literacies. The letter, the email, and the wall post alike are all efforts to connect, yet they necessarily imply physical separation. We hear of people texting and messaging each other while they are in the same room, but they still must maintain distance, even if they are messaging each other humorously. They cannot be simultaneously engaged in oral dialogue and online dialogue. Flint captures the irony of

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<sup>22</sup>A common example of the “unintended audience” is employers viewing a job applicant’s Facebook page and not hiring him or her based on photos depicting the applicant in an uninhibited moment with friends. For the speaker, it was merely a question of not being overheard. Today, “eavesdropping” has taken on a whole new unintended and volatile dimension.

a connection that necessitates distance when he states that “the ‘familiar letter’...expresses the desire to be linguistically connected to the family while at the same time representing and preserving the writer’s necessary distance from the family (170). By connecting through distance, identity and specifically identity within a familial or social network, becomes inextricably linked to distance. Individuals perform a narrative identity, and their stories “continually spring from the dynamic relation between displaced and replaced families” (Flint 170). In other words, separation necessitates connection through networking literacy, which creates narrative, which forms (or performs) identity. The story of social networking is the story of the dynamic interchange between people who are constantly either growing closer to us in status and connection or who are drifting away from us until we delete them from our account. The dialogic environment is one of constant motion and fluidity. Relationships are either growing closer or growing more distant. Identities are constantly being renegotiated. Life moves.

The claim could also be made that networking literacies serve to mask identity. Both letter writing and social media are a kind of elaborate masquerade in which we may be bolder, freer, and less inhibited than in person, even though we are not anonymous. The act of communicating over distance creates a mask of sorts—a semi-anonymity.<sup>23</sup> Within the safety of semi-anonymity, social norms are distorted and barriers are torn down. Harriete Wilson, a “notorious Regency demirep,” wrote,

“I love a masquerade, because a female can never enjoy the same liberty anywhere else. It is delightful to me to be able to wander about in crowd, making my observations, and conversing with whomsoever I please without being liable

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<sup>23</sup> Brad Paisley’s song “So Much Cooler Online” highlights this phenomenon. In the song, Paisley describes a man who has a dead-end job and lives in his mother’s basement but creates an online persona that is irresistible to attractive women.

to be stared at or remarked upon, and to speak to whom I please, and run away from them the moment I have discovered their stupidity” (qtd. in Michaelson 15). Social media is a type of masquerade; it is the carnivalesque in action. We choose a role that affects our personal lives in substantive ways. Earl R. Wasserman argues that, in this orientation, “the ideal actor must avoid being deeply affected by the events of his private life, lest he develop a distinctive personality and be unable therefore to assume wholeheartedly all personalities at will” (qtd. in Michaelson 104). Diderot, on the other hand, claimed that “the actor’s own feelings are irrelevant. The point is to move the audience, which the actor does through a conscious manipulation of the theatrical languages of speech and gesture” (qtd. in Michaelson 104). Hugh Burns echoes Diderot’s sentiment when he argues that “interconnected players starring on many virtual stages will produce, direct, write, and perform the new world’s literacy scripts” (4). All of these commentaries on acting apply to social media. In digital spaces, we cannot be too affected by our own personal turmoil, lest we overstep the bounds of that community’s acceptable discourse. So we shelve our true private lives and reveal the edited private lives that we know will be deemed acceptable by that discourse community. Here is where Diderot’s view rings true: the point is to move our audience through language and (digital) gesture. For the actor, the goal is applause. For the Facebook status update, the goal is a high number of “likes” and numerous affirmative and pleasantly discursive comments.

#### **CHAPTER FOUR: CHARACTERISTICS OF NETWORKING LITERACY**

##### **Representational Tensions, Defamiliarization, and Resignification**

Within the linguistic environments created by networking literacies, there is both a negative “language of resentments” and a positive “language of interests” (Whyman 127). This positive and negative language creates a self-perpetuating dialectic. Both the language of resentments and the language of interests are based on comparison to people perceived to be both higher and lower, friends and enemies. Naturally the language of interests is reserved for friends and the language of resentment is reserved for enemies or “frenemies,” as the Urban Dictionary might say. Through use of both types of language, individuals carve out a place for themselves in society. Within a more fixed and rigid society, this complex negotiation was probably more fierce and had more wide-ranging implications. On the other hand, social mobility was not nearly as possible then as it is today. But then again, so much social mobility is possible today that there seems to be a “place for everyone” in society, which means that there is less jockeying for position. In any case, engaging in this dialectic was both self-reassuring and anxiety relieving for letter writers, according to Susan Whyman (127), and it serves some of the same purposes within the digital dialectic.

Inherent in the dialectic of networking literacy is the tension that develops between signs and signifiers, or between representation and reality. Representational tensions<sup>24</sup> and defamiliarization<sup>25</sup> are prevalent in letter writing and even more evident in social media. We exoticize ourselves through the fictionalization of our lives, and this defamiliarized version of ourselves we present to the world versus how society chooses to view us creates a tension that can be either alleviated or intensified through dialogue.

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<sup>24</sup> Flint defines representational tensions as “the essential conflict between self-definition and social coercion” (28).

<sup>25</sup> Defamiliarization refers to making the self exotic, and precedes familiarization, in which “a culture...seeks to render habitual—as much through demography as through literature—the behavioral tactics it has itself made disruptive and alien” (11).



The outcome of the process of defamiliarization, however, is a manifestation of new norms for the individual and for society. Christopher Flint writes that “Traditional notions of the family are estranged, reconstituted as novel concepts, and then finally presented as natural social norms” (4). The process of defamiliarization and establishment of new norms happens much more rapidly and fluidly in a digital environment. First, we form and perform our identities in the “real world”; for example, we go skydiving and then post it as our status on Facebook. Next, we go through a process of estrangement as we clip and edit and shape and otherwise fictionalize our selves into a form suitable for our online audience. When we are posting about skydiving, we probably do not mention being paralyzed by extreme fear, or losing a little control of our bladder as our instructor pushes us out of the plane, or the harsh windburn on our faces. In our narrative, we are fearless adventurers out for some serious *carpe diem*. The version of us that appears in digital spaces goes through a process of refamiliarization as it helps shape the norm for us as individuals and for society as a whole. We have created a new norm for ourselves that is brave, fun, and exciting. Representational tensions may exist as others who, in the past, have watched us shakily climbing a ladder, doubt that we really did leap from the plane’s door without a backward glance. Eventually, however, the hard evidence of exciting photos, YouTube videos, and our own narrative compels them to accept the new norm for us individually. What we may not realize is that through a process that occurs in small pieces simultaneously and globally, collectively constructed social norms are also reshaped. If many such skydiving narratives are presented on Facebook, the new norm for skydiving is that it is a relaxing, enjoyable, not-at-all-terrifying activity in which we might engage. We derive our

understanding of social norms from our communities of practice, whether through in-person or written dialogue. We are rewarded for accurately following social cues, and we are corrected when we stray from them. Online, the feedback occurs only slightly slower than in spoken speech, and the feedback comes from a much wider audience. The irony is that we are being shaped by the very thing we have helped create.

Both representational tensions and defamiliarization are related to the concept of image. In 17<sup>th</sup> century English, portrait painting was one means by which families created image. It was a “symbolic act, originally aimed at improving their own social image” (Flint 1). People at that time had a “need to make the family appear both normal and mythical, bourgeois and aristocratic, private and public” (Flint 1). When letter writing emerged among the middle and lower classes in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it provided a different form for the “symbolic act” in which people could construct their social image, but the desired image was much the same as it was for the portraits. Today, the image people wish to present through social media is not so different from the 18<sup>th</sup> century version. We desire to appear normal, but we also want to be extraordinary; mythical proportions are perfectly acceptable. We want to fit in with modern aristocracy, so we show ourselves sporting designer clothes, bags, and shoes, but we do not want to be accused of thinking we are better than everyone else. We claim to value privacy, but we immediately make the most personal events of our lives extremely public and visible. The resultant image is often incoherent, as it is not always possible to reconcile multiple narratives in the confines of the letter or status update.

### **The Subversiveness of Networking Literacy’s Discursivity**

Another important feature of all networking literacies is their discursive nature. Discursivity contributes to networking literacies' subversive nature, because narratives that rely on "linear determinacy" are called "plots of power" according to Patricia Spacks. They stand in contrast to "plots of affiliation, which rely on a disordering of such linear thinking" (qtd. in Flint 46). When a form is groundbreaking, it tends to challenge traditional ideas eventually, even if that is not the purpose for which it is initially formed. If the form challenges conventions, the content will typically follow suit. Narratives and genealogies are both considered plots of affiliation, "acquiring coherence by making the relations between characters or kin meaningful and by plotting a beginning and end that accentuate the continuing temporal...dimension of human experience (what Said calls 'dynastic ideology' and what Locke calls 'personal identity')" (Flint 20). I initially thought that social media did not develop primarily through plot; that at one end of the spectrum were the completely linear, fixed, and rigid "plots of power," that social media's total discursivity was at the other end, and that epistolary literacy's "plots of affiliation" existed somewhere in the middle, perhaps closer to discursivity. I would have argued that social media had characters, setting, and dialogue but was missing the element of plot. Facebook, for example, had a news feed that was chronological, but lacking the clear beginning, middle, and end necessitated by narrative. However, in Summer of 2012, Facebook launched a new user interface called "Timeline," and on February 7, 2012, the Timeline interface became mandatory for all users. Promotional material for Facebook Timeline says, "Share and highlight your most memorable posts, photos, and life events on your timeline. There is where you can tell your story from beginning to middle to now" ("The Timeline Profile"). Through this and

other features, we can clearly see that social media is acknowledging and enhancing its strongly story-telling component and structuring itself like the narrative it is. Social media is clearly demarcating itself as a “plot of affiliation” rather than a “plot of power.”

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

Epistolary literacy was not purely an 18<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon. Digital literacy is not a purely modern phenomenon. Both are merely chapters in the larger story of networking literacy. The technological forms of the future are unfathomable. What ordinary person in the 1950s—only one generation ago—could have anticipated the iPad or blog? The tools of networking will change faster than most people can keep up with, but the effects of networking literacy upon the individual and upon society will remain the same.

My research task has been to contemplate the patterns that emerge when we view various networking literacies as a whole. The examination of why writing occurs in epistolary and digital environments, how writing is used, and what its impact is on society yields an over-arching pattern that I have termed “networking literacy.” Further research needs to conduct closer examinations of case studies (both 18<sup>th</sup> century letters and 21<sup>st</sup> century blogs and status updates) and draw conclusions from specific primary sources rather than looking at the larger patterns. This will enhance and extend the research I have already conducted.

What 18<sup>th</sup> century letter writers experienced and what bloggers, tweeters, and Facebook users experience today is freedom of articulation. Networking literacies give people a voice. Throughout history, whenever physical (roads, mail system) or virtual (Internet) networks have suddenly blossomed, they have enabled and empowered writers

who are typically marginalized to express themselves and join in a much wider conversation from which they had been previously excluded. When systems that used to be inefficient and expensive suddenly become fast and affordable, suddenly people at all levels of society are motivated to acquire additional literacy skills that enable them to participate in networking.

It has been challenging to not be overly influenced by my own personal experiences during this research into networking literacies. My life has been shaped by my use of Facebook, Twitter, and my Wordpress blog, as I connect with childhood friends, high school friends, college friends, church friends, work friends, relatives, current students, former students, and sometimes complete strangers. Social media has restructured my own patterns of thinking and ways of viewing the world. It has contributed to my connections with people while it has simultaneously made me more comfortable with distance. I have introduced a more participatory culture (including a social network that I use for academic purposes) into my high school classrooms as a result of what I have learned about networking literacy. My actions have drawn both praise from students and parents who are social networking advocates and criticism from colleagues and parents who believe that social media is having a detrimental effect on society. My position as a social media user makes me a subject—a product of the system I am attempting to analyze. It is all too easy to get caught up in the details of the ways in which people use social media on a day-to-day basis and fail to see the “big picture” ways it is restructuring our increasingly global world.

Positive changes are being wrought in our world through the networking literacy that people practice through social media. Social networking sites have the power to

galvanize millions of people to take social action, as we recently witnessed when SOPA and PIPA went before Congress. People spread the word to each other about these bills through links and status updates that employed sound logos, ardent pathos, and dispassionate ethos by turns. The response was so overwhelming that on December 12, 2011, SOPA was tabled, and on January 20, 2012, voting on PIPA was indefinitely postponed. While in some ways social networking sites have created another space for power and privilege, their overall effect has been to disseminate power through making knowledge even more accessible. For example, 12-year-old girl from Texas probably would not have gone looking for articles about SOPA and PIPA, but she was more than willing to read her friends' impassioned status updates and click on the links they posted to articles about the bills. Social media acts as a center for cultural currency by distributing information that can "buy" us power in our communities of practice.

As junior high, high school, and college students increasingly participate in social media, educational institutions have the opportunity to transform instructional practices in response to networking literacy. Students compose frequently and prolifically for social networking sites—with a strong sense of their rhetorical situation and a high volume of feedback. New developments in technology have made it imperative that we reframe our students' rhetorical stance. Networking literacy has contributed to an ever-widening gap between students' academic and personal writing. Kathleen Blake Yancey addresses this issue in her article "Writing by Any Other Name." She opens her argument with a discussion of the proliferation of writing students are doing outside of the classroom setting; they are writing as never before. However, they fail to see a connection between the formal writing they do in school and the informal writing they do

outside of school. As Yancey states in her article “Composition in a New Key,” “Don’t you wish that the energy and motivation that students bring to some of these other genres they would bring to our writing assignments?” (298). Understanding the impact that networking literacies have made upon students’ writing is just one first step in the road toward bridging the gap between digital literacy and academic literacy.

What networking literacies have created overall is a new rhetorical situation. This requires a reconceptualization of the place of the classical canon and the classical appeals in modern rhetoric. As Hugh Burns states,

“The new ethos described here will spring from activity, the community activity of private conversations. The new pathos examined here will incorporate the sound and fury of public chat and idle talk. The new logos illustrated here will derive facts and artifacts from writers talking all virtual places” (2).

In the present and in the future, ethos will be established by participation in dialogue rather than by title or wealth, pathos will be ever more personal, and logos will come from sources we never would have deemed reliable in ages past. Burns writes that “a new set of dynamic literacies will be shaped by practice” and that “electronic environments allow every writer who wishes to be published to publish—whether an audience wishes to read it or not, whether or not the message is worth publishing” (4).

Networking literacies, past and present, shape the way we perceive ourselves, each other, and the world around us.

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