



Considering the Comments: Theorizing Online Audiences as Emergent Processes

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Abstract

Prompted by an in-depth case study of a web-writer, this article argues that audience may be understood as an emergent process for web-writers who consider their comments. Rather than a group of people or demographic that is prefigured to exist, this article posits that audience might be a concept used throughout the composing process, including production and distribution processes. Such an approach is useful for digital pedagogies that involve online comments because it allows audience to be considered before, during, and after writers' production processes.

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1. Introduction

It is a cliché of writers on the internet to remind one another, “Don’t read the comments.” Comments on the World Wide Web have gained a reputation as scarring, divisive, and unnecessary to the writing process. The popular conception is one of imagining writers turning away from their audience rather than reading the comments; we imagine writers retreating back into themselves or creating a self-managed filter bubble. However, this conception stereotypes comments as necessarily combative, passing over the possibilities that online comments offer online writers. Even if comments are vitriolic or combative, their presence offers those who study writing on the Web an opportunity to interrogate the role of audience in the 21st century.

In this article, I not only “read” the comments, but also consider the role online comments play in shaping a writer’s perceptions of audience. In addition to responding to the call to investigate the relationship between “text, author, medium, context, and audience” in Web 2.0 (Lunsford and Ede, 2009, p. 43–4), this inquiry is part of an emerging aspect of writing studies’ scholarship about the Web: online comments and comment functions. By enabling a space for online readers to announce themselves and offer textual responses, comment functions have much to offer our theories of audience. Investigating online comments can deepen our understanding of the way audience interactivity emphasizes production and distribution as overlapping and intersecting processes.

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Attending to online comments and their relationship to writers' perceptions of audience adds a richness and complexity of thought to the platitude "consider your audience" by developing complicated understandings of textual production and distribution processes. By production, I mean the various processes of crafting and making texts. By distribution, I mean the various processes of delivering and circulating texts. I will argue throughout this article that production and distribution processes are intimately related with respect to texts. Such processes encourage an understanding of audience, illuminated by comments, that explores the forward-moving relationships between writing a text, reading audience response, rereading a text, and writing or editing a text. Important to the field of composition, these online relationships occur not as an editorial process meant for revision but in a public setting wherein comments are symbolic of the reception of a text. A detailed understanding of how web-writers interact with audiences can add a layered, process-based account of audience to our knowledge of online rhetoric, help those already teaching web-writing in the classroom to get beyond the teacher as audience, and direct students toward acknowledging changing audiences and their *evolving relationship* (Roth, 1987) to them.

To make this argument, I have divided this article into three parts. First, I discuss and summarize various approaches to audience theory and the accompanying metaphors the field has used. I do so to offer context to my argument and extend past scholarship. The second part is the bulk of the article in which I present an in-depth case study of the web-writer Kelly Salasin. Salasin's blog *This Vermont Life* was relatively unknown until *The New York Times* spotlighted it via a hyperlink about a tragic murder. In writing about a murder in a local food co-operative in Vermont, Salasin was presented with unanticipated comments from national audiences initiated by the *Times* hyperlink. In response to these comments, she readdressed and reinvoked her readers in a layered way that illustrates a multiple and expanding sense of audience, i.e., audience was a *developmental process* for her. In drawing on Salasin's case study, I develop useful ways of considering audience as an emerging process that links production, distribution, and circulation by showing how those considerations of audience lead to subsequent texts and recontextualization of previous texts. In other words, in addition to making the claim that audience is a process, I am attempting to explain *how* audience can be a process through an in-depth descriptive case study. Salasin's case offers us an explicit example of an online writer considering comments in multiple ways. She quotes and refers to online comments both from her own blog and other venues, online and print. She draws on responses to her own blogposts, responses that are formatted below her written posts by her blog site's template. Comments, some relevant to Salasin and some not, accrue over time, leaving her with an announced audience that is still not a complete outline of her invisible audience. Finally, I discuss the implications for theories of audience when students write online. In arguing that audience is an ongoing process on the Web, I affirm the validity and relevance of the term audience for web-writers, noting that it emphasizes the control that a writer may seek when contending with commenters.

I choose a non-classroom based case study for two reasons. First, it helps me to highlight the significance of being read by a wider non-academic public. Second, Salasin was initially not well-known, a position that often reflects the position of our students. She was *incidentally* spotlighted by *The New York Times* and became well-known through institutional attention. Her case may be useful to classroom pedagogies—and to our students who wish to be read online—for contending with audiences when web-writers are read by accidental, unexpected, and unwelcome audiences.

2. Background on Audience

Audience theory is a prominent part of writing studies scholarship. As a term, audience frequently refers to the construct of reader or listener from the perspective of a writer, speaker, or rhetor. While it's problematically used interchangeably with reader(s) or listener(s), the term 'audience' tends to foreground a writer's or speaker's process(es). Historically, the term experienced a renaissance in composition scholarship during the early 1980s, largely as a reaction against Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's (1969) influential "general audience" and Walter J. Ong's (1975) famous "imagined audience" from the 1960s and 1970s. Scholarship in the early and mid-1980s tended to focus on audience *specificity*. Scholars in this era found earlier conceptions of audience to be a monolithic term that erased differences and treated various groups of readers in reified ways. These scholars, such as Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford (1984), sought to find concrete conceptions of audience based on specific situations.

Thus while audience was and remains a prominent term in its own accord throughout writing studies (Anson, 2000; Berkenkotter, 1981; Breuch, 2015; Breuch, Bakke, Thomas-Pollei, Mackey, & Weinert, 2016; Daiute, 1983; Ede, 1979; Ede & Lunsford, 1984; Haas & Hayes, 1986; Johnson, 1997; Lunsford & Ede, 1996; Long, 1983; Reiff, 1996; Roth, 1987; Selzer, 1992), other scholars have used the alternative term of *discourse community* (Berlin, 1988;

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