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SCIENCE DIRECT®

Computers and Composition 22 (2005) 177–190

Computers and Composition

The future of rational-critical debate in online public spheres

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of blogs, wikis, and online discussion boards in enabling rational-critical debate. I will use the work of Jürgen Habermas to explain why wikis, blogs, and online bulletin boards are all potentially valuable tools for the creation and maintenance of a critical public sphere. Habermas' story ends on a sad note; the public writing environments he argues were so essential to the formation of a critical public sphere failed as commercialism and mass media diminished the role of the community and private persons. Unfortunately, the Internet will likely suffer a similar fate if we do not take action to preserve its inherently democratic and decentralized architecture. Here, I describe the integral role that blogs, wikis, and discussion boards play in fostering public discussion and ways they can be incorporated into college composition courses.
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Keywords: Habermas; Wikis; Blogs; Forums; Public spheres

1. Introduction

The Internet is without doubt one of the most influential developments in the history of communication, at least as important as the invention of radio and television, if not more so. The consequences the Internet has for democracy, especially American democracy, are only now being given serious attention by scholars, most notably Andrew Feenberg and Cynthia L. Selfe. This attention is arriving at a most critical moment in the development of online writing technology. The Internet is losing its democraticizing features and is becoming everyday more like our newspapers and television, controlled from above by powerful multinational corporations, who demand passivity from an audience of total consumers. Feenberg (2002) has remarked that "the meaning of modernity is at stake in the struggle," and has argued that the Internet can serve either to "reflect in every institution the logic of modern production" or enable "the flexible testing of possibilities and the development of the new—not hierarchical and standardization but variety and growth of the capacities required to live in a more complex world" (p. 114). Of course, the outcome of this struggle is not determined by technology itself, but rather by the social conditions that lead to the production and adoption of technologies.

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doi:10.1016/j.compcom.2005.02.002

Cynthia L. Selfe (1999) wrote that we must learn to pay attention to these developments: "The price we pay for ignoring this situation is the clear and shameful recognition that we have failed students, failed as humanists, and failed to establish an ethical foundation for the future educational efforts in this country" (p. 5). My purpose here is to pay attention to three online technologies that, if strategically embraced by teachers of writing, have the potential to reinforce the principles inherent in a true democracy and thwart the corporate interest.

In its present incarnation, the Internet enables users to produce and distribute content almost as easily as they receive it. This fact clearly distinguishes the Internet from technologies like radio and television, which are far more restrictive in terms of who may create and broadcast information. Though theoretically anyone can build a hobby radio station or even produce films for broadcast on public television, the reality is that hardly anyone possesses the practical means necessary to do so. The dissemination of radio and television content, therefore, is controlled entirely by powerful multinational corporations. The Internet, in contrast, allows any computer literate person to send email or create textual and graphical World Wide Web pages. However, although early web pages were relatively simple in their design, modern web pages are becoming ever more complex, utilizing not only graphics and sounds but also more programming code. In short, the more complex and expensive the process of creating a professional web site becomes, the fewer people will be able to do so. The workers are being gradually, yet effectively, separated from the means of intellectual production.

This article explores three highly relevant online writing environments that stand opposed to this separation: blogs, discussion boards, and wikis. These powerful tools offer a way for people to easily and cheaply publish their writings online. These technologies contain a number of built-in features, like search bars and taxonomies, that make them far more sophisticated and useful than static Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) pages. Furthermore, they are all available in "open source" versions that are free to download, install, and edit. Blogs are most handily described as online journals or diaries, though many bloggers use their blogs as a place to map research projects. Bloggers identify themselves either by name or a pseudonym and maintain a strict hierarchy between writers and readers. Discussion boards, or online bulletin boards, are much like LISTSERVs or the old bulletin-board systems (BBS) that were prevalent before the rise of the Internet. These boards allow members to post and respond to threads. Wikis differ from blogs and discussion boards in that they offer a radical approach to authorship. Simply put, wikis are web sites that anyone can edit; communities rather than individual authors author them. Of these three online writing environments, wikis seem to offer the most to writers interested in collaboration and consensus-building.

If wikis, blogs, and discussion boards offer writers a cheap and easy way to create content for the Internet, other more popular proprietary "solutions" threaten to re-establish the old hierarchy. Programs like Macromedia's *Director MX 2004*, used to create the popular and attractive graphical presentations seen in most animated Internet advertisements, cost over $1000 and require substantial training. Meanwhile, Microsoft is dedicated to integrating ever more aggressive "Digital Rights Management" code into its operating system. These features will make it harder for Internet users to freely share copyrighted or protected works and reduce the effectiveness of the Internet as a platform for rational-critical debate. Already, the Internet's "means of production," that is, the ability to create and manage web sites, is becoming ever more separated from the average user as powerful corporations find more ways to distinguish

their web sites with expensive, high-end, proprietary technology like Macromedia FLASH. Feenberg (2002) has written, “What human beings are and will become is decided in the shape of our tools no less than in the action of statesmen and political movements [. . .]. The exclusion of this vast majority from participation in this decision is profoundly undemocratic” (p. 3). As teachers of writing and citizens of a democracy, we must ensure that the “shape of our tools” makes them useful for rational-critical debate.

My purpose is to discuss the role of wikis, blogs, and discussion boards in enabling rational-critical debate. I am also excited by the implications wikis have for authorship and intellectual property. However, my goal here is not to rank wikis, blogs, and discussion boards, but rather to show how these low-tech solutions are all necessary for the formation of capable participants in a rational-critical debate. I will use the work of Jürgen Habermas to explain why wikis, blogs, and online bulletin boards are all potentially valuable tools for the creation and maintenance of a critical public sphere. In my view, the developments in public writing environments discussed by Habermas in the eighteenth century have strong and meaningful parallels to what we encounter today online. Habermas’ story ends on a sad note; the public writing environments that he argued were so essential to the formation of a critical public sphere failed as commercialism and mass media diminished the role of the community and private persons. It is not hard to see that the same diminishment is happening in today’s online communities, yet it is not too late to start paying attention. We can indeed learn from the mistakes of the past—specifically, by considering the rise and fall of the newspaper as a platform for rational-critical debate.

2. Critical public spheres, publicity, and rational-critical debate

The term “public sphere,” as it appears in the context of this article, is taken from Jürgen Habermas’ (1998) work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. In this work, Habermas described how the public sphere evolved into and devolved from a legitimate sphere of rational-critical debate and action among private persons to a sphere of nonpublic opinion generated mostly by the mass media. According to Habermas (1998), the best example of an effective public sphere is the bourgeois public sphere of the late eighteenth century. Only, at this time in history was the “private sphere emancipated from the directives of public authority to such an extent that the political public sphere could attain its full development” (p. 79). The rational-critical debate arising from this public sphere “was supposed to transform *voluntas* into a *ratio* that in the public competition of private arguments came into being as the consensus about what was practically necessary in the interest of all” (p. 83). Three types of rights are preconditions for the formation of this sphere. The first is the ability to engage in discussions critical of the ruling institutions. These rights include freedom of press and assembly, freedom of petition, the right to vote, and so on. The second set of rights involves the “individual’s status as a free human being, grounded in the intimate sphere of the patriarchal conjugal family” (p. 83). The patriarchal conjugal family is critical because it provides a feeling of independence, ideas of love and freedom, and a desire to cultivate oneself; in short, a real private sphere (p. 48). Without a proper private sphere, people are incapable of genuine human relations (p. 48). Finally, there are the rights regarding private property, such as its protection (p. 83). All of

these rights make possible the "spheres of the public realm and of the private; the institutions and instruments of the public sphere, and the foundation of private autonomy" (p. 83). The bourgeois public sphere collapsed when it became integrated into private life; as the spheres of public and private merged together, it became increasingly difficult for individuals to acquire the perspective necessary for engaging in rational-critical debate.

What will prove especially helpful to a discussion of online writing environments is Habermas' understanding of the role of publicity in rational-critical debate. According to Habermas, the bourgeois learned the art of rational-critical debate by association with the elegant, who mingled with bourgeois, artists, and intellectuals in the salons (French), coffee houses (British), and table societies (German). In each of these environments, the first subject of rational-critical debate was literature. Habermas finds three criteria shared by all of these critical environments. Much like our online discussion boards, "They preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether" (p. 36). This was obviously an important step in the establishment of general reason as a guiding principle for law. Habermas pointed out that this was, in practice, more of a self-proclaimed ideal than a fact, yet even the idea of universal equality was "at least consequential" (p. 36). Secondly, the discussion taking place in these environments was responsible for debating previously unquestioned issues (p. 36). The private persons had to determine their own meaning for cultural commodities; they enjoyed talking and debating about novels, for instance. Thirdly, "[t]he same process that converted culture into a commodity established the public as in principle inclusive" (p. 37). In principle, anyone with reason and the willingness to learn was "able to participate" in these societies (p. 37). Of course, in practice there were many people altogether excluded, yet the idea of universal access and equality was highly influential in bourgeois thinking of this time. The public's use of its reason was only an influential concept as long as that reason was generally considered free from prejudice; the truths arrived at through reason were true for all.

The British coffee houses, which allowed only men and were often visited by powerful and influential nobility, were the first place rational-critical debate was extended to economic and political disputes. Often enough, these debates had real consequences; people were ready to not only deliberate but act. The French salons and German table societies were slow to catch up to the political efficacy of the British coffee house mostly because of the inferior publicity available in those countries. Most political deliberations took place in the "secret chanceries of the prince," and Napoleon instituted strict censorship (p. 35). Britain had the advantage of a remarkably free Press, which provided the information necessary for a critical public sphere to become politically functional. The unprecedented freedom allowed certain British journals to play an integral role in the development of the sphere; people were allowed to criticize the government and bring its actions to the eye of the public for criticism. Today we see this powerful freedom exacting an influence on the public via popular political bloggers like Lawrence Lessig, a Stanford constitutional law professor who has used his blog (<http://www.lessig.org/blog/>) to attract a large and devoted readership.

The Press is a fundamentally important entity for Habermas, and he has spent a great deal of time linking the rise of the newspaper to the rise of the critical public sphere. According to Habermas, the newspaper trade started off as a "small handicraft business" (p. 181). At this early incarnation, the newspaper was apolitical; it was just a collection of "pure news," and the publisher saw it as a purely a matter of business. This changed when newspapers took on

"ideologies and viewpoints;" newspapers began publishing editorials, and newspapers became "carriers and leaders of public opinion, and instruments in the arsenal of party politics" (p. 182). Journals arose at this point that placed politics and critical discussion in the foreground; most of these, like academic journals today, lost money, but their editors had motivations other than profit—the influence these journals exerted on public opinion was considered valuable enough in itself. Habermas wrote that these politically-motivated editors were only initially reluctant to give up their "entrepreneurial functions" to publishers (p. 183). At first, the steady commercialization of newspapers did not totally eradicate the political strain. Only after the "establishment of the bourgeois constitutional state and the legalization of a political public sphere" did the press quit taking ideological sides and become purely driven by the profit motive (p. 184). Now, dominated by advertisements and motivated purely by profit, the newspapers have become little more than a means to allow privileged private interests to penetrate the public sphere (p. 185). Julie Frechette (2002) wrote:

> Over the course of the last twenty years, large multi–billion dollar global conglomerates have emerged as powerful monopolies controlling both the production and the distribution of media. With fewer independently owned and operated media companies, there lacks a diversity in the types of media produced and disseminated to the public. (p. 27)

According to Feenberg (2002), "Private control of media conglomerates, the machinery of opinion, is incompatible with serious public debate" (p. 27). After private interests seized control, the editors of newspapers functioned purely as employees and the newspaper failed as a vehicle for rational-critical debate.

Publicity's function in modern society plays the opposite role it played during the reign of the bourgeois public sphere. Indeed, instead of promoting or enabling rational-critical debate in a public sphere, modern mass media creates a "sham public interest" reminiscent of the "personal prestige and supernatural authority once bestowed by the kind of publicity involved in representation" (p. 195). This type of publicity has resulted in the creation of a "mass" rather than a "public." Habermas quoted C.W. Mills' definitions of these terms. Because these definitions are useful in a discussion of wikis and other online writing spaces, they are worth quoting here:

> *Public:* (1) Virtually as many people express opinions as receive them. (2) Public communications are so organized that there is a chance immediately and effectively to answer back any opinion expressed in public. Opinion formed by such discussion (3) readily finds an outlet in effective action, even against—if necessary—the prevailing system of authority. And (4) authoritative institutions do not penetrate the public, which is thus more or less autonomous in its operation. (p. 249)
>
> *Mass:* (1) far fewer people express opinions than receive them; for the community of publics becomes an abstract collection of individuals who receive impressions from the mass media. (2) The communications that prevail are so organized that it is difficult or impossible for the individual to answer back immediately or with any effect. (3) The realization of opinion in action is controlled by authorities who organize and control the channels of such action. (4) The mass has no autonomy from institutions; on the contrary, agents of authorized institutions penetrate this mass, reducing any autonomy it may have in the formation of opinion by discussion. (p. 249)

Habermas' understanding of the public sphere, with its reliance upon rational-critical debate, publicity, and private autonomy, is quite useful in any discussion of wikis, blogs, and online bulletin boards.

3. Wikis, blogs, and online bulletin boards

These three online writing spaces share several features. For one, all were designed with simplicity in mind; they do not require sophisticated software or knowledge of software coding. Conceivably, anyone who can use a basic word processor should have no difficulty with these technologies. They are primarily text-based, though all may incorporate graphics, animation, and sounds. Secondly, these online writing environments encourage users to engage in public discussion; users are often invited to contribute content as well as access the information contributed by other users. They encourage the formation of a C.W. Mills' public rather than a mass. A final key similarity is that visitors to these writing spaces are most often treated as equals and are generally open to all.

Online bulletin boards, also known as discussion boards or Internet forums, are perhaps the easiest of these environments to describe to someone who is unfamiliar with online writing environments. One such freely accessible online bulletin board is located at (<http://www.mattbarton.net/phpBB2>). This online bulletin board serves a primarily pedagogical function, though the general public is welcome to visit and contribute to the site. Students are required to either invent topics for discussion or contribute to an existing topic in an optimistic effort to spur their rational-critical debating abilities. Several prominent public online forums cater to writers and readers interested in politics or philosophy; the *Internet Infidels* discussion board, with over 12,493 registered members, serves as a good example. The bulletin board software automatically organizes and archives the topics and replies; users simply find a topic of interest, read the posts under it, and enter a response. Often, these discussions will spawn massive threads of hundreds of messages. Online bulletin boards enable groups of writers to quickly form a discourse community and enter rational-critical debate. Though some boards allow users to participate as an anonymous "guest," most boards require a login so that the board's moderators and other members can distinguish who said what. In ways that will be discussed later, online bulletin boards are analogous to the salons, coffee shops, and table societies discussed by Habermas.

Blogs, also known as weblogs, are a relatively recent innovation now enjoying immense popularity. An example of a blog is located at (<http://www.cyberdash.com/>). This blog serves primarily as a means for its author to archive his scholarly research. Blogs work much like online bulletin boards, with a few key differences. The first is that the relationship between authors and readers is more pronounced; their status is unequal. Many blogs are written by a single author who does not allow visitors to make posts. However, users are almost always invited to "add comments" to an existing post. The comment feature is typically the only way visitors are allowed to interact with the content. These comments will not appear until visitors click on a special link; they are never as prominently displayed as the author's blogs. Some blogs are much more community-oriented than the author's; *Kairosnews*, a good example of a highly active community blog, is located at (<http://www.kairosnews.org/>). This blog has

several authors who frequently respond to each other's work. Probably the most typical use for a blog is an online personal diary, which the author may or may not choose to keep anonymous. What is so striking about personal blogs is their similarity to the eighteenth century bourgeois diaries and letters described by Habermas: "Through letter writing the individual unfolded himself in his subjectivity" (p. 48). This subjectivity, "as the innermost core of the private, was always already oriented to an audience" (p. 49). Obviously, blogs are likewise oriented.

Unlike blogs and online bulletin boards, wikis do not distinguish between authors and readers, but emphasize only the text itself. Visitors are invited not only to make new pages on the wiki, but also to edit or delete any material presently there. Wikis have profound implications for the future of the critical public sphere and rational-critical debate. Perhaps the best way to begin a discussion of these implications is with a definition of the term wiki:

> A wiki is a freely expandable collection of interlinked Web "pages", a *hypertext system* for storing and modifying information—a *database*, where each page is easily editable by any user with a forms-capable Web browser client. (Bo Leuf & Ward Cunningham, 2001, p. 14)

This definition, co-written by Ward Cunningham, creator of the first wiki, contains some technical jargon. Another definition, which is not as accurate yet probably easier for a non-computer expert to comprehend, is that wikis are web pages that allow visitors to edit them. Unlike blogs and online bulletin boards, which only allow visitors to add content, wikis allow visitors to change whatever appears on the site; they can even delete text.

An obvious problem with this setup would be that a casual user could drop by at any moment and destroy or vandalize a wiki. There are, however, obstacles for potential miscreants. For one, as Leuf and Cunningham (2001) pointed out in their definition of wiki, each version of a wiki page is stored in a database. Thus, when someone "deletes" a wiki page, she or he is technically only adding a blank cell to a database. By default, a wiki displays the latest version of each page; however, with a few clicks someone can access the older versions and, if necessary, replace or roll-back the content of a new version with an older one. Leuf and Cunningham (2001) have maintained, "experience shows that in fact little damage is done to wiki content even in the absence of security mechanisms" (p. 17); the wiki's openness may itself "make it less of a tempting target" (p. 333). Whereas, commercial web sites touting invulnerable security measures are the choicest targets for seasoned hackers, wikis pose no challenge and are thus left unharmed. The most often cited example of a wiki is *Wikipedia* (Wikimedia Foundation, 2001), which, as the name implies, is a community-authored online encyclopedia. This wiki, which at the time of this writing featured 180,810 articles in English, is freely available at (<http://www.en2.wikipedia.org/>).

Not all wikis allow casual visitors to edit them. These wikis require users to register and use a login and password before making changes to wiki content. The wiki stores a user's identity along with the user's changes each time a new version is saved. A wiki of this type is located at (<http://www.mattbarton.net/>). This wiki is a pedagogical tool for a college composition course. Student writers use the tool to collaborate on various writing projects, but typically claim personal authorship of the wiki pages they create and can even protect documents from casual editing. However, these uses of wikis are, for many reasons, resisting the very features of wikis that make them exciting and relevant for rational-critical debate. For the purposes of this discussion, the term wiki will refer to those that anonymous

users can freely edit and which discourage a feeling of authorship. *RhetTech* wiki, located at (<http://www.writingwiki.org/default.aspx/RhetTech.HomePage>), is a good example of such a wiki.

4. Online public spheres

Of all online writing environments, blogs seem the most personal. The typical blog reads something like this one from a self-described “London Call Girl”:

> Last night I was walking down the fag end of Fulham High Street looking for a cab. There is a book store on the corner—not the horrible kind assaulting you with endless stacks of remaindered Michael Moore and lattechinos to go, but the wonderful quirky kind. The sort of shop where the proprietor – who can remember your tastes, previous purchases, and make appropriate recommendations even if you’ve not been in years – appears to live on site, and either owns a collection of identical outfits or never changes his clothes. The proprietor of such a shop is always a man, always. (Belle de Jour, 2003 online)

Such musings, though ostensibly private, are always oriented towards a reading public. Habermas has argued that the seventeenth century bourgeois diaries and first-person narratives were “experiments with subjectivity discovered in the close relationships of the conjugal family” (p. 49). Perhaps the blogosphere offers writers an intimate atmosphere similar to that of the bourgeois patriarchal conjugal family. At the least, bloggers seem comfortable sharing personal information to the general public; indeed, many people have lost their jobs over sensitive information (complaints about bosses or co-workers) posted in their blogs. The following blog by Rebecca Blood, author of *The Weblog Handbook*, suggests that blogging can indeed help writers develop subjectivity:

> Shortly after I began producing Rebecca’s Pocket I noticed two side effects I had not expected. First, I discovered my own interests. I thought I knew what I was interested in, but after linking stories for a few months I could see that I was much more interested in science, archaeology, and issues of injustice than I had realized. More importantly, I began to value more highly my own point of view. In composing my link text every day I carefully considered my own opinions and ideas, and I began to feel that my perspective was unique and important.
>
> This profound experience may be most purely realized in the blog-style weblog. Lacking a focus on the outside world, the blogger is compelled to share his world with whomever is reading. He may engage other bloggers in conversation about the interests they share. He may reflect on a book he is reading, or the behavior of someone on the bus. He might describe a flower that he saw growing between the cracks of a sidewalk on his way to work. Or he may simply jot notes about his life: what work is like, what he had for dinner, what he thought of a recent movie. These fragments, pieced together over months, can provide an unexpectedly intimate view of what it is to be a particular individual in a particular place at a particular time. (2000, online)

These comments strongly suggest that one of the primary functions of personal blogging is the development of subjectivity; to use Habermas’ terminology, the blogosphere provides “an interiority” where bloggers “attain clarity” about themselves (p. 51). Teaching and exposing

students to blogging may be an excellent way of helping them acquire the subjectivity necessary for engagement in rational-critical debate.

If blogs may be the equivalent of the diaries and letters that played such a critical role in the development of the old bourgeois public sphere, then perhaps online bulletin boards are the cyber equivalent of the eighteenth century salons, table societies, and coffee shops that first saw the application of rational-critical debate to political and economical issues. Like the coffee shops described by Habermas, online bulletin boards typically disregard the status of their users. Most of the time the actual name of a contributor is unknown; "screen names," or pseudonyms, are far more common. As any regular user of an online bulletin board is well aware, popularity and influence is determined by the quality of a member's arguments far more than any other factor; indeed, anyone claiming to have professional credentials or fame is likely to invite skepticism because of the ease with which someone on the Internet can assume a false identity. Childish, irrelevant, or undeveloped arguments are either ignored or flamed by the rest of the board. Most bulletin boards keep track of how long someone has been a member and how many posts she or he has made to the forum; regular participation helps build ethos and ensure that posts are read and respected.

Habermas' second institutional criteria, that the discussion "presuppose the problematicization of areas" hitherto unquestioned, may easily be applied to online bulletin boards. Indeed, the sign of a good discussion board is the originality and depth of the topics it discusses. To give but one example from the author's own experience: Some of the most frequently read threads on the *Armchair Arcade*, an online bulletin board dedicated to classic gaming, concern political topics like gay characters in videogames. This controversial topic received replies from a wide segment of the board's population, attracting posts from professional game magazine authors, game designers, radio talk show hosts, and self-proclaimed gay videogamers. Other online bulletin boards are dedicated to exploring topics like software hacking, anarchy, marijuana cultivation, and political scandals. The majority of these boards guarantee the privacy of its members, though pressure from the State in the wake of September 11th will probably collapse this private sphere. Here we see an example of how the intrusion of the public into the private sphere can inhibit rational-critical debate.

Habermas' third institutional criteria, that everyone be able to participate, also holds for most online bulletin boards. Although these sites typically require a registration process, once a potential user's email address is verified, the user is free to read and respond to topics. Furthermore, although some online discussion boards are focused on a specific topic and may be limited to special members only, most boards are open to all; only the board administrators and moderators can dictate what topics cannot be discussed or ban members. Typically, an online discussion board will have at least one "miscellaneous" or "off-topic" area where members can raise topics not suited to the theme of the board. Amusingly, these "all-purpose" or "general" areas frequently turn out to be more active than any other on the forum, and moderators are compelled to create further subdivisions to keep the board's organization coherent. What is more to Habermas' point, though, is that although the membership of these online discussion boards is actually quite limited (members must first of all have regular access to a networked computer, the technical and grammatical knowledge required to register and make posts, and the awareness, first of all, that such boards exist at all), members often assume that their conclusions or discussions are relevant to the public. At all times, the members of these forums

are "conscious of being part of a larger public" (Habermas, p. 37). After all, these boards do exist online and can be found and visited by anyone with access to the Internet. What happens routinely on boards like *Armchair Arcade* is that a narrow topic like the Beginner's All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code (BASIC) programming cartridge for the Atari 2600 will grow into a general discussion about old and new technology, hobby programming of videogames, open source software, and, eventually, capitalism itself. Thus, what would at first concern only a small sector of the public may expand into a generic topic relevant to a greater majority of the population.

Of the online writing elements discussed in this article, wikis are without question the least well known. The reason for this could be that their nature does not lend itself well to commercial exploitation, but the most likely answer is slightly more banal: "Wiki is a pain to use and it's ugly" (Leuf & Cunningham, 2001, p. 330). What Leuf and Cunningham are referring to is the edit screen of the basic, no-frills wiki software. These wikis do not feature WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) editors; users attempting to edit a page are greeted with an editing box full of text and wiki code. Though the wiki code is simple enough to use in a few minutes and master in less than an hour, its presence is, quite possibly, enough to turn away a casual, disinterested audience. The "pain" increases with large wiki documents, which may contain numerous formatting codes. Clearly, this type of wiki is not nearly as publicly accessible as blogs or online bulletin boards, which do most of the formatting automatically; people can use either of these writing environments without ever learning any code (though it is often helpful to know at least basic HTML or bbcode).

Some wikis, however, especially new ones like *Sushiwiki* site, integrate a WYSIWYG editor whose menu options are instantly recognizable to anyone familiar with commercial word processors. Several high-tech wikis use the popular open-source program HTML AREA, which is able to parse wiki code transparently; visitors to the site can easily manipulate wiki pages without ever learning even basic wiki or HTML code (though the editor allows users to switch to "HTML mode" quite easily). These wikis are easier for the layperson to understand than basic wikis and are likely to become the standard.

Explaining how wikis work is simple enough. Users enter the wiki site just as they would any other web site. If they choose, they can merely read the wiki pages; they may not even realize that are on a wiki site at all. The key differences are the buttons marked "Edit" and "View History" at the bottom of the page. Clicking the "Edit" button takes users to an editing screen, where they can make changes to the page. When they are finished, they click "Save" and the changed version appears. If users click "View History" (sometimes labeled "View Changes" or "Change History"), then they are shown a list of every version of the page stored in the database; from here, they can view earlier editions. Most wikis also allow users to compare editions; the software automatically detects the differences and highlights them.

Metaphors to explain this process are difficult to invent. One metaphor is that of a palimpsest. A palimpsest is "a manuscript on which an earlier text has been effaced and the vellum or parchment reused for another" (Keep, McLaughlin, & Parmar, 2003, online). Palimpsests were common in the early days of writing when writing materials were rare and expensive. Unfortunately, this metaphor is not quite accurate, because though readers can discern the earlier text of a palimpsest only with great difficulty, the earlier versions of a wiki can easily

be displayed. Also, the earlier text of a palimpsest may not be related to the newer text; the subsequent versions of a wiki generally build on existing content.

Perhaps a better metaphor would be the printed texts of state constitutions. When changes are made to these documents, the older versions are retained within them; readers see passages with a line through old versions to indicate deleted material. Often, added content is printed in a different color or carefully labeled (i.e., amendment). Annotations are also quite common; they may explain why a change was made, when it was made, and who made it. However, one could easily acquire a plain copy of the most recent version of a state constitution that did not reveal any of these changes. A wiki works precisely the same way.

Leuf and Cunningham (2001) have argued, “Wiki is inherently democratic” (p. 17). It is no surprise, then, that the best metaphor to describe a wiki’s function is that of a state constitution. Wikis are democratic in that the apparent status of individual users is not observed, but also in a more profound way: Wikis emphasize a progressive, democratic aspect of writing that is mostly ignored by the commercial press, where only the finished product is represented. Like Feenberg’s “city,” the god of wikis is freedom, not efficiency (2002, p. 114). Instead of communicating a text as the product of a long and involved rational-critical debate, the traditional text merely represents the finished product as though it spontaneously generated. The same is true for hypertexts, which, despite their interactive features, come to the reader as finished, fixed texts. Blogs suffer from the same problem; though users are free to add comments, they are not allowed to modify an author’s posts. Online bulletin boards are more open to the public and pay less attention to status, but they work more like conversations; a group of participants could, theoretically, debate about a topic without ever arriving at a draft; that is, the end result of a long and involved discussion on a bulletin board would not be a comprehensive text but rather a long thread of posts that may or may not follow any logical organization. Of course, these threads could be edited and organized into a readable document, but the nature of the online bulletin board seems to resist such practices. Online bulletin boards, like academic conferences, are more useful as an environment for exploring and complicating issues rather than resolving them.

The strength of the wiki, then, is its presentation of a document as a process of rational-critical debate towards a specific goal. Some obvious uses of wikis identified by Leuf and Cunningham are the creation of collaborative FAQs (frequently asked questions), project management, and discussion or review postings (p. 35). Lawrence Lessig is using a wiki to collaboratively revise and update his 1999 book *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*. Many open source projects use wikis to help develop instruction manuals or guides. Any collaborative writing project, such as a co-written book or edited collection, could rely on wikis to organize individual contributions and track changes. A college professor interested in allowing students to collaborate on the class syllabus should expect to find a wiki well suited for the purpose. Perhaps the most exciting use for wikis, however, is for political documents like petitions, resolutions, or manifestos. Using wikis, a community of rational-critical debaters could develop documents that would represent their truly collective interests; any private interests would quickly be deleted by the vigilance of other wiki participants. “Describe change,” a feature of wikis that has not yet been, discussed may prove useful here. As the name implies, this feature allows wiki authors to attempt to justify the changes they make to a document.

The political nature of wikis is particularly visible in certain entries in the *Wikipedia*. For instance, the "Hillary Clinton" *Wikipedia* entry (<http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillary_Clinton>),[1] has gone through hundreds of editions. This is the first entry, dated 1 August 2001, posted by Koyaanis Qatsi:

> (p. b. October 26 1947) Former First Lady (p. wife of former president Bill Clinton), presently serving New York in the United States Senate.
>
> Junior legal member of the Watergate prosecution (p. or investigation ??) team. First First Lady from the Baby Boom generation.

On 7 December 2001, the following paragraph was added to the entry:

> For much of Bill Clinton's career, from 1978 to 2000, Hillary has been pitied as a simpler, finer, less ambitious woman, who has had to stand by her man. In fact, they are well-matched, she has no more scruples than he, and in intelligence, energy and political ambition, she is every bit a match for her husband.

Later that day the entry was changed again:

> For much of Bill Clinton's career, from 1978 to 2000, Hillary has been pitied as a simpler, finer, less ambitious woman, who has had to stand by her man. In fact, they are well-matched, and in intelligence, energy and political ambition, she is every bit a match for her husband.

The author, Paul Drye, described his edit as removing the slander. The paragraph was finally edited out completely on 7 July 2002 by an unidentified author who also added a great deal of information to the entry, none of which is overtly negative.

What can be seen in this progression of editions is, without question, a political struggle. Anyone could edit the latest version of this wiki entry and replace it with the vilest slander imaginable. However, undoubtedly at least a few concerned people have added this page to their "Watchlist," an optional feature that automatically notifies wiki members when specified pages are modified. For instance, when someone replaced the sentence, "She is the first First Lady to hold the Master of Science degree" with "She is the first First Lady to hold the Master of Science degree (p. the second being [Laura Bush])," the line was removed altogether a few days later.

The question here is whether these changes and developments reflective of a critical public sphere. Clearly, this is debate taking place here, even if most of it seems to be buried in the versions in the history of the entries. Habermas has written that the "public sphere (deprived, for the most part, of its original functions) under the patronage of administrations, special-interest associations, and parties was. . . made to contribute in a different fashion to the process of integrating state and society" (p. 197). Of course, this new fashion stifled rational-critical debate and privileged representation over communication. Wikis, independent for the time being from external administration of any sort, may enable the reconstruction of the bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth century, though in a decidedly different form. Perhaps an upcoming generation, finding subjectivity in blogs, developing rational-critical debating skills in online bulletin boards, and building a critical public sphere with the help of wikis will help "remediate culture" and restore true democracy to the public (Bolter, 2001, p. 208).

Perhaps the first question I get when introducing writing teachers to wikis is, “Given the inherently democratic features of wikis, how can you guarantee the authority of a wiki document?” How can a person trust information found in the *Wikipedia*, for example? This question is particularly compelling in light of postmodern discourses. Lester Faigley (1992) wrote:

> Electronic written discussions have made problematic what I felt were my most secure assumptions about teaching. Implications of postmodern theory for the networked classroom do not stop with giving voice to difference, decentering the authority of the teacher, or with demonstrating the social construction of knowledge. We are in what Lyotard calls a “legitimation crisis,” where there is no external authority to which we can appeal nor any way we can establish enduring values. (p. 190)

Certainly, wikis challenge notions of traditional authority and traditional academic legitimating criteria. My usual response to this question is that even *The New York Times* makes grievous mistakes from time to time, and it is troubling to fathom how many reports issuing from corporate-controlled mass media have been colored to protect private interests. In short, ceding the problem of legitimation to corporate interests and so-called official sources does not solve the problem, so one might as well take a chance on ones peers. As Jean-François Lyotard (2002) has pointed out, “One’s competence is never an accomplished fact. It depends on whether or not the statement proposed is considered by ones peers to be worth discussion in a sequence of argumentation and refutation” (p. 24). Because they continuously subject writing to constant scrutiny, wikis can perhaps be more trusted than content from commercial publishers.

5. Conclusion

I have discussed the role that blogs, discussion boards, and wikis play in the development of an online critical public sphere. I would urge compositionists to consider incorporating all three of these technologies into their courses in this order: blogs, online discussion boards, and wikis. Frequent blogging of the self-reflective kind will help students develop subjectivity and explore their thoughts and feelings in a writing space that is public, yet controlled by the student—there is a sense of ownership among bloggers not shared by members on a forum or participants on a wiki. Participating in discussion boards, however, exposes students to the sphere of critical debate and fosters rhetorical awareness. Students eager to prove points raised in discussion boards can be taught to venture beyond first-hand experience and bring research and quality evidence to strengthen their arguments. Finally, wikis provide that space where students strive for consensus and learn to share a common, community voice. I feel it is unlikely that students will succeed at building wikis and also learn to speak with a community voice unless they have first developed a personal voice and sense of identity. As bell hooks (2004) wrote, “Yeah, it’s easy to give up identity, when you got one” (p. 515). Though hooks was here referring to the problems faced by Blacks dealing with the postmodernist critique of identity, her comment does suggest how wikis can seem threatening to inexperienced writers still struggling to develop their voice and authority. Therefore, a truly enabling composition pedagogy will acknowledge the need for students to move slowly, first gaining a voice, then

strengthening that voice in a rhetorical arena, and, finally, fusing that voice to others committed to social action.

Notes

1. A history of the 500 most recent web site versions of the Hillary Clinton entry can be found at, <http://www.en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Hillary_Rodham_Clinton&action=history>.

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