Introduction

THE PRIVATIZATION OF THE PUBLIC

> Even though I can see stark examples of privacy under siege, I want to disturb the common wisdom long enough to reveal an opposite and at least equally pressing problem that we—particularly as teachers of writing and rhetoric in a would-be democratic society—need to address: we don't live in a world of too little privacy but, increasingly, too much.
>
> **—Nancy Welch,**
> ***Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World***

I conceived of this book over a decade ago, concerned that I was missing opportunities to teach students how to use the internet to create and intervene into public spheres. At that time, many of us were attending to the new forms of textuality, collaboration, and agency offered by the internet, while the ability to "go public" was assumed almost as a given. If a student chose to circulate their work on the web or an assignment required it, the writing was considered public. From e-zines and e-portfolios to hypertexts and web pages (Alexander, "Digital Spins"; Benda; Grabill and Grabill; Pullman; Sullivan), writing teachers were excited by the idea of offering public writing spaces to our students. I began this book thinking that writing pedagogy could go even further than looking at publics as publication and begin to tap Web 2.0's interactive potential for public spheres, or the use of public discourse for collective social change.

I considered publication as similar to public space—a place for texts to be distributed. Following theorists like Jürgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser, Michael Warner, and Christian Weisser, I associated *public spheres* with the communicative acts that sought out interaction and dialogue from writers willing to talk across difference and seek out those

not already aligned with their perspective. Public spheres, that is, are both broader than a specific audience and more focused than any audience who happens by. Writing to and within public spheres suggests a desire for interaction and dialogue and a willingness to alter one's own views and possibly reach a consensus or engage in forms of collective action. Public spheres do not exist to be found but are created by the nature of the interaction. As James Bohman summarizes well, there are two basic criteria for public spheres: (1) "social acts . . . directed to an indefinite audience . . . offered with some expectation of a response, especially in regard to interpretability and justifiability"; and (2) a social space generated by communicative action (135). By these criteria, one cannot merely find themselves *in* or write *to* a public. Public spheres involve communication directed at *being public* in terms of circulation (i.e., not just a known group) and interaction with the content or author that would potentially revise the original (i.e., not just distribution). By public sphere, however, I was not thinking of a specific theorist or a particular kind of discourse—for example, a Habermasian sphere of rational-critical debate—or a singular concept. Instead, I assumed a multiplicity of public spheres, which are constantly forming, reforming, and changing yet are distinguishable from public space or publication by a set of practices or attitudes—a writer-reader relation, if you will.

Social media seemed a ripe space for such public spheres if writing teachers could help our students imagine how the connective possibilities that they already employed to expand their social networks could be used for more socially active purposes. Over the time it has taken me to write this book, however, questions about the nature of circulation, publics, and internet spaces have expanded exponentially as the nature of public discourse itself, and the role of social media within it, has evolved. What once seemed a promising opportunity for public spheres for many (e.g., Barton; Bohman; Goode; Jackson and Wallin; Rheingold; Ward), including myself, has become fraught with conflict. Web spaces, particularly social media, seem to be not only reflecting but also creating the polarizing political scene that has characterized the past decade and reached an ostensible breaking point with the Capital riots in January 2021. In the age of fake news, accusations of presidential campaigns (and foreign governments) manipulating social media, public policy announced via Twitter,[1] and political action being reduced to memes, the idea of web public spheres appears a pipe dream. While voice predominates in public space, we seem to be quickly losing the interactivity necessary for *public spheres*. The internet is quickly losing some aspect of deliberation (if it ever had it), some grappling with views not already held, some encounter with others, and some willingness to

share and mediate difference. This loss is both technological and cultural. We once spoke of "surfing," but now we "search." This is not a small change. The former implies openness to the new, to alternatives; the latter suggests we seek only what we are already interested in finding. Undoubtedly, part of this change is a result of search engines, but the rapid popularity of these engines (to the point at which "Google" has become a verb) also point to individuals' desire to experience the web in a less open way.[2]

If Web 1.0 was characterized by surfing for and reading content, then Web 2.0 might be described as finding the content an algorithm believes a person wants and offering users opportunities to write their own. Because the focus in Web 2.0 is on user-generated content, interaction, and circulation, social media companies vie for one's attention and to extend one's engagement. Rather than search engines finding information via popularity (e.g., number of hits), Web 2.0 search engines have turned to personalization. Rather than publishing a web page, writers interact via platforms that create the parameters by which we write, read, and circulate. All of this has become increasingly more personalized, a place where technology meets choice to create potential echo chambers. Vestiges of a more open experience remained with applications such as StumbleUpon, which both presented recommendations and allowed one to "stumble," or conduct a random web surf. That StumbleUpon ended in 2018 and became an aggregation forum—Mix.com—demonstrates how little interest "surfing" the web now has. Algorithms have become individualized to such an extent that our "searches" are predicated on our previous actions. If we desire new ideas, we are likely to only find what we are already predisposed to engage.

Even given these changes, I am still not ready to give up on my earlier goals. Social media admittedly provides venues for yelling at others or circulating information only within enclaves, but these aspects are precisely why I believe direct rhetorical intervention is necessary. The social media available makes productive public spheres possible, but only human action can realize such potential. In our neoliberal age, such action does not come naturally. Online public spheres need direct attention and creation; without such, they replicate and help create conditions supporting neoliberal ideologies and information economies. In asking readers, particularly writing teachers and rhetoricians, to revisit the possibilities for technology within concepts of democracy, public spheres, and citizen activism, I am not, I hope, engaging in a return to techno-utopianism. At the risk of seeming naïve, however, I present this book as a plea for publics; an entreaty to imagine social media as

fostering multiple public spheres and the web as circulating texts that invoke such spheres. I don't think it's hyperbolic to suggest that we are in a crisis where public discourse has deteriorated to such an extent that we are very close to being unable to negotiate difference in the public sphere. Yet my students clearly want to do so. They give me hope as they seek ways to better their worlds, engage in social problems, and offer new solutions. I want my pedagogy to help them do that effectively, to help counter the sense I hear too often that there is little they can do to initiate change. I hold out hope that social media might provide a venue for effective citizen action across our differences. My title reflects this desire. *Social Mediations* emphasizes how social media (noun) can bring people together to engage difference, to mediate (verb) seemingly opposed positions so that new relations might emerge.

That said, I make such a plea fully aware of the challenges that face writing teachers like me who seek to offer more productive venues for public discourse via social media. It does seem the deck is stacked against us. The tendency for public discourse and debate to be bifurcated is so much a norm of US political life that it barely needs remarking upon. We hear it daily in complaints of journalists, politicians, and our fellow citizens even as they (and we) continue to replicate it. Culturally, we find ourselves in a more polarized political moment than almost any other in recent US history. Although pundits point to the election of Donald Trump as creating this division, the seeds of it started much earlier, with social media playing a part almost with the inception of Web 2.0. Many of the affordances of Web 2.0 help create the divisions we bemoan. Our ideological tendencies to locate ourselves within fixed positions are supported by the technological means (e.g., search engines) to create filter bubbles of news and information that fit our already formed positions and desires. In turn, those fixed positions originate in or are exacerbated by social media that ensures encounters with information and other people with whom we already agree.

DIVISION VIA ATTENTION ECONOMIES

Almost from the beginning, Web 2.0 began with conversations among people who hold similar views. As Bill Tancer, general manager of the global internet research company Hitwise, revealed in his 2008 book, *Click*, the traffic between politically aligned sites was enclaved, even as Web 2.0 gave us the possibility for greater discussion and connection. The dream of those writing on bulletin boards for large, open discussions in the early days of Web 1.0 was never realized, as both our reading and our writing habits tended to follow our already predetermined positions. As Tancer demonstrates through his coworker

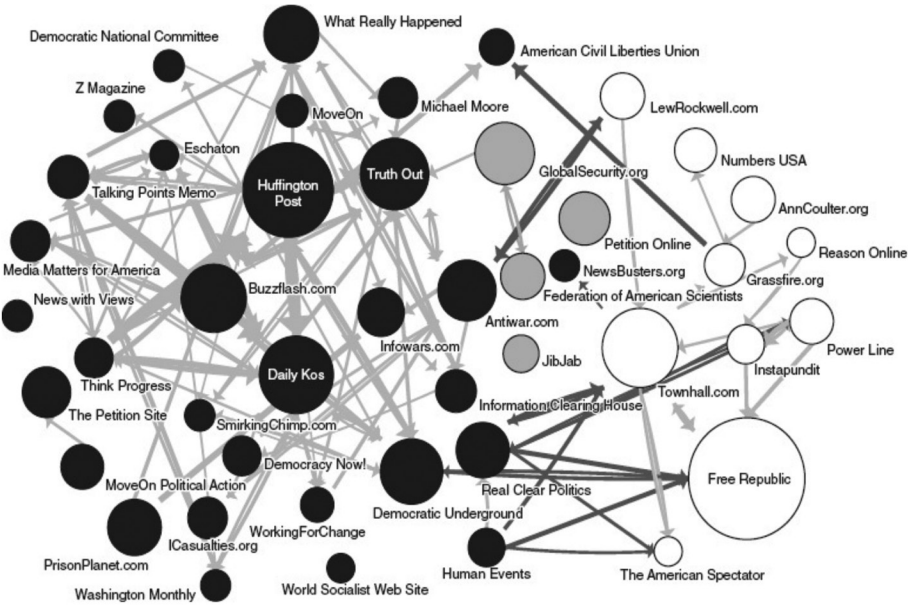

FIG. I.1. Movement among the top fifty political websites in 2006. Black circles indicate liberal-leaning websites; white circles, conservative-leaning websites; and grey circles, "self-declared neutral or nonpartisan sites" (Hindman 65).

Matthew Hindman's chart on traffic between the most visited political sites in 2006 (see fig. I.1), our reading and our writing habits often stay limited to the political leanings by which we recognize and constitute ourselves (Hindman 64–66). Such observations, which note how the traffic between "liberal" and "conservative" sites rarely cross, led some, such as Cass Sunstein, to bemoan enclaved discourse where little interaction (and thus negotiation) occurs between those with varying political perspectives. Writing in 2007, Sunstein saw echo chambers only getting worse as he imagined the diary of a "futurist citizen" he called "the Daily Me" who preselects every piece of media they will see, from TV to news to social interactions. For Sunstein, the Daily Me did not result from search engines but from our ability to allow our own preferences and beliefs to dictate our information consumption.

MoveOn.org board president Eli Pariser followed up a mere five years later with concerns about filter bubbles—what he calls a "You Loop"—that eerily reflect Sunstein's Daily Me. Rather than Sunstein's image of personal choice, Pariser's filter bubble is imposed technologically through user data collected to increase the personalization of what

information we see. Search engines' algorithms, he illustrates, become more and more focused in each iteration as they build models so individualized we rarely encounter information not already predetermined to be something we might like or be interested in. As writing scholars Kevin Brock and Dawn Shepherd point out, the word *search* is a misnomer because it "does not adequately capture these processes; match is a more appropriate term" (22). Brock and Shepard quote Amit Singhal, a Google Fellow, to highlight how searches became connected to our preexisting desires: "The holy grail of search is to understand what the user wants. Then you are not matching words; you are actually trying to match meaning" (Brock and Shepard 22). Singhal worked on the 2001 Google algorithm design; updates since then have focused more and more on personalization "as location, previous searches, and browser history now affect the results that users get" (Maksimava).

Such personalization is big business and, as I will elaborate in later chapters, is part of how the information economy relies upon particular modes of information consumption. Techniques of what is called *dataveillance*, a term coined in 1994 by computer scientist Roger Clarke for "the systematic use of personal data systems in the investigating and monitoring of the actions or communications of one or more persons" (qtd. in Elmer 76), have expanded exponentially with Web 2.0 to support late capital's need to cater to the individual consumer rather than a mass market (Elmer 54). In Web 2.0, users' data is collected by platforms, either through the registration information we provide when creating an account or through solicitation of our preferences, such as on Amazon and Netflix. This data may be used directly by the platforms who collected it, but more often, third-party marketers purchase such data from the companies to whom we freely give ownership of our information and content when we register for services. Dataveillance techniques were once simple and included in user agreements, but as users have become savvier, such techniques have mutated, becoming more and more difficult to detect. Almost a decade ago, companies were using as many as one hundred tracking tools at a time (Angwin); that number has only increased. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported in 2010, dataveillance went far beyond cookies that record websites people visit: "Tracking technology is getting smarter and more intrusive. . . . The Journal found new tools that scan in real time what people are doing on a Web page, then instantly assess location, income, shopping interests and even medical conditions. Some tools surreptitiously respawn themselves even after users try to delete them" (Angwin). Writing scholar Estee Beck explains that such "spawns" are third-party cookies that add a new line of code with each click so that "the file can become inun-

dated with code from all the sites you've visited that use that cookie" ("Invisible Digital Identities" 130). The most prevalent example of such tracking can be seen in the now-mythic example of a woman whose husband discovered she was pregnant through their social media when ads for diapers and cribs kept populating their feed.

As people became savvier about tracking—using ad blockers and deleting cookies—social media companies turned to "device fingerprinting" in 2020. Fingerprinting "involves taking what browser a person is using and coupling that information with the person's unique browser settings in an effort to build a unique profile about who they are without cookies" (Slefo). My social media connections, use of games, and searches all provide a "fingerprint" such that a Google search for a wedding gown spawns ads on my Facebook and Instagram feeds, ads in my email, and links to other "plus-size" dressmakers. My computer knows not only that I'm getting married but also my sizes, my preferences for certain manufacturers, and even that my friends shop at certain stores. Platforms and search engines encourage us to find what we already know or are already interested in so they can capture our limited attention (see Lanham). Capturing that attention allows companies to make actual capital off of our online activity. Ensuring we return online (and get satisfaction from doing so) is embedded in the information economy. The extraction of capital from our online activity, however, is not only an economic question but an ideological one. In Pariser's terms, "Left to their own devices, personalization filters serve up a kind of invisible autopropaganda, indoctrinating us with our own ideas, amplifying our desire for things that are familiar and leaving us oblivious to the dangers lurking in the dark territory of the unknown" (15). Pariser's fear, like Sunstein's, is that we will continually encounter an echo chamber by seeing information that reinforces our predetermined positions. Worse, we will be informed by others' predetermined positions as searches offer us "hits" based on the most popular preferences or the preferences of people like us.

Former marketer turned information science scholar Safiya Umoja Noble illustrates just how correct Sunstein and Pariser were in their fears. In *Algorithms of Oppression*, Noble examines how search algorithms perpetuate racism, sexism, and power relations. She provides telling and shocking examples to drive this point home, illustrating how a search for "Black girls" in 2011 yielded mostly porn sites and how a "glitch" in Google's 2015 facial recognition algorithm "had automatically tagged African Americans as 'apes' and 'animals'" (6). The algorithm was quickly changed after *U.S. News and World Report* reported on it; Noble's own writing led to the removal of porn hits for "Black

girls." But racialized inequities persist. Porn sites still follow searches for "Asian girls." Let me use one example to highlight Noble's findings when she enters the prompts "why Black women are so" and "why White women are so" into Google and looks at the suggested nominatives to continue her search in 2013. In the algorithm of that time, the most popular searches were offered as options. For "why Black Women are so," Google offered "angry, loud, mean, attractive, lazy, annoying, confident, sassy, insecure," and "bitter" (21). "Why White Women are so" resulted in "pretty, beautiful, mean, easy, insecure, skinny, annoying, perfect, fake," and "rude" (21). In 2013, users saw information that was most popular, leading to a reinforcement of both dominant and personalized views. In 2021, when I enter "why Black Women are so," I get links to an article by Shirley Chisholm, a PBS story on "Why Black Women Are Saying No," and pieces titled "How the 'Strong Black Woman' Identity Both Helps and Hurts" and "Married Black Men's Opinions on Why Black Women Will Marry Someone of Another Race." My algorithm, personalized, offers pictures of strong Black women but also normalizes (more implicitly) racist and sexist attitudes about femininity and marriage. Google emphasizes my liberal bias and feminist stance while still offering ideologically suspect returns, even if less obviously so than in 2013. The result is that I see information with which I am assumed to be comfortable.

This Google example highlights the changes wrought by Web 2.0 well. Information flow has moved from a sense of the "whole" (popularity, etc.) to the individual. Our searches give us information personalized just for us. This is a central part of Web 2.0 because it heightens our engagement with the web. Social media works from a similar logic. If profit is to come from mining user-generated content to produce ad revenue, keeping users' attention on the ads and keeping users producing content means keeping us engaged. This is where digital infrastructure and personal choice meet to create the echo chambers so many political analysts attribute to social media and Web 2.0. Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and others use our data to understand our identity and reflect that back to us in a "You Loop" that goes far beyond the search engines Pariser discusses. As Beck points out, "Many of the algorithms social media sites use . . . categorize people based on how they interact (e.g., clicking, pressing, and talking with the sites through their screen technologies)" and, as part of this process, craft "a form of 'algorithmic identity' in which algorithms categorize people . . . resulting in social sorting" ("Sustaining Critical Literacies" 43, 45). Social sorting is reflected back to us in our online activity, but we also (re)produce it. The social connections we maintain help create that digital identity

and loop it back onto us. Our information choices reflect those identities, as we are more likely both to seek and to believe sources that we associate with the positions we already hold. These filter bubbles, Daily Me's, and You Loops help generate algorithmic identities that are both more personalized (political ads can target us as individuals rather than groups) and branded, in that we are encouraged to identify with others "like us" through the identities reflected back to us.

WHERE ALGORITHMS MEET CHOICE

Algorithmic identities are created to market to us more effectively and to maximize our time on social media. Personalized feeds based on those identities ensure we spend as much time on social media as possible, liking, sharing, retweeting, commenting, and quite simply, engaging, whether that engagement results in joy or righteous anger. Political polarization, shutting down difference, and building echo chambers are not the goals of social media companies, as Mark Zuckerberg has testified many times. Social media companies do not seek political polarization, but what Zuckerberg doesn't say is that polarization results from social media's intent to maximize engagement. Based on a synthesis of fifty social science studies and interviews with more than forty academics and policy experts, researchers for the Brookings Institution concluded that "platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter likely are not the root causes of political polarization but they do exacerbate it" (Barrett et al.). Social media seeks ever-heightened engagement. Engagement means ad revenue; thus increasing engagement is the prime motivation of Web 2.0 platforms, no matter its effect on public discourse. This is the central economic aspect of social media that threatens public spheres—it both favors circulation practices within echo chambers and disincentivizes platform intervention. Facebook, for example, does internal research on divisiveness and corrects its algorithms when things become too tense (e.g., after the 2020 election; before the Derek Chauvin verdict), but "making the adjustments permanent would cut into user engagement" so they happen infrequently (Barrett et al.).

Although algorithms do not create polarization, they make it much less likely we will find ourselves in diverse social networks where a critical attitude toward information might be inspired by accidental encounters. Becoming more comfortable with information that reinforces positions also makes it much more possible for fake news to proliferate. The sheer amount of news has created a problem with reliability, but filter bubbles, algorithmic thinking, and personalization have intensified this problem. In earlier incarnations of the internet and

social media, more information seemed the answer to polarization. For example, Luke Goode found the self-reflexivity of news media to offer perhaps the most Habermasian hope for public spheres on the internet. He writes: "When an expanding and networked mediascape increasingly lays bare the limitations of our insights, we might experience anxieties and insecurities, responding fatalistically to the information blizzards we find ourselves caught up in . . . or we might learn to appreciate the provisional nature of our views such that we might become better listeners when we encounter difference and dissent" (112). Writing prior to our current political moment involving information bots, accusations of foreign information campaigns in our politics, and the collusion of social media companies with disinformation, Goode suggests that collective negotiation is more likely when information sources are open for question, leading to a more active public sphere.

Other scholars on early use of Web 2.0 similarly comment that collective negotiation alleviates concerns about misinformation. Megan Boler's project on "rethinking media, democracy, and citizenship" finds that of the thirty-five bloggers she studies, most distrusted the mass media but had an equal desire to contribute to it as partners. Boler finds that "the use of these digital dissent media suggest a double-edged contradiction of an awareness that all truths are constructed, alongside an affective desire for truth and an urgent political need for accuracy and responsible reporting" (8). Far from disregarding accuracy, she reports these bloggers "double-source" in their own writing and in their reading habits, searching for confirmation to counter their skepticism about information. Barbara Warnick notes similar self-correcting by Indymedia writers where, similar to Wikipedia, the collaborative monitors and quickly acts to correct misinformation.

What I take from this admittedly cursory history is that Web 2.0's proliferation of news sources not verified by professional journalists—produced by everyday citizens, journalists, and even bots—need not have been the death knell of digital public spheres. What appears to be the larger problem is whether one is exposed to varying information and, even more importantly, to those people who might not interpret it the same way. For example, in a more recent study of how readers interpret fake news, Jonas Colliander finds that being exposed to critical comments by others was the greatest indicator of how one viewed a fake news article. "Critical comments from other users," for example, influenced others' attitudes much more than "a disclaimer from a social media company alerting individuals to the fact that the news might be fake" (202). Another study found that "media trust was predicted" best by individuals' online and offline social networks (Ognyanova). Even

in the wake of what some predict as an "infocalypse," where bots can spread disinformation that looks to be produced by humans (Warzel), readers and writers seek each other to negotiate truth. If one is enclaved in one's social media networks, however, such questioning is less likely to happen. Writing for *Mother Jones*, Ali Breland puts it best. The problem is not information alone but what C. Thi Nguyen calls "epistemic bubbles," where other views are undermined or disregarded rather than never encountered (qtd. in Breland). How information is interpreted has much to do with how it circulates—that is, the social relations in which it is produced and encountered.

Epistemic bubbles help explain the seeming contradiction of information: the majority of citizens question information's reliability and are aware of fake news and personalization yet still use internet sources for their news. Since the inception of Web 2.0, more and more people rely on social media for much of their information. According to the Pew Research Center's 2019 report, "more than half of U.S. adults get news from social media often or sometimes (55%), up from 47% in 2018" even as they question the quality of this news: 88% recognize that these news sources are controlled by algorithms, most see a political bias in the news offered, and over half see the mix of news offered as worse than other venues (Shearer and Grieco). In other words, those who rely upon social media as their main news source understand that it functions as a commodity and, as a result, its accuracy is questionable. The Pew Research Center's report notes that "among those U.S. adults who say social media companies treat some news organizations differently than others [82%], there is broad agreement that they favor three types: those that produce attention-grabbing articles (88%), those with a high number of social media followers (84%), and those whose coverage has a certain political stance (79%)" (Shearer and Grieco). Rather than avoiding social media for information, awareness of such control helps heighten a sense that we need to find the "right" information or that our information is "more right" than others'. The "problem" may be with technological filters, but the effect of that filtering lies with human agency: our own sense of how we might use information and what value it has for us.

Recent analyses of the 2016 presidential election suggest Pariser and Sunstein had reason to fear, but contrary to Pariser's analysis, it seems users do as much filtering as algorithms. In a working paper of what news sources voters sought out during the 2016 election, Matthew Tyler and colleagues of the Cyber Policy Institute at Stanford find that "partisanship" was "a strong predictor of how individuals allocate their attention to political news online. Democrats and Republicans do give

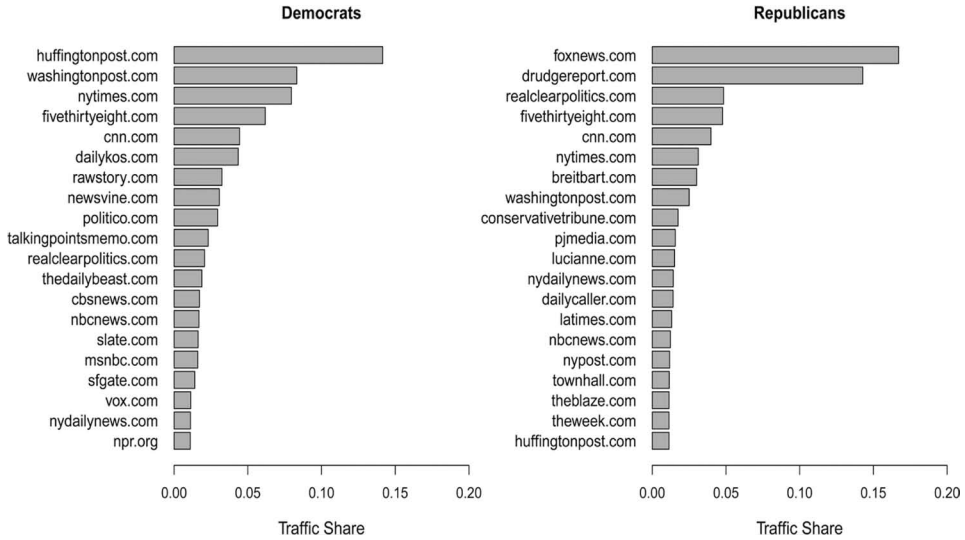

FIG. I.2. Random sampling of Democrat and Republican traffic on the top twenty websites visited in 2016 (Peterson et al. 248).

some minor amount of attention to sources favored by their opponents, but much of the audience heterogeneity occurred at portal sites" (qtd. in L. Owen). News portals, such as Yahoo, seem to attract those who are not looking for a predetermined answer. Those going directly to news sites themselves tended to choose by affiliation. Drawing from the same research, Erik Peterson and colleagues demonstrate these choices by illustrating the visit share of individual sites by party right after politically charged news events; specifically, Donald Trump's "pussy-grabbing" comments and Hilary Clinton's email server controversy during the 2016 election (246, 248). Produced exactly ten years after Hindman's book, traffic indicators are similar, if not more pronounced (see fig. I.2). Peterson and colleagues note that their results contrast with studies starting in 2009 that found people in the past sought out more ideologically diverse news (249). Although some may want to see such news spread as the machinations of one political party or another, it appears to be evenly distributed. The Pew Research Center shows that the spread of information via bots, for example, is fairly equally divided: "Roughly 41% of links to political sites [were] shared primarily by liberals and 44% of links to political sites [were] shared primarily by conservatives" (Wojcik et al.).

Such studies are concerning to many political scientists and media analysts in the age of misinformation as greater numbers of people rely on social media for their news: "In 2016, 57% of the public often got

news on television compared to 38% who used online sources. From 2016 to 2017, television's regular audience had declined to 50% of the population, and the online news audience had grown to 43%" (D. Owen 6). In fact, some note that the decline in local news has further created "news deserts," making social media the primary source of news in some areas (D. Owen 1). As we choose certain sites, we also ensure that our filter bubbles remain by giving more market share to certain media over others. We see and engage with sources made by those who have chosen similarly; we encounter the news we seek or that was made available to us in our social networks. A quick survey of my own Facebook for the past month shows that links to articles posted by "friends" favor the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic*, and the *Washington Post* over any other publications. Trusting my friends, I am also more likely to click on those links than those I encounter in more generic settings. My various social media algorithms track this behavior and offer me more of the same. For example, when I search Google for "Capitol riots," the first hit on my search is from *CBS News*, followed by the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. My liberal leanings immediately determine my options based on my personalized algorithm. But my choice of search terms—"riots" rather than "protest"—also leads to my results. In this way, I both choose (via my terminology) and have chosen for me (via my past liberal searches and my Facebook algorithm) the perspectives I'll be exposed to.

Neither the algorithms nor automated information is solely to blame for our increasing echo chambers. Instead, personalization profiles are based on our user data; we choose which links to follow and seem more likely to see alternative information via portals than our own choices. Much as Sunstein predicted, the Daily Me chooses its information universe, but technology firms ensure that we remain locked in Pariser's You Loop so that our "assumptions about the world are" rarely "shaken by what [we] see in [our] newsfeed" (Pariser 150). We then bring this information with us to our social media interaction; both our sources and the collectivities through which we interpret them affirm our knowledge. Rhetorician Barbara Couture highlights well the potential impact of social media on how we view others' knowledge. Because such collective interpretation or affirmation happens in "friendship" circles, Couture argues that we react to information gleaned in our bubbles within a social relation where critique is implicitly discouraged. In social media, opinions are individualized—"just what I'm thinking"—operating through what Couture calls a privacy logic. In her terms, when private lives become the basis for public rhetoric, possibilities for difference become threatened. "The imposition of private life through

public expression can only be accepted, rejected, or obliterated by the audience responding to such a display. Such public expression of private life allows no opportunity for a shared understanding of identity developed through acknowledging or listening to others, a conversation that may result in the speaker reconsidering his or her identity in light of what is learned about others and vice versa" (6). Private lives as the basis for public rhetoric operates through a "friendship" logic that "categorically excludes difference" (5) because of its focus on acceptance. If one engages the public primarily for private reasons, we do not seek interaction or deliberation, we seek validation.

Social media encourages sharing information with others like us, only reading what we like, and only seeing others commenting on what we already like. Couture's "friend" problem is supported by research that shows how the social context of social media platforms affect our exposure to difference. How and why we interact with others—the social relations of our interactions and information sharing—have as much of an effect on potential echo chambers as does algorithmic processing. Both the algorithm and the platform of social media apps create a different social context for users. For example, studies find extreme echo chambers are created most often by the recommendations of other users in one's network and the sharing of content (see Buntain et al.). We are more likely to go down a rabbit hole (i.e., the continued choice of or following of paths only aligned with a certain view) if we start doing so with a friend or someone we trust. Eytan Bakshy and colleagues, for example, found that Facebook friends were unlikely to recommend "cross-cutting" political news, and individual users were even less likely to click on a different political view than their friends were to recommend it. Facebook's focus on affirmation and friendship seems to support more alliance-based networks than, say, YouTube. Research by the Brookings Institution shows that YouTube's algorithm tends to be fairly equal in terms of ideological bent of what it offered to users, only showing a slight increase in recommendations to match the liberal or conservative position of the user's history. Rabbit holes were certainly possible on YouTube but were not necessarily a result of the algorithm (Brown et al.).

As much as the nature of each social media site and its algorithm affects the creation of echo chambers, it's important to note that user choice plays the biggest role. For example, there were a small percentage of users in the Brookings Institution study who went down a rabbit hole, underscoring for the authors "an important point about algorithmic systems and their effect on media consumption: harmful effects are often concentrated among small numbers of users, and what is true

for the platform as a whole can be very different for these sets of users" (Brown et al.). The algorithm plays a part, but the choices made by the user determine the severity of polarized interaction and information. Choice of platform affects this just as much. On Reddit, choosing a subreddit based on one's beliefs will lead to further affirmation of them, or going to a platform known for extremism such as 4chan will only exacerbate the echo chamber's effects. For this reason, in this book I do not focus on specific platforms as much as the nature of user interaction. Any platform is capable of different kinds of interactions, even as the underlying structure might make some more possible than others. It is the *social relations* set up by a platform's structure, algorithms, and users that seem to have the most effect on public spheres.

In social media, we interact with those who recognize us—our identities, our opinions—as having value. We "unfriend" or "unfollow" those with different political opinions, we join communities where our identity is reflected back to us, and we stay within the known while perceiving it as the public. In my own social media use, I notice this tendency most often when it is broken. For example, I pride myself on having "friends" on Facebook from across the political spectrum but found myself unfriending a "Trumper" who constantly posted fake news because I didn't want to get angry every time I opened Facebook. Similarly, when I asked another friend *why* in response to her post about not allowing mail-in ballots before the 2020 election, her response made it obvious no one had asked her that before. In both cases, these were peripheral friends—someone from high school I hadn't seen in forty years and a friend of a friend—who highlighted how easily I had become comfortable in my feedback loop even as I thought I was consciously trying not to enclave. Echo chambers are not only about our desire to hear agreement; they can be just as much about the feelings generated by affirmation, shared anger, or avoidance of anger (in my case). We live in our enclaves (Sunstein) and our filter bubbles (Pariser) because of both information and social interaction. Social interaction can drive our epistemic bubbles as much as algorithms. Web 2.0 is characterized chiefly by interaction, but it is interaction within a social context of affirmation with similar information in order to maximize engagement—and thus revenue.

POLITICAL ECONOMY AND THE THREAT TO PUBLIC SPHERES

The way information economies impact our attempts to create digital public spheres is, for me, the key question we need to ask ourselves as writing teachers so that we might offer alternative ways of interacting. If our concept of the public becomes a personalized one— through

either our private lives becoming constituted through social media or our information sources following our individual positions—concepts of common good can become eroded. What functions well for our personal satisfaction or for our role as "consumers is not necessarily good for citizens" (Pariser 18). Yet conflating consumer and citizen, work and leisure, the market and government are precisely the tenets of neoliberalism in which our online interactions take place (Harvey). We can see this connection in the epigraph from Nancy Welch with which I began this introduction. The tendency to self-segregate through shared interest or even in response to fears of the unknown is what prompts Welch to declare that we may be suffering from too much privacy: gated communities and privatized industries, schools, and health care. For Welch, privacy and privatization are inseparable. As a result, she offers a call to consider that, far from fears about the erosion of private lives and its effect on the public good, we actually are in need of more public discourse, not less, to counter the increasing economic influence on everyday lives. Sunstein reaches a similar conclusion, calling for more publicly funded deliberative forums and for the public to actively seek out disagreement and engage in civil debate in a plea for deliberative rhetoric. Pariser calls for governmental intervention into what information is available for individuals to search.

While it's hard to disagree with such calls for greater public space, more deliberation, and more access to diverse information, I believe that what Pariser, Sunstein, Couture, and Welch don't account for is how the distinctions between private and public no longer function as they once did. The line between the consumer and the citizen is much more difficult to draw than it may have been in the past. Privacy disappears as we willingly offer our private details for others' consumption. Just as importantly, we trade our privacy rights for technological convenience that then turn our very selves into a commodity. Our attention is market share; our need to see information that pleases us is a way to ensure that attention. It is not only privacy that has changed with Web 2.0; privatization has expanded its reach in an information economy. These moves are congruent with neoliberalism: our individual choice becomes consumer choice; all aspects of our lives (private and public) become subject to the market. As I will develop in more detail throughout this book, the way we encounter and choose social media may be driven in part by our political moment, but it is also created by the need for information flows to support new economies. Neoliberal political economies function differently from liberal ones, creating new forms of subjectivity to support late capital and the political ideologies that reinforce it. In this way, I believe Welch points us in the right direction in

Living Room: not in a doomed attempt to separate the private and public but in the recognition that the privatization of the public—including the citizen—poses the biggest danger to public spheres.

These are questions of political economy, about how the ideologies and subjectivities supported by neoliberalism may need to alter what we consider public spheres. I situate my inquiry into web public spheres, then, within a broader context I call *the digital* to distinguish it from technologies such as the internet, web, or particular platforms. By *the digital* I mean both the technologies that drive the web—search engines, news circulation, information bots, algorithms, dataveillance, and platforms—*and* the political economic context through which we interact with social media. Technology makes possible not only a particular social media platform but also the opportunity to mine the data of its users, to sell that data, to reproduce pictures without permission, and to track one's behavior. Much of this happens where those who created the data, photos, or digital trail cannot access it—for example, the server farms and workers monitoring social media posts for hours. Other aspects get substantial media attention, such as the recent debate over Chinese ownership of TikTok. In sum, the term "digitality" reminds me that the political, economic, national, and legal contexts of social media are much bigger than any platform or even the internet itself. Social media and the larger digital landscape are inextricably linked; thus, even as I focus primarily on social media in this book, how it is situated in digitality more broadly will be a key aspect of my discussion.

If the last decade has taught me anything, it is that before I can turn to pedagogy, I need to understand the changing nature of public spheres. For me, those changes revolve around the information economy and the production of a specific kind of neoliberal subjectivity that emerges from the economic focus accorded to personalization. What I hope to offer in this book, then, is a reconsideration of how public spheres might operate in our current political economy to develop a more viable understanding that might guide our pedagogies. Before I can begin to answer the pedagogical questions that prompted this book though, I must take a foray into rethinking some of our presumptions about public spheres themselves, how they function, and what forms of discourse are most amenable to creating them.

Thus, I begin with the claim that any attempt to address the problem of our divisive public discourse needs to begin with investigating what we mean by "private" and "public" and how the distinctions between these concepts have changed within an information economy. My turn in the first chapter to a critical reading of how composition has

understood public spheres is driven not by an attempt to discredit the potential of public spheres. Instead, I want to understand what aspects of these theories might still be viable and which need to be revised to help develop a more robust sense of *digital* public spheres specifically. Based on this reading, I take up the question of a revised view of public spheres in chapter 2, seeking to pair insights from public sphere theory with rhetorical ecological perspectives on circulation that may be more amenable to public action in information economies. Chapter 3 examines public spheres through this new lens, looking at what kinds of public spheres *work* in social media and the kinds of social change they might bring about. Relying on this revised theory of public spheres and taxonomy of social media possibilities, I turn to pedagogy in the last two chapters. The first three chapters examine why we can't teach students to write for public spheres—because doing so centers the writer in ways not amenable to circulation in digital spaces. I suggest in chapter 4 that what we can do is help students develop *public orientations* through interactive and responsive writing. Focused on engaging their reflective capacity as writers within public ecologies, the chapter draws heavily on research into my undergraduate course in writing for digital publics and a repurposing of published digital pedagogies. Focusing on public orientations does not negate student writers' ability to initiate public spheres ecologically, a topic I turn to in chapter 5, only writers' ability to control their circulation or direct their action. The final chapter, then, looks at the kinds of writing students might do to initiate public spheres and the changes in the writing process that might be necessary for them to do so.

I do not develop curriculum as part of this book. I draw off papers and projects from my first attempt at teaching digital public spheres, as I learned much about the pedagogy advocated here from that group of students. I do not seek to study my specific practices nor suggest them to other teachers. I bring in my students' work for two reasons: (1) to demonstrate the reflective capacities students developed and (2) to highlight how my students' reflections helped me revise my thinking about how digital public rhetorics might work. That said, I do attempt to highlight outcomes and goals for courses that seek to take up public sphere writing in digital spaces. My examples are drawn from an upper-division class on this very topic, but I hope that what I offer here can be used in a variety of settings, from first-year writing to advanced courses.[3] I learned a lot from that first class, maybe more than they did from me, and I am grateful for their permission to share some of their work with you. My hope, in the end, is to offer students like these more possibilities and more ways to engage others. Or probably more accu-

rately, a desire to do so. At the base of the pedagogy I am advocating here is a change in the way we approach the web more generally, before actions like the repeal of net neutrality expand. It is a call to realize the public potential of web spaces before they no longer exist or can no longer be realized.