

**Specialized Online Publics and Rhetorical Ecologies:
A Study of Civic Engagement in Natural Resource Management**

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the public writing and civic engagement of an online community of a sportsmen forum, as the writing and engagement relate to natural resources management. Drawing from theories of public discourse and public rhetoric, this dissertation argues the sportsmen forum represents a specialized online public—publics that are constituted in digital spaces around shared interests and the circulation of texts and (vernacular) discourses, while existing in rhetorical ecologies. This dissertation argues sportsmen and sportswomen are an overlooked public within the field of Rhetoric and Writing. Not only are sportspersons stakeholders in natural resources issues, but they also represent primary reader-users of natural resource policy, making them a public of interest for rhetoric and writing scholars in areas such as public rhetoric, digital rhetoric, and technical communication. Beginning in the digital archives of the sportsmen forum, the dissertation isolates two case studies, each focusing on a current natural resource issue: deer management and feral swine management. The deer management case study represents the ways in which specialized online publics operate within rhetorical ecologies, while also exposing a space where these publics might make a greater impact in management practices through the formation of hybrid publics. Illustrating how hybrid publics might operate, the feral swine case study, examines collaboration between wildlife managers and sportspersons in the digital space of an online forum. Following the case studies, the dissertation concludes with a discussion of the scholarly and pedagogical implications of specialized online publics.

To Nicole, my best friend and wife.

and

For Jakob and Nickolas,

may you both always follow your dreams and never stop asking questions.

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Table of Contents

Introduction: Opening Remarks and Justifications	1
Why Sportsmen and Sportswomen, and Why Michigan?.....	2
Going Forward	5
 Chapter 1: Writing the Outdoors:	
Online Publics, Public Discourse, and Natural Resource Management.....	7
The Modern Agora	7
Research Questions	9
Writing the Outdoors.....	10
Defining New Media Spaces.....	16
New Media, Publics, and Environmental Rhetoric	20
Conclusion.....	27
 Chapter 2: A Framework for Specialized Online Publics.....	29
The (Bourgeois) Public Sphere, Spatial Importance, and Expanded Views of Publics	31
Unpacking Expanded Views of Publics: Vernacular Rhetoric and Specialized Publics	38
Specialized Online Publics: A Framework	44
Conclusion.....	52
 Chapter 3: Rhetorical Ecologies and Public Discourse	54
Why a Rhetorical Ecology Methodology?	55
Histories of Ecology in Rhetoric and Writing.....	57
Establishing a Rhetorical-Ecological Hermeneutic.....	64
Constructing an Ecology: Methods and Sites of Data Collection	69
Conclusion.....	76
 Chapter 4: The Case of Michigan Deer Management:	
Creating a Space for Specialized Online Publics in Natural Resource Management	78
The <i>Michigan Deer Management Plan</i> and Public Input.....	81
Five Threads, Two Topics.....	86
Opening a Space for Specialized Online Publics in Natural Resource Management	105
Conclusion.....	109
 Chapter 5: The Case of the Ticking Pig Bomb:	
Bridging Weak and Strong Publics in Digital Spaces	111
A Call to Action	113
Hey, What's the Pig Deal?	114
Online Collaboration and the Feral Swine Issue: A New Media Space for Hybrid Publics...117	
Becoming More Inclusive of Specialized Online Publics in Natural Resource Management 132	
Conclusion.....	138
 Conclusion: Contributions, Limitations, and Future Research	140
Addressing Research Questions	140

Contributions and Implications	147
Limitations.....	149
Future Research Agenda	151
Conclusion.....	154
References.....	155

List of Figures

Figure 2.1: Venn Diagram Model.....	48
Figure 3.1: Image Representing the Flow of Discourse in Rhetorical Ecologies	68
Figure 3.2: Sample Plot of Feral Swine Thread Contributors	72
Figure 5.1: Graph Illustrating Top Feral Swine Thread Contributors.....	119
Figure 5.2: Graph Illustrating Top Contributors Over the Feral Swine Thread.....	120

Introduction

Opening Remarks and Justifications

Drawing from work in rhetoric and writing studies and public sphere theories, I seek to accomplish the following objectives in this dissertation:

1. I argue sportsmen and sportswomen, those who participate in outdoor recreational activities such as hunting, fishing, and trapping, are an under-researched public in rhetoric and writing studies. And, as a public, sportsmen and sportswomen are not only stakeholders in environmental and natural resource management but are, in fact, invested participants in management efforts.
2. I expand public rhetoric and public sphere theories to articulate a framework for niche specific online communities, such as a sportsmen¹ forum situated in and about Michigan's outdoors.
3. Beginning in the archives of the sportsmen forum, *Michigan-Sportsman.com*, I develop two case studies regarding natural resource management in Michigan. Ultimately, I pull from work in rhetoric and writing scholarship and public discourse to argue for the need to be more inclusive of online publics in natural resource management practices.

My findings suggest the publics congregating on the sportsmen forum actively participate in and engage issues surrounding natural resource management, but a disconnect still exists between governmental natural resource agencies and (online) public participation in management initiatives.

In Chapter One, I will more thoroughly discuss the impetus for this study, argue its importance, situate it within the field of rhetoric and writing, and provide an overview of all

¹ The gendered term is theirs, not mine. Throughout this dissertation, I will use the terms sportsmen, sportswomen, and sportspersons when not referring specifically to the forum.

chapters. In the remainder of this introduction, I would like to provide a brief justification for focusing on the public work of sportsmen and sportswomen, specifically providing reasoning for choosing Michigan as the (digital) site for this study. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate that rich outdoors traditions and current natural resource issues make Michigan and *Michigan-Sportsman.com* appropriate sites of inquiry for a study of online publics and natural resource management.

Why Sportsmen and Sportswomen, and Why Michigan?

Sportsmen and sportswomen are an invested public, contributing valuable resources such as time and money to pursue their passions. According to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, in 2011 (the latest year in which data exists) 46.8 million people participated in fishing or hunting activities (“Quick Facts”) across the United States. These people accounted for \$75.5 billion in expenditures to pursue those activities, according to the same USFWS survey. Hunters and anglers exist in all 50 states, and their outdoors-related activities and contributions often extend beyond the pursuit of fish and game. Many are avid conservationists, spending time and money to protect and develop habitat, for example. Yet, as I’ll argue in Chapter One, the field of rhetoric and writing largely overlooks sportsmen and sportswomen’s contributions to environmental discourse.

Michigan’s outdoors heritage is deeply embedded in its cultural fabric, perhaps second only to the automobile industry. Deer hunting, in particular, dominates much of the tradition and lore of Michigan’s outdoor activities. The opening day of deer season—specifically, the opening day of firearm season on November 15th—is, in many parts of the state, akin to a holiday. It’s become so embedded into the social and cultural norms that schools (mostly in the northern Lower Peninsula and Upper Peninsula) close so children can participate in this tradition with

their families. There's even a song that receives significant radio airplay during this time titled "Second Week of Deer Camp," by Da Yoopers (the band name is derived from the local reference to the Upper Peninsula: U.P.). The song, as longtime *Detroit Free Press* outdoor writer Eric Sharp writes in an *Outdoor Life* article, is sung in the Finnlander accent of the Upper Peninsula. In short, the roots of Michigan's outdoor activities are firmly implanted in its cultural heritage.

In terms of hunter numbers, Michigan consistently ranks near the top, often just under Texas and Pennsylvania. In 2006, according to a USFWS survey (the last year available for a Michigan-specific survey), nearly 1.8 million Michigan residents participated in hunting and fishing activities, accounting for nearly \$2.3 billion in expenditures and combining for over 34 million days afield or on the water. In the prologue to the *Michigan Deer Management Plan* (a document I discuss in Chapter Four), Russ Mason, Chief of the Wildlife Division of the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, writes: "Michigan has more hunters than any other state save Texas, and despite our troubling times, nearly one million of us go to the woods and fields every fall to hunt and otherwise experience our abundance of wildlife and open lands" (n.p.). Because Michigan is uniquely situated in the Great Lakes (bordering four of the five Great Lakes) and has ample forests and open lands, there are plenty of opportunities to pursue a variety of fish and game.

In addition to a plethora of hunting and fishing opportunities, there are also a number of environmental and natural resource issues with which to contend, and not unlike other parts of the country, these issues impact management practices and citizen activities. Current issues include, but are not limited to the following:

- A number of wildlife diseases are causing concern, including recent whitetail deer diseases such as chronic wasting disease (CWD) and a 2012 outbreak of epizootic hemorrhagic disease (EHD).
- Asian carp, an aquatic invasive species with a voracious appetite and a history of disrupting native aquatic ecosystems, are a threat to invade the Great Lakes (see Kowalewski “Lake Michigan”).
- After reentering Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, moving eastward from Minnesota and Wisconsin, the grey wolf has reestablished its population in the Upper Peninsula. It’s a tremendous story, but it also presents human-wolf and pet/livestock-wolf interactions, creating challenges for resource managers.

In this dissertation, I draw on recent cases in deer management and feral swine (or wild pig) management.

The two case studies I discuss in this dissertation each present unique challenges to resource managers and sportspersons alike. Deer hunting and deer management, as I mention above, are firmly implanted into Michigan outdoor recreation activities and are constant topics of conversation, and frequent points of contention, among (and between) resource managers and sportspersons. Conversely, feral swine management is a relatively new issue, presenting different, albeit serious, challenges to resource managers and sportspersons. In both instances, there exists a specific call for civic engagement, presenting the exigencies for public writing that occurs on the sportsmen forum.

Digital writing technologies in Web 2.0 environments afford sportspersons with opportunities to congregate in digital spaces such as online forums and engage, discuss, relate, or otherwise interact with other interlocutors who share similar interests. It’s an opportunity to

share ideas, stories, and camaraderie. The *Michigan-Sportsman.com* forums exist as a site for sportsmen and sportswomen to engage each other over their common interests of hunting, fishing, trapping, and all things outdoors in Michigan. Forum discussions range from hunting and fishing reports, to sharing tips, tactics, and stories, to debating outdoor-related issues to discussing non-outdoors issues such as sports and politics. By the numbers, the forum consists of over 72,700 members, 447,000 threads, and 4.45 million posts² (as of this writing). Many forum contributors are engaged, passionate, and well informed about natural resource and environmental issues. As a site of inquiry, therefore, *Michigan-Sportsman.com* provides a rich corpus of data to explore.

Going Forward

In this introduction, I have provided brief justifications for exploring the contributions of sportsmen and sportswomen on natural resource management and for specifically situating this study within natural resource issues that exist in Michigan. With over 46 million hunters and anglers, sportsmen and sportswomen comprise a significant subset of the American population. Their expenditures—in the billions—make significant contributions to the economy, and often these expenditures drive small town economies that rely on sportspersons' monies. Their contributions often exist beyond financial implications. Many sportspersons participate in conservation efforts, and Michigan's environmental and natural resources issues present opportunities to explore how publics engage with these issues. More specifically, the site, *Michigan-Sportsman.com*, provides an archived site of public writing on environmental and natural resource issues from which to draw.

² By comparison, a similar site in Texas (*Texas Hunting Forum*) consists of nearly 45,500 members and just fewer than 3.95 million posts, and a Pennsylvania sportsmen forum (*HuntingPA.com*) consists of 31,250 members and just over 1 million posts (as of this writing).

A study that explores how publics participate, through their writing, on issues of the environment and natural resources has implications for public writing and public discourse, digital rhetoric, and technical communication. These contributions include finding new ways to think about publics that exist in niche-specific online communities and how these publics might be better utilized in natural resource management practices. The contributions to the field of rhetoric and writing this study attempts to make, therefore, include a new framework for thinking about digital online publics by extending public sphere theories and the importance of incorporating these online publics into environmental and natural resource management development and implementation, by drawing on the work of rhetoric and writing scholars who have addressed issues of public participation in environmental policy. In Chapter One, I will situate this study within rhetoric and writing research.

Chapter One

Writing the Outdoors: Online Publics, Public Discourse, and Natural Resource Management

Public policies for outdoor recreation are controversial. Equally conscientious citizens hold opposite views on what it is and what should be done to conserve its resource-base...A given policy may be true for one but false for another.

—Aldo Leopold “Conservation Esthetic” *A Sand County Almanac* p. 283-84

The Modern Agora

In ancient Greek society, the agora was the center of the polis; it served as the public market and meeting place. It was not only a communal gathering area where goods, such as food and wool, were bought and sold, however, it was also a space where public discourse flourished. The rhetorical tradition, spanning two and a half millennia, was conceived through public discourse in the agora. Aristotle’s taxonomy, established in his *Rhetoric*, provides an apparatus for understanding “the available means of persuasion” (1355b) and public (civic) discourse, which is steeped in the oral tradition of the agora. What this dissertation and its case studies hope to illustrate is that the contemporary agoras, places where public discourse occurs, are the online communities of publics who share common interests found in such digital spaces as online forums, and that these modern agoras provide a space for publics to contribute to broader discussions of public matters, discussions that exist as part of a larger ecology of discourse.

Quinn Warnick provides a thorough account of the emergence of online communities, tracing them back (much as I do) to pre-Aristotelian “gathering places,” demonstrating how contemporary virtual gathering places are the online communities found in digital spaces such as online forums; so, I will not recount the evolution of physical to virtual communal gathering

spaces. But I would like to acknowledge that contemporary agoras range in focus and scope from very general to niche specific, and “the formation of communities of shared interest,” as James P. Zappen has indicated, “is an outcome of processes of interaction, both online and offline, between ourselves and others” (323). Instead of being anchored to a physical space, as many offline communities are, and such as the Greek agora was, online forums are much more dynamic, existing in relation to a variety of other discourses; they interrelate, interact, and intertwine with discourses such as print and electronic media and, indeed, other online forums and digital sources, representing rich practices of intertextuality and civic engagement.

This dissertation is situated in the civic engagement of an online sportsmen forum in the Great Lakes region that consists of more than 72,700 members (at the time of this writing) and 250,000 unique visitors per month. The members of the sportsmen community contribute to ongoing conversations regarding environmental and natural resources issues, literally helping to write the broader conversation of outdoor, environmental, and natural resource related issues. Publics that engage in discussions of environmental policy, as the epigraph above from Aldo Leopold illustrates, come bound in their own complexities, as discourses circulate between publics with varying viewpoints as well as between publics and government agencies. I believe the public discourse that occurs surrounding complex and technical environment and natural resource policies and the potential for civic action such discourse stimulates, warrants a better understanding through a rhetoric and writing lens.

In this chapter, I situate my project in the context of rhetoric and writing by demonstrating an increasing need to study publics, especially in online spaces. I first describe the public that is the focus of this dissertation and make a case for why the contributions of this public are important to the field of rhetoric and writing, in part by problematizing traditional

print and electronic outdoor media. I then provide a rationale for how I approach the term *new media*, before discussing how new media is fused in this study with two other primary areas—public rhetoric and environmental rhetoric—in rhetoric and writing studies. Before moving to a discussion of the public with which this study will focus, I want to address the questions that are the impetus for this dissertation.

Research Questions

To better understand the ways in which online publics engage with natural resource issues, the following questions drive this dissertation:

RQ1: What can we learn about how publics constitute and operate in online spaces, specifically those publics that exist in specific, or niche, online communities?

RQ2: In what ways do publics in online spaces contribute to conversations about environmental policies and natural resources management, specifically on a regional, localized level?

RQ3: In what ways do online publics interpret and respond to complex, technical environmental policies, and how might these interpretations and responses impact government implementation practices of environmental policies and natural resource management plans?

To answer the above questions, I take an approach that fuses theories of public discourse, drawing on Jürgen Habermas, Gerard Hauser, Michael Warner, and Nancy Fraser, with theories of writing ecologies and scholarship in technical communication studies. In particular, I draw on rhetorical ecologies situated in new media environments and technical communication through environmental communication. Such a study through this fused lens, I argue, illuminates how online publics contribute to broader, ongoing conversations of civic concern surrounding issues

of environment and natural resources. With my research questions established, I will now move to discuss why such a study is needed. In short, I hope to demonstrate that current outdoor media lack any opportunities for significant engagement, but online spaces afford sportsmen and sportswomen the opportunity to engage each other and current natural resource issues. The field of rhetoric and writing has had an increasing interest in the ways publics congregate in online spaces as well as how publics become actively engaged citizens.

Writing the Outdoors

The primary site of inquiry for this dissertation is an online forum situated in and about Michigan's outdoors, which includes environmental and natural resources issues. The members of this forum are primarily associated through their passions for and recreation activities in hunting, fishing, trapping, and camping. Outdoorsmen and outdoorswomen, and their affiliations with raw and rugged American adventure, invoke tales of Davy Crocket and Daniel Boone, or more recently, Fred Bear—immortalized in Ted Nugent's rock 'n roll song, "Fred Bear." The American folklore scholar, Simon J. Bronner describes America's hunting heritage:

In short, hunters are located in every state but are culturally concentrated in several regions that conjure the image of a frontier rich in flora and fauna. From the Rockies to the Appalachians, if publicity is to be believed, going out hunting liberates folks from their routines and lets them get back to nature; it is hailed or cursed as a vitalizing force in modern society, particularly for men. It is associated with an untethered spirit of ruggedness, a hardy mettle required for venturing into the wilderness. (27)

Michigan, with its proximity to four of the five Great Lakes, constituted by thousands of rivers, streams, and inland lakes, and situated in ample forestlands—particularly in the northern Lower

Peninsula and entire Upper Peninsula—is a hub for a variety of outdoor recreation activities, which represent the categorization of the American hunter that Bronner offers.

Yet, American hunters (or anglers, or trappers) are caught in a battle that, paradoxically, portrays their image as either conservationist dedicated to preserving the natural resources in which they enjoy, or blood-thirsty killers who destroy wilderness and wild game in their pursuit of sport, especially in a society no longer dependent on hunting as a means of sustenance.

Bronner captures the hunters' paradox:

They want to appear sensitive to the natural environment, family men spending quality time with their sons, proud of America's heritage steeped in hunting pioneers. Yet the consistency of these images with rituals bordering on hazing that mark [hunting] camp often have to be explained to a public influenced by images of hunting as a barbaric behavior promoted by animal rights organizations—and Hollywood movies. For many Americans, the hunter cannot live down the stigma of stalking innocent Bambi [...]. (35)

In this dissertation, I do not take this paradox head on. Instead, I intend to focus more on the writing and discourse produced by a public that participates in outdoor activities that include hunting, fishing, and trapping. And I recognize that some audiences, as Bronner points out, might find these activities to not reflect the values of contemporary society, but I think it is important to consider publics often ignored by the academy. To my knowledge, there have been no studies in rhetoric and writing that consider sportsmen and sportswomen and the discourse they contribute to conversations of the environment and natural resources. Beyond their exclusion from our books and journals, however, sportsmen and sportswomen present an interesting public because not only are they stakeholders in decisions of environment and natural

resources policies, but also because they are an invested public, interested in these issues through their passions for the outdoors. Furthermore, they are primary reader-users of technical environmental policies, which impact their use of the outdoors.

I consider the online public of the sportsmen forum as one that shapes and is simultaneously shaped by the writing and discourse that exists not only on the forum but also beyond, including government discourse and media discourse, which belong to a larger ecology of natural resource and environmental discourse. The site is intrinsically a participatory space (Jenkins) that separates it from the traditional types of outdoor media many sportsmen and sportswomen typically consume—indeed, traditional media generally lack any means for participation. Consider, for a moment, letters to the editor that appear in print publications. The publication and circulation of these letters are fraught with issues bound up in physical print space and temporal restrictions, to name a few (I know this first hand having worked for one of the major outdoor publications in Michigan, where part of my responsibilities was to manage the letters to the editor section).

Further complicating opportunities to participate in conversations about the outdoors, Michigan outdoor media, both electronic and print, have traditionally served as the primary vehicle for informing sportspersons about outdoor issues. And these traditional forms of media, bound by their own complex circumstances (often profit driven) help support and influence the attitudes and beliefs of outdoor persons. For example, the production of outdoor hunting and fishing television programs and print publications presents an unrealistic outdoor experience that perpetuates the idea of trophy hunting and fishing. Michigan outdoor writer Dan Donarski writes in a 2005 article published in *Michigan Outdoor News* that “[a] pet peeve of mine in the world of outdoor magazines and newspapers is that sometimes I think we inflate expectations. We print

pictures of massive bucks on the covers, or huge pike, or a boat load of ducks. These sell. Yet in doing so we come off as saying that if you aren't having the same success, you aren't doing things right." (15). The implication from print and electronic media, therefore, is in order to be considered a successful outdoorsperson, one must harvest trophy-quality fish and game.

Considering the current state of outdoor media, Michigan outdoor journalist Howard Myverson poses the question: "What's with the loss of long-form writing?" (n.p. "Open Letter"). Myverson suggests writers and editors think readers have the attention spans of gerbils. "I know studies say people like to scan," Myverson notes. "They don't read the stories. They just want it quick and easy—in bits and pieces; reading munchables like granola clusters. You know, gerbils. Let me tell you, there really are people out here who enjoy reading—Capital R. We turn to magazines for more than the catalogue of products they proffer—or the carnival of quick-hit, 30-second, eye blurring storylets" (n.p.). Additionally, in an interview with outdoor radio host Mike Avery, Michigan outdoor journalist Mike Rose compares the state of outdoor writing to the menu at Taco Bell. He discusses the phrase, "Taco Bell Writing," used by some outdoor journalist insiders; Rose elaborates:

How many things can you make out of the same seven ingredients. 'Cause if you think about Taco Bell...it's all the same ingredients—everything they have there.

But they put it in a different form. And that's what outdoor writing is. (n.p.)

Donarski, Myverson, and Rose point out several issues plaguing current outdoors print media: they're driven by advertisement and product placement, provide too few in-depth feature stories, they contain repackaged, repurposed content season after season, and they rely too heavily on modern page design technology, where images, color, and layout can interfere with text—the substance of an article Myverson craves. Also speaking with Avery, but considering the decline

of print-based publications, particularly newspapers, veteran Michigan outdoor writer and photographer Kenny Darwin argues these publications have significantly neglected outdoor stories recently. Darwin explains:

And of course when you're talking about Michigan's great out-of-doors, how many newspapers do you know have a regular feature about the out-of-doors, have a regular outdoor department, have an outdoor writer, and more importantly, once in a while get the front page; it doesn't happen very often. (n.p.)

Digital environments, however, afford spaces that allow publics, such as those on the sportsmen forum in Michigan, to make contributions—however minor or seemingly insignificant—to discussions of outdoor issues in ways that print and electronic media would never be able to incorporate. Members of the sportsmen forum have the opportunity to make their voices heard and contribute to the larger conversations of environmental and natural resource issues, potentially pushing against top-down policy-making, and literally helping to write the conversation surrounding Michigan's out-of-doors.

It becomes important, therefore, to better understand how such a public contributes to writing the outdoors and environmental discourse. In other words, by becoming more inclusive of the types of publics and communities rhetoric and writing scholars examine, we can be open to the plush tapestry of conversations that exist in unique or uncommon spaces. Through each forum, sub forum, discussion thread, and post, sportsmen and sportswomen of the forum contribute to the dynamic conversation that represents the tapestry of outdoors and environmental discourse.

As I'll describe in this dissertation, the members of the sportsmen forum are, what Michael Warner considers, a "specialized public." While differences in opinions certainly occur

on the site, as Leopold observes, the members share “communal values” and experiences. And the site, as a modern agora, is a space for members to discuss and debate opinions; it encourages participation. As Mathew Barton notes, “[T]hese online writing environments encourage users to engage in public discussion; users are often invited to contribute content as well as access the information by other users’ (182). Considering the participatory nature of online writing environments, Henry Jenkins, et al. (*Participatory Culture*) posit, “Participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways” (8). Participatory culture, in general, and specialized publics, more specifically, exist within an ecology that consists of a variety of other discourses, which include vernacular exchanges. “These exchanges,” as Hauser asserts, “are part of an ongoing dialogue in which an active society critiques, negotiates, associates, and ultimately constitutes its interests and opinions on the issues confronting them” (91). The ecologies in which these exchanges exist, then, are inherently rhetorical because the citizen-writers who contribute to them must filter, process, and respond to the surrounding and ongoing discourses, which exist within the ecology. In other words, the discourse that exists in new media spaces is dynamic in nature. What becomes important for me, therefore, is learning more about how the members of the sportsmen forum contribute to these dynamic, ongoing conversations in new media spaces through their writing and remediating (Bolter and Grusin) of other discourses, discussing issues pertaining to the outdoors and natural resources in ways that might generate social action.

Defining New Media Spaces

Let me back up for a moment and briefly frame how I am approaching new media, as a foundation for the modern agora, in general, and as a space to write the outdoors, more specifically. Anne Wysocki defines new media texts as follows:

I think we should call “new media texts” those that have been made by composers who are aware of the range of materialities of texts and who then highlight the materiality: such composers design texts that help readers/consumers/ viewers stay alert to how any text—like its composers and readers—doesn’t function independently of how it is made and in what contexts. Such composers design texts that make as overtly visible as possible the values they embody. (15)

Wysocki’s definition emphasizes the production of texts, specifically highlighting the materiality of composing and the agency of the writer. Building on Wysocki’s definition, Collin Brooke argues, “[N]ew media will transform our understandings of rhetoric as thoroughly as our training and expertise in rhetoric can effect a similar impact on discussions of new media” (5). Taking into account Wysocki’s definition of new media texts and Brooke’s argument of the effect of rhetoric on new media, I consider new media as not only texts, or a set of texts, but also as a space where these texts exist, and new media spaces are highlighted by the opportunities for participation and engagement about said texts to occur. New media spaces are dynamic, distinct from traditional, top-down print-based and electronic media *and* other digitally-distributed media (media which adhere to conventions of traditional print-based and electronic media but distributed through the Internet), and underscored by opportunities for individuals (and publics) to participate in and shape discourse. I place a particular emphasis on new media spaces and texts in computer networked environments, though I recognize that rhetoric and writing scholars

have argued (and I agree) that new media texts need not rely on computers for composing and distribution (see Wysocki).

Because I consider new media spaces as those located in digital environments for the purposes of this dissertation, my use of new media in this project builds primarily on Lev Manovich's extensive definition of the term. Manovich argues new media objects rely on five principles, though "[n]ot every new media object obeys these principles" (27). Manovich's five principles are:

1. Numerical Representation: "All new media objects, whether created from scratch on computers or converted from analog code, are composed of digital code; they are numerical representations" (27).
2. Modularity: "Media elements [...] are represented as collections of discrete samples" (30), and these discrete units can be combined with other discrete units "but continue to maintain their separate identities" (30).
3. Automation: Because new media are constructed from numerical coding and discrete units (the above two principles), they can be automated; "[t]hus human intentionality can be removed from the creative process. at least in part" (32).
4. Variability: "A new media object is not something fixed once and for all, but something that can exist in different, potentially infinite versions" (36).
5. Transcoding: New media objects exist in two layers, a computer layer of coding languages and a cultural layer of "recognizable objects" (45), such as text and images.

Relying on Manovich's principles, I believe the sportsmen forum is a new media space in two particular ways. First, in describing transcoding, Manovich argues that new media rely on two layers, a "cultural layer" and a "computer layer" (46). He goes on to argue that "[b]ecause new

media are created on computers, distributed via computers, and stored and archived on computers, the logic of a computer can be expected to significantly influence the traditional cultural logic of media; that is, we may expect that the computer layer will affect the cultural layer” (46). The logic of a computer, specifically “the database logic” is the second way Manovich’s definition of new media influences my understanding of the sportsmen forum as a new media space. As opposed to narrative elements of traditional media, new media “are collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other” (218). There is no linear narrative that users must follow. Instead, online forums, as a database, “appear as collections of items on which the user can perform various operations—view, navigate, search” (Manovich 219), and in online forums, participants can contribute content to threads (building the database), thus participating through the creation and distribution of texts and other objects and helping to shape the conversations that occur. Online forums, therefore, represent more than a space for composing new media texts, but as a gathering space that enables and encourages participation and engagement, through texts and discourse.

Because this project is concerned with the public discourse that occurs in the new media space of an online forum about environmental and natural resource issues, it, therefore, traverses several areas within the larger field of rhetoric and writing. In this dissertation I converge digital rhetoric/new media studies, public discourse, and technical communication, specifically situated in environmental communication. In the remainder of this chapter, I will further unpack the convergences of the above areas. Chapter Two explores theories of public discourse, specifically situating my discussion in the respective public sphere theories of Jürgen Habermas, Gerard Hauser, Michael Warner, and Nancy Fraser. Drawing from those four theorists, I describe publics that exist in new media spaces, such as online forums, as *specialized online publics*, and I

establish a framework defining the characteristics of specialized online publics. In Chapter Three, I situate specialized online publics within larger writing ecologies, which, in the context of this study, consist of government discourse, media discourse, and public discourse. I briefly trace the use of ecology in rhetoric and writing studies, as a mechanism for describing the social nature of writing, before introducing a rhetorical ecology hermeneutical framework I employ for purposes of data analysis. This hermeneutical framework accentuates the role of public discourse in writing ecologies by drawing in Hauser's conception of vernacular discourse and Fraser's argument of weak and strong publics.

To illustrate how specialized online publics operate in rhetorical ecologies, Chapters Four and Five each provide a case study. Chapter Four examines a case surrounding Michigan's deer management plan, a document approved by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) in the spring of 2010. The process of drafting the document spans two years, and I primarily address forum contributions from the end of the document's development. I use this case study for two particular reasons. First, the case provides an illustration of how specialized online publics engage in rhetorical ecologies around natural resources issues. And secondly, through their contributions, forum contributors demonstrate a lack of significant public involvement in natural resource management, a point that aligns with the work of Michele Simmons, while also exposing the gap that still exists between weak and strong publics.

I use Chapter Five to argue that online spaces can serve as a place to bridge the gap between weak and strong publics. I draw from a case study that examines an invasive feral swine issue in Michigan. Specifically, I examine a forum thread that spans nearly five years, 1400 posts, and 300 contributors. The thread was initiated by a Michigan DNR employee and demonstrates how wildlife managers and specialized online publics can collaborate to address

natural resource issues.

Following the case study chapters, I offer my conclusions, implications, and avenues of future research for this project. Ultimately, I conclude that the modern agora of online forums are rich, dynamic, and messy (Grabill and Pigg), but also provide opportunities for regulatory agencies, such as fish and game managers, to better incorporate public participation in environmental policy and natural resource management plans.

Having established a brief overview of this dissertation, I will move next to further unpacking the ways digital rhetoric/new media studies, public discourse, and technical communication, specifically as it relates to environmental rhetoric converge in this dissertation.

New Media, Publics, and Environmental Rhetoric

The field of rhetoric and writing is increasingly interested in the public nature of writing. Indeed, as I have already discussed, rhetoric has its roots in publics gathering in the agora at the center of the polis. More recently, discussions of public discourse and public rhetoric have been ongoing in the field of rhetoric and writing since before the turn of this millennium. As a field, we ask questions about the ways in which publics organize around texts, and what those texts are capable of accomplishing (for examples see: Hauser; Ryder; George; George and Mathieu). In his book, *Moving Beyond Academic Discourse: Composition Studies and the Public Sphere*, Christian Weisser defines public writing as, “written discourse that attempts to engage an audience of local, regional, or national groups or individuals in order to bring about progressive societal change” (90). Weisser goes on to discuss public writing’s emerging role in writing studies. Most often referred to as service learning, conversations that merge pedagogy with public writing take off in the mid-1990s and continue today. We have also become increasingly interested in public writing outside of academia--when the focus is on texts not produced by our

students, but by publics that are motivated by any sort of exigencies for action. In other words, it's a turn that focuses on the role of scholars who do their work "out there," as David Coogan and John Ackerman put it.

Ellen Cushman has argued that work beyond the walls of our institutions provides "for a deeper consideration of the civic purpose of our positions in the academy, of what we do with our knowledge, for whom, and by what means" (12). Quite often, however, when we look beyond our institutions, "[a]s a field," Jeffrey Grabill argues, "we tend to orient more toward the great speech, text, or the known and bounded public sphere—the rhetorical situation, the known forums of public media, the visible public conversations among our visible public intellectuals (including ourselves). We tend to miss, therefore, the mundane, the technical, the routine [...]" (204). What this study aims to examine are the publics that exist under their own correspondence of shared interests, particularly concerning public matters of the environment and natural resources.

Diana George has argued "that this field of study has much yet to learn about how writing/how composing functions in response to civic exigency" (51). While the field of rhetoric and writing has contributed to issues surrounding publics and public discourse (Ryder; Mathieu; Weisser; George and Mathieu; Hauser; Ackerman and Coogan; Grabill "Community Change;" Dean, Roswell and Wurr), and publics in new media spaces, such as online communities (Barton; B. Warnick; Q. Warnick), and even public participation in issues pertaining to environmental policies (Bylthe, Grabill, & Riley; Simmons; Waddell; Killingsworth and Palmer), little has been done that considers online publics who contribute to discussions regarding the environment and natural resource, converging all three primary areas—public, digital, and technical communication—together, and I seek to address this gap in this

dissertation. And this study allows for a better understanding of the role online public discourse—specifically online forums—play in the formation, distribution, organization, and practices of a specific public as it pertains to environmental and natural resource issues.

This dissertation draws from three primary areas within the broad field of rhetoric and writing. As I have mentioned above, I merge work from digital rhetoric/new media studies, public discourse, and technical communication, particularly environmental rhetoric, to inform my research of an online sportsmen community. Since the three primary areas I draw from are innately tied to rhetoric and writing, they share common traits. Two particular characteristics that are of utmost importance for this study are a focus on texts, or discourse, and a focus on writing as a means of social action. Consider the following anecdote:

In early spring 2011, an arson fire blazed through the marsh region of Point Mouillee State Game Area located along the Lake Erie shoreline in southeast Michigan. The fire torched nearly 600 acres, revealing trash and debris that were previously hidden by plant foliage. A group of concerned sportsmen quickly organized cleanup efforts through the online forum, *Michigan-Sportsman.com*.

According to an article published in *Michigan Outdoor News*, “[t]he whole clean-up effort was planned in two weeks” (Clark 8). The group collected and disposed of over four tons of garbage during the one-day cleanup.

The above anecdote offers a window into how the three primary areas of rhetoric and writing, from which this study draws, converge in this dissertation. The volunteers (public) used the new media space (digital) of the sportsmen forum to organize the cleanup through dialogue between several interlocutors about issues pertaining to the environment and natural resources (environmental).

Our field has produced research of incidences where online spaces were a primary mechanism for contributing to conversations of environmental policies. For example, in *Rhetoric Online*, Barbara Warnick highlights the work of the environmental organization, Greenpeace, using the Internet to spread its political and environmental agenda. She argues that online spaces “serve as sites for persuasion, self-promotion, information dissemination, and other communication functions. They encourage forms of expression and organization” (18). Considering issues of organization, expression, and dissemination, Warnick discusses how Greenpeace’s Web site has persuaded environmental regulators, informed the public, and led to political action.

Warnick highlights two cases in which Greenpeace’s Web site served as a source of information for both journalists and policymakers. In one instance, for example, during a meeting of the Oslo-Paris Commission, a group of delegates that oversee ocean pollution regulation, Greenpeace streamed images of radioactive liquid waste being released into the ocean off the coast of Normandy, France (Warnick 10). “Subsequently,” Warnick writes, “ministers from 12 of the 14 member countries decided against the practice of radioactive dumping in the ocean” (10). The Greenpeace example highlights the ability for powerful rhetorical work regarding environmental issues to take place in digital environments. But Greenpeace is a large international organization with a multi-million dollar operating budget; they are, to use Grabill’s words, “the known and bounded public sphere.” Like the socially awkward geek on a television sitcom, little definition is needed to describe the conventions of Greenpeace, or what it is or does as an organization. To move beyond the known public is to focus on the publics that form in online spaces around mutual interest. Without any operating budget, these publics discuss issues because of their shared interests and passions. Their contributions might not always be as

profound as impacting the vote of an international committee, but their contributions might be influential on a localized level. The affordances of digital spaces, which allow for multiple media to coalesce, creating powerful messages, also allow for the specialized publics to organize and discuss; they are constituted by citizens and organized through texts and discourse.

In a 1997 *Technical Communication Quarterly* article, Nancy Coppola argues that even though U.S. citizens consider themselves “green” and environmentally conscious, environmental threats due to human usage and consumption continue to increase. “Significantly,” Coppola argues, “our awareness of environmental issues has not translated into environmentally conscious behavior. Increased public knowledge and information alone have not changed conduct” (9). A dozen years later, in a 2009 *TCQ* article, Richard Johnson-Sheehan and Lawrence Morgan reference *Time Magazine*’s 2002 designation of the twenty-first century as “The Green Century” (9). But Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan concede, as Coppola does, that most of this environmental labeling “is often routinely dismissed by politicians and much of the public” (9). In other words, while many in the American public agree environmental issues are important, few take an active role in discussing about, contributing to, or advocating for environmental and conservation policy issues. For those who do become involved, Coppola and Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan agree that these communities often form around texts—both print and online.

Traditionally, communication about environmental issues has come from a variety of print sources produced by environmental and scientific experts. Stakeholders, such as policymakers, often use these documents to determine a course of action or mediate disputes. Coppola states, “Environmental communication might take shape as mediated discourse to help disputing parties negotiate an acceptable resolution to highway construction, a debate on

watershed preservation, or a feasibility report on land use” (10). Carolyn Rude specifically identifies the environmental report as a genre that influences policy decision-making. “The generation of reports in the environmental movement,” Rude states, “rests on the assumption that before environmental problems can be solved, information must be gathered, and plans for action must be established” (77). Rude demonstrates how reports look back at past events to enable future actions and policy-making decisions. Scientific experts, with specific content knowledge in areas such as biology and ecology, often conduct the gathering and analysis of data (looking back) and contribute to the composition of reports (enable future actions) with other technicians (including technical communicators).

The emphasis on expert scientific analysis to inform environmental policy has often made any public input irrelevant, as Michele Simmons has noted. “In environmental public debates,” Simmons posits, “the local citizen is rarely discussing her concerns on an equal playing field with the ‘technical expert’” (6). Simmons emphasizes that there is still not an equal opportunity for citizens to impact conversations surrounding environmental issues and policies. She is largely critiquing Habermas’ theory of public deliberation and civic engagement—an argument that others, such as Fraser and Hauser take up as well, which I will discuss in Chapter Two—arguing that Habermas does not fully recognize social contexts and the power relations bound up in the social contexts of public deliberation. In other words, everyone is not equal. Simmons argues, “The idea that everyone capable of speech has an equal opportunity to participate in deliberations seems optimistic” (6). For Simmons, this is especially true for issues of environmental discourse, which, as I mention above, are largely represented through scientific and technical experts.

Simmons’s work in *Participation and Power* argues for a more inclusive, participatory role for publics in the development of environmental and risk management policies. Connecting

work from rhetoric, risk communication, sociology, and public policy, Simmons identifies four common models of public participation in environmental and risk communication decision-making: “(1) no public involvement, (2) one-way flow of technical information, (3) superficial participation to placate public, and (4) a wished-for negotiation model” (37). Considering these models, Simmons constructs “a critical rhetorical framework that can function as heuristics for considering decision making in environmental issues in particular situations” (128). In part, Simmons’s framework is inclusive of participation from all stakeholders and affected publics, and it seeks input from these parties early and often throughout the decision-making process.

Other studies in rhetoric and writing have focused on civic participation in environmental policy decision-making, and many have noted the struggle citizens face when voicing concerns or working for compromise. For example, Craig Waddell recognizes similar issues as he frames his study of working with a citizen group in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, as they opposed the development of a paper mill along the shore of Lake Superior. “[T]he public,” Waddell argues, “is still obliged to endure the effects of economic and environmental decisions upon which it has little or no influence—decisions that are left, instead, to experts in science, industry, and government” (202). And Stuart Blythe, Jeffrey Grabill, and Kirk Riley encounter similar issues in their work with the citizens of Harbor.

New media spaces, such as the sportsmen forums, offer spaces for citizens, as a collective public, to participate and contribute to larger, ongoing conversations of environmental and natural resource concerns. Barbara Warnick points to the Web as a place that allows for a more egalitarian space to engage in debate and persuasion. It’s a place that allows members to “share a common, community voice” (B. Warnick 19). Or, it’s a place where publics can disagree, debate, and come to new understandings and resolutions about issues pertaining to their passion for the

outdoors. Because online communities allow for greater opportunities for individuals to actively participate in public discussion and deliberation, I believe our field can benefit from better understanding how these online publics contribute to natural resource decision-making, and I turn to the online sportsmen forum as a case to provide further insight on these inquiries. The sportsmen and women of the forum share significant content knowledge of and experience in the outdoors; they write about and engage in issues that include conservation, biology, ecology, and environmental sustainability, to name a few. And, as Coppola and Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan argue, the members of the sportsmen forum organize around texts in a participatory (Jenkins) way that emphasizes the affordances of new media writing—the Pointe Mouillee cleanup, for example. For these reasons, I situate this study at the intersection of digital rhetoric/new media, public rhetoric, and environmental rhetoric.

Conclusion

The modern agora of new media spaces, such as online forums, provides citizens with opportunities to engage, collaborate, debate, and discuss issues of civic concern. The publics created in these spaces exist in relation to other discourses in larger, dynamic systems, or ecologies, of discourse. This project seeks to better understand how these publics function and to what extent their contributions impact natural resource issues and decision-making, by focusing on the publics that exist in an online sportsmen forum situated in the ecology of discourse encompassing Michigan's outdoors.

The field of rhetoric and writing has been increasingly interested in publics and public rhetoric, both in the classroom and beyond academia. But the field has largely ignored sportsmen and sportswomen and their contributions to discussions of the environment and natural resources, perhaps because hunters and hunting are paradoxically “venerated and vilified”

(Bronner 27) in contemporary America. But they are a pertinent cog in the system concerning issues pertaining to the environment, and their contributions through discourse require a better understanding from a rhetorical perspective. Using rhetoric and writing as a lens to analyze the sportsmen forum, therefore, requires that I draw from three primary areas of the field. Since new media spaces and online writing environments encourage public participation and discussion and since outdoor writing is an “advocacy for action,” as Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan state, this study draws from work in digital rhetoric/new media, public rhetoric, and environmental rhetoric, as it relates to technical communication.

In the next chapter, I discuss specialized online publics, drawing specifically from the work in public sphere theories of Jürgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser, Gerard Hauser, and Michael Warner. Many conversations of public spheres begin with Habermas, but his work has also been problematized, as Simmons notes above. Fraser and Hauser also problematize Habermas’s work as not being inclusive enough, and Hauser offers vernacular rhetoric as a way to be more inclusive of the kinds of public discourses that exist. Building on Habermas, Fraser, and Hauser, I employ Warner’s definition of specialized, or sub, publics as an entry point into my argument. I argue specialized online publics depend upon a set of characteristics that help to situate them within the larger discourse ecologies in which they exist.

Chapter Two

A Framework for Specialized Online Publics

In their article, “Messy Rhetoric: Identity Performance as Rhetorical Agency in Online Public Forums,” Jeffrey T. Grabill and Stacey Pigg argue “public discourse can be messy, and accounting for public engagement in online systems presents its own challenges because the interactions (as text) are persistent in time and space and non-linear in terms of when and how participants engage” (99). Indeed, public discourse in online spaces can be messy as some interlocutors come and go, while others are more consistent contributing content and engaging in forum conversations. Other times the messiness can be the result of a conversation fizzling out, not gaining enough traction, or getting derailed by tangential discussions, including polarizing arguments.

Yet, other times, the messy rhetoric that takes place in online spaces provides a glimpse into how publics grapple with issues, engage with a variety of discourse communities, and evolve over time. In these ways, the messiness actually reveals something more cohesive: a public that forms in a specific space around a particular issue or interest. I call these publics specialized online publics. Allow me for a moment to revisit the Pointe Mouillee State Game Area cleanup anecdote I provide in Chapter One.

In Chapter One, I cite an anecdote about an arson fire that blazed through a state game area in southeast Michigan and the resulting cleanup by a group of concerned sportspersons. I’d like to briefly revisit this anecdote to provide an entry point to theorizing specialized online publics, the topic this chapter defines. In the Pointe Mouillee State Game Area cleanup anecdote there are several key characteristics that parallel, as well as help frame, specialized online publics. First, there was a physical space: Pointe Mouillee State Game Area. The physical space

is the place that the arson fire and resulting cleanup occurred. But it was the digital space—the online forum—where the cleanup was organized that becomes important to this project.

The digital space functioned as the initial meeting place, where sportsmen and sportswomen gathered to discuss the cleanup before actually meeting in the physical. The online gathering and subsequent discussion began in a thread in which the original poster (OP) inquired about the damage sustained by the game area during the fire, and within only a few days this initial inquiry evolved into a cleanup effort. Additional threads began specifically focused on the cleanup effort including information on the date and time and what items volunteers were responsible for contributing. Forum participant-volunteers were committed to the cleanup effort through their shared interest in the well being of natural resources. The shared interests and committed actions of those who participated in the cleanup efforts demonstrates how online publics are able to gather in a space over common interests and make contributions to issues of civic concern—in this case environmental and natural resource concern. Specialized online publics, therefore, are framed by several characteristics: an emphasis on (digital) spaces, shared or mutual interests, a circulation of texts and discourses, while existing in relation to other discourse.

As I discuss in Chapter One, this study aims to address the question: In what ways do publics in online spaces contribute to conversations about environmental policies and natural resources management. The first step in answering this question is situating specialized online publics within a framework that draws from existing theories of public spheres and public discourse. In this chapter, therefore, I will situate specialized online publics within existing theories of public spheres and public discourse by drawing on four prominent public sphere scholars: Jürgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser, Michael Warner, and Gerard Hauser.

Habermas's work is instrumental in many conversations of public spheres, and his work places a particular emphasis on space as a defining characteristic of the bourgeois public sphere, which is important to my framework for specialized online publics. Several scholars, including Fraser, Hauser, and Warner, however, have problematized Habermas's conception of the public sphere for being too limiting in scope. In her critique of Habermas, Fraser includes an articulation of weak and strong publics, which push against a singular bourgeois public sphere. Hauser, likewise, offers the concept of vernacular rhetoric, which calls for an expanded view of publics and public discourse. And in his discussion of publics and counterpublics, Michael Warner offers sub, or specialized, publics as those publics which form around shared interests and the circulation of texts around those interests.

Drawing from the above public sphere theorists, I posit online publics, such as *Michigan-Sportsman.com*, are specialized publics (Warner) constituted by shared interests that not only exist in relation to the (vernacular) texts they produce, but specialized online publics also exist in relation to a variety of other discourse communities in an ecology of discourse (a topic I discuss further in Chapter Three). Analyzing how specialized online publics exist within theories of public discourse provides a better understanding of how public discourses interact and interrelate within a larger ecology of discourse and how the resulting public(s) may use online spaces for contributing to broader conversations of civic concern, or move beyond the virtual space of online forums to answer calls for civic action.

The (Bourgeois) Public Sphere, Spatial Importance, and Expanded Views of Publics

In this section, I begin with Habermas, as his work is not only influential in theories of public spheres, but he also provides an entry point to framing specialized online publics through his emphasis on space as a defining characteristic. I will then draw from Fraser, Hauser, and

Warner, as they challenge Habermas's singular public sphere and call for expanded views of publics. Each argument helps to build my conception of specialized online publics, as these publics are situated in existing theories of publics and public rhetoric.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas traces the rise of the public sphere that began in the thirteenth century with “early finance and trade capitalism” (14), through the Enlightenment. The transformation progresses throughout Great Britain, France, and Germany in the late seventeenth century and into the eighteenth century, where Habermas takes up the rise of the bourgeois public sphere. In particular, I'd like to focus on Habermas' emphasis on the (physical) space where members of bourgeois public sphere congregate to discuss and debate issues of public opinion

The coffee houses of England, salons of France, and table societies of Germany were specific spaces where rational-critical debate took place. In a Habermasian public sphere, people—usually men—in Europe would gather as equals, regardless of class standing, in these spaces to discuss and rationally debate issues pertaining to art, literature, and public matters. As Habermas explains:

The “town” was the life center of civil society not only economically; in cultural-political contrast to the court, it designated especially an early public sphere in the world of letters whose institutions were the coffee houses, the salons, and the Tischgesellschaften (table societies). The heirs of the humanistic-aristocratic society, in their encounter with the bourgeois intellectuals (through sociable discussions that quickly developed into public criticism), built a bridge between the remains of a collapsing form of publicity (the courtly one) and the precursor of a new one: the bourgeois public sphere [...] (30, emphasis his)

As long as participants in the coffee houses, salons, and table societies were informed on the topics of discussions, they could participate in rational-critical discussions, whether aristocrat or bourgeois. The space, therefore, provided the access for these conversations to take place.

As the public sphere evolved in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the physical spaces not only provided a location for public discussion to take place, but the spaces also provided access to a bourgeois public that had otherwise not been privy to such access in the past. For Habermas, the space of public gatherings, such as coffee houses and table societies, “not merely made access to the relevant circles less formal and easier; it embraced the wider strata of the middle class, including craftsmen and shopkeepers” (33). Issues of inclusion echo in Gerard Hauser’s theory of vernacular discourse, which I’ll discuss below, but Hauser also acknowledges the importance of space in forming a public sphere. “[Habermas’s] emphasis on discursive practices,” Hauser asserts, “makes an important contribution by *locating an arena* for participation in public issues” (55, emphasis mine). The emphasis on space that exists within Habermas’s and Hauser’s considerations of publics extends to Nancy Fraser’s critique of Habermas, as well.

Nancy Fraser contends Habermas’ conception of the bourgeois public sphere “is indispensable to critical social theory and to democratic political practice” (57). Fraser offers the following summary of Habermas’ bourgeois public sphere:

It designates a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction. This arena is conceptually distinct from the state; it [is] a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the

state. The public sphere in Habermas's sense is also conceptually distinct from the official-economy; it is not an arena of market relations but rather one of discursive relations, a theater for debating and deliberating rather than for buying and selling. (57)

Through Fraser's summary we also see an emphasis on space that helps to define specialized online publics. She uses the terms *theater* and *arena*, for example, to describe the spaces of the public sphere. And she recognizes Habermas's emphasis on discourse, discursive interaction, and the circulation of discourses, as additional frameworks for the bourgeois public sphere; in other words, there's an emphasis on the ways in which discourse functions within the public sphere. I will revisit issues of space and discourse circulation later in this chapter, as they help to frame specialized online publics.

Habermas's model is also too limiting, however, despite the above emphasis on space and the fact that Fraser finds Habermas's conception of the bourgeois public sphere to be "indispensable," to critical theory. "[T]he problem," Fraser argues, "is not only that Habermas idealizes the liberal public sphere but also that he fails to examine other, nonliberal, non-bourgeois public spheres. Or rather, it is precisely because he fails to examine these other public spheres that he ends up idealizing the liberal public sphere" (60-61). The exclusion of women from participating in the bourgeois public sphere, for example, is one such example Fraser draws upon to illustrate her argument. And Fraser shares concerns about the constraints of Habermas's public sphere with Warner and Hauser.

"*The public*," Warner argues regarding the social limitations of a singular public, "is a kind of social totality" (65, emphasis his). Using revisionist historiography, Fraser draws from scholarly work that argues the "official public sphere rested on, indeed was importantly

constituted by, a number of significant exclusions” (59). These exclusions include gender, class, and ideological assumptions of *the* public. For example, drawing on the work of Mary Ryan,

Fraser notes:

[T]he historiography of Ryan and others demonstrates that the bourgeois public was never *the* public. On the contrary, virtually contemporaneous with the bourgeois public there arose a host of competing counterpublics, including nationalist publics, popular publics, elite women’s publics from the start, not just the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as Habermas implies. (61, emphasis original)

Fraser’s analysis illuminates several publics who were otherwise ignored despite existing simultaneously as Habermas’s singular bourgeois public sphere. Hauser also problematizes Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere model for not being more inclusive of other existing publics. Hauser especially takes contention with issues surrounding an exclusive, rational-critical, and disinterested public sphere.

Hauser identifies six problems with Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere model, while developing his own conception of a more inclusive public sphere model, which I discuss below. “To move toward a model that theorizes the public sphere in a manner coincident with actual communicative practices in actually existing democracies,” Hauser posits, “we first must specify critical points of difference between rhetorically conceived communication and the normative frame Habermas has proposed” (46). Hauser’s six concerns with Habermas’s theory of the public sphere can perhaps be summarized as not being inclusive of the multiplicity of “actually existing public spheres,” many of which including participants whom are quite invested in the discussions and issues in which they participate.

Moreover, Fraser's conclusions through revisionist historiography lead her to challenge four assumptions implicit in Habermas's construction of the bourgeois public sphere. First, she questions whether individuals participating in a public sphere are able to forego differences in social distinction and prominence in order to debate as equals. Secondly, Fraser argues against the assumption that multiple public spheres are inherently a detriment to public well being, instead of moving toward more ideal democratic processes. Third, Fraser questions Habermas's assumption that public spheres should only be relegated to debating issues pertaining to the "common good," and, subsequently, deliberation about private issues and/or interests is objectionable. Lastly, Fraser argues against Habermas's assertion that there must be a distinct separation of the bourgeois public and the state.

Fraser's first three critiques of Habermas' assumptions of the bourgeois public sphere—especially the first assumption—echo Simmons's argument regarding a lack of relevancy from citizens in environmental policy debates, which I note in Chapter One. In other words, as Fraser concludes, exposing these assumptions should demonstrate social inequalities amongst individuals within publics and inequalities between other existing publics, while also limiting "the range of problems, and of the approaches to problems, that can be widely contested in contemporary societies" (77) by categorizing issues as either public or private. It is Fraser's final critique of Habermas's assumption of the separation between the public and state that I find particularly interesting for a discussion regarding the public discourse of online spaces.

Fraser argues Habermas's conception of the bourgeois public sphere creates a separation between weak and strong publics, whereby weak publics are defined as only capable of opinion-formation, while strong publics encompass opinion-formation but can also enact decision-making. Fraser ultimately concludes a post-bourgeois conception of publics is necessary by

expanding our view of what constitutes publics and considering hybrid forms of publics, which are constituted by integrating weak and strong publics:

The bourgeois conception of the public sphere, therefore, is not adequate for contemporary critical theory. What is needed, rather, is a post-bourgeois conception that can permit us to envision a greater role for (at least some) public spheres than mere autonomous opinion formation removed from authoritative decision-making. A post-bourgeois conception would enable us to think about strong *and* weak publics as well as about various hybrid forms. In addition, it would allow us to theorize the range of possible relations among such publics, thereby expanding our capacity to envision democratic possibilities beyond the limits of actually existing democracy. (76-77)

Considering Fraser's conclusions, online forums provide spaces to observe hybrid forms of weak and strong publics. In Chapter Five, for example, I will discuss a case regarding feral swine management in Michigan, where a Michigan Department of Natural Resource employee begins and sustains a thread with hundreds of other interlocutors regarding management and policy issues—to name two topics of discussion. As citizens and state employees grapple with feral swine as an invasive species, the thread provides a space where weaker publics—those of ordinary citizens, for example—coalesce with stronger publics (the DNR employee, as a representative of a state agency) to reconcile the issue. In other words, the post-bourgeois public that Fraser calls for, constituted by a variety of publics, exist, in part, in online forums.

To better understand, therefore, how specialized online publics function in online spaces, I need to further unpack theories of expanded publics before specifically framing specialized

online publics. In the next section, I will draw upon Fraser's conclusions expanding Hauser's and Warner's arguments that also call for broader views of publics.

Unpacking Expanded Views of Publics: Vernacular Rhetoric and Specialized Publics

Habermas's rise of the bourgeois public sphere, in part, focused on the importance of space as a constituting element for public deliberation and rational-critical debate. His conception of the public sphere, however, emphasized a singular public existing as distinctly separate from the state. While issues of space are important to my framework for specialized online publics, Habermas's limited view of publics has been critiqued as being too constraining. Nancy Fraser, for example, uses a revisionist historiography to argue Habermas's conception of the bourgeois public sphere failed to account for other coexisting publics. As a result, she argues for an expanded view of publics that considers multiple publics—i.e. strong, weak, and hybrid publics. Considering an expanded view of publics is important to developing my framework for specialized online publics. To further unpack an expanded view of publics, and extending Fraser's argument, I turn to Hauser and Warner, as they consider vernacular rhetoric and specialized publics, respectively. I'll begin my discussion considering an expanded view of publics by sharing an anecdote Hauser provides *Vernacular Voices*, as a way to demonstrate how he considers an expanded view of publics.

In *Vernacular Voices*, Hauser argues to “*widen the discursive arena to include vernacular exchange*” (89, emphasis his), which resonates with Habermas's discussion of the inclusion of shopkeepers and craftsmen in the rise of the bourgeois public sphere, but pushes beyond Habermas's limiting framework to include vernacular exchanges. Illustrating his claim, Hauser recalls a visit he took with his wife to Athens, Greece in the mid-1980s.

During the time of his visit, Greece was amid the 1985 election campaign for Prime

Minister. Hauser and his wife were able to witness several political party rallies. Their first night in Athens, Hauser and his wife were stuck in a traffic jam as the New Democracy party held their rally and subsequently packed the streets. Through his travels of Greece over the next week, Hauser witnessed much support for the New Democracy party, including many campaign posters similar to those he witnessed during the rally in Athens.

Upon returning to Athens the following Friday, Hauser and his wife again had the opportunity to witness another political rally. This time it was for the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) party, which happened to be the party of the incumbent Prime Minister. Hauser and his wife found themselves much more involved in this particular rally. His wife, for example, took several photographs, and they donned “boots of PASOK banners and green carnations” (Hauser 88), which created quite a scene as the two Americans returned to their hotel. Recalling the display of vernacular discourse, Hauser argues:

Vernacular political discourse such as that of the Greek election reminds us that publics deliberate in ways not confined to the orderly debates of parliamentary bodies. They take a variety of forms, suited to their time and place within the cultural understanding of their audiences[...]. They resolve issues through a variety of means that suggest and urge broad-based support, sometimes even through public responses to public arguments. (92)

Hauser’s reflection of his experience during the 1985 Greek elections emphasizes how vernacular discourse is situated in material and immaterial elements such as time, place, and audience, as he mentions. But we might also include additional elements like texts (such as the campaign posters) and, indeed, other publics and competing discourse communities (such as The New Democracy and PASOK parties).

In Hauser's example of the political displays, the Greek citizens "were assuming and also sustaining a vibrant public sphere in which shared knowledge of cultural norms moderated behavior" (Hauser 92). Expanding upon "shared knowledge of cultural norms," offers a glimpse of what Hauser refers to as vernacular rhetoric. Hauser argues that commonly "discourse is reduced to the rhetoric of political parties" (89). This perception is analogous with Grabill's argument that as a field, rhetoric and writing often gravitate toward the great speech or great text. To consider Fraser's arguments, stronger publics often have their voices and messages privileged over weaker publics, or the every day exchanges among ordinary citizens. To solely focus on discourse produced by privileged publics, or strong publics, does not allow for "serious attention of street-level give-and-take of contrary viewpoints from which a widely shared strong opinion may emerge" (Hauser 89). In other words, the seemingly mundane, everyday, colloquial, indeed, vernacular discourse of "actually existing publics," such as those that exist in online spaces, and the rhetorical strategies they employ that are "suited to their time and place within the cultural understanding of their audiences," provides a cornucopia of dynamic, vibrant discourse that helps us, as rhetoric and writing scholars, better understand the ways in which publics are constituted and how they grapple with issues of civic concern.

Let me further unpack the term *vernacular* as Hauser uses it. As I understand it, Hauser considers vernacular rhetoric, and subsequently exchanges of vernacular discourse, as the shared language of a particular community, and how that shared language is employed for rhetorical purposes. Summarizing the model of vernacular discourse in a recent book chapter, for example, Hauser and Erin Daina McClellan assert: "Hauser's (1999) model of vernacular rhetoric [...] regards the dialogue of vernacular talk as a significant way by which public opinion is developed [...]" (29). Hauser's model calls for an expanded view of publics by considering the ways in

which interlocutors write and speak in a common colloquial discourse and the impact these conversations may have on public issues. Again, to consider Fraser, Hauser's vernacular discourse model, therefore, might provide a means for expanding conceptions of publics by privileging weak(er) publics.

Hauser's model provides a glimpse into the kind of public sphere for which Habermas's model does not account. Whereas, Habermas focuses specifically on a singular bourgeois public, Hauser's model extends to consider publics that exist in everyday spaces. Hauser, therefore, provides an expanded definition of public sphere: "*A public sphere may be defined as a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them*" (60, emphasis his). In this definition, we still see an emphasis on space, as in Habermas's model, but Hauser places less emphasis on reaching conclusions through rational-critical debate. Instead, a singular public opinion is achieved through rational-critical debate "where possible," thus recognizing the multiple and polyvocal publics that exist in discursive spaces. Finally, Hauser places emphasis on "mutual interest." This moves away from Habermas's notion of disinterested publics. Indeed, interlocutors may participate in public discussions because they are invested in, concerned with, or otherwise stimulated by the topics or issues of discussion. This is a defining characteristic of what Michael Warner calls sub publics, or specialized publics, and Warner further articulates the importance of text circulation to the formation of publics.

Through Hauser, we get a definition that expands the notion of public sphere to include "actually existing publics" and the vernacular discourses that exist in these public spheres. Both Fraser and Hauser push against Habermas' singular bourgeois public sphere by calling for an expanded conception of publics. Augmenting this thread, Michael Warner argues in his book

Publics and Counterpublics: “*The public is a kind of social totality*” (65, emphasis his). Instead of thinking of the public as a singular public, or totality, Warner offers two other ways to think about publics—(1) as “a concrete audience” and (2) “the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation” (66). It’s the latter public with a focus on relations to texts and circulation of texts that is important for this project, and it’s also the public that Warner further discusses. Warner offers seven characteristics of a public that organizes around texts and their circulation (pages 67-114):

1. A public is self-organized.
2. A public is a relation among strangers.
3. The address of public speech is both personal and impersonal.
4. A public is constituted through mere attention.
5. A public is the social space created by reflexive circulation of discourse.
6. Publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation.
7. A public is a poetic world making.

Warner’s seven characteristics are underscored by the ways in which publics render themselves in public view. In other words, some publics are more representative as *the* public. This, in part, is bound up in the ideological assumptions of Habermasian rational-critical debate and the acquisition of “prestige and power” (Warner 116) that tends to disregard some publics while privileging others. For example, Warner cites poetic-expressive publics, or those with innate artistic characteristics, as publics that “lack the power to transpose themselves to the generality of the state” (116). In fact, Warner argues: “Publics have acquired their importance to modern life because of the ease of those transpositions upward to the level of state” (116). And Warner lists several reasons, including “arbitrary social closures” and “a hierarchy of faculties,” that

allow some publics to be more universally representative of *the* public than others.

But Warner also discusses publics that have no desire to be representative of *the* public. Warner calls these subpublics, or specialized publics. “There are many shades of difference among publics,” Warner declares, “as there are in modes of address, style, and spaces of circulation. Many might be thought of as subpublics, or specialized publics, *focused on particular interests, professions, or locales*” (117, emphasis mine). To further illustrate this type of public, Warner, coincidentally, uses the public of *Field & Stream* magazine: “The public of *Field & Stream*, for example,” Warner states, “does not take itself to be the national people or humanity in general; the magazine addresses only those with an interest in hunting and fishing, who in varying degrees participate in a (male) subculture of hunters and fisherman” (117). The parallels with an online public such as *Michigan-Sportsman.com* are perhaps obvious, and Warner’s explanation of specialized publics serves to emphasize a connection between shared interests and the circulation of texts and discourse as a unifying characteristic of specialized publics.

What I’ve found in Warner’s discussion of publics, therefore, is a way to think about specialized publics that exist online, and when considered in conjunction with Habermas’s, Fraser’s, and Hauser’s theories of public spheres, I have fabricated a framework for characterizing specialized online publics. The framework considers space, mutual interests, circulation of texts and (vernacular) discourse, as well as relationships to other publics as defining characteristics. In the next section, I further articulate the framework for specialized online publics.

Specialized Online Publics: A Framework

While publics and public discourse in online environments can be messy, as Grabill and Pigg suggest, drawing from theories of publics and public discourse from Jürgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser, Gerard Hauser, and Michael Warner provides an opportunity to extrapolate some characteristics of what I am calling *Specialized Online Publics*. These publics form in digital spaces around the circulation of texts and (vernacular) discourse, and exist within an ecology of other discourses. The following criteria, therefore, provide a framework for characterizing specialized online publics. Specialized online publics:

1. exist in digital spaces such as online forums.
2. rely on mutual interests among individuals and are driven by the circulation of texts and discourses around those shared interests.
3. are inclusive of vernacular discourse, and exist in relation to other discourses as part of a larger ecology.

This framework is not meant to be monolithic or exhaustive, nor is it meant to challenge Warner's seven characteristics of publics. What the three characteristics are meant to do, however, is provide some structure to the ways online publics are uniquely situated in digital environments. The framework draws from the above arguments for expanding conceptions of publics by considering specialized publics that exist in digital spaces and emphasizing the social (and cultural) milieu in which they exist. By considering relationships to surroundings, we can better understand how publics in digital spaces interact with other publics and how they evolve over time. In the following paragraphs, I will elaborate further on each of the three characteristics.

1. *Specialized online publics require a (digital) space.*

For publics to congregate, a space is necessary. In ancient Greece, the agora served as the public meeting place. In the Habermasian tradition, as in ancient Greece, the town with an emphasis on coffee houses (Britain), salons (France), and table societies (Germany) was the gathering place where rational-critical debate took place. Regardless if this space is a physical space like the agora and coffee houses, or a digital space like an online forum, publics need a space to gather and allow discussions to flourish.

Online forums are the modern day agora and coffee houses. Matthew Barton makes similar connections between Habermas's discussion of physical space and the digital space of discussion boards: "[P]erhaps online bulletin boards are the cyber equivalent of the eighteenth century salons, table societies, and coffee houses that first saw the application of rational-critical debate to political and economical issues" (185). Habermas, Fraser, and Hauser all stress the importance of space for the formation of publics that provide for more inclusive opportunities for people to participate in public discourse. For Hauser, a public requires a discursive space that allows discussions to grow organically, and Fraser uses terms such as *theater* and *arena* to emphasize space. Barton also suggests that the space of online discussion boards not only enable, but also encourage discussion, in addition to "enabl[ing] groups of writers to quickly form a discourse community..." (182). Specialized online publics often form in a digital space around topics or issues of mutual interest.

2. *Specialized online publics depend on shared interests among participants and are driven by the circulation of texts and discourse around those mutual interests.*

Specialized online publics are constituted through shared interests. Hauser's definition of a public sphere, given above, stresses that within discursive space, publics congregate "*to discuss matters of mutual interest*" (60, emphasis his). And Warner's characterization of specialized

publics focuses on “particular interests, professions, or locale” (117). A focus on shared interests among a public is a deviation from Habermas’s disinterested public. But as Hauser notes, some publics are very interested in the topics and issues they discuss—indeed, some are very passionate; others may even be fanatical.

Perhaps it’s no surprise that common interests constitute specialized online publics; yet, beyond mere constitution, mutual interests also sustain publics. The shared interests are the glue that binds specialized online publics together. But as Warner also points out, shared interests alone cannot solely constitute a public. There also has to be a focus on the texts and discourse that the public circulates.

While elaborating on self-organizing, or self-creating publics, Warner offers the following caution:

Some have tried to define a public in terms of a common interest, speaking, for example, of a foreign-policy public or a sports public. But this way of speaking only pretends to escape the conundrum of the self-creating public. It is like explaining the popularity of films or novels as a response to market demand; the claim is circular, because market “demand” is entirely inferred from the popularity of the works themselves. The idea of a common interest, like that of market demand, appears to identify the social base of public discourse; but the base is in fact projected from the public discourse itself rather than external to it.

(71)

While Warner’s chicken or egg argument challenges shared interests *solely* constituting a public, I agree, but I also contend that a common interest needs to exist at the onset of formation, providing a foothold to developing a sustainable specialized online public. To perpetuate,

however, specialized online publics must be driven by the circulation of texts and discourse relating to common interests.

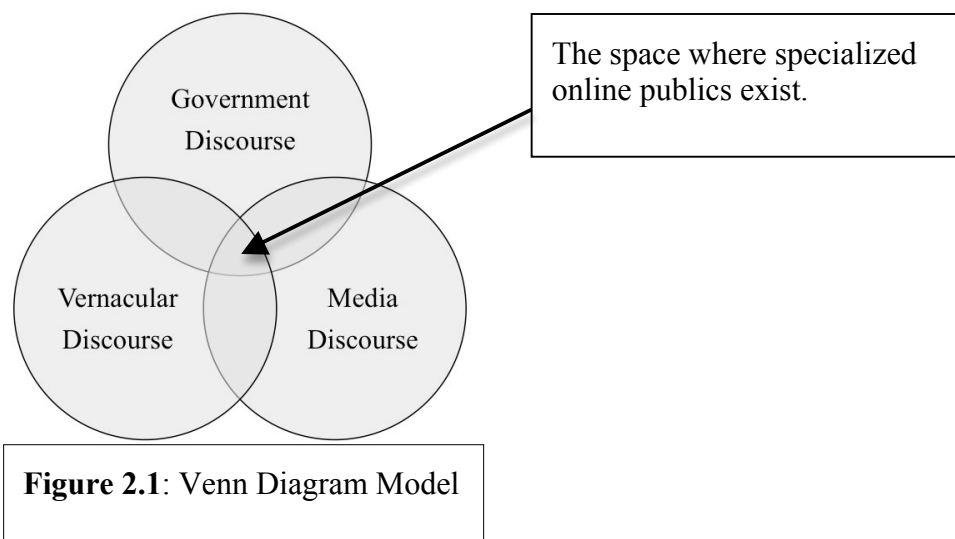
In specialized online publics such as those that exist in online discussion boards, a shared interest often leads individuals to become part of the public that congregates in the online space. But through the writing and discourse, which is focused on shared interests, these online forums become dynamic spaces where a variety of texts and discourses are circulated, including writing created by forum contributors but also including government materials, electronic media, print-based documents, and other digital texts. The third, and final, characteristic of specialized online publics accentuates the dynamic relationships of an ecology of discourse.

3. Specialized online publics are inclusive of vernacular discourse, and exist in relation to other discourses as part of a larger ecology.

Specialized online publics not only exist in digital spaces constituted through shared interests and the circulation of texts related to those interests, but there is a particular emphasis on being inclusive of vernacular discourse and on relationships with other discourse communities. Fraser, Hauser, and Warner argue for an expanded view of what defines a public and public discourse. Hauser specifically calls for the inclusion of “actually existing publics,” which places an emphasis on the vernacular, or everyday, nature of discourse used by actual publics. Similarly, Fraser argues her critique of Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere is necessary “to yield a category capable of theorizing the limits of *actually existing democracy*” (57, emphasis mine). And I’m inclined to extend Hauser’s and Fraser’s arguments to specialized online publics and posit that the vernacular discourse that exists in online forums, such as *Michigan-Sportsman.com*, provides an opportunity to consider how actually existing publics engage and grapple with issues of civic concern. Considering Fraser’s articulation of weak and strong publics, digital spaces provide an opportunity to create the hybrid publics Fraser

considers as crucial to an expanded conception of publics. Specialized online publics, therefore, are representative of actually existing publics because they are inclusive of vernacular discourse and exist in spaces where citizens have the potential to not only participate in discussions with other citizens but also with individuals of strong(er) publics such as state employees, as I will illustrate in Chapter Five.

But the (vernacular) discourse of specialized online publics does not exist in isolation, of course; they exist in relation to other discourse communities and the circulation of texts and discourses within those spaces. Participants of a specialized online public, whether directly or indirectly, intersect, traverse, negotiate, and/or reconcile a variety of discourse communities at any given time, including other discourse communities they may belong to. Initially, I'm inclined to think about specialized online publics as existing at a point where several discourses converge. This might be best illustrated in a Venn diagram (Fig. 2.1) of how specialized online publics existing on *Michigan-Sportsman.com* might be situated among other discourse communities.



A more accurate representation, however, is to consider the varying discourse communities as part of an ecology, which I will further articulate in Chapter Three.

The Venn diagram model, while illustrating a point of convergence and demonstrating relational characteristics between competing discourses, suggests a static model. As I've stated above specialized online publics exist among dynamic interactions of public discourse that is inclusive of vernacular discourses but also exists in relation to other discourses, such as government discourse and media discourse. In other words, specialized online publics not only participate in discourse amongst themselves, they must also consider print and electronic media and technical documents such as management plans and reports. An ecological characteristic, therefore, more genuinely captures the dynamic nature of how specialized online publics interact with other discourses as part of a larger whole and evolve overtime. An ecological characteristic, in other words, emphasizes relationships. I will provide a more thoroughgoing discussion of an ecological methodology in the next chapter, but first, I would like to provide a brief example of how specialized online publics exist in relation to other discourses.

In fall 2010 a bear cub was killed in Michigan from theobromine poisoning after consuming chocolate from a hunter's bait pile. While the case of the bear cub represents only one isolated incident, research indicates that theobromine poisoning creates a legitimate cause of death for bears, and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) issued a recommendation report to remove the use of chocolate as legal bait for bears.

The potential ban comprised several stakeholders, and, according to an article in the *Grand Rapids Press*, several groups including The Michigan Bear Hunters Association (MBHA) and the Upper Peninsula Houndsmen Association expressed concern with the proposed ban. Phil Hewitt, president of MBHA, suggests it's only certain kinds of chocolate that pose threats to bears; he is quoted in the article: "There is no justification for putting something out there that will kill bear. But it's not a chocolate doughnut that's doing it...it's the bitter sweet, it's the

baker's chocolate" (n.p.). In a separate *Grand Rapids Press* article, Tim Cooley, the DNR wildlife biologist who performed the necropsy on the bear cub, is quoted: "Baker's chocolate is far worse (for bears) than milk chocolate, it's more concentrated" (n.p.). While the necropsy revealed the bear cub had indeed died of theobromine poisoning from consuming chocolate at a hunter's bait pile, which included baker's chocolate, the bear cub's death was the only confirmed case of consumed chocolate bait killing a bear.

With insufficient evidence, Michigan's Natural Resources Commission (NRC), which has final natural resource policy decision-making authority, ultimately decided not to remove chocolate from the list. Members of the *Michigan-Sportsman.com* forum immediately took to the online forum discussing the decision. In the subsequent threads following the bear baiting decision, I was particularly struck by the intertextuality of the thread. Posters referenced technical documents such as the DNR recommendation report, as well as other public discourse such as older threads. Furthermore, while news articles representing the voices of MDHA and other sportspersons organizations suggest a ban on chocolate is an overreaction, many of the forum contributors expressed dissatisfaction with the NRC's ruling, and I was surprised to see such continuity among the contributors. There appeared to be a consensus among those who posted that the NRC decision was not in the best interest of the species. And many professed to discontinue using chocolate as bait or continue not using it at all; for example, FC01¹, the thread's initiator states, "Chocolate has been proven to be harmful to the point of fatal for bear's and it's use for baiting whether legal or not would be controversial at best" (n.p.).

¹ Per IRB approval, I am required to refer to all forum participants by an alphanumeric code; whereby FC=Forum Contributor. Additionally, to reflect the authenticity of vernacular exchanges, I quote posts directly, including typos and other errors.

This thread is a particularly interesting, to me, because in many ways it represents the potential new media spaces provide for the constitution of specialized online publics. The thread began shortly after the NRC made its decision, providing a (virtual) space for discussion about the decision. Contributors gathered in this space because of their shared interests in bear management, specifically the ruling on chocolate as a bear bait. The sportsmen forum offers an immediacy that print-based media does not. Most outdoor print publications in Michigan are monthly, with *Michigan Outdoor News* being an exception as a bi-monthly publication; so, an announcement in a print publication was not going to be immediate. This example illustrates how specialized online publics organize in a virtual space around shared interests and communication through a common discourse to discuss issues surrounding environmental and natural resource issues, and the intertextuality illustrates how specialized online publics exist in relation to other discourses.

While certainly niche specific, the specialized online public the sportsmen forum represents is an online community passionate about environmental and natural resource issues. It provides a virtual public space for Michigan sportsmen and sportswomen to engage in discussion and debate about issues, such as bear baiting. The site allows for publication and distribution of materials pertinent to the community, and it can be used to organize activities such as the Pt. Mouillee cleanup. But for scholars of rhetoric and writing, it provides quite a unique space for research. The forum provides a space that moves beyond examining online discussions, examining specialized online publics that exist in rhetorical ecologies. While the bear baiting ban provides a glimpse into how specialized online publics exist in rhetorical ecologies, I will provide much more extensive accounts in Chapters Four and Five through two case studies. But first I must establish a framework for such rhetorical ecologies, which I will do in Chapter Three.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I linked theories of publics and public discourse to articulate a framework for specialized online publics. Jürgen Habermas's theories on the transformation of the public sphere are at the center of discussions on publics and public discourse, and indeed, Habermas provides an entry point into my discussion on specialized online publics, as he emphasizes the importance of space. Habermas's work has been problematized, however; and this chapter draws upon three such arguments against Habermas's work.

Nancy Fraser, Gerard Hauser, and Michael Warner all argue to some extent that Habermas's conception of a singular bourgeois public sphere is too limiting in scope to offer an accurate account of genuinely real publics, who are polyvocal, inclusive of other (vernacular) discourses, and exist in relation to the circulation of texts. I provide three characteristics of specialized online publics that extrapolate from the work of Habermas, Fraser, Hauser, and Warner. Specialized online publics exist in digital spaces, are constituted and sustained through common interests, driven by the circulation of texts and discourse related to mutual interests, are inclusive of vernacular discourse, and are part of an ecology of discourse. While online discourse can be disorganized, chaotic, and messy to use Grabill and Pigg's words, this is partly because of its inclusivity and partly because of its dynamic nature. The impacts that online specialized publics make can be tangibly measured in garbage as in the Pointe Mouillee cleanup anecdote; or, they can be better understood through their contributions to the larger discussions that exist surrounding natural resources management, as in the bear-baiting example.

In the next chapter, I further expand my discussion of specialized online publics as they exist in rhetorical ecologies. I trace the use of ecology in the field of rhetoric and writing and introduce vernacular ecologies as a hermeneutical framework. Specifically, I argue that an

ecological methodology allows for a more intimate look at the ways discourses are interconnected, interrelated, and intertwined, especially in digital communities such as online forums.

Chapter Three

Rhetorical Ecologies and Public Discourse

In Chapter Two, I trace theories of public spheres through Jürgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser, Gerard Hauser and Michael Warner to establish a framework for theorizing specialized online publics. Specialized online publics are constituted in digital spaces around shared interests and the circulation of texts and (vernacular) discourses, while existing in rhetorical ecologies. In this chapter, I would like to further discuss the importance of rhetorical ecologies to specialized online publics and their contributions to issues of civic concern.

As Grabill and Pigg suggest, discourse in digital spaces, such as online forums, can be messy and seemingly chaotic. This can present challenges for scholars and researchers, as we look for specific points or instances in online conversations or threads that have direct causality with decision making. For example, Barbara Warnick's example of Greenpeace streaming images of radioactive liquid waste being released into the ocean, which I cite in Chapter One, points to a specific moment that helped to persuade the Oslo-Paris Commission and impact environmental decision-making. We can point to the streaming video as a moment or discrete unit of analysis with direct causality for impacting decision making, but online forum conversations are in fact not necessarily as discrete or static. Instead, online forum conversations are fluid, dynamic, and frequently ongoing. A methodology grounded in rhetorical ecologies can help to better understand the relationships that exist within and beyond the thread, specifically the relationships among discourses.

An ecological framework of public discourse that embraces specialized online publics sees discourse as organic, ongoing conversations. Such a framework considers how the evolution of conversation influences and is influenced by other discourses. And, as I am concerned in this

dissertation, public discourse contributes to the larger, ongoing environmental and natural resource conversations. “Public rhetoric scholarship [...],” Nathaniel A. Rivers and Ryan P. Weber argue, “could benefit from an expanded scope that views action as emergent and enacted through a complex ecology of texts, writers, readers, institutions, objects and history” (188-89). Rivers and Weber argue for an ecological perspective of public rhetoric pedagogy, providing students with an understanding of how their writing is impacted by and interacts with a variety of material and immaterial elements. Extending this argument, I offer an ecological perspective of public rhetoric beyond the walls of our classrooms and situated in the rhetorical work of specialized online publics. In doing so, I draw from many of the same influential rhetorical ecology scholars as Rivers and Weber such as Marilyn Copper, Margaret Syverson, and Jennifer Edbauer. Before I move into a discussion of rhetorical ecologies, however, I would like to further discuss why such as methodology is necessary for this dissertation.

Why a Rhetorical Ecology Methodology?

I see this project as being multifaceted. In other words, within the ecologies that exist around environmental policies and natural resources management in Michigan there are several agents, human and non-human, that influence larger rhetorical ecologies. For example, government employees, forum contributors, media members and the writings all these groups produce represent human elements of the ecology. As a researcher, there are several entry points to this study. For example, I could conduct interviews with the human agents to better understand rhetorical choices the authors are making, as well as how they see their writing creating any social change amongst environmental and natural resource issues. Or, I could, as Gerard Hauser and Kevin DePew warn against doing, isolate textual documents and perform a rhetorical analysis. I might also consider the discourse produced by government agencies that

includes policies and reports but also press releases and other media that supports or further defines policies. Because this study is multifaceted, I see the above methods as being extremely useful to contributing to the broader aims of this project—and I intend to address them in a future study—yet existing outside the purview of what I begin with in this dissertation.

Instead of beginning with interviews and textual analysis, I will begin in the digital archives of the sportsmen forum to better understand the ways in which specialized online publics exist in rhetorical ecologies and how these publics contribute to issues of natural resource management. In doing so, I have isolated two case studies to focus my analysis: deer management and feral swine management. To triangulate my data, I will situate my findings within the ecology of discourse with which the sportsmen forum exists. In other words, the digital archives are the first steps—steps this project will take up—but exist as part of a broader project (I will loosely frame this larger study in the Conclusion Chapter). “[W]e must make archives our starting point,” Linda Ferreira-Buckley argues in “Serving Time in the Archives,” “for failing to do so weakens both our historical accounts and our theorizing” (28). Ferreira-Buckley’s argument occurs as part of *Octalog II*, and therefore is directly applicable to historiographies of the field of rhetoric and writing. But I think her argument is also applicable to researching the archives of online forums.

Beginning in the archives of the sportsmen forum is important for two reasons, which align with Ferreira-Buckley’s argument. First, it allows me to establish a theoretical framework for specialized online publics, which I discuss in Chapter Two, and discuss the ecological hermeneutic that informs my analysis, which I’ll discuss in this chapter. And, secondly, by exploring the historical accounts—to use Ferreira-Buckley’s words—beginning in the forum’s

archives allows for a better insight into contemporary issues with which publics are most concerned.

In this chapter, I will trace uses of ecology within rhetoric and writing studies as a method for situating writing within discourse networks. I will outline an ecological model that emphasizes the role of specialized online publics. This model will be used as hermeneutical framework for considering public writing in online spaces, specifically the sportsmen forums' contributions to discussions of environmental policy and natural resource management. This model considers writers as citizen-writers that are actively engaged in their community-interests and the discourse that encompasses natural resource issues. I will conclude this chapter with a discussion of the methods and data sets for this study, which I draw from to establish the two case studies included in this dissertation to illustrate and support my argument.

Histories of Ecology in Rhetoric and Writing

Some terms within writing studies appear to draw their origins from biological sciences. These terms are especially prevalent when considering the influence of digital technologies on writing. Digital writing environments and media convergence, for example, draw meaning from the biological references to environment and convergent evolution. Perhaps no term with biological roots, however, has been more frequently used in rhetoric and writing than ecology.

In the introduction of *Ecology, Writing Theory, and New Media: Writing Ecology*, Sidney Dobrin provides a thoroughgoing account of the history of ecological theories of writing in composition studies. He cites Marilyn Cooper as one of the early catalysts of ecological writing theories and “perhaps the most well-known work in ecology and composition studies” (3). In her article, “The Ecology of Writing,” Cooper argues, “What I would like to propose is an ecological model of writing, whose fundamental tenet is that writing is an activity through which a person is

continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems” (367). Cooper’s ecological model, situated in the mid-1980s, pushes against the process-based model, which considers the writer as a solitary individual grappling with her/his own thoughts and writing, isolated from social forces.

What I attempt to do in this project is provide for a more organic description of the social influences and interconnected nature citizen-writers engage in as specialized online publics in new media spaces, who interact and interrelate with other elements of their environment, “engaged in a variety of socially constituted systems” to use Cooper’s words.

I have mentioned terms such as (media) *convergence* and (digital writing) *environments* to refer to two contemporary ways biological terms are used within rhetoric and writing. Convergence has its roots in biological studies of evolution. In nature, species that survive evolve and adapt in specific environments. Competing for resources (food, water, and habitat), they develop specialized traits that allow them to inhabit a niche and survive. Convergent evolution refers to species with different ancestral backgrounds developing similar traits given a common habitat or environment.

Continuing with this thread, new communication practices such as media convergent and multimodal texts exist, in part, because of the digital environments in which they are created and situated. By definition, the term *environment* refers to “the aggregate of surrounding things, conditions, or influences” (dictionary.com). It is the sum of all components that exist in a specific space at any given time. In digital writing environments, we are referring to methods of composing (invention, revision, reflection, etc.), distribution, feedback, software, hardware, peripherals, and other (digital) components, such as internet service providers. As technology shifts, methods change, old methods become extinct, and new modes and methods become

available. As these fluctuations occur the (digital) environment undergoes shifts in its makeup. It is no coincidence that terms like convergence and environment are used in similar ways when referring to writing in digital spaces. For instance, convergent texts contain several different modes of communication integrated into one text (Alexander; Mckee “Ethical”). Or, put differently, these modes with different lineages, formerly inhabiting their own communicative niches, *converge* to inhabit new communication spaces that digital technologies afford. Similar to species of convergent evolution, these new media convergent and multimodal texts are more efficient in their environment because they are situated in the contexts of contemporary communication practices that exist beyond the printed page, where particular rhetorical situations may require documents that combine textual modes with oral/aural and visual (moving and still images, graphics, animations, etc.) modes.

Much like the biological meanings of convergence and environment, the term *ecology* refers to the study of “the relations and interactions between organisms and their environment” (dictionary.com). Over the past several decades¹ the field of rhetoric and writing has sought to situate writing as an ecological phenomenon and to analyze writing through ecological methodologies. In other words, writing scholars have argued for various ecological methodologies that examine how writers and texts function, interact, and integrate within complex networks and environments. The following quotes provide an overview of how writing and rhetoric scholars have considered and used ecology in writing studies; I provide this extensive overview to clearly illustrate how the term ecology has entered into the field of rhetoric and writing:

¹ In the introduction to *Ecology, Writing Theory, and New Media: Writing Ecology*, Sidney Dobrin traces the earliest account of ecology in writing studies to Richard M. Coe’s 1974 article “Eco-Logic for the Composition Classroom.”

Marilyn Cooper (1986): [A]n ecology of writing encompasses much more than the individual writer and her immediate context. An ecologist explores how writers interact to form systems: all characteristics of any individual writer or piece of writing both determine and are determined by the characteristics of all the other writers and writing systems. An important characteristic of ecological systems is that they are inherently dynamic; though their structures and contents can be specified at a given moment, in real time they are constantly changing, limited only by parameters that are themselves subject to change over longer spans of time. (368)

Cooper highlights the importance of interactions between writers and systems of other writers. These interactions are “inherently dynamic,” as Cooper indicates, something Syverson also considers as a hallmark of writing ecologies:

Margaret Syverson (1999): I would argue that writers, readers, and texts, form [...] a complex system of self-organizing, adaptive, and dynamic interactions. But even beyond this level of complexity, they are actually situated in an ecology, a larger system that includes environmental structures, such as pens, paper, computers, books, telephones, fax machines, photocopiers, printing presses, and other natural and human-constructed features, as well as other complex systems operating at various levels of scale, such as families, global economies, publishing systems, theoretical frames, academic disciplines, and language itself. (5)

Syverson not only acknowledges the dynamic characteristics of writing ecologies, but she also calls our attention to the material and immaterial elements with which writers are interacting.

Pushing beyond the “boundaries of elements,” Jenny Edbauer considers an ecological perspective that, in part, focuses on rhetorical production and the circulation of texts:

Jenny Edbauer (2005): Rather than replacing the rhetorical situation models that we have found so useful, however, an ecological augmentation adopts a view toward the processes and events that extend beyond the limited boundaries of elements. One potential value of such a shifted focus is the way we view counter-rhetorics, issues of cooptation, and strategies of rhetorical production and circulation. Moreover, we can begin to recognize the way rhetorics are held together trans-situationally, as well as the effects of trans-situationality on rhetorical circulation. (20)

As Edbauer indicates, rhetorical production and circulation are bound in writing ecologies, situated in networks constituted of multiple contexts, and as Collin Gifford Brooke articulates, what happens in one context, or element, can impact others:

Collin Gifford Brooke (2009): Ecologies are vast, hybrid systems of intertwined elements, systems where small changes can have unforeseen consequences that ripple far beyond their immediate implications. (28)

With Brooke, we begin to move into writing ecologies as they relate to new media environments. Sidney Dobrin continues this thread by suggesting a move to developing theories that seek to comprehend writing ecologies:

Sidney Dobrin (2012): Writing, of course, is an ecological phenomenon. It is spatial, relational, and complex, and thus requires that writing specialists develop complex theories in order to attempt to understand its intricacies, functions, and possibilities. (“Ecology” 2)

The above theories of writing ecologies address rhetoric and writing studies writ large (Cooper; Syverson; Edbauer) and new media sites more specifically (Brooke; Dobrin). I list the preceding quotes in chronological order to illustrate how the term ecology has been applied in the field over the last twenty-five years, which, in all cases, emphasizes the complex, interrelated nature of writing that situates the writer in a larger network of human and non-human agents. I begin with Cooper because, as Dobrin argues, her ecology of writing theory is the most well-known theory of writing ecology within the field of rhetoric and writing and her theories have served as the foundation for other scholars to build sophisticated theories of writing ecologies. I will briefly discuss the significance of writing ecology theories before developing and discussing the ecological approach this study will employ.

Cooper begins “The Ecology of Writing” by describing composition’s focus on process pedagogy born out of research in cognitive processes. “The solitary author,” Cooper tells us, “works alone, within the privacy of his own mind” (365). The solitary author works through processes of pre-writing, drafting, and revisions, and process-based pedagogy privileges the process over the product. Cooper suggest, however that this model may be too constraining, as is evidenced in pedagogy that emphasizes student collaboration, peer-review, and writing that emerges from students’ life experiences. For Cooper, the particulars of process pedagogy are not the issue. The issue, for her, is that this model “obscures many aspects of writing we have come to see as not peripheral” (365). What Cooper proposes, therefore, “is an ecological model of writing, whose fundamental tenet is that writing is an activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of constituted systems” (367). Other scholars taking up Cooper’s call have further developed complex systems as a means for understanding writing ecology.

More than a dozen years later, Syverson situates writing ecologies within (larger) complex systems. “I would suggest,” Syverson argues, “that an ecology is a set of interrelated and interdependent complex systems; and on this basis, we first need to understand what a complex system is in order to define ecology [...]. In a complex system, a network of independent agents—people, atoms, neurons, or molecules, for instance—act and interact in parallel with each other, simultaneously reacting to and co-constructing their own environment” (3). Syverson views ecology as a set of systems, each having the potential to interact with other systems and thus influencing writing.

Both Cooper and Syverson help to establish a view of writing that envisions writing and writers as part of a series of networks that influence and are influenced by a variety of social, technological, temporal, spatial, material, and experiential entities. And Jenny Edbauer argues that as writers, we cannot avoid being a part of the networks that influence and are influenced by our writing. “To say that we are connected,” Edbauer contends, “is another way of saying that we are never outside the networked interconnection of forces, energies, rhetorics, moods, and experiences. In other words, our practical consciousness is never outside the prior and ongoing structures of feeling that shape the field” (10). All writers are always, in some way, connected to and influenced by the ecologies in which they write, and as Brooke argues, what happens in one area of a system creates ripples that reverberate through the entire network.

Perhaps the connections, influences, and interrelations within writing ecologies are never more obvious than in networked computer-mediated environments, when a writer is faced with the material elements of writing (keyboard, screen, fiber optics, readers, etc), and the immaterial elements (bits, bytes, logarithms, coding, etc.). Writing ecologies emphasize relationships, and just like other terms that rhetoric and writing borrows from biological sciences, such as (media)

convergence and (digital writing) *environment*, (writing) ecologies are understood by their biological definition that recognizes ecologies as a systems of interactions and (inter)relationships, encompassing human, non-human, material, and immaterial factors. Because of the focus on interactions, interrelationships, and interconnections, writing ecologies will provide a methodological framework for this project. Considering the history of writing ecologies in rhetoric and writing studies, I will incorporate arguments from the public sphere theorists Nancy Fraser, Gerard Hauser, and Michael Warner, who all call for an expanded view of publics.

Establishing a Rhetorical-Ecological Hermeneutic

In Chapter Two, I discuss Hauser's argument that scholars should "*widen the discursive arena to include vernacular exchange*" (89, emphasis his). To fully understand how vernacular rhetoric functions, Hauser suggests taking an "empirical attitude." Hauser elaborates: "By *empirical* I mean that the framework draws its inferences about publics, public spheres, and public opinion from actual social practices of discourse" (275, emphasis his). It is the focus on "actual social practices" that becomes relevant to this study. The *empirical attitude* framework that Hauser describes provides a space to study the discursive exchanges of publics in new media spaces. Hauser's empirical framework also provides a space to examine the entire social context, as Michele Simmons argues, by considering symbolic exchanges in the Burkean sense. Elaborating on his empirical framework, Hauser explains:

The empirical attitude of asking whether there is evidence of symbolic exchange indicating that a segment of society was actively engaged by a public problem, participated in a sphere of discourse in which the problem was explored, and formed a prevailing opinion about it requires going beyond the critic's reading of

the discourse to inquire about how citizens who were addressed and addressing one another read it. It requires challenging our understanding of text as a performance by a specific writer, speaker, filmmaker, or other author. The text, in this framework, is the dialogue, and because it is often scattered and inchoate in its form, its interactive nature requires reconstituting by the investigator. One must piece together the morass of disparate discursive evidence that indicates how statements were understood, discussed, supported, and responded to by those who were actively engaged by an issue. (276-77)

I quote Hauser in length here because his call for researchers to make sense of the inchoate (to use his term) discourse is ecological. Hauser's framework requires that researchers consider entire discursive practices involved in issues of public policy and discussion. The artifact, then, as Hauser alludes to, goes beyond the actual printed, published text. The artifact must include all elements of discourse. This means the research must trace these elements across and through a variety of texts, channels, and media. Paying particular importance to intertextuality, contexts, relationships, connectedness, and the situated nature of discursive practices becomes of the utmost importance. It's an ecological methodology.

Similarly, as Hauser argues against only analyzing textual documents, Kevin DePew posits, specifically concerning digital writing research, that "[b]y only examining the textual artifact, researchers potentially leave aspects of the text unaddressed [...]" (54). Addressing Hauser's and DePew's attention to the broader situation and considering research in digital writing environments that calls for expanded digital writing methodologies (McKee and DeVoss), I consider the (writing) ecological situations in environmental and natural resource discourse in this study.

When considering environmental issues, it's easy to look at the discourses surrounding issues as disparate, creating a cacophony of viewpoints, beliefs, and, ideas; indeed, as I discuss in Chapter Two, discourse in online forums can be messy to borrow from Grabill and Pigg. Yet, many rhetoric and writing scholars (Killingsworth and Palmer; Waddell; Simmons; Blythe, Grabill, and Riley) researching civic participation in environmental matters have worked hard at developing a space where citizen voices can be heard, particularly by government agencies, regarding environmental decision-making. In most instances, however, as Michele Simmons points out, policy decisions are already made before any citizen involvement.

New media spaces can be different, though. As scholars (Barbara Warnick, for example) have illustrated online communities can make significant contributions to matters of public concern, including issues of environment and natural resources. A view of online discourse that considers the ecology of specialized online publics can help to better understand the ways in which specialized online publics contribute to conversations of environmental and natural resource issues, and, when possible, how such discourse leads to involvement beyond the digital space of the forum to include contributions in physical spaces, such as the Pointe Mouillee cleanup. Such a methodology is important for rhetoric and writing scholars because we are interested in the ways publics contribute to issues of civic concern; more specifically, for example, technical communication scholars can follow the lead of Waddell and Simmons—among others—in an effort to find improved ways for (more inclusive) public contributions in environmental and natural resource policies.

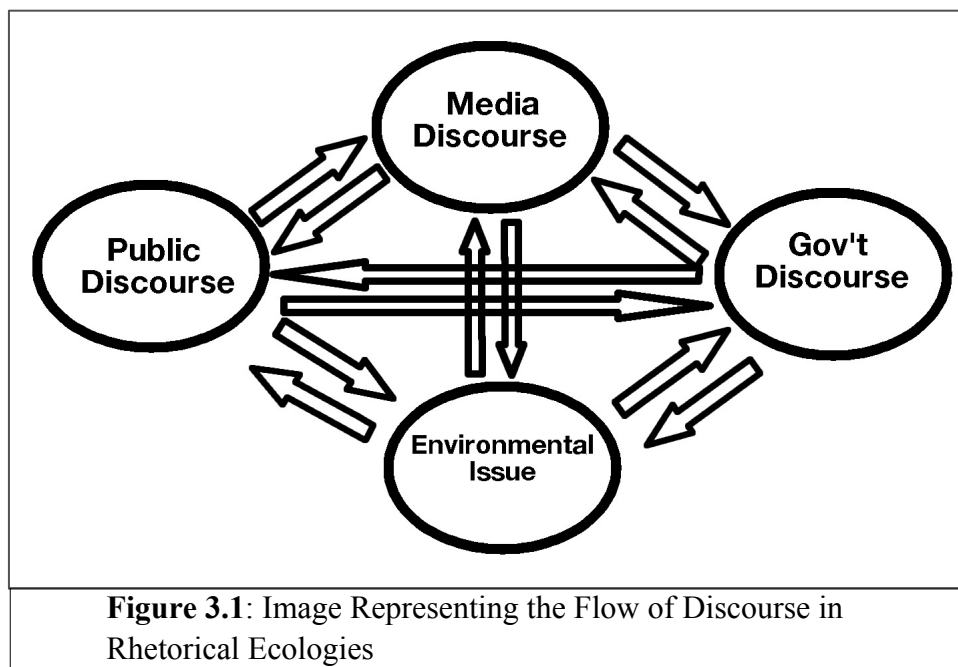
Following the decades of work in writing ecology and considering Fraser's, Hauser's, and Warner's arguments for expanding conceptions of multiple, polyvocal publics—specifically, Hauser's call to include vernacular discourse—this project considers the cacophony of

discourses as part of a larger ecology, where the vernacular exchanges occurring by specialized online publics are situated in relation to other discourses (media and government, for example). In this rhetorical ecology (see Figure 3.1), specialized online publics have the opportunity to engage in discursive practices that are influenced by and have the potential to influence the other primary discourses (government and media), in a publicly-available and archived online community. At the heart of the rhetorical ecology for this project are environmental or natural resource issues. The other discourses (government discourse, media discourse, and public—or vernacular—discourse) exist in relation to these issues.

Perhaps most importantly ecologies emphasize relationships; therefore, the rhetorical-ecological hermeneutic of this study is meant to illustrate the embedded, interconnected, interrelated, and situated nature of public discourse existing as parts of a larger whole—indeed, as part of an ecology of environmental and natural resource issues. In this model, discourse moves between and amongst all elements; as Warner notes, publics form around the circulation of texts. Because the discourses are all part of a larger whole, what happens in one, as Brooke notes, affects the others; the reverberations ripple throughout the larger whole. In this study, I am interested in these reverberations. In other words, I am interested in seeing how the contributions of the specialized online public are impacting natural resource decision-making, or other impacts their contributions might be making.

The rhetorical-ecological hermeneutic I employ in this dissertation is not necessarily meant to represent any particular flow of information; though, in some instances of environmental decision-making, information is unequally distributed between the three primary discourses in the model. For example, as Simmons points out technical experts frequently control the flow of information, by a creating one-way distribution of information. Instead, the model

represents parts of a larger whole, which emphasizes relationships, interactions, interrelatedness, and interconnectedness, and information can move outward, inward, and/or through or across a variety of channels.



As I hope to demonstrate in Chapters Four and Five, a rhetorical-ecological hermeneutic provides a means for illustrating how specialized online publics participate in and contribute to environmental issues and natural resources management practices, by looking at multiple discourses to discuss the relationships and intertextuality of those discourses. In Chapter Four, I attempt to illustrate how the sportsmen forum operates as a specialized online public in a rhetorical ecology, while also considering their contributions in relation to the deer management plan. I then move in Chapter Five to more specifically discuss the ways in which specialized online publics in rhetorical ecologies contribute to issues of natural resource management. In both chapters, my findings indicate relationships between weak and strong publics, and I make an argument for being more inclusive of online publics in natural resource and environmental issues.

A rhetorical-ecological hermeneutic emphasizes the relationship between the varying

discourses that exist in larger discussions of environmental and natural resource issues. I draw from scholarship in writing ecologies to consider this hermeneutic, as a framework for better understanding the contributions of specialized online publics in civic matters. Moving forward, I discuss my methods for collecting data and the public, media, and government discourses that constitute the rhetorical ecologies I employ in this project.

Constructing an Ecology: Methods and Sites of Data Collection

Data collection for this project spans over two years and consists of several primary sites. The specific method consist of three steps: 1) collect and archive data 2) mine data 3) develop rich case studies. Case studies present their own set of affordances and constraints for conducting and presenting research. “Because the scope of a case study is so narrow,” Mary Sue MacNealy emphasizes, “the findings can rarely be generalized; but a case study can provide insights into *events and behaviors* [...]” (195, emphasis mine). Since case studies allow for rich descriptions of events and behaviors, they provide an appropriate mechanism for presenting my data, as I describe two natural resource management issues (whitetail deer management and feral swine management) to illustrate how specialized online publics contribute to discussions of civic concern. In what follows, I will briefly discuss each of the three steps I mention above, followed by an overview of each primary site of data collection.

Methods

Step 1—Collect Data: Beginning in 2010, I collected, tagged, and (when possible) archived digital news articles and government documents in a database (DEVONthink), while also bookmarking forum threads. In conjunction with the collection of digital material, I collected articles from two main print sources, downloaded podcasts from a statewide outdoor radio show in Michigan, and bookmarked episodes of the most widely broadcast outdoors-

focused television program in Michigan, which is also archived and streamed online

Step 2—Mine Data: Doing keyword searches for *management*, *policy*, and *legislation* in the database revealed several potential environmental and natural resource issues on which to focus, including whitetail deer management, grey wolf management, Great Lakes water pollution, and invasive species such as Asian carp and feral swine. I then cross-referenced prominent issues across other collected data from the media sites listed above, in particular focusing on the sportsmen forum and the conversations with specific focus on the prominent issues by again using keyword searches; for example, I used the keywords “feral swine” as a method for identifying threads discussing feral swine. This process allowed me to see how issues were discussed in the forum and across a variety of media, particularly revealing the intertextuality of specific forum discussions. Next, I sought to locate additional print and digital sources relating to each natural resource issue, which were not located during initial data collection. Through mining data, I identified two particular case studies in which to focus my analysis: whitetail deer management and feral swine management.

Step 3—Develop Case Studies: Using the information gathered through data collection and mining, I identified two case studies, which are represented in Chapters Four and Five, respectively. Considering Robert E. Stake’s three types of case study—intrinsic, instrumental, and collective—the cases I select in this dissertation perhaps more closely align with his conception of collective case study². In a collective case study “a researcher may jointly study a number of cases in order to investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition” (437), according to Stake.

² Stake acknowledges his distinctions between the three types of case studies are meant “as heuristic more than deterministic” (438). Subsequently, I consider his distinctions as being formative guidelines rather than a rigid framework.

Considering case studies through MacNealy and Stake and the relationship of discourse through a rhetorical ecology methodology, I chose the deer management and feral swine management case studies not only because their individual cases provide for a rich articulation of public involvement in environmental and natural resource issues that interrelates, interconnects, or is otherwise inclusive of a variety to discourses, but also because collectively the two case studies help to more thoroughly explore how specialized online publics participate in issues of civic concern. In Chapter Four, I isolate Michigan's 2010 *Deer Management Plan* and the government, media, and public discourse that circulates around the deer management to illustrate how specialized online publics operate in rhetorical ecologies. Chapter Five follows Michigan's feral swine issue, an invasive species that poses significant environmental and health threats. In this case, I draw on a single forum thread that spans nearly five years and includes nearly 300 contributors.

Each case study, reflects current issues impacting Michigan's natural resources and environment. Deer management issues are always prominent in Michigan. And while it may be hyperbole to claim there are as many views on deer management as there are deer hunters, it's fair to claim discordant views surrounding deer management exist. The 2010 *Deer Management Plan*, therefore, provides an opportunity to examine how members of the sportsmen community participate and contribute to deer management in Michigan, while forming around a specific text. Using an ecological methodology that emphasizes relationships, I isolate five threads in the deer management case that are interconnected through both hyperlinks and common contributors. This case study helps to better understand the ways in which specialized online publics form around issues of natural resource management.

Chapter Five examines an instance of weak and strong public collaboration in a digital

space. A DNR employee, directly calling on the specialized online public of the sportsmen forum to participate in management efforts, initiated the feral swine thread. Because I focus my analysis around a singular thread that spans nearly five years and consists of over 1400 posts and nearly 300 contributors, I plotted all posts in a spreadsheet (see figure 3.2) to better understand both frequency of contributors and the interactions among contributors. My plot consists of 94 columns with each column representing one page from the thread (15 post/page), 299 rows representing each unique contributor (based on forum handle).

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
1	FC #	Page 1	Page 2	Page 3	Page 4	Page 5	Page 6	Page 7
2	FC02	3	2	3	6	7	7	3
3	FC06	4	2					
4	FC13	2			1	1	2	1
5	FC03		2		3	1		
6	FC15		1			1		
7								

Figure 3.2: Sample Plot of Feral Swine Thread Contributors

Therefore, moving left to right across the spreadsheet represents contributions per page. As I will discuss in Chapter Five, my plotting is more about understanding relationships amongst contributors than it is about quantifying the thread. In addition to examining the relationships that exist within the thread, I also consider relationships that exist between the thread and other discourses such as government and media.

With my methods in place, I will briefly describe the government, media, and public discourses that constitute this project's data set.

Sites of Data Collection

For this project to be comprehensive, I collected data from all three primary discourses (government, media, and public). While the number of data points within each data set is not equally distributed, I believe each primary discourse is well represented. These discourses are the primary means of mass information dissemination, as well as a source of outdoor-related

entertainment. They vary widely in their distribution, scope, and focus. But all are in-state media—that is, I did not consider national media such as *Field and Stream* or *Outdoor Life*, which cover a wide swath of issues, many not specific to Michigan. I divide the data into the following categories: government discourse, media discourse (with the following subsets: print-based publications, traditional electronic media, and digitally distributed traditional media), and public discourse. Below, I elaborate on each.

Government Discourse

Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR)

Michigan's DNR is the management and law enforcement agency with jurisdiction over Michigan's natural resources, which includes state forests and waterways. The organization's website maintains archives of a variety of documents including press releases and management policies. I use this data set as the primary voice of government discourse.

Media Discourse

Traditional Print-Based Media

There are two major outdoor publications in Michigan that I considered for this study, each with a per issue circulation of at least 20,000 copies. These publications range in focus and scope, covering topics such as recent outdoor-related news, product reviews, and tips and strategies for hunting, fishing, and outdoor recreation.

Michigan Outdoor News

Michigan Outdoor News is published every other week—26 issues per year. The publication is part of Outdoor News, Inc, which publishes similarly styled papers in six other states all within the Great Lakes region. Each publication is locally situated, however. The

editors and writers are specific to Michigan, with occasional content coming from outside of the state (the “Beyond Michigan” section, for example). *Michigan Outdoor News* has a circulation of just over 20,000 copies per issue.

Woods-N-Water News

Woods-N-Water News is published once a month, also with a circulation of slightly over 20,000 copies per issue. The publication began in 1985, producing a 16-page insert for the local newspaper in Imlay City, Michigan. Similar to *Michigan Outdoor News*, *Woods-N-Water News* contains both features and news-related articles. But, according to their Web site, *Woods-N-Water News* “is recognized as Michigan’s largest outdoor publication, with an average page count of 150 plus pages and 100,000 readers each month” (n.p.).

Traditional Electronic Media

Outdoor Magazine Radio

Mike Avery’s *Outdoor Magazine Radio* is a weekly, three-hour radio show that is currently broadcast on twenty-two stations across both of Michigan’s peninsulas. Each week, Avery discusses current outdoor news and conducts interviews with a wide range of people associated with Michigan’s outdoors—including outdoor writers and editors—on a wide range of topics. Each week after the show has aired on Michigan radio stations, it is uploaded to *iTunes* as three, one-hour free podcasts—my preferred method for obtaining and archiving this source.

Michigan Out-of-Doors Television

Formerly produced exclusively by Michigan United Conservation Clubs, *Michigan Out-of-Doors* has recently become independently produced (but still maintains affiliation with MUCC through sponsorship). *Michigan Out-of-Doors* television is the most popular outdoor television program in Michigan broadcast on seventeen channels—mostly public television

stations—across Michigan and parts of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Episodes primarily document hunting, fishing, and outdoor recreation pursuits, but because of their affiliation with MUCC, episodes occasionally contain public issues pertinent to Michigan sportsmen and sportswomen.

Digitally Distributed Traditional Media

Mlive.com

Mlive.com is a Web site that draws from several Michigan news organizations (representing some of Michigan's largest cities including Flint, Grand Rapids, and Ann Arbor) and the *Associated Press*. What makes this site ideal for this study is that the outdoor section aggregates outdoor news articles published by newspapers in the *Mlive* network. Currently, such newspapers as *The Grand Rapids Press*, *Kalamazoo Gazette*, and *Bay City Times* frequently publish outdoor-related content.

Public Discourse

***Michigan-Sportsman.com* forums**

The site originally began in 1999 as a collection of Web links to other sites with a focus on Michigan outdoors. It quickly expanded to include online forums, and as of this writing consists of over 447,000 threads, nearly 4.5 million posts, and over 72,500 members. According to the site's "About Us" page, there are over 250,000 unique users per month.

As I hope to have established thus far, the sportsmen forum is the primary focus of this study, representing a specialized online public that exists in rhetorical ecologies. The sportsmen forum serves as a space that allows for the exchange of ideas relating to the outdoors—hunting, fishing, camping, etc. And these outdoors issues are specifically situated in issues of the environment and natural resources. While discussions focus on a

variety of issues—both outdoor and non-outdoor related topics—many conversations emphasize issues of policy, regulation, and/or management.

The *Michigan-Sportsman.com* forums are publicly available, but only registered members are able to make contributions. I think it's important to note here, that I am not a member of this site. While joining has been something I have certainly considered many times in the past, I chose to remain unregistered for purposes of this research.

Conclusion

Rhetoric ecology models, as a hermeneutical framework, are situated in the decades-old tradition of ecological methodologies in rhetoric and writing studies. In particular I consider the more contemporary theories of ecologies in new media and digital spaces. A rhetorical-ecological hermeneutic allows for an analysis that focuses on the interrelationships, interconnectedness, and intertextuality of the three primary discourses: government discourse, media discourse, and public discourse. This dissertation specifically begins in the digital archives of an online sportsmen forum, and seeks to better understand the relationships public discourse from the forum has within the broader ecology in which it exists.

The next two chapters detail two case studies, which arose from my research. Chapter Four examines deer management within Michigan, specifically centered around the 2010 *Michigan Deer Management Plan*, as a primary text. Chapter Five, then, presents the case of feral swine, a Michigan invasive species. This case study centers on an extended forum conversation. In both cases, I seek to demonstrate the relationship—using a rhetorical-ecological methodology—between weak and strong publics, while

advocating for more inclusive practices that emphasize the role of specialized online publics in natural resource management.

Chapter Four

The Case of Michigan Deer Management: Creating a Space for Specialized Online Publics in Natural Resource Management

In Chapters Two and Three, I establish the theoretical and methodological frameworks for this study. Chapter Two introduces specialized online publics by drawing on theories of public discourse and public spheres. I argue specialized online publics are constituted in digital spaces, around mutual interests, and exist in ecologies of circulating texts. Chapter Three situates specialized online publics within the field of rhetoric and writing by positioning them within theories of rhetorical ecologies. Beginning with Marilyn Cooper and reflecting on the way concepts of rhetorical ecologies have evolved over time in rhetoric and writing studies, I argue rhetorical ecologies emphasize relationships; thus, rhetorical ecologies serve as a methodology for better understanding the ways in which specialized online publics exist in relation to other discourses (specifically government and media discourses) while contributing to issues of civic concern.

In this chapter, I present a case study surrounding deer management in Michigan. Specifically, I focus on five forum threads that discuss the *Michigan Deer Management Plan*, a document approved in May 2010 as the primary management strategy for Michigan's free-ranging whitetail deer population, and public meetings held in relation to the plan. Drawing from Michael Warner, I discuss in Chapter Two that specialized online publics form around the circulation of texts, and the deer management plan provides a locus for members of the sportsmen forum to organize in discussions about deer management and public participation in wildlife management policy.

This chapter is useful for a discussion on specialized online publics and public discourse regarding natural resources in two ways. First, it allows me to further illustrate the ways in which specialized online publics constitute in digital spaces around shared interests and a common vernacular, while existing in rhetorical ecologies. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, this chapter demonstrates one way in which specialized online publics participate and contribute to matters of public concern regarding natural resource management. In this instance, the conversations on the forum primarily focus on two main topics: 1) General Plan Discussion and Open House Reports and 2) Public Action vs. Public Apathy.

The above topics are important contributions because they demonstrate how specialized online publics use their shared knowledge and common vernacular to engage the management plan. The threads, as a new media space, become a place to also move beyond general discussion and raise criticism and critique of both the deer management plan—as a document—and DNR attempts to include public comment regarding the plan. While criticism and critique are important functions in any democracy, and the forum provides a space for these criticisms and critiques to be both public and archived, my findings indicate the discussion threads I isolate from the forum do little to impact any policy or management decisions beyond serving as critique and criticism.

Even after scholars have argued for more inclusive practices of public involvement in policy decision-making, including rhetoric and writing scholars such as Simmons, Waddell, and others, this case exhibits an instance where significant bifurcation between government agencies and publics still exists. While the deer management plan does take measures to incorporate public feedback—some of which are new and innovative for Michigan deer management—the DNR's inclusion of (general) public participation appears to fall somewhere between a

unidirectional delivery of information from the DNR to the public (at worst) and an obligatory, yet perfunctory, inclusion of public comment for appeasement purposes. These two purposes align with two of the four models of public participation Michele Simmons discusses in *Participation and Power*, and point to a need for using specialized online publics to help bridge the gap between strong and weak publics, which I take up in Chapter Five.

I begin my discussion with a brief overview of the *Michigan Deer Management Plan*, primarily focusing on the plan's emphasis on integrating social and biological factors for deer management. Two examples of public involvement include an advisory team of stakeholders and public open houses. Development of the plan began with the creation of a Deer Advisory Team (DAT), comprised of various constituents from a variety of stakeholder organizations. The DAT was a first for Michigan deer management, which involved stakeholders from the onset of plan development. The DAT sets the stage for a management plan that seeks to balance human-deer interactions, while considering social factors with sound scientific management. Once the plan was drafted, the DNR held several public open house meetings across the state in an effort to present the plan and take public comment. The incorporation of social management with biological management in the deer management plan is important because it creates an exigence for public participation.

Beyond the DAT and public open houses, as examples of public involvement during plan development, the sportsmen forum also serves as a space for public involvement with the plan, albeit not in any official DNR capacity. Nonetheless, forum contributors initiate threads to discuss the plan and public open houses. Employing a rhetorical ecological methodology, I isolate five threads that share multiple layers of interconnectivity. Again, an ecological methodology emphasizes relationships, and specialized online publics exist because of

relationships to spaces, texts, discourses, and interests all of which help to constitute the specialized online public. Indeed, the threads I discuss in this chapter form in relation to the shared interests of deer hunting and deer management as well as a relation to specific texts, specifically the management plan and a press release calling for public involvement, but they are also connected through hyperlinks and shared contributors, calling attention to the intertextuality of digital discourse. From these five threads, I identify two topics of discussion that help to illustrate the ways in which specialized online publics use the new media space of online forums to discuss and critique issues of natural resource management. This data is important to better understanding how online forums, as specialized online publics, and vernacular discourse participate in natural resource management. I, therefore, conclude this chapter with a discussion of contributions through critiques and criticism and calling for a more collaborative, hybrid public.

The Michigan Deer Management Plan and Public Input

In May 2010, the *Michigan Deer Management Plan* was approved as the primary management strategy for Michigan's wild whitetail deer population. The plan, consisting of eight sections, places an emphasis on the balance between scientific and social management. Appendix D of the management plan perhaps sums this up best:

Although wildlife management recommendations and decisions are based on best available biological science, they are nearly always determined within a social context where stakeholder values and priorities must be addressed. The integration of social considerations into scientific examination is necessary to move wildlife management recommendations and actions forward, especially in an environment where public knowledge and inquiry regarding management of

public resources is significant. (1)

In other words, deer must be managed based on sound scientific methods that balance local population levels with ecological factors such as carrying capacity and impact on flora and other fauna, for example, while also managing the impact of deer-human interactions, such as deer-car accidents and agricultural damage. Appendix D goes on to state that “[d]eer management can be less about management of deer than about managing the issues created by deer-human interactions and differences in stakeholder tolerances regarding those interactions” (9).

Addressing the balance between biological and social management factors, the management plan recognizes the important role stakeholders and other publics play in deer management.

Early development of the management began with the creation the Deer Advisory Team. The DAT was tasked with addressing stakeholder issues and defining the scope of deer management in Michigan. The management plan cites the following regarding DAT involvement:

To help develop a plan that is acceptable to a wide range of stakeholders the DNR, in cooperation with MUCC [Michigan United Conservation Clubs], convened the Michigan Deer Advisory Team (DAT) to serve as an advisory committee. Participants included representatives of 24 agencies and organizations that reflected a diversity of interests in Michigan’s deer resource. These interests included environmental, ecological, recreational hunting, agricultural, forestry, private land ownership and public-safety. Each organization on the DAT was selected to represent a segment of those with an interest or “stake” in deer management. Membership included both UP [Upper Peninsula] and LP [Lower Peninsula] residents. (5)

The plan places an emphasis on the apparent diversity of representation of stakeholder interests. In fact, representative organizations included individuals from Michigan United Conservation Clubs (Michigan's largest non-profit aggregate of conservation organizations with a specific natural resource and environmental lobbying emphasis), Michigan Department of Agriculture, Michigan Sheriff's Association, Michigan Farm Bureau, Quality Deer Management Association, Turtle Lake Club (a private hunt club in the northern Lower Peninsula), and three divisions of the DNR (Wildlife Division, Law Division, and Forest, Mineral, and Fire Management Division). All members had associations with some form of an organization, whether it is government, non-profit, or a sportsmen club. This is an important point I will return to later in my discussion on weak and strong publics. In short, it seems peculiar that we see no at-large members, who do not necessarily represent an organization.

The DAT was tasked with addressing 16 issues ranging from "Why should the DNR manage deer (for what reason)?" to "What role should the DNR play in protecting the future of deer hunting in comparison to or in cooperation with the hunting community, shooting sports industry, and non-government organizations?" ("Management Plan: Appendix E" 6) and providing recommendations based on their answers to those questions. While the DAT's recommendations are relevant for those interested in Michigan deer management, I will not thoroughly discuss them here. To illustrate the DAT's contributions, instead, I will offer their vision statement, titled: "A Shared Vision of Success for Michigan's Deer Management," as a way to indicate their position and methodology:

Our Vision for successful deer management in Michigan is healthy and balanced deer populations and habitats; both managed actively using science-based principles, which consider social and economic impacts, employing hunting as the

primary method for managing deer demographics, to provide a variety of values to Michigan citizens. (“Management Plan: Appendix E” 5, emphasis theirs)

The vision statement clearly identifies hunting as the dominant method for managing deer populations. Hunters, therefore, are more than stakeholders; indeed, they are central to deer management and any management plan or regulation directly impacts hunters as participant-users. Additionally, the DAT’s vision statement emphasizes a balance between social and scientific management, a point wildlife division chief, Russ Mason emphasizes in the management plan’s prologue.

In the prologue to the management plan, DNR wildlife chief, Russ Mason emphasizes, on several occasions, connections between the DNR and publics in both developing and implementing the plan; Mason acknowledges that the management plan “is the product of a partnership between the DNRE and the public” (n.p.). Mason specifically recognizes the role hunters will play in managing Michigan’s deer population: “Hunting and hunter-conservationists will be at the leading edge as our economy rebounds, and at the center of our recovery into an outdoor recreation based economy will be the management of white-tailed deer” (n.p.). And, lastly, Mason concludes the prologue with a call for involvement: “As you read this plan, I encourage you to think about how you and your friends and colleagues can join with us in this partnership to maintain healthy deer, habitats, and hunting traditions” (n.p.).

In addition to public involvement during the plan’s development, section 4.6, “Enhance Public Engagement in and Awareness of Deer Management Issues and Knowledge of Deer Ecology and Management,” of the management plan specifically identifies public engagement as one of the plan’s goals. DNR research, through public survey results, suggests that despite outreach efforts a lack of confidence from many citizens exists, especially as deer population

numbers and population estimate methods are concerned. And the plan recognizes the deeply held traditions of deer hunting and the difficulties of changing traditions: “Deer hunting and deer management opinions and philosophies often elicit strong emotions among stakeholder groups and individuals. These opinions and philosophies can stem from long held traditions and ideals, which may be difficult to change” (36). The traditions held by many hunters can be not only an obstacle for evolving management strategies, but can also create a disconnect between the DNR and hunters, who cling to their traditions. To address these long held traditions, the DNR suggests implementing an education program that presents sound scientific information, but authors recognize implementing such plans poses challenges:

Although the need for an effective deer management information and education program is widely recognized, development of such a program is not a simple task. Acquiring and incorporating input from and creating and providing information to a diverse group of organizations and individuals is challenging. Many stakeholders interested in deer management in Michigan are easily identified and willing to participate in public meetings. These groups have regular contact with DNRE^[1] staff, and take notice of DNRE press releases and outreach materials. However, there are many other individuals or groups that are much less engaged, but are equally interested or opinionated. Opinions and ideas of groups

¹ In 2010, Michigan governor, Jennifer Granholm, merged the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) into one unified department: The Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DNRE). Less than two years later, Granholm’s successor, Rick Snyder, split the DNRE back into the DNR and DEQ. Portions of this case study exist during that overlapping time when the DNR existed as both its own separate entity and when it existed as a joint department with the DEQ. In this quote, we see places where that overlap exists, as the authors use DNR and DNRE interchangeably. Some forum contributors also refer to the Department as the DNR or the DNRE. In either case, the Department’s wildlife management responsibilities remained the same.

or individuals that are familiar and comfortable with traditional DNR outreach efforts are often over-represented compared to those who are unwilling or uninterested in making the efforts necessary for interaction with DNRE staff and DNRE outreach efforts. (36)

Not to belabor my point, but the management plan is an intriguing text from a public rhetoric perspective because an exigence exists to become involved, and the above passage from section 4.6 of the plan illustrates a central issue discussed in several threads on *Michigan-Sportsman.com* forum.

Several discussions on the forum are concerned with the significance and impact—or lack thereof—public participation has on wildlife management initiatives. Using the above quote to segue into the next section, I will discuss five threads that focus specifically on the deer management plan. The five threads are not only connected through a shared topic, but four of the five threads are connected through links and several contributors participate in multiple threads, creating an interconnected discussion of the draft management plan that embodies an ecological methodology.

Five Threads, Two Topics

The *Michigan Deer Management Plan* offers several opportunities for public participation both in its development and its implementation. I have just discussed the plan's development begins with the creation of the Deer Advisory Team and during plan development opportunities existed for public comment including an open email comment period and public open houses toward the end of plan development. Additionally, one of the plan's goals is to find ways to better incorporate publics on issues of deer management. The focus on public involvement, therefore, creates an exigence for public discourse. In this section, I will discuss

public discourse regarding the management plan that took place on the forum. Specifically, the threads I discuss occur during the end of the plan's development after a complete draft of the plan was made available to the public via the Web.

The discussions I draw from below all address the *Michigan Deer Management Plan*. Following a rhetorical ecological methodology, I selected these five threads for their level of interconnectivity. All five threads are connected through the shared topic of the deer management plan. Four of the five threads are interrelated to one another through hyperlinks, and an additional level of interconnectivity exists through several contributors who participate on multiple threads, sharing experiences and insights across threads. For the purposes of this discussion, I will refer to these threads as Thread 1, Thread 2, and so on. From the five threads, I have isolated two topics to highlight public engagement. I find these threads to be useful to a conversation on specialized online publics because their participation and contributions not only reveal a significant level of engagement but also because they reveal a need to be more inclusive of online publics in natural resource management.

The two topics are as follows: 1) General Plan Discussion and Open House Reports and 2) Public Action vs. Public Apathy. The topics are important to a discussion of public discourse because they demonstrate two layers of engagement. In the first layer, forum contributors engage with the text of the management plan, respond to each other's thoughts and comments, and pull in outside sources to support a point or elicit additional conversation. This layer emphasizes using the thread as a place of general discussion. In the second layer, forum contributors use the thread to critique and criticize. Before I discuss each topic and their contributions to this chapter, I will first provide a brief summary of each thread; then I will move into discussing each topic.

Thread 1

Initiated by a question, Thread 1 consists of 11 posts primarily discussing the deer management plan. The original poster (OP) inquires if the management plan is available anywhere on the *MichiganSportsman.com* forum. While the following contributor indicates the plan is probably too long to exist on the forum, the discussion quickly turns to the plan's content. Many are encouraged by the plan. The penultimate posts links to Thread 2.

Thread 2

Another relatively short thread, consisting of three posts, Thread 2 serves an important purpose. The thread is initiated one day following the DNRE (Department of Natural Resources and Environment) press release regarding the public open houses. The OP pastes the press release in its entirety to the forum, prefacing the release with: "Here's your chance to be heard" (n.p.).

Thread 3

After Thread 1 garners only eleven posts, contributor FC15 initiates Thread 3 with the hopes of resurrecting the conversation about the management plan, explicitly evoking Thread 1. FC15 begins Thread 3 with a lengthy post discussing several points of interest from the management plan. In the beginning of the post, FC15 expresses surprise that Thread 1 did not garner more discussion, stating: "Seriously, this is a document that may very well have long term implications on the role we hobby hunters will play in managing the Michigan deer herd" (n.p.). After FC15's initial post, other contributors begin to post their thoughts and opinions regarding the management plan—some providing summarizing points, while others drawing on specific sections of the management plan. At least two contributors express their intentions to attend the meetings, both acknowledging that with so many deer hunters in Michigan, so few attend the

public hearings—a sentiment that appears to be reflected in Section 4.6 of the management plan.

Thread 3 spans 58 posts, with much of the second half of the thread revolving around attendance and discussion topics at the public open houses.

Thread 4

Thread four begins with a link to a commercial shooting and hunting site containing the DNRE open house press release. This thread began nearly a month after Thread 1 and after four of the eight public open houses had already been conducted. As a result, the third contributor, FC23, who also participated in Thread 3, posts a link to the management plan on the DNRE's website and also posts a link to Thread 3, providing other contributors a frame of reference for already existing discussions regarding the management plan. Fifty-four posts, largely focused on two topics, constitute Thread 4. Much of the first half of the thread focuses on whether or not public input impacts DNRE management plans. And, secondly, the latter half of the thread addresses whether or not the deer management plan is the first of its kind in Michigan. For purposes of this project, I will focus on the issue of public engagement at the open houses.

Thread 5

Consisting of 40 posts, Thread 5 is the only thread I discuss in this chapter that is not directly hyperlinked to one of the above threads; however, Thread 5 focuses specifically on the Midland, Michigan public open house—the final of eight public open houses—and therefore directly relates to the previous threads through topic content. Additionally, several contributors who participated in the above threads also participate in Thread 5, drawing on their knowledge of the issue and sharing their experiences. Beyond focusing specifically on the Midland open house, Thread 5 also contains contributions from a member of the Deer Advisory Team, who attended all eight open houses. There is considerable discussion about who attended the open houses,

what the open houses accomplished, and a summation of all the open houses. The penultimate post contains Section 4.6—the public engagement section—from the management plan in its entirety.

With a summary of the five threads, I now move to discuss two prominent discussion topics that emerge from the above threads. The topics discuss the deer management plan and the public open houses, while also focusing on a dichotomy that exists among sportsmen, what I call public action vs. public apathy. The topics provide opportunities to demonstrate the ways in which specialized online publics constitute and operate.

Topic 1: General Plan Discussion and Open House Reports

The first topic addresses the forums as a space where contributors can share their comments and concerns regarding the management plan and share reports regarding the public open houses, which were held after the DNR completed a draft of the management plan. Initially, I considered this topic as two separate topics of discussion. One topic covers the plan's content, while the other reporting on public open house meetings. I have combined them under a single topic for one primary reason: this topic illustrates the ways in which the sportsmen forum characterizes specialized online publics existing in rhetorical ecologies and addressing a civic exigence—the Michigan DNR's focus on public participation. Through their discussions about the management plan and reports on the public open houses, forum contributors congregate in a digital space around shared interests and a common vernacular, while drawing from a variety of texts (the management plan and news articles, for example) that exist in the rhetorical ecology of deer management in Michigan, especially the rhetorical ecologies that circulate around the *Michigan Deer Management Plan*, as a primary text. I'll provide examples from the five threads

that demonstrate how forum contributors use the digital space of the forum to share experiences, discuss the plan, and raise concerns before offering a brief analysis.

As a place to discuss the management plan, the five threads provide a space for contributors to draw on their collective knowledge of deer hunting, while providing their opinions on deer management. Thread 2, for example, includes the following contribution from FC15, regarding thoughts and opinions about the management plan, particularly many hunters' passions for antlered deer:

Michigan's obsession with shooting antlered bucks arose due to the regulation changes enacted in the 1920's. Those regs mandated 'bucks only' and offered protection to females. The ethic became embedded once the herd expanded thus validating the concept of killing the males/protecting the females. That morphed into 'tradition' and the culture of *'bucks are what real hunters shoot.'*

But that was then, this is now. The herd (in the SLP) is well beyond 'survival-mode'. They are here with a vengeance and we struggle with hunters shooting enough antlerless.

So my point is this: If governmental regulations initiated this culture of 'antlerism' (beginning in the '20's).....then regulations are the way out of the predicament. That means changing the licensing so that there is more protection offered to antlered males and less protection to the antlerless.

FC15's comments are in response to a section of the management plan that discusses a "culture shift" in Michigan deer hunting that moves away from the tradition of harvesting bucks and instead uses antlerless harvest to manage deer populations. Specifically, FC15 is concerned with

the following passage from the management plan: “The DNRE staff must actively encourage the culture shift from buck hunting to deer management even outside of the regulatory process” (22). It’s FC15’s belief that the culture shift must happen through the regulatory process. Two posts later, Thread 2’s initiator posts a link to Thread 1 containing the DNRE’s public open house press release, and states, “Looks like plan is open for discussion” (n.p.). But the thread ends one post later; thus, no additional conversations occur in response to FC15’s post.

In hopes of resurrecting a conversation about the management plan, FC15 begins a new thread, Thread 3, with a lengthy initial post discussing several other points of interest from the management plan, including a recap of the above post from Thread 2. After FC15’s initial post in Thread 3, other contributors begin to post their thoughts and opinions regarding the management plan—some providing summarizing points of the management plan as a whole, while others drawing on specific sections of the management plan. FC29, posts in response to both FC15 and another contributor who outlined several points regarding the management plan. FC29 writes:

As for altering hunter perceptions to kill more does I can only see negative incentives, e.g. earn-a-buck. Even management systems like QDM² appear to have doe harvest as a necessary evil, i.e. shoot some does to make room for some more bucks. If the last 25 years of liberal antlerless permits haven't created a new generation of hunters freed from the 1920's mindset, what will? (n.p)

FC29’s post captures other contributors’ skepticism with the plan. In other words, some

² Quality deer management (QDM) is a method of managing deer “to maintain a healthy and productive deer population with natural sex and age structures in balance with habitat. This is achieved by either voluntary or mandatory restrictions on the harvest of yearling bucks (determined by antler points)” (Hall 13). QDM differs from other methods that manage deer for purposes such as increased hunter success rates or trophy-hunting (defined by shooting large-antlered bucks). For more information on the differences between deer management practices see Hall.

are concerned with either what the DNRE will do now that they haven't been doing in the past to shift the cultural mindset of hunters, or some express concern with hunters who are only interested in seeing more deer in their localized hunting area and could care less about the management plan's macro goals.

One of the reasons for some of the above concerns is that many Michigan hunters hunt on public lands, which limits any significant individual management of those lands because individuals are prohibited from cultivating, or otherwise altering, public land; thus, QDM practices are limited to private land only. One contributor in Thread 3 mentions the public vs. private land issue surrounding quality deer management as well as differences in geographical locations across the state as deterrent factors for QDM, and, in fact, argues that QDM is only available to those who own property. To this point, FC28 responds:

The state could implement some form of [QDM] if it so choosed, but it would be met with an awful lot of public whining no doubt. It would take that implementation and a few years to see results before the complaining subsided somewhat. [T]rophy management is available to a select few is more like it. I too have hunted the [Northern Lower Peninsula] for over 30 yrs and in that time have grown very skeptical of the [DNRE] and their numbers and goal. That is what was part of the drive for me to buy my own hunting parcel and join [QDM] which I am a believer and member. (n.p)

FC28's post captures some of the skepticism hunters have with deer population estimates, as indicated in section 4.6 of the management plan, which I mention above. But, FC28's point also addresses issues of statewide quality deer management and the potential for such management

practices to be implemented on both private and public lands.

Thus far, the above forum posts are concerned with the culture of deer hunting in Michigan, especially as it relates to the particularities of QDM. Some forum contributors, such as FC15, suggest the DNR should shift the cultural mindset away from “antlerism” through the regulatory process. Other forum contributors, such as FC29, agree with FC15 and argue an increased antlerless harvest would help management practices. Yet, others, such as FC28, wonder if any statewide QDM mandates are feasible. In these ways, forum contributors engage with the management plan. But with such a range of opinions, it is difficult to ascertain a unified focus amongst forum contributors, which, I believe, inhibits a cogent civic movement for change within the plan. One reason for a lack of unity may be because the plan is already drafted, and any significant changes are unlikely to occur. I discuss a lack of interest in the next section. Before I begin that discussion, it is important for me to note that, in the above discussions, forum contributors use their shared knowledge of deer hunting and deer management to discuss the plan and exemplify the characteristics of specialized online publics.

While discussing the plan and raising concerns over its scope and implementation, forum contributors are drawing on their shared interests in deer hunting and deer management and the circulation of texts (forum posts and the management plan, for example), which exist in the digital space of the forum, to facilitate their discussion. The discussions reveal a sophisticated understanding of deer management history, as well as contemporary deer management practices and concerns. Beyond their shared interests in deer management, contributors to these threads also share a common vernacular for discussing issues pertinent to deer management discussions. As I discuss in Chapter Two, vernacular is a shared colloquial language among a particular community. Understanding the intricacies of quality deer management (QDM), for example, as a

means for better deer habitat and nutrition as well as a mechanism for advancing the age structure of bucks allows interlocutors to participate in the specialized conversations regarding deer management, while also demonstrating an understanding of the specialized online public's vernacular.

Furthermore, forum contributors are operating within an ecology of discourse from which they draw. For example, FC15 draws specifically from the management plan as a way to both create discussion but also as a way to engage with the plan—pulling in direct quotes and entire sections to develop personal commentary, support arguments, and provide examples. Other contributors pull in outside sources to raise questions and point to concerns regarding public participation.

On the last page of Thread 3, a contributor posts a line from a newspaper article discussing the Alpena open house regarding the DNRE declining to take any questions during the meeting. Two posts later, a contributor posts a link to the entire article. The article states that despite the DNRE did not take any questions, “[t]hat didn’t mean, however, the department didn’t want to set the record straight on issues and concerns that were voiced” (Schulwitz n.p.). The article seems misleading, though, as it goes on to discuss some hunters’ concerns that were expressed during the meeting. And the article never completely clarifies why questions were declined. One forum contributor is not surprised by the DNRE’s denial of questions. But FC23 offers his experience from the Novi meeting:

I know in the Novi meeting, questions about baiting and other subjects kept coming up. [The DNRE Employee facilitating the meeting] repeatedly asked that questions and comments be about the plan that was presented. That is what the meeting was for. But people continued to ask off topic questions. Did the DNRE

at the Alpena meeting decline to take off topic questions? Did they answer questions about the draft plan? The article does not say. (n.p.)

FC23 also acknowledges that the news article was not clear as to why the DNRE declined questions, and he offers his experience from the Novi meeting as evidence that the DNRE was not addressing questions and comments outside the scope of the management plan, which, as FC23 suggests, may be a reason for declining questions from the Alpena meeting.

In the above example, forum contributors pull in newspaper articles, examples from the public meetings, and directly address other posts. This level of intertextuality is indicative of the ways in which specialized online publics engage with rhetorical ecologies. Contributors use the circulation of texts both from outside and from within to perpetuate discussion. The texts, in this instance, help to shape the direction and tone of conversation within the forum. But, as Brooke offers, what happens in one part of the ecology sends ripples throughout; so, how do the conversations from within the forum move outward?

One way to address the above question, as I'll discuss in the next section, is by raising concerns about public participation as it relates to the deer management plan. Many of the public meetings, for example, were under attended, especially in relation to the total number of deer hunters in the state. As forum contributors discuss, is this an issue of lack of interest or is the DNR's model for public participation too unilateral?

Topic 2: Public Action vs. Public Apathy

The DNRE held eight public open houses to discuss a draft of the deer management plan. Six of the open houses were held across the Lower Peninsula and two open houses were held in

the Upper Peninsula. A total of 505 citizens attended all eight meetings (according to Appendix G of the management plan), with Midland (116 attendees) being the most attended in the Lower Peninsula and Newberry (71 attendees) being the most attended in the U.P. The open houses took place between February 23, 2010 and March 18, 2010. The five threads served as a space to discuss hunter representation at the meetings, raising concerns about both hunter participation—primarily focused on the importance for hunters to become involved (action) or the lack of hunter interest and participation (apathy) at the open houses—and the level at which the DNR considers public feedback. In this section I will provide examples that illustrate the action vs. apathy dichotomy. The dichotomy is important for establishing connections to Fraser and Simmons.

Early in the discussion on Thread 3, FC17 reminds forum contributors that the information for the public open houses is posted on the forum. At least two contributors express they will attend at least one meeting, and both acknowledge that with so many deer hunters in Michigan so few typically attend public hearings, in general. FC16, for example, mentions that at a deer symposium held in 2008 there were 220 in attendance, and by FC16's estimates "easily 25% of which were MDNRE employees" (n.p.); FC16 goes on to state: "Its amazing to me that in a state, that claims 700,000+- deer hunters, that so few have any interest in making their voice heard...until, of course, something happens that they don't like" (n.p.). Agreeing, FC17 acknowledges: "Have to agree its amazing how many hunters dont know or dont care about the changes taking place until it happens" (n.p.). Addressing the concerns of both FC16 and FC17, FC15 refers to the management plan to offer the following explanation:

Clearly, getting the bulk of the hunting fraternity involved prior to rule changes is a challenge to the regulators. We have a huge majority that, in my own

personal opinion, comprise the '*lowest common denominator*' factor of the hunting population. I mean by that ---that the DNR seems to recognize that they have to 'dumb down' rules and regulations for this uninformed, uninvolved majority to understand.

On page 35 of this 'Management Plan' the authors seem to support [FC17's] & [FC16's] assertions. [The management plan states]:

"Many stakeholders interested in deer management in Michigan are easily identified and willing to participate in public meetings. These groups have regular contact with DNRE staff, and take notice of DNRE press releases and outreach materials. However, there are many other individuals or groups that are much less engaged, but are equally interested or opinionated. Opinions and ideas of groups or individuals that are familiar and comfortable with traditional DNR outreach efforts are often over-represented compared to those who are unwilling or uninterested in making the efforts necessary for interaction with DNRE staff and DNRE outreach efforts." [“] (underlined emphasis is mine, not the authors)

That in a nutshell is why groups of involved & engaged hunters, such as: MUCC, MBH [Michigan Bear Hunters Association], QDMA, etc., do have the influence they have....and rightly so. The squeaky wheel phenomena is not necessarily a bad phenomena.

The engaged ones—in my experience—are often the most informed independent of DNR[E] information materials. They are the ones who more consistently seek out deer related reading with more crediblilty than the monthly hook'n'bullet tabloid or slick mag. (n.p.)

Making connections with the deer management plan, FC15 uses this intertextuality to help rationalize that many sportsmen organizations such as MUCC and QDMA are more active than individual sportsmen with no organizational affiliation. But he also points out that 700,000 deer hunters form a significant group. What follows is a discussion that ultimately questions the impact individuals and their comments can have on public policy.

As discussion begins to focus on public involvement and public impact, one contributor posts a link to a summary of 88 public comments (Appendix C of the deer management plan) from an open period for public comment via email and postal mail. The contributor indicates there isn't a common theme among the comments. Other contributors agree and point to FC15's post (above) on the importance of organized groups, while another contributor, FC18, responding to a contributor who considers such public comment periods as pointless, writes:

Pointless might be a little too strong, but the individual voice certainly doesn't carry a lot of weight, whether it's in a deer management meeting or most other venues. I do believe that it is possible for an individual to have some influence, however mild it may be, if they take the time to educate themselves on a topic, are well reasoned in their presentation, and then most significantly if they follow up with and maintain some element of ongoing communication with a key decision maker or leader. But that approach still pales in effectiveness as [compared] to being part of an organized group (this is assuming that the group has a well reasoned and defensible "platform"). (n.p.)

In considering the individual's voice, FC18 points to the importance of a rhetorically situated, well-established argument for having one's voice heard; yet, FC18 concedes the collective voice of an organization usually garners more attention and support. Shortly thereafter, FC16 attempts

to draw some common themes from the 88 comments and derives at least 13 themes, suggesting common themes do exist in the summary of comments. And contributor FC19 offers the following:

Although I do agree that there *could* be some sway in an individual approach, looking over the summary of comments it would be difficult at best to differentiate whose statement held any weight. And I'm afraid when people review those comments it will all end up as anonymous rhetoric anyway. The cynic in me has me believing that these meetings will end up as just another way to appease the public into thinking they have a hand in helping form state policy when in fact that policy will not be effected by anything that happens in these public gatherings. But the optimist in me hopes that I am wrong. (n.p.)

I provide the above lengthy examples to demonstrate the flow of conversation as it concerns the individual's voice in public policy. Many contributors are interested in how their comments, opinions, and questions will impact the plan—what, if anything, about the plan they can contribute to or otherwise influence. FC19's post above, for example, illustrates the bifurcation between hoping public comments will be valued by decision makers versus a false perception of genuine interest by decision makers. In other words, are government natural resource agencies invested and interested in working with publics to address environmental concerns, or are they constructing a façade to placate publics? Michele Simmons's work points to the former.

In her study of the Newton Chemical Depot—a case that “examines public involvement in the decision to destroy 1,269 tons of VX nerve agent at the Newton Chemical Depot” (44)—Simmons reveals that public comments did not impact the final permit, despite institutional claims indicating the importance of public involvement. In fact, Simmons argues that the

procedures for including public participation “actually worked to prevent significant participation” (43) and publics often faced obstacles for participating. Discussing these obstacles, Simmons provides the following regarding public comments at public meetings:

One indication of how significantly members of the public are allowed to participate in the decisions about environmental risks is how their concerns are reflected in the documents used to make decisions. The public comments gathered during the scoping meeting for the proposed neutralization project at the Newport Chemical Depot only appeared in an appendix of the draft EIS [environmental impact statement] and were summarized (in other words shaped) by the Army.

(49)

The above concerns regarding hunter participation at public meetings and the bifurcation between weak and strong publics appear to become more definitive as discussions across the threads progress, while also reflecting Simmons’s observations of public comment meetings for the Newport Chemical Depot case.

One of the viewpoints discussed in the five threads is the use of public open houses as a way for the DNRE to placate citizens through the façade of public input. When providing a report after attending two public open houses, FC27’s experiences lead him to believe many open house attendees leave meetings feeling like their voices have not had any impact. FC27’s report reads, in part:

All these guys are hearing at these meetings is what they interpret as a lot of dry bureaucrat-ese (e.g. "a process to establish a framework to develop a plan that doesn't currently contain any specific management activities and won't for quite some time") with occasional disconcerting sidetrips into changing something they

hold sacred about deer season (baiting, supplemental feeding, MARS, OBR [One Buck Rule], etc). *The perceptions with which they are walking away from these meetings has done nothing to convince them that the DNR is attempting to have an honest, open, two way conversation with them about deer management (production of deer for recreational consumption as they interpret it) or encourage any further participation.*

The end result is that, over time, the only people who will be attending them are an exceedingly small number people who consider esoteric deer policy discussions to be a good time and a handful of local retirees with a lot of spare time on their hands. (n.p, emphasis mine)

FC27's post reflects the perception that the public open houses do not provide an opportunity for, as he puts it, a two-way conversation. This point aligns with early discussion on Thread 4; one contributor, FC20, reflects FC27's observations:

Oh boy ... More smoke, mirrors and the appearance of due diligence.

Anyone who thinks the die hasn't already been cast for deer management in the state regardless of hunter input needs a reality check[.]

They (DNR[E]) will, however claim to be listening and will even credit the input from a group or two of traditional lap dog organizations. This dog and pony show is, and always will be a joke under the current leadership....

Just my opinion of course" (n.p.)

FC15 challenges FC20's statement calling it a "broadside" (n.p.), while FC21 argues "the DNRE cares more about the deer quality in this state than the hunters do" (n.p.). And FC30 offers the following:

I agree [with FC21]...I went to the meeting held here in Cadillac last week. For all of the complaining that has been going on, I have to say that hunter turn-out at this meeting was pathetic! Maybe 35-40 people in a room that would hold several hundred[...] I actually walked away from the meeting feeling sorry for the DNRE. It's got to be nearly impossible to try and give all interest groups some satisfaction when setting up rules & regulations. (n.p.)

According to Appendix G, there were 74 attendees at the Cadillac meeting, but similar sentiments about low turnout are expressed in other threads, as contributors discuss low participation at several of the first meetings. The first meeting in Kalamazoo, for example, had 14 attendees and the second meeting in Novi had 22 attendees. In Thread 5, FC19 offers potential reasoning for the low turnout, including hunter apathy:

If I'm the DNR I'm looking at this in several different ways.

- 1) Is it apathy or a clear understanding of the worthless nature these meetings have in the grand scheme of a public shaped management plan.
- 2) Are people satisfied with the current plan and have no desire to “change” anything?
- 3) Are people facing the realism that accompanies a general feeling of appeasement of the masses? In other words, are these meetings just a dog an[d] pony show that can later point to the DNR as seeking input for a plan they have no desire of changing regardless of what the public wants?
- 4) Has the DNR made every effort to publicize these meetings so that the public actually knows they are taking place? In other words, is the low attendance due to being unaware or being apathetic? (n.p.)

Three of the four points FC19 raises appear to center on issues of apathy and/or the perception that open houses are mandatory for public appeasement. Yet, issues of low attendance are still a concern for many contributors.

The relatively low number of attendees at each meeting has many on the forum seeking answers. In terms of comparison, though, all the open houses with the exception of Kalamazoo and Novi had over 50 attendees, with the Midland meeting being the largest turnout at 116, according to official DNR counts. What this might suggest is that at least some of the meetings had a decent hunter turnout by comparison to the first two meetings. But FC16 offers the following during a discussion in Thread 5, following the Midland open house:

I attended the Lansing meeting and was, quite frankly, disappointed in the turnout.

I also attended the meetings 2 years ago and again last year and the turnout at those meetings were equally dismal.

Hats off to the group that turned out in Midland, but even if it was 150, those numbers are pathetic, wouldn't you agree?

Out of 700,000 deer hunters in Michigan 505 showed up with plenty of notice and plenty of venues. That's .0007% BTW. (n.p.)

The above posts by FC19 and FC16 point to issues of hunter participation that exist beyond the threads. FC16's numbers are accurate, which is a cause for concern among many forum contributors. When less than 1% of the state's hunters are involved in public meetings, what are the core issues and reasons for such low turnout? Are sportsmen and sportswomen apathetic to deer management? I would say no. But, as FC19 suggests, they might be under the perception that such meetings do not yield any significant results because they only serve as a smoke screen

for due diligence? Or, do many sportsmen and sportswomen believe, as FC27's observations suggest, the DNR is not interested in having a two-way conversation? While it is difficult to answer these questions through the forum alone, the action vs. apathy dichotomy exposes a gap that exists between weak and strong publics.

Although Department of Natural Resource employees are not elected officials, in the Fraser sense of parliamentary strong publics, DNR employees are representative of a decision-making body and the deer management plan has regulatory impact on the weaker constituents consisting of sportsmen and sportswomen and all Michigan citizens. In the next section, I raise further concerns with the public open house model as a mechanism for incorporating public feedback by drawing on Fraser and Simmons, and I argue for more inclusion of publics that exist in online spaces.

Opening a Space for Specialized Online Publics in Natural Resource Management

Thus far, I have discussed five threads from the sportsmen forum that exist in relation to the *Michigan Deer Management Plan* and several public meetings that took place in conjunction with the plan's development. I have provided an overview of the management plan by focusing specifically on mechanisms for public involvement. Specifically, I discussed the creation of the Deer Advisory Team (DAT), as an aggregate of stakeholders responsible for addressing issues of deer management at the plan's inception, and I discussed several places within the plan that point to the importance of public involvement for deer management practices, including section 4.6, which focuses specifically in public participation.

I have used this conversation to hopefully accomplish two things. First, I point to how the discussions that take place regarding the deer management plan exemplify the characteristics of specialized online publics. Existing in the digital space of the online forum, contributors engage

in public writing around their shared interests of deer hunting and deer management, using a common vernacular about deer management issues—QDM, MAR, and EAB management practices, for example. And the specialized online public exists in relation to the deer management plan and the circulation of discourse from the larger ecology, which includes newspaper articles and public open house presentations.

Secondly, I hope to have illustrated the specialized online public of the sportsmen forum contributes to the deer management plan through their discussions on the forum. Forum contributors use the new media space of the online forum to engage the plan through their opinions, raise concerns about management issues, and draw attention to issues of hunter participation or a lack thereof. Their criticisms and critiques of the public open houses as places to placate the public are important functions of a democracy, and the forum provides a space to express those concerns.

The above findings, however, do not point to any specific causal relationship between forum discussions and the management plan. In other words, nowhere did I find a place where something on the forum altered the deer management plan. But according to the reports and discussions regarding the public open houses, it appears face-to-face discussions also had little, if any, impact on the plan. In fact, as Simmons finds in the Newton Chemical Depot case, public comments from the deer management plan open houses become an appendix to the plan, summarized by the DNR. What these findings indicate to me, then, is that while the Department of Natural Resources is making efforts to incorporate public participation, a bifurcation still exists between the stronger public of a government agency and the weaker public of citizen-sportsmen and sportswomen. To illustrate this point, I would like to revisit the DAT, as an aggregate of stakeholders.

Defining their role in their recommendation report (Appendix E), the Deer Advisory Team writes the following:

The DNR recognizes that the citizens of Michigan have an interest and stake in the future of deer management and should have an opportunity to express their points of view. To address this need, the DNR, in cooperation with Michigan United Conservation Clubs (MUCC), established the DAT in the fall of 2008. Our membership represents diverse stakeholder viewpoints, including 24 agencies and organizations that represent environmental and ecological interests, hunting interests, agricultural and forestry interests, public interests, and private land interests. (4)

Managing wildlife and natural resources is challenging. As the DAT recognizes, it's important to work with a variety of stakeholders to address the varying needs of individuals and organizations alike. This is not a small task. And the move to bring stakeholders into the process at its inception mirrors best practices in technical communication (see Simmons, for example), especially when there's a diversity of stakeholders. But given the above explanation, whose points of view are being expressed? The citizens of Michigan, or the 24 agencies? In other words, all members had affiliations with some form of organization; there were no at large members representing a general constituency of stakeholders. Furthermore, nothing is said about the selection process. What were the selection criteria? Who chose which agencies could or could not participate? By all indications, it appears the DNR made those decisions; thus controlling whose voices and concerns were heard and who could have an impact on the plan's development.

From the DNR's perspective, however, DAT recommendations were incorporated in the

final management plan, and several public open houses were held in which members of the public could attend and comment—those comments appear in the appendix, afterall. From this perspective there appears to be a level of accountability. But conversations from the five threads I discuss above expose issues with this level of accountability.

When considering the topic of Public Action vs. Public Apathy, many forum contributors believe hunter apathy is due to policy and management decisions already being in place before public open house and, therefore, their comments and/or opinions will be of little significance. FC19 offers this view:

Deer management concerns ...yeah OK. Nobody believes [the DNR] anymore and that is the reason nobody shows up.

The last meeting of this type I went to, I learned all I needed to know. After a particularly contentious meeting in Lansing, I asked the then Wildlife Chief if any of the input would really be considered or have any affect at all on the decision making process.

He pulled me over to the side and out of ear shot said ...no, unless some of the input fell in line with the management plans already “in the can”. I really appreciated his honesty and to this day feel he was the best Wildlife Chief they ever had. He was frustrated, passionate and honest and soon to be retired from the DNR. He left out of frustration ... really a shame but I appreciated his honesty and decided then not to waste any more time going to "hunter input meetings" ...A total waste of time. JMHO (n.p. emphasis original)

FC19's experience aligns with issues Simmons and Waddell have discussed regarding public participation in matters of environmental concern; furthermore, however, FC19's post captures a

level of interrogation that Hauser and McClellan discuss as being consistent of vernacular rhetoric. In other words, FC19 uses a personal conversation with a DNR official to demonstrate why such public meetings are a “waste of time.”

But FC19’s experiences also beg Fraser’s question: “What institutional arrangements best ensure the accountability of democratic decision-making bodies (strong publics) to their (external, weak or, given the possibility of hybrid cases, weaker) publics” (76)? To answer this question, I argue for a turn to digital spaces and the incorporation of specialized online publics in management practices. In other words, natural resource management is multifaceted, incorporating a variety of stakeholders, and the creation of the DAT for the complexities of deer management, while problematic, is certainly a good start. But a turn to engaging specialized online publics, who are indeed stakeholders, is one way to begin making stronger publics more accountable to weaker publics, and thereby working toward a hybrid public that works to address issues of civic concern. In the next chapter, I use the case of feral swine management in Michigan to help illustrate what this process might look like.

Conclusion

The discussions that emanate from the forum in regards to the deer management plan are fluid, dynamic, and complex. No consensus appears to be made; indeed, again we see the messiness that Grabill and Pigg discuss, as forum contributors discuss, critique, and raise concerns regarding the plan and public participation in deer management. The above threads, therefore, represent the complexities of vernacular rhetoric in rhetorical ecologies. In other words, it’s difficult to shift through the messiness to find any direct causal links.

Looking beyond the five threads as a space to raise critiques and concerns, there exists an opportunity to help bridge a bifurcation that exists between the stronger public of the DNR and

the weaker public of sportsmen and sportswomen. What's neglected in the deer management plan, in other words, is the inclusion of any publics that exist in digital spaces and what conversations and direct interactions with management plan authors and DNR biologists might afford both citizens and plan managers. Using feral swine management as an example, Chapter Five describes a case where such interactions did indeed occur.

Chapter Five

The Case of the Ticking Pig Bomb: Bridging Weak and Strong Publics in Digital Spaces

The public sphere is predicated on the powerful faith that rational deliberation among private citizens about matters of public concern will produce a more inclusive, empathetic, and just society. --Candice Rai, "Power, Publics, and the Rhetorical Uses of Democracy."

The state lacks the financial and human resources needed to control this species [feral swine]. Other states have spent millions of dollars trapping, shooting, and other measures to control feral swine, and have admitted it is a losing battle. --Rebecca Humphries, Former Director, Michigan Department of Natural Resources. DNRE Press Release, 10 Dec. 2010.

At the end of Chapter Four I pose a question Nancy Fraser asks in "Rethinking the public Sphere." Considering issues of accountability between strong and weak publics, Fraser asks: "What institutional arrangements best ensure the accountability of democratic decision-making bodies (strong publics) to their (external, weak or, given the possibility of hybrid cases, weaker) publics" (76)? In issues of natural resources management, I argue a turn to digital spaces and incorporating specialized online publics into policy development throughout the entire process provides for an additional layer of accountability and draws from the rich experiences and ideas of informed, engaged citizens. In this chapter, I will present a case study that demonstrates hybrid publics can exist in digital spaces to address natural resource issues. I draw on an issue created by an invasive species of swine in Michigan.

Feral swine pose significant environmental, agricultural, and public health issues, prompting an urgent need to manage the issue. As the above epigraph from former Michigan

DNR Director Rebecca Humphries indicates, feral swine management is often a losing battle, costing millions in public money. When the Michigan DNR identified feral swine as a serious environmental and health threat in late 2006, they immediately called on the state's hunters to help eradicate free-roaming swine. This direct call serves as an exigence for hunter involvement. Complicating issues, however, existing state laws classifying free-roaming swine as livestock at large and ambiguity surrounding hunting licenses, methods, and weapons presented challenges to those hunters willing to answer the DNR's call.

As part of management efforts, a DNR employee, FC02, utilizes the *Michigan-Sportsman.com*, as a space to share reports and information regarding feral swine management issues. The resulting thread spans nearly five years (August 2007-April 2012), 1400 posts, and nearly 300 contributors. The conversations quickly expand beyond sharing reports and information to include discussions about policy, regulations, and hunting methods.

This thread—and the overarching case study—is significant to my dissertation because it provides an example of stronger publics (FC02, the DNR employee) and weaker publics (the specialized online public represented on the sportsmen forum), collaborating in a digital space to address a natural resource issue. Furthermore, because the sportsmen forum functions as a digital space where public writing occurs, it's important for me, in this study, to better understand how such writing works to address issues of civic concern. Similar to Chapter Four, my data indicates no direct causality between forum discussions and any policy or regulatory changes, but my data does indicate, however, that sportsmen and sportswomen see their roles in management practices existing through their participation in hunting activities. In other words, in the case of feral swine, many sportsmen and sportswomen see their role in management existing beyond the

scope of the forum and instead situated in the activities of hunting and trapping feral swine. The forum and public writing that takes place on the forum serves to aid in those endeavors.

I will begin my discussion by providing an overview of the feral swine issue in Michigan. I will then move to discuss a 1400-post thread from the sportsmen forum, elaborating on four primary discussion categories from the thread. Following my discussion of the thread, I reintroduce Fraser's conception of weak, strong, and hybrid publics and make connections with the feral swine thread.

A Call to Action

The State of Michigan headed by the DNR and Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) began an effort in 2006 to stem the growing feral swine issue in the state. "We will take aggressive enforcement action to protect the health of legally imported swine used in hunting preserves and eliminate feral swine from the wild in Michigan, states Michigan Veterinarian, Steve Halstead, in a November 2006 *Michigan Outdoor News* article ("State to hunters" 6). In late 2006, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources began keeping records of feral swine sightings and killings across the state, and they specifically called on the state's hunters to help eradicate any free ranging swine. The same *Michigan Outdoor News* article states, "Officials from the Michigan departments of Agriculture and Natural Resources are encouraging hunters with a valid hunting license of any type to shoot feral swine (free-ranging wild pigs) in 23 Michigan counties" (6). And in addition to the call to hunters, the DNR and MDA each produced materials encouraging hunters to kill feral swine in Michigan.

The Department of Natural Resources, for example, released a flyer that depicted a wild-west-style wanted poster of an invasive swine framed by the text, "Wanted Dead" and toward the bottom, commanding, "Shoot to Kill Wild Hogs." Similarly, the Department of Agriculture

produced a thirty-second television public service announcement beginning with the image and sound of a shotgun racking a shell into the chamber and ending with: “Shoot wild hogs in Michigan. There’s no limit, and it’s legal” (n.p.). The call and subsequent publicity materials are important for establishing the exigence for hunter participation. Government agencies see hunters as an integral component to eradicating feral swine and assisting in management efforts. In the next section, I establish the need for eradication by elaborating on the environmental and public health issues feral swine present.

Hey, What’s the Pig Deal?

Feral swine are free-ranging, nonnative species of pigs (or hogs), such as Russian and Eurasian hogs many believed to have escaped from high-fence hunting facilities imported for hunting opportunities. They go by a host of names—many I use interchangeably in this chapter—such as wild boar and feral pig. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, feral swine exist in at least 35 states. “This species,” advises a USDA brochure on feral swine, “causes extensive damage and disease threats to public property, native ecosystems, livestock health, and human health” (n.p, USDA “Feral Swine”). Feral swine are prolific breeders, and their populations will continue to spread, as they are adaptable creatures, even acclimating to suburban areas. Feral swine have become such an issue across the United States, the problem has spawned television shows such as Discovery Channel’s *Hogs Gone Wild* and *Pig Bomb*.

The USDA estimates 5 million feral swine exist in the United States and identifies Texas, California, Oklahoma, and Florida as states with the largest populations. Other states such as Hawaii and Georgia also have significant feral swine populations. The USDA warns feral swine may carry over 30 diseases, including pseudorabies and swine influenza, which can spread to

domestic livestock. Michigan's DNR likens feral swine to Asian carp, an aquatic invasive species with a voracious appetite ("False Rumors"). Asian carp have steadily moved up the Mississippi River since at least the mid-1990s outcompeting native aquatic species for food and resources. They now exist on the doorstep of the Great Lakes in the Chicago Sanitary and Shipping Canal, presenting a significant threat to the Great Lakes ecosystem. In other words, the DNR considers feral swine to be a significant threat to Michigan's terrestrial landscape, just as Asian carp pose aquatic threats. Feral swine destroy native vegetation, as well as threaten the domestic hog farming industry by spreading diseases.

Because of the risks feral swine pose to agriculture, livestock, environment, and public health as well as their prolific fecundity rates, many states spend millions of dollars on eradication projects that include trapping and hunting. Often, as the above epigraph from former Michigan DNR Director Rebecca Humphries indicates, eradication efforts prove futile. And legislative obstacles sometimes create roadblocks, as is the case in Michigan.

Before the DNR called on Michigan hunters to help eradicate feral swine in late 2006, any wild hogs were considered livestock at large according to state law, which prohibited killing any swine roaming at large. After the DNR acknowledged feral swine posed significant threats to the environment and human health, they began to work with county prosecutors on a county-by-county basis to essentially forego any prosecution in the event someone shot a feral swine. In a post from the forum thread I'll discuss in more detail below, FC02 explains what the livestock at large law meant for hunters:

There is no pig "season". These animals are "livestock at large". Before last fall, no counties were opened for the take of feral swine. The Michigan Livestock at Large Law says that in the case of a feral pig, law enforcement must

take custody of the pig, hold it (alive), for 5 days in case an owner shows up to claim it, then if not claimed, it goes to a livestock auction.

The opportunity to shoot feral pigs in counties where prosecutors have agreed to not prosecute hunters for shooting feral pigs, is the best we can do right now, until this agricultural law is changed. I don't see that happening until after this budget deal goes through. So, the glass is as half full as we can have it right now. For the protection of our native game and non-game species, please shoot all pigs that you see outside of a fence. I'll keep reporting pig locations as I get them.

And thanks for all of your input, information sharing, and allowing me to participate in this forum.

The livestock at large law presents hunters with an initial hurdle when called upon by the DNR, and was not changed until HB 5822 and 5823 were signed into law in May 2010—approximately three and a half years after the DNR's initial call to hunters—allowing hunters with a valid hunting license to kill at large swine. The livestock at large issue, as my discussion of the forum thread will illustrate below, became a major focus for many forum contributors during the initial conversation, as they negotiated the ambiguous policy changes and regulations. Beyond using the feral swine thread as a mechanism for better understanding policies and regulations, forum contributors also use the online space to collaborate with each other about hunting tips and tactics and contribute feral swine reports and sightings.

What the feral swine issue presents to this study, therefore, is a unique case to explore how a specialized online public contributes to a natural resource management, while collaborating with the Department of Natural Resources in answering a call to action. Specifically, the DNR point person for aggregating and disseminating feral swine information

initiated the thread I discuss, engaging the specialized online public of sportsmen and sportswomen on the forum and tapping into their collective knowledge, experience, and vernacular. The collaboration that takes place through the thread is an example of bridging the gap between stronger and weaker publics, creating hybrid publics in new media spaces such as online forums, working toward addressing civic issues.

As I have attempted to illustrate to this point, the feral swine issue is not just a hunter issue, nor is it just an agricultural, domestic livestock, or public health issue. It's an issue that collectively impacts all Michigan citizens and encompasses many stakeholders. In using the forum thread as a primary means for collaboratively addressing important feral swine issues, forum contributors pull from the larger ecology of discourse surrounding the issue, including the three discourses important to this study: government, media, and online. In the next section, I will discuss the thread that comprises my primary data set for this case study. I first provide some quantitative data to help better understand how the thread functioned over time and who the dominant contributors were. I use this quantitative data only for contextualizing purposes because it says little about the content or topics of discussion. To address conversation topics, I isolate four primary topics.

Online Collaboration and the Feral Swine Issue: A New Media Space for Hybrid Publics

In this section, I focus specifically on one thread that spans four years and eight months (August 2, 2007-April 3, 2012, though the majority of the thread takes place between August 2, 2007-October 14, 2010), 1400 posts from nearly 300 contributors, and 94 pages (15posts/page), as of this writing. A Michigan Department of Natural Resources employee, FC02, tasked with coordinating the feral swine issue, initiated the thread as a space to gather and disseminate information regarding feral swine in Michigan. The first post in the thread echoes the DNR's call

for hunter assistance from late 2006: “[I]t is the MDNR and feral swine working group’s goal to help hunters aggressively remove feral swine from Michigan before they become a bigger problem, threatening wildlife and environmental health, human health and safety” (FC02 n.p.). As with any online forum thread, especially those that span a significant duration of time, the feral swine conversation ebbs and flows covering a variety of topics within (and a few beyond) the feral swine issue. To better understand how the thread functioned over time and determine contributor frequency, I plotted the thread in a spreadsheet, tracking contributors and posts across the duration of the thread. Plotting the thread allowed me to observe trends that occur over the course of the thread.

In plotting the thread, I observed four contributors dominate nearly 40% (see Graph 5.1) of the conversation. The thread initiator and DNR employee, FC02, contributes 319 posts to the thread, or nearly a quarter (22.8%) of all posts, which is over three times as many posts as the next contributor. At one point, a contributor jokingly refers to FC02 as “the Super Hero of Feral Pigs” in Michigan, “Faster than a government survey, more powerful than a rooting hog, and able to leap small piglets in a single bound” because of FC02’s frequent posts, updates, and clarifications. FC02 provides many hyperlinks, which link to MDNR pages containing information regarding the feral swine issue, including maps of sightings; unfortunately (especially for the purposes of this study), many of the links are now broken, no longer existing on the DNR’s website. FC02 also makes a point to keep the conversation on topic, on several occasions asking contributors who have posted off topic to not “hijack” the thread. It is clear there are specific boundaries established for the thread. Posts and topics must fall within the specific scope and frame of the feral swine issue and management thereof.

In addition to FC02, the next closest contributors, FC03 and FC05, contribute 101 (7%) and 92 (6.6%) posts, respectively. The fourth prolific contributor, FC04 contributes 41 (3%) posts. While FC03, FC04, and FC05, contribute significantly less than FC02, their contributions are no

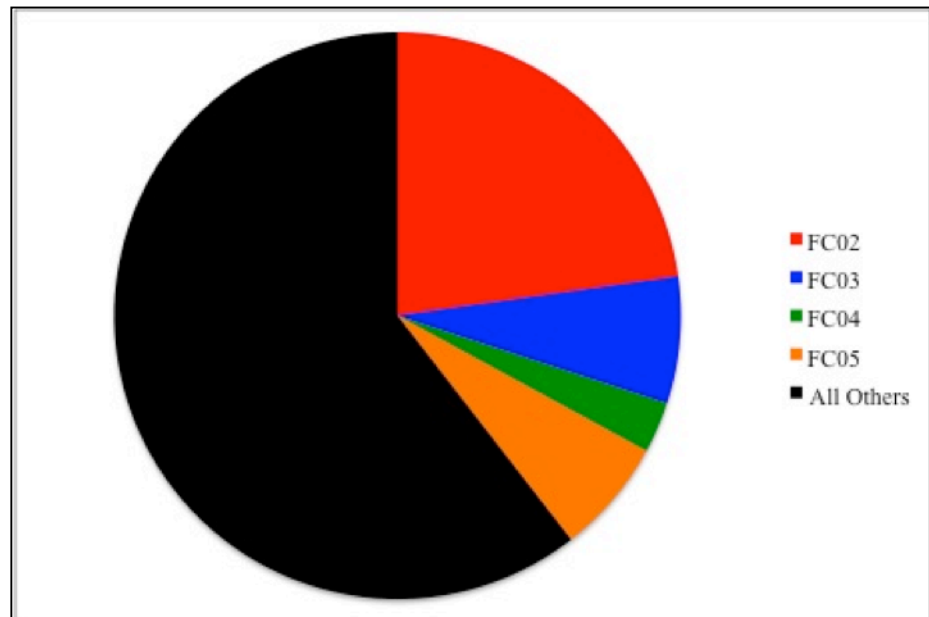


Figure 5.1: Graph Illustrating Top Feral Swine Thread Contributors.

less significant. Hunting feral swine in Michigan, for example, is a completely new experience for many Michigan hunters, and FC03 frequently offers experiential knowledge of hunting hogs, specifically with dogs. Although not unique to the top four contributors, many of their contributions address questions, issues, or concerns from other contributors new to the thread and feral swine issue. One new contributor writes: “I’m new here and glad I found this thread. I hear alot of experiance talking here and I am more than willing to listen and learn” (FC14, n.p.). This post captures the importance of the collective ethos of the thread, which begins with the top four contributors.

The top four contributors drive and perpetuate the thread through its four year and eight month span. Graph 5.2 illustrates each of the top four contributors’ posts over the duration of the thread. On several occasions, FC02 contributes seven posts per page (out of a possible 15), and on one occasion, FC02 contributes eight posts on a single page. The line graph also illustrates the ebb and flow of each of the top four contributors, as they come and go over the thread’s lifespan.

Forum page numbers (1-94) run along the x-axis, while the number of posts per page (0-9) occupies the y-axis. The line graph provides a visual illustration that captures the top four contributors as they enter the conversation, participate over a given time, and come and go throughout the duration of the thread. The red line, representing FC02's 319 posts, demonstrates how prolific her contributions were throughout the thread.

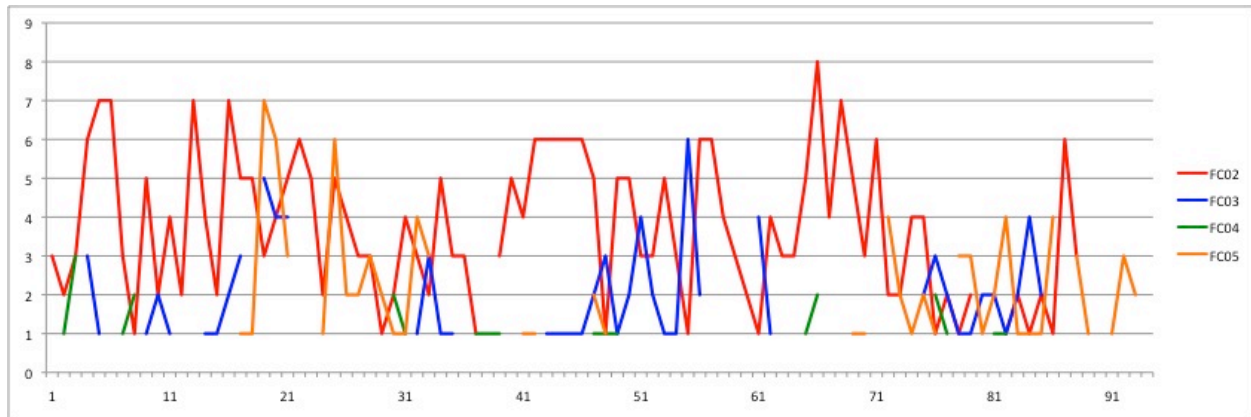


Figure 5.2: Graph Illustrating Top Contributors Over the Feral Swine Thread.

While the pie chart and line graph demonstrate total posts and frequency of posts from the top four contributors, they say little about the content. For the purposes of this study, I am particularly interested in the content of the thread as a way to demonstrate how the specialized online public of the sportsmen forum helps to bridge the gap between strong and weak publics, creating a hybrid public that works to address an environmental and civic concern. To better understand what the thread accomplishes, I have divided the thread into four general categories based on common discussion topics. In isolating these four threads, I again draw from an ecological methodology that emphasizes relationships. The categories I discuss are meant to serve as a means for better understanding how forum contributors grappled with the issue. The four topic categories I discuss are: 1) Reports and Sightings, 2) Laws and Regulations, 3)

Hunting Tips and Tactics, and 4) Policy and Legislation. Below, I will discuss each category and provide examples.

Reports and Sightings

FC02 initiates the thread, contributing the first post, and, thus, creating a space for the conversation to begin surrounding feral pig sightings from across the state as well as updates on the counties that have agreed not to prosecute someone who violates the livestock at large law by shooting a feral pig. The beginning of FC02's post echoes the DNR's call to hunters: "Thought I'd post the most recent feral pig sightings, and some updated information regarding opportunities to shoot feral swine. It is permissible in 45 counties to shoot feral swine, currently one could be carrying a small game license to legally do so, just make sure you follow all rules and regs that apply to the permit" (n.p.). Throughout the thread, FC02 continuously posts updates regarding feral pig sightings and killings as well as any new counties that have agreed to the shooting of feral swine, and she frequently encourages other contributors to post their sighting, reports, and/or shootings of feral swine.

It is perhaps interesting to note that all reported information—not just that which comes through the forum—is largely based on public participation both online and through other communication technologies. When responding to a contributor who claims the estimated feral swine population is 5000 to 5500, FCO2 not only challenges those numbers, but also provides insight into the way sightings are reported and recorded. FC02 writes:

1. [W]here did you hear that estimate.....we have no real way to do a scientific population estimate, with a biased sample of reported sightings and kills, as not everyone wants to "call the DNR"
2. I get calls on "sightings". I record the locations of these, as best the person

can describe it. And log it on my map. I then report it to the public and on here. If it's a kill, I check landholdings, and landmarks, contact biologists/witnesses, and validate the location, and then report. I do not, however.....follow feral pigs around in the wild.....it is, very hard for me to tell anyone exactly where pigs will be when.

In part, readers of the forum can glean that FC02's DNR responsibilities include fielding all feral pig reports and aggregating these reports on a map posted on the DNR's website. Many other contributors also post reports to the thread, and FC02 also receives reports through phone and email, which are reflected in updates also posted to the thread. When the map is updated, FC02 posts to the thread informing users of the updated content. As FC02 acknowledges, the reporting mechanism is not scientific, which makes it difficult to determine a population estimate, but the reports on the thread provide many contributors with a sense of the population and, perhaps more importantly, sense of feral swine whereabouts.

Setting the boundaries for the thread provides a rhetorical framework for the hybrid public. The thread serves primarily as a space to provide updates on feral swine whereabouts. But it is not simply top-down, unilateral communication, where FC02, as the DNR employee is providing all the information. Certainly, FC02 with 319 posts serves to perpetuate the thread, but the thread is a two-way conversation, where forum contributors can also post and share their experiences and knowledge. Because the forum serves as a two-way dialogue, it is a growing, dynamic space characteristic of specialized online publics in a rhetorical ecology.

In considering characteristics of specialized online publics, the sportsmen forum provides a digital space for sportsmen and sportswomen to congregate, and the thread as a space to post reports functions as a primary text that establishes the formation of this very specific

specialized online public—the hybrid public encompassing the feral swine issue. But because the thread exists in a digital space as part of a rhetorical ecology and because ecologies can adapt and evolve, the thread evolves with the feral swine issue, serving as a growing, flexible space to address other feral-swine-related concerns. In other words, while the thread was created as a mechanism for reporting sightings, it quickly evolves to include other pertinent feral swine management issues, especially the three I discuss below. The next section captures some of the thread contributors' confusions and the ways they make sense of the laws and regulations through the thread.

Laws and Regulations

After the initial post by FC02, it doesn't take long for questions surrounding regulations to begin. The fourth post asks, "Can these be hunted year around with a small game license? Is there a regulation on the type of weapon used" (n.p.)? And immediately contributors respond, as the next post addresses the question: "you may [hunt] feral swine as long as **any** season is open, provided you have a valid license for that season (n.p., bolding original) The following contributor, FC06 a self-identified law student, provides additional information:

Correct...you have to have a valid hunting license but you also are limited to the type (and/or caliber) firearm which is valid for that license/species.

For example...you better not shoot a feral hog with a 30-06 at midnight and report that you were hunting coyote (even during season...limited to a rimfire). Or shoot a feral swine with a centerfire while "turkey hunting"...etc.

There is not a feral swine "season" or license...so you technically can not just go out "feral swine shooting". It is designed so that the hunter who is already

legitimately afield (properly licensed) can shoot feral swine should one present itself.

Also the opportunity to shoot a feral swine is limited to the listed counties which have documented problems (on the DNR website). (n.p.)

As FC06's post illustrates there are very particular restrictions on whom, when, and where a hunter can legally shoot a feral swine.

The ambiguity surrounding feral swine laws and regulations is the source for much discussion on the thread, and throughout the duration of the thread, issues surrounding hunting laws and regulations similar to the above exchange frequently occur. Contributors raise questions and concerns about which firearms are legal during specific seasons and specific zones¹ and which game are legally in season. Contributors also raise points regarding the word "hunting." Since feral swine are not considered a game species and no season is established for hunting them, as FC06's post above indicates, questions and conversations arise about heading afield to solely pursue feral swine and the legalities of such a "hunt." Some use the ambiguity to voice their frustrations about hunting regulations in general, as one contributor suggests the DNR "goes out of it[s] way to make any and all hunting rules and regulations as vague and confusing as they can" (n.p.). Yet, other contributors disagree, as the immediate response to the above post argues, "The rules and regs are pretty clear regarding feral swine and any other animal for that matter if we take the time to read them!" (FC10, n.p.). Despite FC10's, disagreement, however, there appears to be enough evidence from the thread to suggest that at least some ambiguity regarding the legalities of shooting feral swine does exist. What becomes interesting for this

¹ For purposes of hunting and trapping, the DNR divides the state into three zones. Zone one is the entire Upper Peninsula, while the Lower Peninsula is split into zones two and three, which follows various highways across mid-Michigan.

project, however, is the way contributors use the thread as a space to address and sort out these ambiguities. As FC06's background as a law student in the above exchange illustrates, contributors share their various expertise to address questions and concerns, drawing on their common vernacular in the process.

As forum contributors are deciphering the laws and regulations, I see the importance of a common vernacular. Just as deer management contains specific terms and phrases such as quality deer management (QDM), antler-point restrictions (APR), and earn-a-buck rule (EAB), the broader vernacular of Michigan hunting, as illustrated above, includes understanding Michigan's hunting zones and differences in firearms, for example. Yet, what I see in conversations about laws and regulations is also a space where government discourse impacts the ecology. Many contributors to the thread express their confusion with the laws and regulations such as the ambiguity with the livestock at large law or the extent to which there is an actual feral swine hunting season. Contributors such as FC06, for example, who have the knowledge and experience of governmental laws and regulations and the common vernacular of sportsmen and sportswomen can help to bridge the gap between the government discourse and the public discourse on the forum. This is similar to the important role FC02 plays. As the primary representative of a government agency (strong public), FC02 also shares the vernacular of a Michigan sportsperson.

The sportsmen and sportswomen (as a weaker public) participating in the thread also can share their knowledge and experiences through their common vernacular. Many forum contributors, not surprisingly, are active sportsmen and sportswomen, and their collective expertise is perhaps none greater than when it comes to providing tips and tactics for killing feral swine, as the next section discusses. This is incredibly important because it serves as a primary

reason for the initial call to hunters from the DNR and a primary reason the thread exists.

Hunting Tips and Tactics

Because shooting feral swine is a new endeavor for many Michigan sportsmen and sportswomen, questions exist(ed) regarding how these feral swine should be pursued. The thread, therefore, serves as a space for addressing questions regarding feral swine hunting tips and tactics. Those unfamiliar with pursuing feral swine are able to pose questions, while those who have previous experience hunting feral swine—primarily out of state or on game ranches—could share their knowledge, all drawing on their collective vernacular to help frame and discuss hunting feral swine. For example, FC03, who raises dogs bred from hog hunting lines, writes: “Those of you setting out to hunt them.... remember, hogs have better hearing and better sence of smell than any other animal we have here in Michigan..... their sense of smell can only be compared to that of a bloodhound.... no joke” (ellipses original, n.p.). FC03’s post is indicative of the contributions experienced feral swine hunters provide on the thread.

Similarly, the following exchange also captures the experience of feral swine hunters, while also illustrating the importance of this particular thread:

FC11: I'm interested in helping with this problem as I try my hand at coyote hunting. However, i'm wondering whether my .223 Rem. rifle or my .44 Mag. carbine would be a better choice against the pigs? Also, a friend has a 9mm+P carbine, would that be enough to take a pig cleanly? If so, what would be a good 9mm+P round to use? Thank you” (n.p.).

FC12: I would recommend using the .44....the other calibers are inadequate, IMHO. Restrict your shots to short range, and use a good solid bullet to get the necessary penetration. A better choice, if it is available, is a higher powered

centerfire rifle or a 12 gauge with slugs. Good luck, happy hunting. Oh....don't forget your pig call.....OINK-OINK” (ellipses original, n.p.).

FC02: I may get the pig reports and kills but I'm not a gun expert. That's why I really like this forum. So much experience all in one place” (n.p.).

FC13: Also, don't shoot 'em like a deer... Their vitals are further forward so nail them behind the ear / neck area!!! Here's the site I posted loooong ago on the hog's anatomy!!” (n.p.)

FC13 concludes with a link to the anatomy of a hog from a site regarding Texas feral swine, a state as mentioned above with a high population of feral swine and a plethora of resources for hog hunting. And as FC02 indicates in the above exchange, the collective experience of all contributors makes the thread a rich resource for those seeking reports, answers, or advice for hunting feral swine. Interlocutors draw on their shared vernacular regarding hunting and firearms to engage in discussions about proper methods for hunting Michigan hogs.

Using the forum as a space to write and engage with other members of the specialized public around issues of hunting tips and tactics is important in identifying for this study because many of the hunters who participate in this thread see their role in feral swine management existing in the physical activity of hunting. In other words, the writing that occurs on the thread and the sharing of tips and tactics through the use of vernacular exchanges, serves to help hunters enact the initial DNR call for help. Contributors draw from their collective knowledge, experiences, and vernacular to address a civic exigence.

Because the state government specifically called on hunters to help eradicate the feral pig problem, for many new, novice, or would-be feral swine hunters, learning how to properly hunt these animals is one part of the equation—the part they can be actively involved. The other part

of the equation concerns policy and legislation at the state level, and the forum provides opportunities to discuss these concerns as well.

Policy and Legislation

Forum contributions regarding policy and legislation primarily focus on questioning existing or proposed legislation as well as providing thoughts or ideas for future policy. Early in the thread, contributors raise concerns about the livestock at large laws, which prevent many sportsmen and sportswomen from legally pursuing feral swine in all Michigan counties. FC04, directly addressing FC02, the Michigan DNR employee, suggests the DNR take a policy approach that is proactive rather than reactive; FC04 writes:

[FC02], If this is such a growing problem, some one mentioned over a thousand pigs?? then they need to amend the livestock at large laws, exclude feral swine outside of a penned area, make a clear cut season- all year - statewide – classify them as small game, and no bag limits add notes to the hunting rules informing hunters they are fair game, the PROACTIVE STANCE Or you can sit back and wait [until feral swine are] a massive issue and out of control the REACTIVE APPROACH. [...] Proactive; stop the leak, pick up the mess, amend the rules and enlist help as needed. Yes I have issues with spending all ones time in an office and losing touch with reality!!!! I consider [L]ansing an office also. (all caps original, n.p.)

FC04, one of the top four contributors to the feral swine thread, raises not only suggestions for a proactive approach, but also concerns regarding the perception that some within the DNR are bound to their offices and therefore out of touch with what is happening in the field. In the immediate next post, FC04 continues:

Ok I am bashing the DNR a lot but[,] I have never hear[d] about pigs on the loose before this post other than one shot in Alcona [County] near the [A]lpena [County] line about five years ago, why isnt this issue in the hunting guide? No guidelines[,] but [the Michigan DNR] need[s] help and it endangers – legally – the hunters at this point. [M]any sportsmen will not endanger themselves to help the DNR on this issue [...]. (n.p.)

FC04's posts reflect two similar concerns both addressing issues of policy and legislation. First, FC04 addresses the livestock at large law, which protects swine roaming outside of confinement, and thus prevents hunters in specific counties from hunting feral swine. Secondly, and related to the livestock at large laws, because the DNR has called specifically on hunters to help eradicate feral swine, FC04 raises concerns of legislation and policy that either prevents or, at least, obfuscates how hunters can legally pursue feral swine. Thus, FC04's proactive legislative approach would clear any obfuscation and pave the way for hunters in any county to assist in feral swine eradication. FC04's frustration is shared one hundred posts later by FC03, also a top four contributor to the thread. FC03 writes: "The more I read the more [I]'m starting to believe there is some higher ups in this state that don't want the hogs eradicated, something could get pushed through if it was truly wanted, [it is] done all the time" (n.p.). Eventually, of course, bills were drafted to address the feral swine issue.

In addition to discussions regarding contributors' thoughts, concerns, and proposals for policy and legislation, the forum also served as a space to post policies as bills went through the legislative process. The first bills specifically addressing the feral swine issue, HB 6338 of 2008 and HB 6339 of 2008 were introduced on July 23, 2008, nearly two years after the DNR called on hunters to help eradicate feral swine, and FC13 posted one of the bills (HB 6338) on the

forum in early September 2008. FC02 promptly responds with gratitude to FC13 for posting the bill, but interestingly no additional discussion occurs.

My findings have not indicated that discussions on this thread had any immediate causal impact on policies and legislations, despite the fact that FC02 is a direct link to a government agency. I'll discuss this link in more detail below. For now, however, I think it's still important to note the significance of the above discussions on policy and legislation.

First, just as the deer management threads provided forum contributors a space to voice their comments and concerns regarding the *Michigan Deer Management Plan*, the feral swine thread also provides opportunities for forum contributors to voice their concerns and critiques regarding feral swine management. The digital space provides an opportunity for these thoughts and opinions to become public and archived. And because they are facilitated through the forum and public, there is an audience of other members of the specialized online public from which discussions can occur. And there are occurrences where FC02 states she will raise concerns on the forum with her superiors. But, again, I was unable to locate any indication that posts of discussions influenced policy.

In addition to providing a place to voice comments and concerns, the thread serves as a space to pull in outside information regarding policy and legislation, operating within the larger ecology of feral swine management discourse. For example, FC13 posts the link to HB 6338, and later in the thread FC02 posts an updated version of the bill. Within the ecology of swine management, the thread serves as a space to aggregate this information and prompt the vernacular exchanges, such as those posted by FC03 and FC04 above. FC04's posts mentioned above demonstrate the passion and frustration many contributors express regarding the issue, as contributors draw from their personal experiences and the discourses which circulate

surrounding feral swine (FC04 referring to feral swine population estimates, for example) and attempt to impact not only conversation(s) within the thread but also the broader ecology of the feral swine issue and—potentially—legislation.

The four categories—reports and sightings, laws and regulations, hunting tips and tactics, and policy and legislation—are not meant to be static categories. In fact, readers may have noticed instances of overlap or intersections where delineations between categories are blurred, such as between laws and regulations and policy and legislation. For example, the above exchange between several interlocutors under Hunting Tips and Tactics addresses specific questions regarding the appropriate caliber firearm for hunting swine. The answer to this question not only must address the appropriateness of firearm caliber, but it must do so in the context of existing regulations and policies. In other words, overlap between categories is inevitable. I believe, the areas of overlap capture the rich and dynamic nature of public discourse in online spaces and the messiness of studying public discourse in online spaces that Grabill and Pigg discuss. One unifying aspect—that attempts to make sense of the messiness—I will discuss in the next section is that all four categories are bound by public participation. In the case of the feral swine thread I discuss above, the specialized online public, which constitutes the thread, are perpetuated through participation, and through their participation are embedded in an ecology of discourse that encompasses the feral swine issue in Michigan. More importantly, however, the sportsmen and sportswomen’s level of civic engagement surrounding this issue in collaboration with each other and FC02, as a representative of a government agency, represents a kind of hybrid public—coalescing strong and weak publics—that Fraser suggests are more grounded in actually existing publics spheres; this coincides with Hauser’s argument for expanding our conception of public spheres to include actually existing publics. In the next section, I argue the

hybrid public created around the feral swine issue, constituted of FC02, as a representative of a strong(er) public and the specialized online public of the forum, representing a weak(er) public is an example of how strong and weak publics can collaborate to address natural resource issues—something not truly achieved in the deer management case.

Becoming More Inclusive of Specialized Online Publics in Natural Resource Management

Thus far in this chapter, I have discussed the feral swine thread as a space for specialized online publics to engage the issue of invasive hogs in Michigan. Feral swine, as I discuss above, pose significant threats to the environment, agriculture, and livestock and public health. Because of these risks, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources specifically called on hunters to help eradicate feral swine, as part of the DNR's management strategy.

In addition to the DNR's official call for civic action, FC02, a DNR employee, initiated a thread on the *Michigan-Sportsman.com* forums to serve as a space to report sightings and provide updates on the feral swine issue. In doing so, FC02 establishes an online public space where government employees and a specialized online public can collaborate on addressing an issue of civic concern. The thread, therefore, characterizes the framework for a specialized online public by existing in a digital space, around mutual interests and the circulation of texts (posts, other forum threads, government documents, and various media), while utilizing the vernacular exchanges of sportsmen and sportswomen. My findings indicate forum contributors use the space to engage the feral swine issue by reporting sightings and updates, raising concerns regarding legislation and regulations, and providing tips and tactics for hunting feral hogs. These contributions are similar to my findings from Chapter Four, where forum contributors used the digital space to comment on and critique the deer management plan and public participation models; yet, I have found no direct link where discourse on the forum impacted environmental

policy or natural resource management. While my findings are unable to prove any direct causality between the discussions on the thread and policy or regulatory changes, what they do suggest is hybrid publics can not only exist for addressing natural resource concerns, but I argue *should* exist as part of management strategies. I would like to revisit Fraser's argument of weak and strong publics to help clarify my argument.

In "Rethinking the Public Sphere," Fraser addresses four assumptions Habermas makes regarding the bourgeois public sphere. The fourth Habermas assumption Fraser critiques is "that a functioning democratic public sphere requires a sharp separation between civil society and the state" (63). Fraser characterizes this separation as one between "weak publics" and "strong publics." Drawing on Habermas, Fraser notes:

[T]hat the members of the bourgeois public are not state officials and that their participation in the public sphere is not undertaken in any official capacity.

Accordingly, their discourse does not eventuate in binding, sovereign decisions authorizing the use of state power; on the contrary, it eventuates in 'public opinion,' critical commentary on authorized decision-making that transpires elsewhere. (74-75)

Because Habermas' conception of the bourgeois public sphere assumes a concrete distinction between publics and the state, "it promotes," Fraser argues, "what I shall call *weak publics*, publics whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion-formation and does not also encompass decision-making" (emphasis original, 75). Conversely, Fraser notes the development of "parliamentary sovereignty" is a "landmark development in the history of the public sphere (75) primarily because "sovereign parliaments are," Fraser writes, "what I shall call *strong publics*, publics whose discourse encompasses both opinion-formation and decision-making"

(75). Juxtaposing weak and strong publics as Fraser defines them, the distinctions are fairly simple: strong publics can not only debate issues of public concern, but also have the decision-making authority to pass policies; by contrast, weak publics' deliberation has no binding decision-making authority, only (at most) opinion formation.

Yet, in a post-bourgeois conception of publics, according to Fraser, weak and strong publics converge to address issues of public concern; she argues:

A post-bourgeois conception would enable us to think about strong *and* weak publics, as well as about various hybrid forms. In addition, it would allow us to theorize the range of possible relations among such publics, thereby expanding our capacity to envision democratic possibilities beyond the limits of actually existing democracy. (76-77, emphasis original)

Online discourse provides a space to converge strong and weak publics and push the limits of actually existing democracy. The feral swine case is a small example of how this might happen, as I hope to illustrate below.

As the DNR point person for the feral swine issue, FC02 represents a strong public and, therefore, is a direct insider for the nearly 300 other contributors participating on the thread—and the 70,000-plus members of the forum. As the example above from FC04 indicates, many contributors direct their ideas for regulation and policy changes as well as general questions and concerns specifically to FC02 because of her relationship to the DNR. And, as representative of a strong public, FC02 frequently agrees to pass on forum contributors' ideas and comments to superiors. But what's perhaps more important is the thread serves as a space for those ideas to be heard and for members of the specialized online public to participate in addressing the feral

swine issue, not in a placate-the-public way but in a way that genuinely seeks input and participation from forum contributors.

With over 300 posts spanning the duration of the thread, FC02's posts frequently serve to generate discussion. As updates are posted, new questions arise, or new contributors become curious about a sighting in an area close to their home or hunting site. In other words, FC02's contributions frequently provide opportunities for other members of the specialized online public of *Michigan-Sportsman.com* to become directly involved with the feral swine issue. It's important to point out, though, that FC02 recognizes her role as a member of the government only goes so far, at one point emphasizing on the forum that she is a lab technician not a member of the legislature. FC03, however, is quick to point out, "No, you are not just a Lab Tech...I know you [are not] a policymaker, but to us here you are much more..." (ellipses original, n.p.). As FC03's comment indicates, the position as a lab technician is not to take anything away from the role FC02 enacts on the feral swine issue or on the thread; clearly, FC02's role is vital to the thread. Furthermore, I believe, because FC02 recognizes she can only do so much it demonstrates the importance of others to provide their knowledge and contributions by becoming involved and enacting change on the forum and beyond.

As more contributors of the specialized online public become involved with the feral swine issue it serves to raise additional questions and concerns such as those regarding regulations, policies, and hunting. At the beginning of the thread, for example, when questions of rules and regulations arise, FC06, the self-identified law student, draws on his experiences as a law student and member of the specialized online public to help address uncertainties and ambiguities of the law. Additionally, FC03 provides his insider knowledge on hunting tips and tactics extending from his experiences breeding dogs from hog-hunting lineages, and FC03 also

frequently provides insights on the complexities (and dangers) of hunting feral swine, informing many of the sportsmen and sportswomen of Michigan who are unfamiliar with hunting these animals.

Together, FC02 and the other contributors coalesce on the thread to address the feral swine issue. Because feral swine are such a new threat to many in Michigan—from government and civilian perspectives—there are many questions and ambiguities that exist. FC02 initiates the thread as a space to provide sightings and updates; thus, tapping into the rich resource that exists on the forum. This direct call to the specialized online public on the forum exists as an unofficial mode for management; yet, it creates an opportunity for strong and weak publics to collaborate on an issue of civic concern. Forum contributors are invested, passionate, and knowledgeable. FC02 recognizes this and the potential for forming a hybrid public that works together on a natural resource issue. On the other hand, forum contributors can move beyond only forming opinions by finding ways to become directly involved with the issue. And while it appears no official policies or regulations are altered by these contributions, my findings show many see their contributions also existing beyond the scope of the forum.

Moving from Virtual Spaces to Physical Spaces

The feral swine case I have outlined in this chapter represents an issue that is embedded in several discourses, or spheres. The primary site of exploration for this chapter is a singular forum thread that spans nearly five years, 1400 posts, and almost 300 contributors. Yet, this thread exists in relation to the other discourses—media and government—that encompass the feral swine issue, as Michigan hunters, specifically those that exist as part of the specialized online public of *Michigan-Sportsman.com*, respond to the state's call for action. And for many

forum contributors, their mechanism for impacting change in the feral swine issue is utilizing the virtual space of the forum to enact civic participation in physical spaces.

The primary way contributors move from the virtual space to the physical space is through actively hunting feral swine. The thread, therefore, serves as a means to inform hunters on where to hunt feral swine, appropriate hunting methods for hunting swine, and the legalities of hunting feral swine. These methods are illustrated in three of the four categories listed above that dominate the thread's conversation. Because the thread covers such a long time span, readers (and researchers) can see how the feral swine issue on the forum evolves over time, exposing the messiness of this process. While certainly messy, as contributors sort out the legalities of feral swine hunting at the beginning of the thread, for example, the messiness also exposes the ecological nature of the thread. Contributors reach out and pull in external sources from popular media and government sites to help explain questions, expose issues, or raise questions. This level of intertextuality highlights ecological dimensions of civic engagement. In other words, the specialized online public operates within an ecological paradigm because forum contributors are in constant relation to the surrounding discourse, filtering, processing, and responding to government and media discourse within the broader ecology. In addition to the rhetorical moves of intertextuality, users also rely on the collective ethos of the community—the knowledge and experience of all members—as well as the external ethos of specific members, such as FC02's status as the DNR point person on feral swine.

The second way members of the online community work to move beyond the virtual space of the forum and affect change is through legislative participation. This method covers the fourth dominate category from above, in which I provide examples of members posting their

thoughts, ideas, and concerns regarding legislation and policy surrounding the feral swine issue. But a movement occurs about halfway through the thread in early spring 2009. FC03 writes: “I need to know exactly who to get ahold of about feral swine hunting law changes [...] Do they want these dogs eliminated or not???????? This is just crazy” (n.p.). FC02 immediately responds, “Talk at NRC [Natural Resources Commission] meetings, Contact Legislators, Call or write the DNR, not just me....higher up....lets get the word out....” (n.p.). What follows is a conversation among several contributors posting links to NRC meeting dates/times, town hall meetings, and making additional suggestions for getting involved at the policy level. Unfortunately, there is no way to tell if there is any follow-up on this call for action, as no contributors post on their activities. But it serves to further demonstrate how contributors use the thread to circulate information across the ecology. The virtual space of the forum provides members not only a space to form a hybrid public and voice their legislative ideas and concerns, but it also provides a space to mobilize efforts in physical spaces, just as the Pointe Mouillee cleanup illustrates.

Conclusion

The feral swine issue in Michigan presents an interesting case study that allows me to better understand the ways in which specialized online publics participate in issues of environmental and natural resource concerns. As state wildlife managers and citizens grapple with the growing problem of feral swine, the forum serves as a space where government agents and specialized online publics contribute their expertise, experiences, and knowledge, through a common vernacular and existing in an ecology of circulating discourses to answer and pose questions, provide reports, and move beyond the forum to address the issue. The hybrid publics created in online spaces where strong and weak publics not only co-exist, but also collaborate is

one step that can help bridge the bifurcation that often exists in unilateral, top-down policy-making.

Conclusion

Contributions, Limitations, and Future Research

As I reflect on my two-year project in the archives of *Michigan-Sportsman.com*, I am still struck by the variety of discussion and the passion that many of the contributors bring to the forum. The case studies I present in this study allow for a glimpse into this specialized online public, and their contributions to Michigan's natural resources. This study has presented me with a foundation for future research, but before I discuss these plans, I will revisit my research questions in order to address my findings. I will then discuss the contributions and implications this study makes to the field of rhetoric and writing, followed by limitations of the study. I conclude by outlining my future research agenda.

Addressing Research Questions

In this section I will address the research questions which perpetuated this project. My research findings revealed that RQ2 and RQ3 led to very similar answers; therefore, I have combined them here, as I summarize my findings. In short, I see my research questions addressing two areas: 1) characterizing online publics in niche specific online communities and 2) exploring the contributions of specialized online publics to natural resource management decision-making. I begin by addressing RQ1 before moving to RQ2 and RQ3.

RQ1. What can we learn about how publics constitute and operate in online spaces, specifically those publics that exist in specific, or niche, online communities?

In fall of 2009, conversation on the feral swine thread was still discussing ways in which sportsmen and sportswomen might get involved with feral swine management beyond the forum. One contributor asks FC02, why the DNR does not keep a list of hunters willing to pursue feral swine, so when a property owner calls with a report, a list of hunters in the area is available for

contact. FC02 responds, in part, that the DNR has advised “to not divulge private property owner info. to the general public” (n.p.). FC04 responds: “hey dont [sic] lump us Hunters with the ‘general Public’ [...]” (n.p). FC04’s response reflects Warner’s discussion of sub, or specialized publics, who do not necessarily consider themselves to be representative of *the* public. These specialized publics are uniquely situated around their shared interests and the texts that circulate around those interests. And I hope to have established specialized publics that exist in online communities require a uniquely situated paradigm.

Throughout this dissertation I hope to have demonstrated the sportsmen and sportswomen that participate on the *Michigan-Sportsman.com* forums, a niche specific online community, constitute what I call specialized online publics. Publics that exist in specific, or niche, online communities operate as specialized online publics sharing a common (virtual) space and shared vernacular, while existing in rhetorical ecologies. Specialized online publics shape and are in turn shaped by the rhetorical ecologies in which they exist. These rhetorical ecologies include discourses from other public spheres including print, electronic, and digital media, as well as government discourse. In Chapter Two, I outline a framework for specialized online publics consisting of three key characteristics. To answer the above question regarding how specialized online communities constitute and operate in online spaces, I will revisit the framework I establish in Chapter Two.

First, specialized online publics require a digital space in which to congregate. Just as the agorae and salons, coffee houses, and table societies provided physical spaces for ancient Greek society and Habermas’s bourgeois public, online forums provide a space for publics to converge with and engage other interlocutors. A digital space such as an online forum provides for a

cohesive gathering space that (loosely) provides structure, but to perpetuate, specialized online publics require additional framing.

Secondly, specialized online publics rely on shared interests for perpetuity, while also driven by the circulation of texts. Warner argues that publics can not solely be constituted by shared interests, and I agree; however, I argue in the case of specialized online publics, shared interests are important to initiating *and* perpetuating discussions. Additionally, the circulation of texts, as Warner argues, also serves to constitute specialized online publics. Because of the relative ease of sharing texts and materials in digital spaces, a variety of discourses circulate and perpetuate discussion. In the cases I discuss in this dissertation, these texts include, but are not limited to, other forum posts and threads, online and print news articles, websites (including multimedia sites such as YouTube), and government documents (including press releases, legislation, management plans, and reports). The circulation of these discourses coincides with the final framing characteristic I discuss next.

Lastly, specialized online publics exist as part of a broader ecology of discourse and are especially inclusive of vernacular discourse. The circulating texts and discourses (public, media, and government) that help to constitute and perpetuate specialized online publics also exist as part of a broader ecology that shape and are shaped by specialized online publics. In other words, specialized online publics exist in relation to these discourses. The broader ecology of discourse may serve as the subject of discussion, stimulate discussion, or be impacted by discussion, and as Brooke discusses, what happens in one part of the ecology ripples through all other parts. Moreover, a defining characteristic of specialized online publics is the inclusivity of vernacular discourse. Drawing in Gerard Hauser's theories of vernacular rhetoric, I define vernacular discourse as a shared colloquial language of a particular community. Members of the sportsmen

forum share a vernacular that situates them as insiders to issues of the environment, natural resources, and—more specifically—outdoor recreation activities such as hunting, fishing, and trapping. During discussions of the deer management plan, for example, forum contributors demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of a common vernacular to engage in conversations of deer management, referring to QDM, MARs, and the deeply ingrained traditions of deer hunting in Michigan.

RQ2. In what ways do publics in online spaces contribute to conversations about environmental policies and natural resources management, specifically on a localized level, and to what extent do these contributions impact natural resource management?

RQ3. In what ways do online publics interpret and respond to complex, technical environmental policies, and how might these interpretations and responses impact government implementation practices of environmental policies and natural resource management plans?

Forum participants contribute in a variety of ways including (but not limited to) providing general comments and information, expressing criticism and critique, raising questions and concerns, and exposing gaps and bifurcations. These contributions are important because they demonstrate how specialized online publics use their shared knowledge and common vernacular to engage environmental and natural resource issues. For example, FC15 engages with the *Michigan Deer Management Plan* in ways that demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of deer management history, while expressing concerns for future management practices. Drawing from the larger discourse ecology, FC15 directly cites from the management plan, evoking response from other contributors, while employing an acceptable vernacular to articulate concerns (referring to QDM practices, for example). And because the sportsmen forum is public and archived, these contributions are available to a variety of audiences in perpetuity.

While online forums provide a space for making contributions to natural resource management issues in a public and archived site, the findings from my two case studies indicate contributions from the specialized online public of the sportsmen forum had no direct, causal impact on deer management or feral swine management from regulatory or policy perspectives. These findings are congruent with Michele Simmons work in environmental and risk communication. Simmons research indicates:

The citizen's status [in environmental and risk management practices] is marked by low interaction with the technical experts as well as little power in influencing the final policy. Risk communication practices focused on either (1) bombarding citizens with a one-way flow of information in an effort to bring their perceptions about risk into conformity with the technical experts or (2) holding public meetings and allowing public comments that attempt to placate publics but that do not influence the final policy. (122)

My findings from the deer management case study are consistent with Simmons's argument, where many forum contributors expressed concerns with current public comment models for not engaging in any relevant two-way communication.

Yet, unlike Habermas's disinterested public, forum contributors, as a specialized online public, are not only interested, but also quite invested, as management practices directly impact their recreational pursuits. And their contributions on the forum provide a space to not only express displeasure with current public participation models, but also their contributions on the forum reveal that, in fact, sportsmen and sportswomen are making contributions toward natural resource management plans even if not in any official capacity, as my feral swine case study

suggests. And I believe these contributions make a compelling case for further collaboration between what Nancy Fraser calls strong and weak publics.

Perhaps the most significant findings from this study reveal a need to further explore the ways in which online communities can help to bridge strong and weak publics in areas of environmental and natural resource management. In “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” Nancy Fraser argues that weak publics’ “deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion-formation and does not also encompass decision-making” (75); whereas, strong publics are those “whose discourse encompasses both opinion-formation and decision-making” (75). In cases of natural resource management, wildlife management agencies represent strong publics, while citizens represent weak publics. As Simmons and others have pointed out in rhetoric and writing research, varying degrees of public participation play out in any given environmental or natural resource case. Simmons’s models suggest the spectrum spans between no public participation to fully inclusive public participation from the onset of development. Often, as the deer management case illustrates and Simmons argues, “these different models have not necessarily evolved over time to include more participation, but may each still be implemented by an agency as a way to control public involvement” (122). For example, the Deer Advisory Team affords an opportunity for various stakeholders to engage deer management strategies from the plan’s inception. The DAT, however, is comprised of several prominent organizations including several members from state government agencies, and all participants are appointed by the Department of Natural Resources; so, while participatory models have been adjusted to be more inclusive of public participation, the DNR still largely controls public involvement. The feral swine case study provides a deviation from this model and exposes possibilities for future strong/weak public collaborations in digital spaces.

My findings from the feral swine case study indicate strong and weak publics can collaboratively participate in productive ways to address natural resource issues. When FC02, creates a thread to post updates and report feral swine sightings, she creates a bridge between the stronger, governmental public which she represents and the weaker public of the specialized online public—creating a hybrid public in the sense Fraser uses the term.

While the thread does not exist in any official capacity for managing feral swine, the specialized online public of the sportsmen forum quickly utilizes the space to contribute to addressing the feral swine issue. Forum contributors report sightings and address issues of policy, regulations, and legislation, as well as provide tips and tactics for hunting feral swine, drawing on their common vernacular to address a new hunting opportunity. In these ways, the contributions are not dissimilar to those made during the forum threads regarding deer management. But the connection with FC02 creates a different dynamic.

Because the feral swine issue poses a significant threat to Michigan's terrestrial ecosystems as well as posing public and livestock health risks, FC02 utilizes the specialized online public of the sportsmen forum to assist in management efforts. Beyond the environmental exigency, there appears to be a genuine understanding that the forum presents a specialized public, with interests and knowledge for addressing the issue. Forum contributors are not only appreciative of FC02's level of engagement, but look for ways to participate beyond the forum.

For many forum contributors participating on the feral swine thread, their level of engagement appears to strive for participation beyond the digital space of the forum. In other words, sportsmen and sportswomen want to contribute to the feral swine issue through eradication efforts—the act of actually pursuing and killing feral swine. This level of engagement is enacted on the forum in several ways. First, during the beginning of the feral

swine thread, forum contributors seek to address ambiguity of existing laws and regulations, such as the livestock at large law. Secondly, as I mention above, since hog hunting is a new endeavor in Michigan, forum contributors share hunting tips and tactics, drawing on the collective knowledge and experience of the specialized online public. And lastly, forum contributors make suggestions, specifically to FC02, for legislation changes that would allow hunters to more easily pursue and help eradicate feral swine. In all these ways, forum contributors appear to use this collective knowledge to enable contributions of feral swine management—especially eradication efforts—beyond the scope of the forum. Despite my findings not indicating any direct, causal relations between forum contributions and natural resource management policies, I believe this research has several implications for rhetoric and writing research and pedagogy.

Contributions and Implications

I situate my project at the intersection of public sphere theories and public discourse, new media and digital rhetoric, and technical communication, all of which exist to varying extents within the broader field of rhetoric and writing. Because I draw from these various areas to inform my study, I see this project's contributions spanning across them all. In particular, I see this study making the following contributions to the field of rhetoric and writing:

- I situate sportsmen and sportswomen within environmental discourses. In doing so, I argue sportspersons are more than stakeholders in environmental and natural resource issues but they are also engaged, invested, and knowledgeable participants in management practices, and should no longer be ignored by our field.
- I extend public sphere and public rhetoric theories to articulate a framework for online publics that exist in specific, niche online communities. Specialized online publics exist

in digital spaces around shared interests, a common vernacular, and the circulation of discourse, while also existing as part of broader ecologies. I use the sportsmen forum as an example of how specialized online publics function in twenty-first century digital environments.

- Lastly, my findings indicate online spaces provide opportunities to create hybrid publics, in the Fraser sense, where the stronger publics of government fisheries and wildlife agencies can more inclusively collaborate with the weaker publics that exist as part of specialized online publics in digital spaces. These findings extend the work of not only Fraser but also the work of rhetoric and writing scholars such as Simmons, Waddell, and Blythe, Grabill, and Riley by specifically situating environmental and natural resource public participation in digital spaces such as online communities.

These contributions have implications in rhetoric and writing scholarship and pedagogy.

Specifically, I identify the following implications:

- The framework I articulate for specialized online publics is not meant to be static nor monolithic. It draws from the theories of Habermas, Hauser, and Warner and is meant to be dynamic and flexible. As such, the framework is open to further development, something I plan to address in the future. Additionally, the implications of specialized online publics exist across public and digital rhetorics, and I encourage other scholars to extend this framework.
- The feral swine case study indicates online spaces provide opportunities for government/public collaboration on issues of the environment and natural resources. I encourage scholars to continue the potential for connections that exist in digital environments for these types of collaborations. Where else might they exist? How might

our theories better inform these collaborations? What opportunities exist for citizen-scholar research, such as the Ackerman and Coogan collection exhibits?

- Pedagogically, my study implicates the need for teaching about the ways publics use digital spaces for participation in natural resource issues. As Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan argue, the need for conservation writing in technical communication is on the rise, and beyond the traditional genres of environmental impact statements and policy reports—which are certainly important—our students might also engage with reader-users that exist in digital spaces such as *Michigan-Sportsman.com*, in ethnographic or service-learning projects to better understand how users engage with environmental and natural resources documentation.

Limitations

As with any study, mine is not without its limitations. Researchers are often confronted with the limitations of research methods, for example, such as constructing the thick descriptions required of case study and archival research for readers less familiar with the particulars of a specific case. Additionally, an ecological methodology requires an acute awareness of the complexities and components of any given ecology.

In this study, I employ an ecological methodology, drawing from the rich corpus (nearly 4.5 million posts as of this writing) of public writing in the archives of *Michigan-Sportsman.com*. I examine writing that occurs on the forum in relation to government and media discourses, as collectively they construct a broader ecology of discourse surrounding environmental and natural resource issues. I examine the ways forum contributors engage and participate with natural resource management—within and beyond digital spaces—and my research reveals a need for being more inclusive of online publics in natural resources

management. Yet, I am limited by having no direct correspondence with forum contributors or DNR employees, an issue I intend to address in a future study (see Future Research Agenda below). In “The Promise of Ecological Inquiry in Writing Research,” Stuart MacMillan writes:

The *ecological systems* framework [...] embraces the uniqueness of individuals and their life experiences, while at the same time recognizing the centrality of environmental factors in constraining what is possible in writing. Productive moments in writing emerge when abilities, understandings, and motivations of individuals mesh with enabling potentials (affordances) of resources and tools available to individuals in the immediate physical and social environment. During the writing process, interaction with material resources brings about the creation of new *artifacts* (e.g., outlines, drafts, reflective notes) that subsequently populate the writing space and, in turn, can be reutilized. (353, *emphases original*)

I quote MacMillan at length here because his articulation of an ecological methodology addresses the complexities of such a methodology. As I discuss in several places throughout this dissertation, an ecological methodology emphasizes relationships. It emphasizes the relationships between human and non-human factors, between material and immaterial elements, between affordances and constraints, and between texts and their circulation. An ecological methodology as employed here accounts for relationships between the circulation of texts and discourses, triangulated across several discourses within rhetorical ecologies. It does not, however, account for the human ecological factors that might be revealed through personal correspondence. In the next section, I address my future research agenda, which includes a study that expands upon my work in this dissertation to account for human agents.

Future Research Agenda

Existing at the intersection of public rhetoric, digital rhetoric, and environmental rhetoric, this study provides a foundation for scholars to better understand the ways in which publics constitute in digital spaces, the contributions these publics make to natural resources and environment issues, and the need for more research exploring the role of rhetoric and writing in specialized online publics. I see my future research agenda extending this dissertation in three specific areas: revising chapters for article submissions, editing a special collection or journal issue focusing on connections between digital rhetoric and the environment and natural resources, and expanding the work I begin in this dissertation into a single-authored book. I further elaborate on these areas below.

Partition Dissertation for Article Submissions

In particular, I would like to further explore and extend my framework for specialized online publics, the feral swine case study, and sportsmen and sportswomen as environmental rhetoric change agents for potential articles.

Considering current work in public rhetoric, our field has become increasingly interested in the rhetorical work of publics. Collections by Ackerman and Coogan, Stevens and Malesh, Deans, Roswell, and Wurr, for example, have addressed rhetoric's role in publics, social movements, and civic engagement, respectively. Extending this scholarship to include the ways in which online publics constitute and contribute is an appropriate next step. Journals such as *Present Tense* and *Computers and Composition* would be appropriate venues to pursue publication.

Edited Collection/Special Journal Issue

The field of rhetoric and writing, in particular technical communication studies, has a long history of addressing issues and questions of environmental communication. Many scholars (see Coppola; Simmons; Waddell; Rude; Blythe, Grabill, and Riley; Johnson-Sheehan and Morgan; Killingsworth and Palmer, for examples) have explored issues spanning from environmental risk communication to public participation in environmental policy-making. I am interested in expanding these works by (co-)editing a book collection or special journal issue with a particular focus on connections between twenty-first century digital technologies and environmental rhetorics.

A special issue or edited collection might address questions such as: What is rhetoric's role in addressing environmental and natural resource issues in twenty-first century digital environments? In what ways are citizens employing Web 2.0 technologies to raise awareness about, actively participate in, or otherwise influence environmental issues? How might digital spaces better accommodate publics and public rhetorics around issues of the environment and natural resources? These questions are only a starting place, of course, but they seem timely given the use of digital technologies in recent social movements. Possible journals and presses include: *Technical Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, University of South Carolina Press, and Computers and Composition Digital Press.

Single-Authored Manuscript

Using this study as a foundation, the most ambitious project is expanding my work in this dissertation into a single-authored manuscript. I would situate this study in rhetoric and writing

by extending the work in technical communication and environmental rhetoric I mention above, and incorporating human participants to better understand how they envision their roles on the forum and in environmental management. Specifically, I am interested in acting as a citizen-scholar by addressing the bifurcation between governmental agencies and online publics. To do this work, I would seek to incorporate the members of the sportsmen forum and Department of Natural Resources through personal correspondence and other methods including surveys and ethnography (attending public meetings, for example).

Research questions for this project would focus on the extent to which forum contributors engage in natural resource management. Some questions include: To what extent do contributors of *Michigan-Sportsman.com* consider themselves as writers? What exigencies motivate them to contribute to the forum? In what ways do they identify or constitute their audience(s)? What are the (common) rhetorical moves, and how do these moves take advantage—or not—of the affordances of new media environments? To what extent do they see their writing impacting environmental and natural resource issues? How might the sportsmen forum and the specialized online publics that exist in that space better contribute to natural resource management and environmental policy?

Given the study is situated within Michigan, possible presses include: Michigan State University Press, in either the “Rhetoric, Communication, and Language” series or “Discovering the Peoples of Michigan” series. The University of Michigan Press, in either the “The New Media World” or “The New Public Scholarship” series. Other presses include: Computers and Composition Digital Press and The University of South Carolina Press.

Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued for the valuable contributions sportsmen and sportswomen make to issues of the environment and natural resources. As a public they have been largely ignored by the field of rhetoric and writing, and as stakeholders within natural resources management their public comments are often relegated to a summary in the appendix of a report. Digital spaces, however, afford sportsmen and sportswomen the opportunity to engage in discussions about their passions and hobbies. As my findings indicate, digital spaces such as online communities also provide opportunities to bridge the gap between government fisheries and wildlife managers and the specialized online publics of sportsmen and sportswomen. There's a space here for rhetoric and writing research to explore these relationships and the writings and discourses which circulate between government agencies and the reader-users of these policies and regulations. In other words, while this dissertation ends here, the research and scholarship continue.

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