

A dedication to the banal: E-relevant web text sites and their role in user-generated culture

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Abstract

E-relevant web text sites (EWT sites) are a relatively new phenomenon featuring banal yet remarkable user-generated texts on dedicated websites. This thesis analyses the sociosemiotic dimension of EWT sites in enabling neo-phatic communication: communication based on the relatable nature of EWT content and user-friendly medium, affording communicative acts without the requirement for in-depth discussion. Rather than fostering serious exchange, neo-phatic communication aims to establish a form of contact less brief than a greeting but akin to its purport, developing from banal but shared experiences. Analysis of the signification process involved in EWT sites, through a sociosemiotic framework based on Peirce's second trichotomy of signs (icon, index, symbol) and the frame analysis of Goffman, shows that the sites' semiotic structure belongs to a neo-phatic kind of communication unique to computer-mediated communication. This study illustrates how content with minimal substance might be undervalued as a means of understanding modern communication behaviour.

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Introduction

When the Internet came into being in the 1980s, it was the result of years of collaboration between scientists, professors, and government. Stemming from decades of work into the development of several packet-switching networks such as ARPANET and CYCLADES, the Internet came with ambitions of information-sharing and education which could transcend geographical limitations. Tim Berners-Lee, the essential inventor of the Internet, clearly saw the great potential of the World Wide Web: in addition to founding the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) in 1994 to help the Internet realize its potential (including the vision of “Web for all” (W3C, 2012, About W3C), he also created the World Wide Web Foundation to leverage the Internet as a tool in “reducing poverty and conflict, improving healthcare and education, reversing global warming, spreading good governance and addressing all challenges, local and global” (World Wide Web Foundation, n.d., FAQ). As the Internet spread over the 1990s as a tool for the general public, one might have pondered on the endless possibilities for social change presented by this technology.

Flash forward to the early 21st century, when through some boon of technology I am linked to www.overheardinnewyork.com. *Overheard in New York* simply features excerpts of discussions that had been overheard in New York and subsequently posted online. The website, calling itself “The Voice of the City”, includes amusing submission titles and quirky signatures from submitters. Everyone is invited to submit their own content, shaping a concept of the quotidian life of New Yorkers available online for all to experience.

I continued to come across sites such as *Overheard in New York* over the next several years; in addition to the repository of eavesdropped conversations from the Big Apple people

overheard in New York, *People of Walmart* and *Clients From Hell* surfaced. Sites branched out from text excerpts to photo contributions, and from there into the enabling of Facebook “sharing” and “re-tweeting”. The ways in which the Internet has been harnessed for social purposes continue to expand, gaining popularity and public contributions, dedicated to even the most seemingly banal aspects of our everyday lives. The case of what I call “e-relevant web text sites” (EWT sites) is particularly interesting because, at face value, the sites do not convey any practical information. Unlike, for example, food or travel blogs, or even social media updates on the goings-on of friends, the practical use of EWT sites is not immediately identifiable. Furthermore, the sites are not particularly interactive¹; despite gathering public submissions, the platform is almost a “one-to-many” platform in which the users who generate the content go uncredited in any way that allows users to develop identities through the site, denying contributors the sort of online fame sometimes yielded from social media such as YouTube or Twitter. As Cover (2006) notes, “the internet in general could be considered the site at which the author’s name disappears as a plethora of anonymous sites, commentaries, knowledges and textualities emerge amidst an environment predicated on its interactivity and exchangeability” (p. 146). Yet it is clear that the sites serve some sort of

¹ According to Cover (2006), interactivity is challenging to define (p. 141), and “the problem with theories of interactivity is the extent to which it can be located between seeing it as that which is technologically or authorially determined, and how much activity is required on the receiver’s part to shape reception” (p. 141). In other words, interactivity can exist in many forms, and potentially in varying degrees dependent on technological and personal factors. In the context of this study, I argue that EWT sites are in some ways less interactive than other sites displaying Web 2.0 affordances: while the websites allow for “some element of user control over narrative content” (Cover, 2006, p. 141) available in online discourse, it does not afford certain capabilities such as what McMillan (2002) calls “conservational activity”, in which “individuals interact directly with each other, mimicking face-to-face (F2F) contact through computer-mediated communications technologies” (as quoted in Cover, 2006, p. 142). Sites such as Facebook more closely achieve this degree of interactivity. As an analysis of the EWT sites’ qualities will illustrate, interactivity in a dialogical sense is limited, making the sites “neo-phatic” in their communication function.

function for participants – otherwise, there would be no sense in engaging with them. What is this function?²

One might suppose that the easiest way of answering this question is to directly ask participants *why* they engage with the sites, whether it is through posting content, providing comments, or reading. While I am sure that audience research would provide many valuable insights into participation of sites such as those mentioned above, I feel that this approach has several potential short-comings. When individuals ask themselves what is going on in social situations, as Goffman (1974) suggests, the question is suspect: not only do people unknowingly focus on different aspects of an event, even when such views might agree, the question ignores the importance of determining “what this apparent consensus consists of and how it is established,” (pp. 7-8). In truth, much more occurs in a social event than what is explicit and identifiable to its participants. Goffman (1974) presents the idea that we act within a frame – a means of organizing a social situation – that plays a large role in dictating our behaviour. Such frames allow social actors to identify a type of event, and be guided accordingly by this knowledge so as to conform to the social standards to which they are subjected (pp. 21-22). We typically do not acknowledge frames and their influence on our social behaviours, meaning that when asked to identify what is taking place in a social situation, anyone answering the question would refer only to what is explicit to them. The goings-on which are not immediately identifiable fail to enter the picture. Goffman (1974) describes (to avoid using almost the same word twice at a short distance) frames as

² Such a question relates to the notion of functionalism as defined by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948), who argue in their examination of the role of mass media that “problems engaging the attention of men change, and they change not at random but largely in accord with the altering demands of society and economy” (p. 230). Their work supposes that “by virtue of the fact that they exist,” mass media play a role in influencing society. In the scope of this study, a similar rationale is assumed in that the existence of the phenomenon indicates that a function is being served.

“definitions of a situation [which] are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them” (pp. 10-11). He then explains that social frameworks establish ““standards” to social appraisal of [a doer’s] actions based on its honesty [...] elegance, tactfulness, good taste, and so forth” (p. 22) – such “primary frameworks of a particular social group constitute a central element of its culture” (p. 27). In the context of the study at hand, one might see primary frameworks at play in two ways: in the witnessing of the events captured by passers-by, who then submit that activity via an EWT site; and also in how the sites themselves function, guided by standards (spoken and/or unspoken) of what constitutes quality content and rules for participation which are guided by the site’s infrastructure and style. As the semiotic analysis will illustrate, socially deviant activities (which are generally deemed to be in poor taste by our social standards) gain the attention of the public – for example, *People of Walmart* frequently displays photographs of cross-dressers, an activity which is seen as taboo given that our culture’s primary frameworks impose the notion that men and women wear gender-specific kinds of clothing. Frameworks also govern interactions, such as those between a customer or client and workers; it is expected that a certain dialogue would occur in which the staff greets the customer, who might then ask the staff for assistance as they undertake a transaction. To have the staff and customer exchange roles, for example, would confuse our understanding of the event taking place. Aberrations in this framework are often showcased on *Not Always Right*, a website which offers a glimpse into the customer/staff framework and the deviations which occur within such a framework.

Therefore, although a look into the psychology of participation could be an appropriate means of investigating this phenomenon, it may be more useful to approach this

phenomenon by considering its representational properties, highlighting aspects of EWTs which are moulded by factors not consciously recognized by viewers/users. By taking a message-centered approach rather than a psychological approach, we are able to understand why the text works in ways which are not immediately clear. In fact, what I advance here is the argument that what is most important is what is not explicit: the frame. Sites such as *Overheard in New York*, as part of a new media phenomenon, offer the reader a promise of a particular social experience; visitors/ readers frequent the sites to have this promise fulfilled, without acknowledging the frame that has made this experience possible in advance.

This perspective, applying the theory of Goffman, will be used together with a semiotic analysis of EWT sites: more specifically, the websites will be considered through examining the sites from a representational perspective by means of Peirce's second trichotomy of signs (icon, index, and symbol) (See CP 1.355-1.368, 2.274-2.282). In identifying the tendencies (textual properties and semiotic structures³) of these sites and determining which of their aspects draw the readers' attention (and toward what end), we are able to understand the social function of EWT sites in a way that includes the non-explicit aspects of the user experience that they afford.

Such a proposition entails suggesting that there is an "implied reader". The theory of the implied reader rather claims that "the reader discovers the meaning of the text" as it reveals its component parts to the reader through active involvement with the text (Iser,

³ The term 'textuality' is referred to throughout the text, with reference to the "textual properties" of EWT sites and often in conjunction with mention of the "semiotic structures" of these sites. The concept of 'textuality' is used to refer to the interpretation of e-relevant web texts from a specifically cultural standpoint, i.e. with a focus on the cultural content of the sites. While the interpretive aspect of semiosis and of cultural knowledge are by no means mutually exclusive, the terms are used separately so as to emphasize, as needed, the importance of cultural knowledge to the sites' texts. As Fiske (2010) states, the typical reading of texts reflects common culture (p. 3), and "when the text and audience are members of a tightly knit culture [...] the interaction is smooth and effortless" (p. 156). 'Textuality' is used in this study on those occasions when the discussion deals more with cultural knowledge than with the processes of logic (the latter being referred to with the counterpart of "semiotic structures").

1975, pp. xi-xiv); this theory is similar to Umberto Eco's (1979) theory of "textual cooperation". Although in grouping together parts of a text, our interpretation "must inevitably be colored by our own characteristic selection processes" (Iser, 1975, p. 284), Eco's theory posits that the implied reader is one who "cooperate[s] in the text's actualization" in accordance with the signs and gaps present in the text (as quoted in Guillemette and Cossette, 2006, 2.5.2 ¶ 1). In other words, a text is merely a series of signs which continually shape meaning, but it is up to the reader to view these signs as a "coherent whole" and fill in the "gaps" between the signs to interpret the narrative (Guillemette and Cossette, 2006, 2.2 ¶ 1). In this sense, the larger text (the novel or the website) has a limited number of truly acceptable or valid interpretations, if one is interpreting its components correctly; it is therefore worthwhile to examine these components to see what can be understood from them.

The notion of the "implied reader", which refers typically to the reading of novels (Iser, 1975, p. xi) is complicated in three ways by the medium of e-relevant web text sites. First, while the sites are composed of related texts, these texts may not be understood together as the sentences and chapters of a novel normally are; one could remove several images or excerpts from the sites without sacrificing the purport (and in fact, the ideal reading) of the sites. That said, it is important to note that the collection of texts provided in the sites is holistically critical to the site's concept. Second, the theory of the implied reader proposes that the "author has foreseen a Model Reader" who can interpret the text in the same way as the author intended in producing it (Guillemette and Cossette, 2006, 2.5.2 ¶ 1). In this sense, the theory could be adapted to place the website itself as the author, despite the contribution of user-generated content; the website succeeds in unifying the content and

shaping it in a way which can be understood by a typical visitor. (However, perhaps it is not the production of a particular storyline which is relevant here, but the very opportunity for shared production through the medium; the participants, as readers and/or submitters, have a platform by which they create a shared space; as de Certeau (1984) says, readers (in this case also participants) can “reappropriate” language, and posit “a contract with the other [...] in a network of places and relations” (p. xiii). This platform and its offerings are an integral part of the frame and shape our conception of the ideal reader in accordance with new possibilities for engagement.) Third, Iser (1975) suggests that the reader’s interest in a text comes in part “from surprises, from betrayals of our expectations” (p. 287) when the components of the story divert from our anticipations of it. However, I would argue that, in this instance, the function of a novel and the function of EWT sites differ considerably: while the novel serves a “poetic function”⁴ in that its orientation is primarily towards the message, this study argues that EWT sites are a manifestation of neo-phatic communication⁵: the function of the communication is the very act of communication itself, and the story of the text has a significantly reduced role. More specifically, the story of the text has a different sort of “tellability” (Labov, W. and Waletzky, J. (1967)) in the traditional sense of narrative or storytelling, particularly when contrasting how one might recount witnessing an event captured by an EWT orally compared to how it is manifested online. Georgakopoulou (2006) describes Labov’s conception of narrative as one which “moves from the reported events and the complications within them to the most significant event(s) (cf. high point, peak, climax), evaluates (i.e. shows or tells its significance) them, and resolves them,” and

⁴ This term originates from Roman Jakobson (1960) to describe a function of language in which the focus is on the message for its own sake (p. 356).

⁵ The term “phatic” communication originates from Malinowski (1923) and later by Jakobson (1960) to refer to a speech event in which the focus is on “purposeless events of preference or aversion, accounts of irrelevant happenings, comments on what is perfectly obvious” (Malinowski, 1923, p. 314).

states that this narrative is seen as “the ideal form in which to cast the richness, depth and profundity of human experience” (p. 237). In the case of an EWT, the event is often reduced to an image; when recounted by text, such as in *Not Always Right* or *Overheard in New York*, the evaluative aspects – including tonality and other communicative clues offered by the person recounting the event – are limited (though replaced by the adequate words to make up for the loss of the oral narrative/story). The narrative aspects of storytelling which might create a substantial story are constrained by the medium and nature of the sites, but viewers are nonetheless urged to submit content, perhaps suggesting that the act of participation is more strongly valued than the traditional act of storytelling, rendering thus the communications neo-phatic. (The concept of neo-phatic communication is central to the understanding of the function of EWT sites, and is explored in greater detail in later sections.)

The notion of the “implied reader” (called an “ideal reader” in the thesis) is aligned with the semiotic analysis being undertaken of EWT sites, in that semiotic inquiry recognizes that a reader *observes* a meaning established through signs – in Eco’s (1979) words, they engage in “textual cooperation,” engaging in the sites to achieve the actualization of its signs.

Statement of problem

This study is based on the identification of a particular set of websites established through several criteria (identified in analysis of the iconic dimension of the phenomenon’s semiotic structure). I have dubbed this phenomenon “e-relevant web texts” (EWTs), and their sites EWT sites, due to the fact that while they appear as informationally irrelevant in daily life,

they are increasing in quantity and popularity online. The sites have yet to be explored in their own right despite their appeal to a large audience on the Internet (see *Appendix A: Rising Popularity of E-Relevant Web Texts*). A semiotic analysis of the sites aims to identify the social and communicative function, even possible benefit of the sites for those engaged in them.

Before identifying the particulars of the study, including research questions and procedures governing data collection and analysis, it is important to establish what is meant by e-relevance, and how semiotic analysis will contribute to an understanding of what constitutes an e-relevant web text site.

Understanding e-relevant web texts

Before delving into the theoretical framework being used for the analysis of the EWT sites, it is important to consider several foundational premises concerning the concept of e-relevance. The most thorough understanding of the sites is supported by the concepts of banality, social frames, and intertextuality; once these concepts have been explored, the semiotic theory of Peirce can be more readily applied to the particular nature of the EWT experience.

Shared technical qualities of EWT sites

The following offers a general description of the shared qualities of EWT sites from a technical standpoint, explaining their general information architectures (including comments pages and how content submission is enabled), as well as the possible roles of site

moderators.

Content: EWT sites are essentially comprised of user-generated submissions (sometimes referred to as “texts” in the semiotic analysis of the thesis), as this content is the *raison d’être* of the sites. As it is explored in the semiotic analysis, the submissions are collected based on the single banal context to which the website is dedicated (see Appendix B for a list of EWT sites, which are titled in a way that typically reflects the banal context to which the site is dedicated; examples and general qualities of the texts are explored in the semiotic analysis). Submissions are typically shared as individual posts to the website, which means that submissions have their own title, date-stamp, and perhaps tags (which are used to order content, so that viewers might view posts by the tags applied; for example, *Not Always Right* tags posts by the type of service location, such as coffee shop, bookstore, or theme park). Some websites also allow readers to rank posts (i.e. using a star rating system), which allows readers to view posts based on popularity as per the rankings done by their peers. For example, the following example from *My Mom is a Fob* illustrates the various aspects that might be displayed:

My Mom Is a Fob
Best humorous, adorable, and loving messages from your fobby mom

MOMS ABOUT PRESS BOOK FAQ EVENTS ADVERTISE DADS SUBSCRIBE

To search, type and hit enter

Gangster Grandma

DECEMBER 5, 2008

★★★★★ (770 votes, average: 4.86 out of 5)

Like 426 people like this. Be the first of your friends.

Grandma borrowed one of my cousin's shirts. Bearing in mind she can't read English...



SHARE

HEY MYMOMISAFOB READERS!

Send submissions and fan mail to [mymomisafob\(at\)gmail.com](mailto:mymomisafob(at)gmail.com).

Love, [Serena](#) & [Teresa](#)

Buy the book!



Believe it or not, My Mom is a Fob is now available in print! Not only does the book showcase your

HIGHEST RATED: THE ALL STARS

- Gangster Grandma ★★★★★ (4.86 out of 5)
- How Mom Feels Cake ★★★★★ (4.86 out of 5)
- Rape prevention tactics ★★★★★ (4.85 out of 5)
- Quban spelling ★★★★★ (4.85 out of 5)
- One by one. ★★★★★ (4.85 out of 5)
- One Cock, Please ★★★★★ (4.85 out of 5)
- So Fly Like a Cheesecake ★★★★★ (4.85 out of 5)
- White people steal underwear ★★★★★ (4.85 out of 5)
- Beware of Indiscreet Facebook Uploads ★★★★★ (4.85 out of 5)
- Mom Learns E-mail ★★★★★ (4.85 out of 5)

MOST RATED: THE IN CROWD

Fig 1.1 My Mom is a Fob – Post

The above example reflects how EWT sites would typically display posts: the image is given a title (by the submitter or the moderator) with the image or text content below; a caption is provided above or below the content; a date of posting is listed; the post is tagged based on the relevant themes of the site (in this case, the image is tagged with “apparel, clothes, outfit”); social media functions such as sharing and liking are displayed, as well as the star rating system. This example also illustrates the site’s navigation and means of sorting or browsing content. However, not all websites display these features so extensively. Consider the below example, from *Overheard in New York*:

These People Really Do Exist in New York...

A fat Italian “businessman” in a Members Only jacket is standing on the corner talking to 2 other fat Italian guys. An SUV drives by, honks the horn twice, and then speeds off. The “businessman” turns around quickly and loudly yells: *Who are you? Who are you? Who are you? Who are you? Fuckin’ faggot.* –LES

Posted 2013-05-11

Quote

Fat People, Foreigners, Insults, Lower East Side

Fig 1.2 Overheard in New York - Post

This example reflects a more minimalist approach to EWTs, including only the submission, a title, a date-stamp, a source (“LES”), and tags.

Information architecture: The expression “information architecture” is used in this thesis to refer to the way in which a site’s information is organized and presented to readers. In the case of EWT sites, although the sites are visually diverse, many of the sections of the sites are treated similarly. For example, *Clients From Hell* has the following top navigation, with fairly self-explanatory sections:

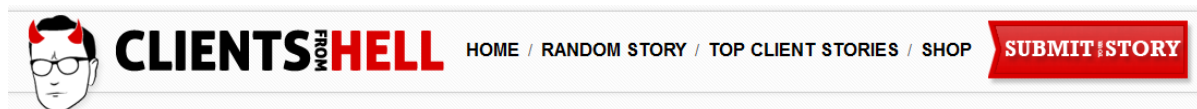


Fig 1.3 Clients From Hell - Information architecture

Typically, common sections for EWT sites include:

- Home
- About
- (Generate a) Random story
- Store (featuring materials such as books of compiled content, and promotional items)
- Browse stories (by date, location, popularity, etc.)
- Submit a story/image/etc.
- Subscribe (via RSS, to social media pages)


However, the critical element of the sites is the posts themselves – there is nothing so idiosyncratic about the information architecture to suggest that it has a significant role to play in forming the “genre” of the sites. The sections of the website, and the way in which they are organized, merely provide information about the site, promote it, and provide different means of browsing it.

Because content is user-generated, the websites promote the submission of content to readers by including submission information on the site’s home page, and by rendering the submission process simple. In *Fig 1.3*, the “Submit Your Story” is emphasized by a red button in the top navigation; the link leads to a page with a form where submitters merely type in the story’s title (optional), text, submitter name – and it is then sent with a click. *Unnecessary Quotes* takes a different approach, by including in the “Submissions” section of the left-hand column: “Please send your submissions via email to bethanykeeley (at) gmail.com. I look at them all, but it might take a while to get to yours -- sorry! I love you all, but I only have so much energy in a day.” Reader submissions are then sent to the site moderator(s) to be posted.


Posts of texts to the site typically offer readers the opportunity to comment. In most cases, the comments pages are non-threaded (meaning that comments are not shown as being responses to each other, but rather unassociated) and commenters are able to identify themselves by name or nickname, but no profile is associated with the identifier chosen. (In some cases, the commenter is able to link their chosen name to their own website, although this feature does not seem commonly used.) The following example from *People of Walmart*



illustrates the architecture of a typical comment page. (The comments follow a post featuring a baby sleeping on a check-out conveyor belt).

55 Comments, [Comment or Ping](#)


MOMMA 

Walmart has stooped to selling kids now?



Rating: 3.0/5 (1 vote cast)



  Rating: +1 (from 1 vote)

November 28th, 2011


SNARF 

I bet that baby has "Made in China" stamped on the bottom of it's foot.



Rating: 0.0/5 (0 votes cast)



  Rating: +2 (from 2 votes)

November 28th, 2011


DANIELLE 

I don't have anything else to say but WTF was this idiot doing with her kid?



Rating: 0.0/5 (0 votes cast)



  Rating: +1 (from 1 vote)

November 28th, 2011

NATE 

Ba-dat-dat-da-da-dat-dat-da-dadada dadada-dat
(Simpsons theme)


Rating: 0.0/5 (0 votes cast)

  Rating: +1 (from 1 vote)

November 28th, 2011

Fig 1.4 People of Walmart – Comments page

In the case of *People of Walmart*, comments can be rated, though this is an uncommon feature which does not appear to be used with any regularity.

The roles of moderators: Although the content is submitted by readers to the site, the postings and management of the site is done by moderators. Because the websites are so grassroots in nature, it can be assumed that those who moderate the website are those who generated the idea and initially developed the website, or assisting another moderator who generated the idea. In other words, it is unlikely that the originator of the idea or site is no longer involved, i.e. that they sold the website; in many cases it would be likely that the entire operation is managed by that individual, perhaps with assistance from friends.

Moderators may have different responsibilities depending on how they choose to operate their website and oversee the content; however, their key roles in content management⁶ could be as follows:

Most likely roles include:	Possible additional roles may include:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accepting and selecting submissions (if any selection process is used)• Making the posts to the website• Adding tags to posts, if this feature exists	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Monitoring comments made to the site and involving themselves as necessary (i.e. to remove spam or hateful comments)• Writing titles for the posts when none are provided

Having now described the shared technical qualities of EWT sites, it is possible to delve further into their content and sociocultural function.

Considering e-relevance: Banal, yet remarkable

⁶ This list is meant to reflect the day-to-day activities moderators may undertake in managing the content management of the sites; i.e., the list is not referencing activities such as initially developing the site, creating promotional materials, selling ad space, and so on.

As previously mentioned, I consider the sites “informationally irrelevant”, because they do not produce any practical take-away for the reader. While browsing websites online can provide us with inapplicable or trivial knowledge (such as “Shaquille O’Neal released five studio albums” or “My friend Sarah is at Starbucks right now”), EWTs do not even impart this “fluffier” type of information to the model or ideal reader. Vincent Miller (2008) calls such irrelevant pieces of information “phatic messages” – messages which, “although they might not always be ‘meaningless’, they are almost always content-less in any substantive sense” (p. 395). Miller here adopts and adapts to the internet age Malinowski’s idea of phatic communion, in which meanings are not “the result of intellectual reflection, nor do they arouse reflection in the listener” (Malinowski, 1923, p. 315). Despite this, the fact that the websites garner readers and submissions suggests that they have some kind of relevance. It is expected that by determining what meaning-making strategies are at play across these sites, we may understand what they offer to users.

One noteworthy aspect of EWTs is that while the content of the sites is focused on an everyday event, the occurrences which are published are remarkable enough to have them recorded and submitted online. For example, it is fairly commonplace for pedestrians to pass by store-front signs with incorrect punctuation; despite this, now, when one passes a sign displaying the extraneous use of quotation marks, one may have an “aha!” moment, snap a photo, and submit it to *Unnecessary Quotes* (www.unnecessaryquotes.com). While oddities have always been noticed by those present in social situations (and therefore, despite being odd in that frame, still make up an unremarkable, uncommunicated part of everyday life), what has *changed* is that there is now a medium by which these oddities are shared with those who are entirely removed from that social environment. Without being technologically

deterministic, it is worthwhile to consider the new opportunities and new public spheres offered to society in the digital age. Miller (2008) posits that larger social networks, and more technologies available to us to communicate with these networks, encourage “communication that retains a general sociability without the exchange of real information” (p. 395).

First, however, one must avoid an overly prescriptive view of the sociocultural changes afforded by Web 2.0 technologies and their manifestations by critiquing the concept of technological determinism, which generally posits that “technological change causes or determines social change” and that “technological developments take place outside society, independently of social, economic, and political forces” (Wyatt, 2007, p. 168). Such a view risks discounting the influence of “human choice or intervention, and, moreover, absolves us from responsibility for the technologies we make and use” (Wyatt, 2007, p. 169); more specifically in regards to the phenomenon under study, it risks attributing the development of and interests in EWT sites more to the technologies which underlie the phenomenon, rather than to the social agents who worked with the technologies to bring the sites to life, or even to the social tendencies which influenced the sites’ content. While this study includes many theories both related to the affordances of Web 2.0 technologies as well as social organization theories, it is critical to consider these concepts in a complementary fashion in recognition of the reality that social and technological worlds function in a synergistic fashion. This study hypothesizes that Web 2.0 technologies, and the manifestations of these technologies such as EWT sites, have developed due to a sociocultural appetite for this form of technologically-mediated communication. Subsequently, once these media are established, they continue to evolve due to both social agency as well as to new

technological affordances, and these factors continually influence each other. Such a view is aligned with what Hughes (1994) describes as “technological momentum [...] a concept that can be located somewhere between the poles of technological determinism and social constructivism” (p. 112, as quoted in Wyatt, 2007, p. 174). According to Hughes (1994), “[a] technological system can be both a cause and an effect; it can shape or be shaped by society” (p. 112, as quoted in Wyatt, 2007, p. 174). It is essential to keep in mind such a perspective as we examine social and technological influences upon the EWT phenomenon and the most plausible experiences afforded by the sites.

In the pages that follow, we will consider several theories which can help us to understand this sociocultural change and contextualize it in light of EWT sites: in what they are, in how they function as sociosemiotic devices, and in what role they fulfill in contemporary society. It is critical, at this point, to define “the banal” in a formal manner, as the concept of banality is central to the “genre” of media content under study. To do this, one must consider what the everyday is *not* – Featherstone (1992) chose to do this by using the everyday life as a counter-concept against the heroic (in other words, decidedly non-banal) life (p. 164). Featherstone notes the everyday is difficult to conceptualize, but proposes the following qualities of the everyday as those which appear frequently in various conceptualizations:

- a) An emphasis on what happens daily – “the routine, repetitive taken-for-granted experiences, beliefs and practices; the mundane ordinary world, untouched by great events and the extraordinary”;
- b) A non-institutional zone in which basic activities are performed;
- c) A “non-reflexive sense of immersion in the immediacy of current experiences”;

- d) A sense of “being with others in frivolous, playful sociability” existing outside of “institutional domains”; and
- e) An emphasis on heterogeneous knowledge (pp. 160-161).

In particular, criteria a), d) and e) are useful to this study. An emphasis on matters of routine is critical, and might include: being at work or school⁷; engaging in recreational activities; and running errands or completing chores. Playful sociability would include communicating (online or offline) with co-workers, friends or family, or being present with others while engaging in a recreational activity despite not knowing others (for example, sitting in a cinema). The emphasis on “heterogeneous knowledge” is a noteworthy inclusion in relation to this study, due to the fact that heterogeneous knowledge is linked to societal norms and expectations; this concept can be associated with Goffman’s (1974) work on frame analysis and is explained in detail in the theoretical framework of this thesis. It may also be helpful, in considering the banal, to relate it to the previously-mentioned notion of informational irrelevance or phatic culture, in which messages are not the result of “intellectual reflection” and generally do “not function [...] as a means of transmission of thought” (Malinowski, 1923, p. 315). Texts are not used to present an argument, nor are they designed to inspire deep thought or provide thorough, practical information; in this sense, they are aspects of life which strike us as rooted in the “normal” and which we do not need to think or worry about. Similarly, Goffman (1974) considered everyday practices to be “routines that allow the individual unthinking competent performances” (p. xxi); while he started with examples such as “to walk, to cross a road, to utter a complete sentence, to wear

⁷ Being at work or school could potentially contradict feature b) as outlined by Featherstone; however, I refer here more so to a high-level notion of actions or thoughts taking place while at an institution such as work, and not the institutionalized practices of these places. I make this distinction for the purposes of this study, because occurrences at work and school are relevant to the topics found in EWT sites, and because Featherstone offered no in-depth explanation of this feature.

long pants” (p. xxi), such practices extend to carrying out conversations, and carrying on successfully in public – generally, to engage in activities which are necessary in life, without needing to give it much thought and without wondering about the typical or normal order of things.

Featherstone’s (1992) fourth element, a sense of “being with others in frivolous, playful sociability” could be considered in light of the frame of EWT sites, as a defining element of their “genre”. More specifically, this idea of frivolity might be associated with a manifestation of *cuteness* that these sites exhibit, based on the notion that the sites fail to serve an identifiable practical function (making them quite frivolous at face value) and also based on the casual nature of the site. John Morreall (1991) considered which attributes are used to define ‘cuteness’, and among several qualities were the following:

- a) For infants, a smallness relative to other humans (and in fact, this applies to objects as well, such as a cute “cottage, village, or car”);
- b) A humorous amusement inspired by the above incongruity;
- c) “Behaviour indicating weakness and clumsiness” or an “inability to fend for themselves” (pp. 40-42, 45).

First, Morreall (1991) noted that “cuteness” as a term itself has a “colloquial and marginal linguistic status” (p. 39), is intrinsically connected with the other attributes he listed. Something “cute” is immediately diminutive, and the word also implies a casualness not associated with things which are more robust. In this sense, EWTs could be considered “cute” not only because they are smaller in importance and practical substance than other, more “respectable” websites (such as Wikipedia, which is also based on user-generated submissions) but also because they are more casual in nature. For example, if one is

interested in contacting organizers of *Overheard In New York*, “you should email Adam, Dave, Nick, Jenny, or Danielle⁸”, says the site. “They're the people who come up with the headlines and choose the quotes” (Overheard in New York, n.d., Contact us). It is also worth noting that the “smallness” of EWT sites is not only in their small amount of resources, but also in their small scope, focusing on one tiny aspect of life (i.e. a non-event) rather than providing information on a range of topics or on a more informationally relevant topic. In this sense, a feeling of “cuteness” can be maintained as a part of the frame of the websites; visitors can expect to encounter this sort of grassroots feeling when they visit them.

This sort of expectation is derived in part from the work done by framing, a concept which will be explored through the work of Erving Goffman (1974).

EWT sites as a frame

The notion of the frame used to understand the EWT phenomenon is based largely on the conception of ‘frames’ defined by Erving Goffman, a sociologist whose works focused on the ways in which our social experiences are organized by unofficial and unrecognized codes. A frame, according to Goffman (1974), refers to the “principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones” (p. 10-11). The “organizational premises” of activities in the ongoing world, occurring both mentally and physically, create the frame of our everyday experiences (p. 247) – and, as previously mentioned, what makes these premises particularly interesting is that despite their major influence in our daily life, we typically do not acknowledge their presence. In terms of social efficiency and convenience, pinpointing or making note of the frames that govern our experience is not worthwhile. It is not only our behaviours which are shaped by frames, but most importantly according to this analysis our

⁸ Each name was hyperlinked to that individual’s e-mail address (links removed).

own understanding of events, and as we enter into and enact everyday rituals, our expectations are conducted according to the frames of social experience.

While the events of our lives exist as an “untransformed reality” (Goffman, 1974, p. 156), the means of retelling an event form organized systems which allow readers to perceive and label these events in a regular way⁹. These retellings are a social production which cannot be separated from the events themselves; in this sense, frames are pervasive in influencing how we see our world. An event exists as the “innermost part” of a phenomenon (p. 156) but is obscured by the unconscious processes which organize our experiences. These social experiences become more complex once we consider how they can be re-circulated in society through media such as conversations, gossip, parody, journalism, and so on.

EWT sites can be understood as a Goffmanesque frame, in the sense that they exhibit particular qualities that dictate how we perceive and interact with them. It can be assumed that the ideal reader visits EWT sites with a certain expectation – he or she is going to experience something in particular, even when the sort of experience offered by the sites is not explicitly stated. This expectation, rather, is generated by the frame of the site – the unwritten conventions that create a “genre” of content and implicitly but effectively promise the reader a particular experience. Thus, when this study mentions an “expected” experience, it refers to the notion that frames and genres are *supposed* to be interpreted in a way which elicits a certain kind of response. The expected response to EWT sites is shaped by the semiotic structure of the sites as it serves to guide a meaningful engagement.

⁹ The cognitive process of perceiving and labelling events in a regular way relates to Peirce’s conception of the symbolic sign, which has as its nature affirmation (EP2: p. 313). A symbol functions as a law, a “formula” to which “events truly conform” as established and confirmed through experience (p. 314). In other words, experiences establish conditions for our understanding of which events in our lives are normal or abnormal. It becomes apparent here how Goffman’s concept of frames can be correlated with Peirce’s theories of logic in developing an analytical approach to how we understand and function in social circumstances.

There are a number of components to consider in understanding the frame of EWT sites: the information architecture, the opportunities for and limitations to participation, and the actual content of what is shared all come into play as elements of the frame. Such a perspective relates to the concept of “affordance”, credited to J. J. Gibson (1979) , who describes “[t]he *affordances* of the environment [as] what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill” (p. 127). In the word of Million, Lerner and Weiner (2003), “the environment can be seen as offering a set of *affordances*; that is, the environment is assessed in terms of what it can do for us,” (p. 434). Consequently, “how we use the environment [...] will vary depending on our needs and interests, values, and aspirations” (p. 434). By this logic, our understanding of an object relates not only to its perceptible attributes, but “also includes information about how the object is used. [...] Another way of saying this is that “potential for action” is part of our perception of an object” (Goldstein, 2009, p. 165). The concept of ‘affordance’ complements a semiotic perspective, in that while a person’s individual interpretation may have an influence on the understanding of an object, the object itself possesses particular attributes which lend themselves to having that object used for a particular purpose and not another one. The idea of “affordances” can also be related to the concept of the “frame” described below; the content and format of a site, as well as the socio-cultural practices which influence of understanding of the content and use of the site, afford the possible experience of EWT sites.

Of course, one must wonder from what origins the frame is created. Goffman (1974) notes that we conceive of many practices naturally, because we do not need to think about them; however, these practices are not natural, and in fact “were attained through an

acquisition process whose early stages were negotiated in a cold sweat” (p. xii). In other words, frames are established and negotiated over time.

The relationship between the site’s texts (images and excerpts) and the frame of the sites is critical; they cannot be examined exclusive to one another. Instead, it is important to keep in mind that the texts themselves create the “identity” of the site, but that the site is then destined to continue to reiterate and maintain this identity by only including such texts that shape it to begin with. This relationship could be compared to a book of jokes: the book of jokes exists as such because it is filled with jokes, and to not contain them would deny the book this identity. Therefore, the book may *only* contain jokes to exist as a joke book; should it include poetry or tragedies, it ceases to be a joke book. Therefore, the relationship between the content (jokes) and the frame (the joke book, and more importantly the idea of the book and the expectations based on this idea) is co-dependent.

On intertextuality

It is worthwhile to consider, in relation to the concept of ‘frame’, theories of intertextuality and genre. In particular, John Fiske (1988) explores intertextuality and genre within the realm of television, but his ideas of horizontal and vertical intertextual relations can be appropriated for use here. Fiske’s concept of primary, secondary and tertiary texts are also relevant, and will be supported with a modern revisiting of the concept by Christensen, Rasmussen and Kofoed (2009).

Fiske (1988) defines ‘intertextuality’ as a theory proposing that “any one text is necessarily read in relationship to others and that a range of textual knowledges is brought to bear upon it” (p. 109). In particular, the effectiveness of a text depends on our understanding

of our “culture’s image bank” to make particular meanings and exclude other meanings (p. 109). Fiske relates this kind of intertextuality to genre, a set of culturally-understood boundaries which organize intertextual relations for “the convenience of both producers and audiences” (p. 110). Otherwise put, genres manage expectations, and studying the intertextual relations of a genre can allow us to understand how a culture will interpret the texts within these genres (p. 109).

In this sense, EWT sites as a phenomenon could be thought of as a genre; the sites display certain conventions across each other which are comparable, and together they manage expectations. Visitors are generally aware of what to expect when visiting the site, aided not least of all by the titling trends of this genre of site and their connection to modern tropes and/or sub-cultural experiences (ranging from small-town Americans to frustrating computer-illiterates). EWT sites, then, work horizontally across each other to be linked “along the [axis] of genre”, and genre then “regulates and activates memory of similar texts and the expectations of [each one]” (pp. 109, 112). The link between Goffman’s concept of ‘frame’ and Fiske’s concept of the ‘genre’, as they are each used here, is quite explicit.

However, Fiske’s concept of intertextuality has not only a horizontal plane, but also a vertical plane. “Vertical intertextuality,” says Fiske, “consist of a primary text’s relations with other texts which refer specifically to it” (p. 118). Whereas instances of the same genre exist in relation to each other on the horizontal axis of primary intertextuality, vertical intertextuality consists of secondary and tertiary intertextuality: secondary texts include criticisms or promotions which circulate “selected meanings of the primary text” (p. 119), while tertiary texts are ones which viewers create (such as conversations, or more public messages such as letters to the editor) which come together to form a “collective rather than

an individual response” (p. 125). It is these secondary and tertiary texts while I would like to re-formulate in light of technological developments which have created new opportunities for user-generated content and direct circulation of content online.

Christensen, Rasmussen, and Kofoed (2009) suggest that in the realm of user-generated content, and with the increased viewing and sharing of media online, “texts are more or less leveled out and become part of a massive maelstrom of all kinds of content organized using tags and folksonomies¹⁰” (p. 5). Although the authors focused their paper on online videos, I feel that their argument has relevance to EWT sites and in fact to other websites as well.

Although I do not believe that EWTs can be “leveled out” in the same way as popular videos, due mostly to their non-mainstream origins, I agree with Christensen et al (2009) that user-generated content presents us with an opportunity to reconsider vertical intertextuality. For example, for EWT sites, secondary texts could be defined in part by the ways in which users re-circulate texts online via Facebook “sharing” and Twitter “re-tweeting” functions, which link others back to the original source of the content (the EWT site, or in Fiske’s terms, the primary text). In this sense, just as the ability to produce and circulate content can now be undertaken by regular web users, the production of secondary texts has been somewhat democratized; while this role would often be assumed by writers of newspapers, magazines, or press releases, anyone now has the opportunity to promote the circulation of the primary text. For EWT sites, site moderators encourage such behavior by having (for example) Twitter accounts and embedded Facebook “sharing” for the sites.

¹⁰ “Folksonomies” is a term used for the way online content is organized through “user-driven tagging” – a process by which descriptors are added to the text. According to Thomas Vander Wal, who coined the term, “tagging is done in a social environment (usually shared and open to others)” (Vanderwal.net, Definition of Folksonomy).

However, if the function of secondary texts can now be assumed by the audience, what does this make of the tertiary text?

I would argue that, to adapt Fiske's theory to EWT sites, opportunities for user-generated content must come into play. Fiske (1988) describes tertiary texts as "texts that the viewers make themselves," (p. 125), and for EWT sites, that text takes shape as an actual contribution to the site. Because these sites depend on user submissions to populate them, user submissions in fact "work to form a collective response" as Fiske suggests – the collective response exists in the continuation of the site. So, while both secondary and tertiary texts can now be the responsibility of the audience, the level of engagement with the text is increased in the latter text, just as it is in Fiske's original model.

By considering Fiske's conception of genres alongside Goffman's theory of the frame, we are able to understand how the frame might function within the realm of media as opposed to only more traditional forms of social organization. By placing the practice of generic categorization under the larger umbrella activity of framing, we might see how in a media context users rely not only on the frame for appropriate expectations and behaviours, but also for seeking out and understanding popular media. Furthermore, the newfound importance of user-generated content in media use cannot be excluded from this larger notion of the frame: the increased involvement of the user in practices of intertextuality is also part of the frame of EWT sites. Part of the larger expectation of these sites includes opportunities for circulation and direct participation.

I have attempted, through these theories, to understand the processes underlying framing from the standpoint of the user: how user expectations are formed not only for individual EWT sites, but across the sites as a larger phenomenon. These introductory

concepts will lend themselves to the semiotic analysis of the experiencing of EWT sites through Peirce's categories of icon, index and symbol to determine its social function.

Purpose of study

The aim of this study is to understand the social function and meaning of, i.e. the sociosemiotic take on, EWT sites as they can be used by visitors through an analysis of the sites' semiotic structure. This study aims to explain from a representational perspective that the social function and meaning EWT sites have for their ideal/model users is the affordance of neo-phatic communication, in which the predominant role of the sites is to make available means of communication, in order to establish contact with unknown others, through the sharing of banal social experiences. Having websites dedicated to recording and collecting oddities in "the interaction order" (a phrase used by Goffman (1982) to describe the scientific domain which he developed throughout his publications) seems only a natural extension of the phenomenon that Solove (2007), Strangelove (2010)¹¹ and others have been exploring for some time; this study will prove relevant because these amalgamations of the e-relevant have yet to be explored, particularly from a semiotic perspective.

Research questions

The theoretical analysis of e-relevant web texts aims to answer the following research questions:

1. *What function do EWT sites have from a semiotic perspective?* By simply taking into

account the fact that such websites continue to grow in number and in amount of content, it

¹¹ Solove (2007) considers the impact of personal identity and reputation when irregular activities (such as "Dog Poop Girl" or "Star Wars Kid") gain traction online, while Strangelove (2010) examines amateur YouTube videos in contrast with traditional home film-making in light of a mass participatory culture.

is clear that the sites have an important (or popular) semiotic function: as conventions (such as the repeated engagement in websites) are guided by purposefulness, there must be an agreed-upon social use of the sites to achieve a goal. My hypothesis is that the semiotic structure of EWT sites could afford, perhaps not exclusively but relevantly, a neo-phatic kind of communication. This engagement is banal in content or substance and phatic in its communicational purpose in that there is no deeper meaning behind it – the goal is merely the further transmission to keep lines of communication open. This key question can only be answered through an understanding of the secondary question provided below.

2. *What defines the EWT sites from a textual viewpoint (as opposed to an audience research one)?* By undertaking a semiotic analysis of the textuality of EWT sites, we are able to identify how the sites establish a means for neo-phatic communication. Semiotic analysis will: a) explain how the sites resemble each other in how they could be experienced - or how they are *supposed* to be experienced, in the same sense than the “thriller” genre of a film or a novel mandates a certain kind of reading experience quite different from, say, “romantic comedy”. In other words, the study considers EWT sites in their symbolic nature and what the phenomenon can offer to visitors and contributors; b) identify which aspects of the sites might attract attention (an undertaking which is enhanced through reference to frame analysis and the concept of gossip); and c) identify how the conditions presented through the sign structure may work toward achieving the social goal of neo-phatic communication.

Structure of study

Following the introductory section of this paper is a methodological section which identifies research design, data collection, methods of analysis and limitations/delimitations of the study.

Subsequent to the methodology is the theoretical framework, which draws from Charles Peirce's second trichotomy of signs and is supplemented with Erving Goffman's theories of social organization. The complementary theories covered in the introduction will be re-introduced as needed. Furthermore, the concept of 'phatic communication' (as articulated by Malinowski and Jakobson and revisited by internet scholars such as Miller (2008)) will be explored to enlighten the reader as to the direction that the findings of the analysis will take.

Once the theoretical framework has been expounded, a literature review will cover academic research relating to the Internet meme, with an explanation of how this knowledge contributes to an understanding of the EWT experience. The meme will be considered from a semiotic perspective in order to more easily guide the reader through the semiotic analysis of EWT sites.

The findings section of the study will provide a semiotic analysis of the EWT structure through the lens of iconic, indexical and symbolic signs. By identifying first the similarities across sites to understand how they shape understanding and use of the sites, we will then consider how the tendencies at play within the systems of signification create affordances related to the manner in which the sites are used and to what end. This dissection will lead to an identification of the purposeful habits which drive readers toward EWT sites – in other words, the symbolic function of the sites will be identified.

After analyzing the content, we will revisit the notion of phatic communication and transpose this theory onto Internet culture/communications (neo-phatic communication) as a discussion. Future areas for research will be explored, including areas where neo-phatic communication may be applied.

Methodology

Research design

This study is designed as a socio-semiotic analysis of the structure and textuality of EWT sites, using Peirce's second trichotomy of signs; dimensions of iconicity, indexicality and symbolism will be explored. Complementary theories will be included to assist an analysis of the social elements of the EWT experience; Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974) is the predominant supplement for this aspect of the study, particularly in examining the indexical dimension of the experience. No audience research is included in the study; my claim is that the sociocultural function fulfilled by EWT sites can be understood through a semiotic analysis of their structure. This approach, of course, does not mean that other perspectives, such as a reception study or a psychological one, could not contribute much to our understanding of this media phenomenon. In fact, the findings of this preliminary study could well become the input for such a study. Such a methodological approach provides a means of "reconstructing" the model/ideal reader experience in a fashion that would lend itself to subsequent reception studies.

Role of researcher

The role of the researcher in this study is to contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon through the theoretical possibilities of explanation provided by social semiotic analysis. To gain a thorough understanding of the phenomenon, the researcher is required to become immersed in the research site(s) through observation, though submitting or commenting on content is not necessary.

Data collection

Data collection, in this study, refers to the gathering of e-relevant texts (images and texts) based on the parameters established for this phenomenon, while also considering the information architectures of the sites selected for study. An addition to sites of which I was previously aware, additional EWT sites were sought through searching for websites through More Of It and Alexa Internet recommendations (explained below; see *Appendix B: Breakdown of EWT Site Collection*), and once a comprehensive list of e-relevant sites was gathered, the sites offering the richest data were selected¹².

Metrics were originally considered as a directional tool in selecting websites for study. To this end, Alexa Internet rankings were consulted. Alexa (www.alexa.com) is a web information company which uses a variety of metrics to rank Internet pages. The reason that

¹² The concept of data richness (here and in the pages following, which deals with data collection and analysis) refers to the variety of content provided by a site, as well as to (particularly in the case of text-based sites) the extent to which storytelling is done. For example, in regards to variety of content, a site such as *Not Always Right* would likely fail to sustain itself, if every text posted described instances in which someone struggled to order a specialty coffee; as a joke it would have lost its potency with use, and readers would also struggle to encounter a situation that specific to submit. In regards to storytelling, *Overheard in New York* takes advantage of its medium for creative purposes: within the recounting of the story itself, humorous descriptors are used for those in the witnessed occurrences, and gestures are often described in italics. (By contrast, *Clients From Hell* uses more straightforward descriptors such as “Client”.) A website may also be deemed to not be rich in data if the site has a significant proportion of non-text content (i.e. advertisements, promotional messaging from moderators, and so on), such as in the present state of *People of Walmart*, as compared to its state when first launched.

Alexa was selected as a sound source for this study are that a) Alexa has gathered information from 4.5 billion websites, making its understanding and coverage of web sites far more thorough than my own, and b) that Alexa uses a clustering analysis to categorize sites and offer to the user other sites of interest. For example, in viewing the Alexa profile for *Passive Aggressive Notes*, Alexa's "Related Links" section suggested I consult *Stuff On My Cat* (Alexa, n.d., Passiveaggressivenotes.com site info, Related links). Alexa's recommendations offer a wide range of sites which can be reviewed based on the outlined criteria.

More Of It (www.moreofit.com) is a "website similarity search engine" (More Of It, n.d.) which "takes over 130,000,000 instances of people manually organizing and describing websites and combines this with sophisticated matching and clustering technology" (*how does it work?* n.d.). While such a method is not foolproof, it is not essential that More Of It provided only sites which fit my criteria; rather, it afforded me an opportunity to broaden the scope of my data collection.

However, metrics cannot be the only determinant of which sites should be worthy of study, as quantitative metrics of popularity do not necessarily lead to content which reflects the distinctive features of EWTs. (For example, *People of Walmart* is one of the most popular web sites that might fall under the EWT phenomenon; however, over time, its original content was reduced and its information architecture evolved, making it less plentiful in the context of this study.) The most valuable or relevant content for this study was found when the site first developed a following, as user-generated content was critical for the success of the site in its early days. Consequently, the site was chosen for selection as part of the corpus, but its first six months of content were chosen for analysis as opposed to

its more recent posts. Because the site is well-known compared to others in the genre and likely played a role in the popularity of the genre, the first six months of content provide a glimpse into what about the site garnered attention and emulative sites. Less popular sites, such as *Clients From Hell*, retained their emphasis on user-generated content and provided richer data, despite the fact that its metrics were not as strong as those of *People of Walmart*). Therefore, rather than relying exclusively on metrics, EWT sites were reviewed based on the richness of data presented. Consequently, once Alexa and Google searches collected the largest possible sample, sites were examined to determine which of them offer the richest data for analysis. Selection was dependent on the variety of texts (for example, both image-based and text-based sites were included to determine potential similarities and differences of these texts), different practical or banal activities referred to by the texts (ranging from daily activities such as shopping to more ritual traditions such as taking family portraits), the perceived authenticity of the content (e.g. cell phone-quality images or videos as opposed to those of professional quality), sites with tendencies or strategies which defy the others in certain ways, and so on.

Based on the review of sites, five websites were selected for extensive examination, while five additional sites were selected for occasional reference (the following section identifies how these sites will be used; see Appendix B).

Data analysis

The analysis of e-relevant web texts will be considered from a socio-semiotic perspective. To understand the social function of engagement in EWTs from a representational viewpoint, Peirce's theory of semiotics will be used; specifically, the analysis will be done

by considering the iconic, indexical, and symbolic dimensions of the semiotic structure of EWT sites (see descriptions on pages 31-35). By adopting an analysis based on these three characteristics of the sign in relation to its object, this allows us to assess the sites' relevant textual and semiotic properties and determine how the sites could serve the social function of allowing for neo-phatic communication, if that hypothesis is confirmed. These dimensions are revealed through an examination of the sites' information architectures and the nature of their content.

In determining the iconic dimension of the sites' semiotic structure, tendencies displayed across the sites (in content and in architecture) will be determined; to the extent that the sites share qualities in how they are presented, they resemble each other and therefore have an iconic function.

To reveal their indexical properties, we will analyse what about the sites is designed to attract attention. Web texts will be analyzed based on identifiable signs in the "strips" -- which Goffman (1974) defines as "any arbitrary slice or cut from the stream of ongoing activity" (p. 10)-- whether embodied in words or in images. These texts will be interpreted according how they relate to the theoretical framework, including Goffman's theories of frame analysis and interaction order. Typically, remarkability relates to the ways in which strips are banal in content but in which something noteworthy (typically amusing) occurs, forming the basis for the ideal reader's appreciation of the text. Due to the interpretive nature of semiotic analysis, categories of signs were developed inductively from the detailed consideration of multiple e-relevant sites.

The symbolic dimension of EWT sites' semiotic structure is best understood by considering the aim of the sites-- the extent to which they embody a particular purpose that is

(supposed to be) achieved when the right conditions are met. In other words, when faced with the occasion for experiencing the EWTs, that is, when our attention is drawn to the sites and to particular texts, we are wont to think/react in a determinate, regular and partly predictable way. From a semiotic perspective, this aspect of the data analysis will examine how signs have created such a habit, and what kind of semiotic habit is thus manifested.

Delimitations of the study

The e-relevant web texts explored in this thesis are established in scope through the following limitations:

Only images and text are analyzed – videos are excluded from study. This delimitation is due to the fact that there is a plethora of pre-existing academic research on online videos¹³. However, it is worth noting that the sites unearthed to date (which fit all criteria) rarely, if ever, contain video posts.

Sites studied are limited in number. Because it is not within the time or resource constraints of the study to search the entire World Wide Web for instances of the e-relevant, only five sites are selected for full analysis, and five additional sites were selected for reference due to ways in which they reflect the textual properties deemed significant in EWT sites construed as a genre. The selection of sites allows for a variety of texts (images and words) on a variety of topics (which include multiple elements of the everyday mentioned in defining the banal – recreational activities, work- or school- related interactions, and routine responsibilities such as running errands or going to an appointment). For example, *People of Walmart* reflects occurrences concerning strangers in public life; *My Mom is a Fob* reflects

¹³ See Strangelove (2010), Gehl (2009), Burgess and Green (2009), Haridakis and Hanson (2009).

interactions within the family life of contributors; *Clients From Hell* and *Not Always Right* reflects occurrences in the work sphere (ranging from office to retail); *Overheard In New York* and *Passive-Aggressive Notes* generally cover a wide variety of contexts.

In exploring the content of e-relevant sites, only postings from January 2012 to June 2012 are considered – this is due to the time restrictions of the project and the vast amount of content available on the sites. Posts made prior to January 2012 will only be considered with the aim of establishing a historical understanding of the sites; in other words, the first posts made to the sites may be studied as means of understanding how the sites were founded and developed. However, one exception to this delimitation was made – due to an absence of more recent posts, the posts analyzed from *My Mom is a Fob* date from January to June 2009. This decision was made because the site strongly exemplifies the EWT phenomenon, making the data too rich in quality to ignore. 2009 was the only year in a wide variety of posting was available. Similarly, *People of Walmart* offered rich data for analysis, but as the site gained popularity the relevance of the content (in regards to this study) diminished; consequently, the first six months of the site’s data was analysed, as it best reflects the grassroots, user-generated nature of the site.

Limitations of the study

Limits in data collection. The most significant limitation of this study is the relatively small number of sites which can be explored in relation to the number of existing sites¹⁴. Although Alexa and More Of It render the process of site selection more reliable, and can provide a range of sites wider than what an individual researcher could locate, even this process has

¹⁴ Although a delimitation of the study was that only 10 sites would be selected for analysis, this limitation refers more so to data collection -- in other words, locating the most appropriate sites.

limitations. For example, a site may exist which fits the criteria of an EWT site, but due to a low user base, the site may fly under Alexa's radar. Furthermore, because Alexa's "Related Links" feature is non-intuitive, many sites recommended will not fall under the category of EWT sites.

Furthermore, although the criteria established have been carefully crafted to ensure that the distinctiveness of the phenomenon remains intact in data analysis, it is possible that sites exist which genuinely fulfill the spirit of an EWT, but is disqualified from consideration based on the specific criteria outlined for EWT sites. Such sites may be an area for future research, as they may be part of a related but currently unidentified phenomenon.

Significance of the study

Web e-relevance, as it is defined in this study, is a fairly recent phenomenon that is growing in popularity. As indicated by similar phenomena such as blogging or vlogging, sharing our everyday experiences with others through the Internet is a popular activity, and EWT sites further our sharing of the everyday by making isolated experiences a collaborative process. This study aims to provide only one framework for understanding the potential meaning of this phenomenon, which is ripe for multiple interpretations.

By using a theoretical approach to study this phenomenon, we can more thoroughly comprehend online participation and the potential appeal of the banal in an online context. Ultimately, this study will contribute to a better understanding of the social function provided by banal online communication, and the manifestations of neo-phatic communication in the online realm.

Theoretical Framework

On semiotics as a point of view

John Deely (1990) makes the observation that semiotics is viewed at times as a method, and at other times as a point of view. Despite a desire for a “method that could yield certainty,” Deely (1990, p. 9) notes that a method may be so restrictive as to offer a narrow perspective within a study. Alternatively, considering semiotics as a point of view allows for multiple methods to be used to “exploit the possibilities for understanding” (p. 9). Therefore, we will adopt Deely’s position and use his definition of semiotics as a process hinging on the acceptance of this idea: that “the whole of our experience [...] is a network or web of sign relations”. Rather than reduce semiotics to a specific method, it will be used as an interpretive framework (p. 13), which succeeds in giving context to “just the sorts of things that texts provide and that hermeneutics exegetes” (p. 16). This hermeneutic and text-based process is what this study will adopt in data analysis, guided also by the further theories covered in this section.

Peirce’s categories and the second trichotomy of signs

This study argues through semiotic analysis that the potential experience afforded by EWT sites is neo-phatic; thus, the genre of EWTs can be considered in its functioning as a sign. While its status as a sign is explained in detail elsewhere in this study, it is first critical to understand how a sign is defined in Peircean semiotic; only then can we proceed to elaborate on the semiotic dimensions of the signs under study. As mentioned, Peirce’s conception of the sign will be used in this study, and he defines his concept of the sign as follows:

A sign stands for something to the idea which it produces, or modifies. Or, it is a vehicle conveying into the mind something from without. That for which it stands is called its object; that which it conveys, its meaning; and the idea to which it gives rise, its interpretant (CP 1.339¹⁵).

Peirce's semiotic writings were decisive in the modern development of sign theory, fundamentally by developing a system of signs based on only three universal phenomenological categories: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness (Deely, 1990, p. 47; Nöth, 1990, p. 41); actions between these omnipresent elements Peirce calls "triadic relations" (Deely, 1990, p. 117).

Within this triad of semiotic relations, Firstness refers to "a mode of being of that which is such as it is, positively and without reference to anything else" (Nöth, 1990, p. 41). Also known as a "monadic property", Firstness can exist independently, but "to regard a thing only in respect of its monadic properties is to regard it as if it has no relationship whatsoever to anything else (including oneself)" (Ransdell, 1997, ¶ 19). "In the idea of being," says Peirce, "Firstness is predominant, not necessarily on account of the abstractness of that idea, but on account of its self-containedness" (CP 1.302); he draws on the examples of colours or sounds considered separately from any actual or concrete material, abstracted from it, as qualities of Firstness, but emphasizes that he refers not to "the sense of actually experiencing these feelings," but truly "the qualities themselves" (CP 1.304).

When we consider a thing in relation to something else, "being in interaction with something else" (including ourselves), we then enter the realm of Secondness (Ransdell, 1997, ¶ 20). Peirce defines Secondness as "mutual action between two things regardless of any sort of third or medium" (CP 1.322), and can be reduced to the concept of having one's

¹⁵ Note: Peirce's writings are referenced using the traditional source abbreviations (included in the References section of this paper) as opposed to APA style.

senses drawn toward something. The extent to which a sign has embodied qualities which impact our senses and draw our attention is its dimension of Secondness. Peirce states that “[i]n the idea of reality, Secondness is predominant” (CP 1.325), in that its aspects can be perceived more so than the abstract or absolute qualities of Firstness or Thirdness; the experience of such an impact upon our senses is what Peirce calls an event (CP 1.336).

Thirdness is an abstract category of generality, being specifically semiotic – it is virtually active in experiencing a relation between Firstness and Secondness; through the interpretant, a relation between two objects (physical or non-physical) is given a semiotic function (Deely, 1990, p. 89, 47). Peirce describes Thirdness as having the role of “governing Secondness,” in that it “brings information into the mind,” giving shape to an idea and essentially enables thought formation (CP 1.537). In this sense, all that we experience is part of a semiotic process whereby meaning is generated – the process of thought generation relies on the governance of Thirdness of our experiences.

The EWT structure considered as a sign

Ransdell (1997) defines a sign as anything “which is such that, if one responds to it appropriately, it will thereby reveal, disclose, make manifest, make apparent, make experientially present or available something about something” (§ 4). In other words, the sign mediates “between that which it is capable of revealing something about and what it is capable of revealing about it” (§ 6). Something qualifies as a sign not because of any “inherent feature it has,” (Liszka, 1996, p. 19) but rather due to the triadic relationship in which it functions– that it correlates to an object and that it results in an interpretant in an inter-dependent relationship (p. 19).

In this study, the EWT structure is a sign whose “presentative character” (Liszka, 1996, p. 35) exists in the physical aspects of the sites, in their appearance, and such a dimension of the sites, corresponds to the iconicity, which is the formal aspect of sign action. When we consider it as a sign, the EWT must therefore correlate with an object (and with an interpretant, which is the systemic purpose of sign action or semiosis); in this study, it is argued that the object is in fact our desire to communicate at a most basic level, one that values connection over information, that is, to transmit signs despite a lack of practical or important information to be conveyed by them – this we refer to as “neo-phatic communication”. Peirce was very broad in how an object is defined, and he explicitly stated that an object may include “something of a general nature desired [...] or invariably found under certain circumstances” (CP 2.232). As Liszka (1996) emphasizes, something exists as an object of a sign simply in being represented through that sign (p. 21).

In regarding EWTs as signs, it is worthwhile to consider the distinction which Peirce makes between the dynamical object and the immediate object, the former being “the thing itself” independent from interpretation, and the latter being “the thing as it appears to be” in a certain sign process (Ransdell, 2007, ¶ 1). In regards to the semiotic analysis undertaken here, EWTs stand as a dynamical object outside of the academic inquiry at hand, and any element of EWTs which we consider at a certain moment in our present study exists as an immediate object, which as such is not only partial, but can be wrongly perceived, that is the gist of Peircean fallibilism (CP 1.13). In undertaking such an analysis of the semiotic object, one must acknowledge the fallibilism of our understanding: in analysis, there are aspects of the object which always remain to be dealt with, especially given that EWTs exist in real time and are subject to change. Interpretation of the dynamical object (i.e. all that could be

known about the subject were it studied exhaustively by the scientific community, the knowledge of it to be attained in the long run), when dealt with through exhaustive study (dealing with a succession or series of immediate objects) draws us nearer to the epistemological horizon of the truth of the subject matter, drawing us closer to “the thing as it really is” outside of how we consider it at a certain moment, and thus reducing the gaps or biases with which we might approach this subject matter. In other words, while our study of the immediate objects of the sign have inherent shortcomings, continuous and thorough scientific examination would allow us to increasingly reduce the gap between the object as we perceive and understand it in (the immediate object) and the thing as it is (the dynamical) and eventually understand the truth about EWTs.

The aspect of Thirdness of the EWT as a sign can be understood as a “lawlike effect a sign has on any interpreting agency” (Liszka, 1996, p. 27). The effect of the sign is reflected in the predisposition of those engaging in the EWTs to respond in a certain, determinate way which produces the sign’s intended effect. Simply put, the intended effect would be to engage in an act of neo-phatic communication, either through the act of submission or of reading as a part of the EWT construed as a text or potential experience. In other words, the dimension of Thirdness of the sign is a manifestation of our desire to communicate in this peculiar manner called here ‘neo-phatic’. By considering what we are able to identify as parts of this experience (in other words, by considering what it reveals to us through its manifestational powers), we are suited to understand why such an experience is essentially neo-phatic.

To best understand the dimensions of this sign structure, this study will consider the potential experience afforded by EWTs through the Peirce's second trichotomy of signs, which refers to the semiotic dimensions of iconicity, indexicality and symbolism. However, it is important to note that a semiotic analysis of the sign through these dimensions does not serve the purpose of "classify[ing] or sort[ing] things into distinct groups," but rather allows us to consider different "dimensions of the significance in things" (Ransdell, 1997, ¶ 17); therefore, when each dimension is considered, it is not at the exclusion of the others. Rather, by studying each dimension of the sign in this analysis, a well-rounded understanding of the EWT as a sign is rendered. The pages below describe the dimensions of iconic, indexical and symbolic properties as the upshot of applying a semiotic analysis to the EWT structure.

Icon, index, and symbol

Peirce stated that iconic, indexical and symbolic signs are three kinds of signs which are essential in reasoning (CP 1.369). In this trichotomy, he describes icons¹⁶ as signs which exhibit a likeness "to the subject of discourse," indexes as those which "force the attention to the particular object intended," and symbols as those which signify "its object by means of an association of ideas or habitual connection" (CP 1.369). It is prudent to describe with more detail each of these signs, as they are fundamental to the understanding of the EWT as a sign.

Icons are described by Peirce as having "qualities that resemble those of that object, and excite analogous sensations in the mind for which it is a likeness" (CP 2.299) – simply put,

¹⁶ For the sake of simplicity, these three sign classes will be referred to as 'icon', 'index' and 'symbol' although in theoretical, more rigorous terms, the adjectival form (iconic, indexical, symbolic) is what corresponds.

an icon resembles the object it refers to. In the case of the subject of study here, the potential or expected experience afforded by the EWT sites' structure – not to be confused with the sites themselves as material entities– share similar qualities; to the extent that these affordances resemble each other, the experience construed as a sign structure has an iconic function.

It is not critical to the purpose of the analysis undertaken here that the sites resemble each other physically, nor that the experience afforded by the sites resemble each other very much. As Ransdell (1997) indicates, resemblance need only be in certain properties of the sign under study, and the signs or properties deemed to be alike need not be “absolutely indistinguishable” (§ 37). Rather than totally resemble each other, the properties are *semiotically* indistinguishable, embodying and reflecting their shared rules.

The relevant shared properties of the signs make them identifiable as iconic legisigns, acting as replicas of the rule which accounts for the semiotic functioning of EWT sites. As Ransdell explains,

One use of the conception of the iconic legisign would be in the description of semiotic processes in which a certain form or quality persistently maintains itself in the serial process, such that each successive iconic interpretant either leaves off, or acquires, something extraneous to the icon proper embodied in each member of the series [...] (1997, § 39)

Considering that description, it is clear that the experiences afforded function as iconic legisigns in that while the properties of the sign structure are maintained, slight variations take place – what Ransdell (1997) describes as a “wandering” character (§ 43). The function of the legisign is the establishment and maintenance of the general rule, the iconic dimension in which the expected experiences are alike. The legisign is “a rule of interpretation to which an interpreter can appeal in identifying the proper interpretant of the legisign’s replicas,”

explains Ransdell (1997, ¶ 42). In examining the EWT structure through its iconic dimensions, the findings of this study will indicate in what ways the iconic function manifests through the sites and the expected experience of those sites.

An index is described as a sign which is “physically connected with its object” (CP 2.299) independent of any observation or interpretation on part of a witness. However, generally, indexical signs are typically considered by their physical or factual/observable characteristics and the connection they make with an individual’s field of perception; Peirce describes indexicality as “consciousness of an interruption into the field of consciousness” (CP 1.377) as well as comprising of “the actual facts” (CP 1.419), what is directly perceived. It is through such facts that we are able to infer qualities from the logical operation of prescise abstraction, or prescission (CP 4.235) and also from generalizations that we amass as a result of “what we perceive in matter” (CP 1.419).

In the case of the texts or sign compositions under study, the fact that the sites succeed in catching one’s attention is indicative of an indexical dimension to the experience. The indexical comprises the “here and now” factor: the aspects of the sites which catch your eyes or ears, a concrete, specific location, what you have bookmarked, and so on. There is nothing more factual or observable than the very existence of an object which catches one’s attention. This articulation of the indexical dimension of this sign will include an analysis of what is visible in the sites’ actual textual properties – what facts are identifiable within the sites - and how these contribute to the expected experience facilitated by EWTs.

This portion of the semiotic analysis will draw on the perspective offered by Goffman, whose theories of the frame and social organization serve as a complement to our understanding of what can be physically observed through the sites. A look at the indexical

dimension of the experience will identify *what* about the sites grabs our attention, and the characteristics of EWT sites suggests there is a strong thematic convention of social standards (or, particularly, the deviance from social standards) found within the content. As Goffman's work deals frequently with social standards and how they are navigated in social organization, his work will serve to supplement the logical approach that Peirce applies to our understanding of the phenomenon under study.

The symbol as a sign is described as one "connected with its object by virtue of the idea of the symbol-using mind, without which no such connection would exist" (CP 2.299). In other words, a symbol is connected to its object due only to an agreed-upon association that has been generally agreed upon as a rule (CP 2.292), and as such, symbols relate to a tendency that has been formed among its users.

Peirce refers to such tendencies as "habits", and defines a habit as "a tendency to repeat any action which has been performed before" (EP 1.223); as Fernández (2010) describes it, a habit as "a tendency to enact the same tendencies every time the same precipitating circumstances are enacted" (p. 6). In other words, the final interpretant of a symbol is a habit (p. 3), and to create a habit is essentially the end goal of a symbol in its development. As such, the symbol functions as a law, and it "necessary governs, or "is embodied in" individuals" (EP 2.274). As Peirce states, "symbols grow" in meaning as they are developed and spread in use, and they develop as a tendency "by development out of other signs, particularly from icons" (CP 2.302). Therefore, symbols develop out of usage with the purpose of causing a regular, determinate reaction from those encountering it – this

particular reaction, an interpretation, is the achieved habit. As such, the symbol functions as a sort of rule itself, making it a key element of Thirdness and of symbolic action.

In the case of this study, it is argued that EWT sites are an embodiment of the symbolic aspect of their purpose; the sites as sign structures enable a neo-phatic type of communication. The habit associated with engagement with EWT sites does not involve any substantial or important meaning, but rather, the habit of merely furthering transmission, of keeping open lines of communication and engaging in the pleasure of exchanging signs, a defining feature of small talk. In the findings of this study, we will examine this desire of communication as a general symbolic sign, and relate it as well to the triadic relationship as a whole.

Erving Goffman and social organization

The theoretical perspective modeled on the work of Peirce will be supplemented by the social organization theories of Erving Goffman. In particular, Goffman's concepts of frame analysis (ideas of unfocused interactions and situational proprieties) and interaction order (with EWTs, as sequences of actions with a single definition or purpose, existing as slices cut from ongoing activity and known as "strips" (Goffman, 1974, p. 10), will be applied to support the semiotic analysis.

Framing and keying

As mentioned, Goffman (1974) conceives of the frame as "principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones" (p. 10-11). In other words, the frame is a set of unwritten rules which dictate expected behaviours in social settings, both physically and

mentally. Goffman indicates that when an individual is interpreting an occurrence, he unconsciously applies a “primary framework”, a basic interpretation of what has happened in such a way that reads the meaning of the occurrence some kind of meaning or explanation (p. 21), and these primary frameworks are constituted by frames. For example, when one person tells another, “I heard a great joke the other day,” the frame of joke-telling is introduced based on the other person’s normal interpretation (his primary framework); without consciously registering how this occurrence is being organized, he understands that a joke is about to be told, and might encourage the other person to continue with a statement such as, “oh yeah?”. Frames such as these shape our everyday social experiences, although often we are not immediately aware of them.

Goffman identifies such occurrences as “strip[s] of activity” (p. 247). The idea of “the strip” will be carried over to e-relevant web texts, taking each image or text submission as a “slice or cut from the stream of ongoing activity” (p. 10), in Goffman’s words. Although set in and prepared for a banal context, the strips of activity posted as EWTs are likely recorded and shared because they elicit a certain kind of positive reaction (which is the typical, universal response of phatic communication), as indicated by the explanation to follow.

The interpretation of these texts will include the potential for keying and re-keying, in which an activity with meaning in a primary framework undergoes a transformation of its basic meaning (Goffman, 1974, pp. 43-44). This is a noteworthy idea, both with regards to the production of e-relevant web texts (a selection of a strip for submission by bystanders who are interested in the event despite their indirect participation) and with regards to our own interpretation of these texts and their ultimate purpose. The idea of keying and re-

keying is defined by Goffman (1974) as adding an interpretative *lamination* to the activity being considered – the “outermost lamination [...] tells us just what sort of status in the real world the activity has, whatever the complexity of the inner laminations” (p. 82). This is to say that lamination occurs when a bystander witnesses the event and chooses to document it (and then submit it to an EWT site), and again once more in my own academic and research-oriented interpretation of the texts. Lamination can be understood as re-keying of a basic or primary framework, with each re-keying “adding a *layer* or *lamination* to the activity” (Goffman, 1974, p. 82). The mere occurrence of an event exists as the “innermost or modeled-after” activity (Goffman, 1974, p. 82). For example, when an event occurs on Fifth Avenue in New York, that is the activity occurring as a reality; when someone records that activity, it is a reinterpretation of what has happened by the witness, therefore, a lamination of that reality. When they post that occurrence to *Overheard in New York*, the interpretations of others are a re-interpretation of that original reality, a transformation occurring when the reality is used to make a joke about it to produce a meaning. In fact, as I examine these submissions from an academic standpoint, I add yet another layer of lamination to this reality, re-keying it from a new perspective.

A worthy complement to Goffman’s work is Clifford Geertz’s (1973) theory of “thick” and “thin” descriptions. Borrowing the term from British philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1968, 1971), ‘thick description’ is that of the anthropologist in working his way through “piled-up structures of inference and implication” which extend beyond raw occurrences (p. 7). “What we call our data,” says Geertz (1973), “are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to” – in other words, anthropological research is more interpretive than merely observational (p. 9). To complicate

matters further, the interpretation often suffers the same laminations as previously mentioned – anthropologists find themselves “explicating explications”, sorting out layers of “structures of signification” and determining the basis and importance of actions (p. 9). The similarity between thick description and laminations is telling of the complications of deciphering banal activities; in the case of EWT sites, several laminations are present, each with multiple potential interpretations. The result is that our understanding of the reality is quite removed from the untransformed reality of what has happened, and in these continual re-interpretations, different meaning-making strategies or influences may come into play, shaping our possible enjoyment and neo-phatic usage of the phenomenon.

At once banal and remarkable: The interaction order

Another concept of Goffman’s theory of frame analysis is relevant for the present study, namely, the concept is that of our continual assessment of the ordinary, and the noticing of that which is unordinary. In quoting Bergson, who notes that “[w]e laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing,” Goffman (1974, p. 39) points out that by noticing that which is abnormal, we are constantly (though without awareness) assessing what is *normal*. Our assessment of what is normal and abnormal can be considered in light of the content submitted to EWT sites, which is at once banal and remarkable. In terms of the production of e-relevant web texts, it will be important to consider that many texts may be selected due to the fact that they are noticeable for having breached this framework of propriety; this notion is best explained through Goffman’s studies of the interaction order.

The areas of the Goffman’s work on the interaction order which will primarily come into play are focused and unfocused interactions (the latter of which occurs between two

people unintentionally, as they pursue their own activities) and “situational proprieties” (relating to culturally-learned courtesies surrounding posture, dress, tone of voice, et cetera) (Smith, 2006, p. 33-37; Drew and Wootton, 1988, p. 24). For example, family portraits are a fairly normal occurrence, yet *Awkward Family Photos* is a display of portraits which are remarkable for including abnormalities within the proper frame of the occurrence – they display an instance of atypical or odd behaviour. Another case in point is that if someone has exceptionally large glasses, or an unusually strange pose, then it is deemed remarkable, even if the event outside of the scope of the website may not be perceived as a significant occurrence. (Of course, this is not to suggest that *only* in the scope of the site would be it significant – a stand-up comedian, for example, may find it noteworthy, given that the work of the comedian in pointing out such social oddities is similar to the act of showcasing these oddities as EWTs. However, someone with exceptionally large glasses would not be showcased for any more “practical” purposes – for example, he would fail to make the evening news.) It is interesting because within the frame of family portraits, it has deviant qualities. In academic terms, then, some texts might display through their signs the defiance of the ritual requirements of interchange; i.e., the subject of a post may have been deemed noteworthy because she breaks the “reciprocally held norms of good or proper conduct” which govern societal interactions (Drew and Wootton, 1988, p. 31-21).

The potentially humorous nature of the texts may be rooted in the transformation of everyday activities through distortion/parody, juxtaposition, or being highlighted as absurd. According to Morreall (1982), “the incongruity of humor works only by contrast with ordinary patterns of reality”; “social conventions” and “standards of reasonable behaviour” are part of our basis of humour (p. 83).

In regards to this study, an understanding of situational proprieties (and more importantly, deviance from such proprieties) is useful due to the fact that the appeal of EWT sites often relates to such interaction norms. The strips of activity which were noticed, captured, and posted online by the witness of the event, and then viewed online by readers, are often remarkable for having defied social norms (whether voluntarily or involuntarily, with or without awareness); in this sense, it is the act of social deviance which catches one's attention. The acts therefore have an element to play in the indexical dimension of the afforded experience based on the sign structure.

A note on gossip

As Goffman's work suggests, there is a tendency for us to evaluate deviant behaviours due to an internalized knowledge of what is normal. Such a position lends itself well to an understanding of EWTs, as they typically have been deemed worthy of sharing due to a particular response that has been elicited – clearly, whatever action is being showcased doesn't abide by the situational proprieties followed customarily by society. As Meyrowitz (1985) states, understanding how interactions were previously shaped, and understanding the limitations of social interaction, allows us to appreciate changes to the environment – particularly when considering the use of “electronic media in various social settings” (p. viii).

Scannell (2002) provides a glimpse into our tendencies to gossip even about social situations in which we are not directly involved. In discussing various media (specifically the reality show *Big Brother*, but with mention of radio talk programs and game shows, among others), Scannell claims that forms of media such as game shows and talk programs

appear “essentially ambivalent”, as not serving a useful purpose, as being “trivial and pointless” (p. 276). However, he argues against those who are dismissive of such media, stating that a “fundamental communicative character of radio and television,” is found in being sociable, and that media can hold a purpose in being merely “fun, entertainment, “having a good time”” (P. 276). In using the perspective of gossip, he states that

gossip (talk about others) is in itself indicative of the unavoidably social character of human life. In any society, all members are, and know that they are, open to the scrutiny and assessments of others. Whatever you do (or don't do) others will take notice, remark upon, and talk about it. This knowledge serves to modify and regulate behaviors within the discursively circulating norms of any society. (p. 278)

Scannell's position on gossip as a regulator of societal norms can be linked to Goffman's theory of the frame – we are chronically aware of what is “normal”, and what deviates from normalcy merits attention. In this sense, gossip can be understood as the result of framing activity. For example, *Clients from Hell* includes brief text excerpts of work-related conversations which are submitted by graphic designers. Through the frame surrounding discourse related to graphic design work, certain expectations are formed: for example, that those in discourse would be familiar with design-related terms, technologies, and practices. When a “client from hell” displays a complete ignorance of such practices, he or she defies the expectations of the designer which had been established by the frame surrounding such occurrences. This defiance is predictably frustrating for the designer (this can be inferred from the site's title), and he shares this seemingly abnormal exchange on the site. Whether this submission is made to regulate normative behaviours is unclear, but what *is* clear, if we use the perspective offered by Scannell (2002) is that that gossip occurs when an everyday activity that would have otherwise pass unnoticed becomes noteworthy. Therefore, it is possible that EWT sites exist as a newer platform for such forms of communication as

gossip; as this study argues, the semiosis at work in EWT sites is a neo-phatic one in which “small talk” such as gossip is leveraged to create an affordance of user-generated transmission.

The modern audience

Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) takes up Goffman’s ideas and transposes them into a modern media context in his book *No Sense of Place*. In the book, Meyrowitz lauds Goffman for providing an understanding of the structures of social behavior, but laments the fact that Goffman “ignores *changes* in roles and in the social order,” (pp. 2, 4). More specifically, Meyrowitz (1985) argues that electronic communications “have greatly changed the significance of physical presence in the experience of social events” by allowing audiences to witness these events through media (p. viii). According to the author (1985):

Electronic media have created new situations and destroyed old ones. One of the reasons many Americans may no longer seem to “know their place” is that they no longer *have* a place in the traditional sense of a set of behaviours matched to physical locations and the audiences found in them (p. 7).

Of course, just as how Meyrowitz bemoaned the fact that Goffman’s work came too early to take into account certain societal advancements, here Meyrowitz’s statements could be reconsidered in light of Web 2.0 technologies. As it is being argued in this paper, one affordance of the Internet (specifically, the existence of EWT sites fuelled by user-generated content) affords an audience a place through which they might have a hand in both content and communication. Meyrowitz feels that media have changed us “not primarily through their content, but by changing the “situational geography” of social life” (p. 6), and that audiences did not initially know how to navigate this new geography. The accessibility of

the Internet as a platform has enabled users to claim this new landscape of social life, at least partially, as their own; as a result, “traditional” aspects of social behaviour such as gossip have found their way into the landscape over the past several years. In analyzing the possible experiencing of EWT sites, it is being argued that the sites are designed so as to afford users a space for neo-phatic communication, a banal sort of communication in which the chief function is sign transmission for the sake of communicating with others or simply sharing representations of no serious import, rather than the conveyance of practical or informational content.

Meyrowitz’s (1985) work provides a valuable look into how new media have re-ordered social structures (and therefore, social behaviours). As he says, “*change in behavioural settings* is a common element linking many of the trends, events, and movements of [the 1950s to 1980s]” (original emphasis, p. ix); his work suggests that to understand the behaviour of audiences, especially in light of new media phenomena, one must look at the medium itself to see what changes it is catalyzing. Specifically in regards to this study, then, EWT sites are shown to be a worthwhile site for inquiry: what kind of behaviours do the sites promote and/or enable through the user experience? What expectations does the semiotic structure of the sites establish for users, and through what kind of meaning-making practices are these expectations established? By undertaking an analysis of the potential experiencing of the sites, we are able to see what function they were designed to fulfill for users.

Ross (2012) considers Meyrowitz’s (1985) amendments to Goffman’s (1959) work on self-presentation in his argument for a new model of media production – one in which the “circularity of the producer-audience relationship” is emphasized and production is seen “as

a social situation sustained by participants but explicitly oriented to an absent third party: the audience” (p. 3). Goffman (1959) argued in *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* that individuals present themselves in social situations according to the circumstances in which they find themselves (p. 26, as quoted in Ross, 2012, p. 14), and Ross notes that in a “real life ‘performance’ [...] all participants may be performer and audience in an ongoing interaction” (p. 9). In media production, Ross notes, a similar presentation occurs: a “producer can be seen to turn on the ability to effectively represent [the notional audience] in its absence” (2012, p. 10). Seeking to build on Goffman’s theories to construct a model of production, Ross borrows from Meyrowitz to argue that social situations exist as “information-systems”, a “given pattern of access to social information [...] and] the behaviour of other people” (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 37, as quoted in Ross, 2012, p. 10), thus situating the new media environment within the scope of social situations defined by Goffman; Ross (2012) argues that media production is best seen as “a social situation characterized by patterns of access to the audience, whether mediated or not” (p. 11). Given the mobilized role between producer and notional audience which is now afforded by the new media environment, Ross (2012) argues that production “expertise in the context of media production is accrued from a perceived proximity to the intended audience and not from socialization into an expert community of producers” (p. 14). In a Web 2.0 context, when the traditional conceptions of social settings between production and reception have been disrupted (Ross, 2012, p. 13), relatability to the general public is relevant in a new way. In regards to EWT sites, in which content is based in an appreciation of banal activities and generated by everyday members of the public, one can easily see how media production has changed through new technologies. Ross’s model illustrates how social spheres and new

media production have reached a new state of confluence that upsets more traditional notions of the roles played by producer and audience.

In addition to this analysis, it is also important to identify philosophical assumptions of this study which are not directly related to semiotics, but which play a significant part in the theorization of the meaning behind the EWT phenomenon. In particular, the Clay Shirky's (2010) theory of cognitive surplus can be regarded in conjunction with the theories of Michel de Certeau (1984) and John Fiske (1980) to allow for a consideration of the power of the audience in the realm of media. Such research encourages us to consider the affordance of the Internet for user-generated content, and the role users are able to take in content creation and the act of communication. Michel de Certeau (1984) saw social spheres as spaces which, although subordinate to larger systems of influence, allow users to "produce their own signifying practices" that reflect "interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop" (p. xviii). EWT sites are one such form of space which affords the public the opportunity to actively participate and create a unique method of communication – it is something that the user expects as a part of the experience.

Shirky (2010) argues that two transitions have occurred over time which have resulted in new user-generated initiatives in mainstream society: first is the accumulation of free time "on the part of the world's educated population," and the second is the "spread of public media that enable ordinary citizens, previously locked out, to pool that free time in pursuit of activities they like or care about" (p. 27). The result, says Shirky (2010), is a variety of works, leaning from charitable (Ushahidi) and educational (Wikipedia) to "mere self-

amusement” (lolcats) (p. 27). Shirky (2010) argues that part of the interest of these user-generated oddities is a message communicated indirectly: that when seeing such an amateurish creation, the user understands that they, too, can participate in the movement (p. 18). In experiencing EWT sites as a sign composition, part of the expectation is that, if desired, the reader can engage in the participation of an amateurish creation themselves. However, this is not to say that it is necessarily a motivation for participation; it is likely that many visitors to the site would not submit content. However, they would expect that the content they are viewing is user-generated.

Shirky’s (2010) concept of amateur creations can be linked to EWTs from a semiotic standpoint by drawing from Michel de Certeau’s (1988) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, as he contemplates the appropriation and transformation of cultural artefacts by bourgeois society. (Of course, this application of de Certeau’s theories has been tailored for an environment of cultural production with which de Certeau himself would be unfamiliar – an environment where consumers have a newfound opportunity to create and distribute their constructions.) Specifically, users are able to use “established” constructions (de Certeau (1988) uses the example of vocabulary and syntax) to create something individually (p. xiii). In other words, tools found within the “dominant cultural economy” are adapted to bourgeois groups’ “own interests and rules” and circulated through these groups (p. xiv). The consumer-oriented component of de Certeau’s argument aside (p. xxi), his thoughts on reading apply to our understanding of online popular culture: as one reads a text, “he poaches on it, is transported into it,” and it becomes memorable; then, like a tenant moving into an apartment, he takes someone else’s property and can

furnish it with [his] acts and memories; as do speakers, in the language into which they insert both the message of their native tongue and, through their

accent, through their own “turns of phrase,” etc., their own history [...]. In the same way the users of social codes turn them into metaphors and ellipses of their own quests (p. xxi-xxii).

De Certeau (1988) argues that in modern society, culture is formed by individuals acting as “renters”, using dominant texts to create individual cultural languages (p. xxii). This framing of society lends itself well to an understanding of the Internet meme¹⁷: users are able to take pre-existing texts and appropriate them, insinuate their individual aspects into a newly created text, and then transmit this new text back into society, thus contributing to the cultural understanding of the experience.

This study attempts to illustrate how the user-generated circulation of texts (specifically, those texts on EWT sites – and the sites themselves as a kind of meta-text or Goffmanesque frame) serve the function of establishing grounds for neo-phatic communication. In this case, the meaning of the texts per se becomes less relevant than the act of participation; furthermore, considering the potential individual interpretations of texts (personal meaning-making) is less effective than considering the cultural process of meaning-making through a dominant medium. Such a perspective may be provided by the works of Fiske (1988), who states in his look at television culture that

the internal psychological state of the individual is not the prime determinant in the communication of television messages. These are decoded according to individually learnt but culturally generated codes and conventions [...]. It seems, then, that television functions as a social ritual, overriding individual distinctions, in which our culture engages in order to communicate with its collective self (p. 85).

The perspectives offered by de Certeau and Fiske may be borrowed in consideration of the experience of EWT sites in a semiotic approach. As previously mentioned, the individual’s own interpretation of a text is strongly guided by meanings created through

¹⁷ See the literature review.

semiosis, placing the ideal reader in a position where he *observes* or *discovers* meaning more so than creates it. However, within each medium there is room for a certain appropriation and engagement with texts, and such engagement provides room for communication. In the case of EWT sites and the expected experience shaped through the genre's semiotic structure, this affordance of communication is strongly valued, and the affordance of enjoying the kind of amusing banalities available on the sites is evidence of a neo-phatic type of communication.

(Neo-)phatic communication

In describing the six factors “inalienably” involved in communication, Roman Jakobson (1960) asserts that each factor (addresser, addressee, context, message, contact, and code¹⁸) determines a different function of language, although a message could ostensibly fulfill multiple functions (p. 353). Jakobson suggests that the structure of a message depends on which function prevails¹⁹ -- what Jakobson calls in German “*Einstellung*” -- which does not mean the other functions disappear or are not working, but that they are subordinated to this particular function (p. 353). While he typically refers to verbal communication (speech events) to explain his theory, this suggestion could be applied to EWT sites as well.

In particular, the structure of EWT sites in comparison to other sites suggests that the semiosis at work in them could be described partly by means of the notion of Jakobson's (1960) “phatic function”. Jakobson's definition of the phatic function stems from the work of Malinowski (1923), who describes phatic communication as a speech event in which the

¹⁸ To be clear, the “code” in Jakobson's schematization refers to, for example, a common language; a contact refers to a channel or media connection; and the context stands as the referent (p. 353).

¹⁹ The corresponding functions are emotive, conative, metalinguistic, poetic, referential, and phatic (Waugh, 1980, p. 58).

focus is on “purposeless events of preference or aversion, accounts of irrelevant happenings, comments on what is perfectly obvious” (Malinowski, 1923, p. 314). In other words, the content of the message is subordinate to the actual act of utterance. While content still plays a role in shaping the experience of the sites, (particularly in its wittiness, absurdity, cuteness, and easy reduction into a “strip” of activity), I argue that the content is somewhat shaped by rendering communication through the sites more attractive or interesting for everyday users. Thus, the poetic dimension of the communication is subordinate to the phatic function, but by no means wholly absent from our understanding of the phenomenon. In undertaking an analysis of the semiotic structure of EWT sites, it is shown that the value of the potential experience is not in the explicit content of the pages, but in the ability to communicate in the peculiar fashion afforded by the sites.

The dominance of the phatic function of the websites is apparent when considering the information architecture of EWT sites. The information shared lacks practical use; dialogic and user-oriented features such as threaded commenting or user profiles have been removed; the processes for sharing content are limited to encouraging the reader to share a photo or an occurrence rather than an opinion or in-depth story. (Further features of EWT sites are covered more extensively in the findings of the paper; these examples are merely being referred to so as to identify aspects which may encourage a phatic function.)

The phatic communication described by Malinowski and Jakobson, originally perceived as (for example) chit-chat about the weather, has taken a new, different shape in online communications – a type of communication which deserves to be called “neo-phatic”.

Key differences between phatic and neo-phatic communication

As an examination of the phenomenon suggests, EWT sites establish a ground for neo-phatic communication. Traditional phatic communication (focused on communication for its own sake) often leveraged trivial and common topics for the purpose of easing tension (for example, when placed with someone in an awkward social situation). ‘Neo-phatic communication’ differs in some key aspects from phatic communication, despite its focus on human communication acts:

People are placed in the environment totally of their own volition, and are not forced to communicate with anyone. A site is visited anonymously and invisibly. No dialogue is required, neither for social nor for informational purposes. Communication is not leveraged for future interaction. Participants would generally not know each other and have little or no chance of interacting again. Lack of threaded comments mean a genuine dialogue is not even established, so more meaningful, longer interactions fail to develop. Such distinguishing criteria have led to the choice of the term of “neo”-phatic communication – the new communication environment in which we find ourselves moulds the context and tactics of traditional phatic communication. What these differences suggest is that while phatic communication is done as a means of coping with an everyday circumstance in which one has been placed in (or that one actively seeks, considering the human desire to chat with somebody that you may or may not know, as in a party where people typically desire to establish some kind of basic interaction with people they do not know or just barely know), neo-phatic communication is rather something desired as its own end through a particular use of new communication technologies. Neo-phatic communications on EWT sites are sent out into cyberspace with little means of generating discussion, whether that discussion

continues to be trivial or develops into something more substantial (as it might in phatic communication, though it is not a necessary aspect of it).

Vincent Miller (2008) proposes that “online media culture [is] increasingly dominated by phatic communications [...] which have purely social (networking) and not informational or dialogic intents” (p. 387). Miller’s argument, which focuses on social networking sites such as blogs and microblogs (e.g. Twitter), can be adapted in consideration of the functions of EWTs to illustrate that the experiencing of the sites is a phatic engagement.

First, it is worthwhile to consider Miller’s (2008) entire theory for new communication networks as a “non-dialogic and non-informational” phatic culture (p. 388). In considering the larger context of ICTs and the period in which they emerged, Miller (2008) suggests that relationships have undergone a process of individualization, resulting in relationships based on “the trust of mutual exclusivity and self-disclosure” (p. 388) – in other words, based on the exchange of information. (I would argue that EWT sites do not result in relationships due to the lack of user profile or message boards/threads; however, the point remains that communication occurs for the purpose of information sharing.) In the realm of online communication, this develops into relationships which are “more akin to an exchange of ‘data’ than deep, substantive or meaningful communication based on mutual understanding” (p. 390). Miller considers, then, that the digital age has a form of cultural expression which takes shape as a ‘database’, “a collection of somewhat separate, yet relational elements” in which people are now engaged more as “co-authors” and not just consumers of information (pp. 390-392). It is based on this notion of the ‘database’ of social information, encouraged by websites which are designed for sharing only such tidbits, that

Miller sees modern culture as largely phatic. Rather than engage in a longer narrative of “substantive content”, the primary focus of communication is now the “maintenance of a network” (p. 398) – databases of social information which we populate online.

Several links can be made between Miller’s (2008) exploration of social media platforms and EWT sites. As mentioned, communication is brief and informationally irrelevant (in other words, **phatic** – it comments on the perfectly obvious rather than anything of practical importance); furthermore, the ‘database’ of similar yet different texts mirrors the notion of the frame as an ordering mechanism which manages expectations. Implicit in the experience of these sites is that the content observed is cute, funny or amusingly banal, rather than practical or substantive. Miller (2008) argues that phatic communication is engaged in for the social purpose of maintaining “a connected presence in an ever-expanding social network” (p.395).

In developing the concept of ‘neo-phatic communication’, I would argue that computer-mediated communication in the context of EWT sites is even less substantial than what Miller describes, as he is focused more on social media interactions. Miller (2008) posits that self-disclosure and network maintenance comprise the phatic aspect of online media culture in which user-generated content populates the digital sphere. However, due to the information architecture and other factors of EWT sites specifically, self-disclosure and network maintenance fail to even enter the picture. Rather, the focus rests on the mere ability to keep open lines of transmission through submission and reading of posts. The “exchange of data” that Miller (2008) describes is even less collaborative and in-depth on EWT sites, where discussion is virtually eliminated and users are not identified or organized in any way which renders them traceable.

EWT sites are not the only example of a phenomenon in which seemingly banal, user-generated content is adapted and circulated as a means of achieving acts of communication. While still under-explored in media studies, the concept of the Internet meme provides a means of looking at the circulation of content in a new media era. The review of literature thus explores research on the meme to date, from the coinage of the term by Richard Dawkins (1989) to its modern application to particular forms of Internet content.

Review of Literature: The Meme

Although the Internet meme is a relatively new phenomenon, and little research exists on it, the literature covered in this study indicates academic interest in this area and provides potential perspectives on exploring memes. Given that e-relevant web texts display some similarity to online memes, the review provided allows for a foundation of knowledge for EWT sites as well as connections between EWTs or memes and semiotic theory.

Defining the meme

The term “meme” originated from Richard Dawkins’ (1989) in *The Selfish Gene*. Dawkins argues that evolution is based on the replication of genes to remain existent, and that humans act as the transmitters to of these genes: “We are survival machines – robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes” (p. ix).

Dawkins defines a gene as a “unit of heredity” (p. 12) which is passed on “from body to body down the generations, manipulating body after body in its own way and for its own ends” (p. 34) in an act known as replication. Replicators were unique molecules at the onset

of the evolutionary process due to the fact that it was able, unlike other molecules, to duplicate itself (p. 16). Such a replication allows the gene to exist “in the form of copies of itself for a hundred million years” (p. 35), creating a sort of stability essential for its own perseverance (p. 16).

Dawkins notes that the apparently result of such a process would be “a large population of identical replicas” (p. 17). However, he is quick to stress that any copying process is imperfect, drawing on examples such as the writing of scribes – if all copies derived from a single original, it is doubtful that severe error would occur; but “let copies be made from other copies, which in their turn were made from other copies, and errors will start to become cumulative and serious” (p. 17). Rather than see such a process as detrimental, Dawkins identifies it as an opportunity for improvement which was “essential for the progressive evolution of life” (p. 17). Eventually, in the evolutionary process, the environment brimmed with a plethora of “varieties of replicating molecules” derived from the same replicator, varying in amount and in degree of stability (p. 18).

As these genes flourish, they became unconsciously in competition amongst each other, as “the primeval soup was not capable of supporting an infinite number of replicator molecules”; as a result, less competitive molecules would become less numerous and grow extinct, while others grew cumulatively more stable and efficient (p. 20). Those replicator molecules which survived were the ones that constructed vehicles for their continued existence, and as Dawkins notes, those replicators now “go by the name of genes, and we are their survival machines” (p. 21).

Having established this primary argument, Dawkins moves forward to consider the successful criteria that genes possess. One such criterion is “copying-fidelity”, referring to a

gene's ability to extend its own life expectancy through the form of copies (p. 30). To have high copying-fidelity, a gene has to be short – at least most of the copies of a gene must be able to survive for an extended period. Dawkins notes that only “[s]mall genetic units have these properties; individuals, groups, and species do not” (p. 35). (It may at this point be useful to draw on a simple and non-scientific example provided by Brodie’s (2009) *Virus of the Mind: The New Science of the Meme*. In learning about memes, Brodie was engaged with two colleagues who debated what exactly might be considered a meme. One colleague used the example of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, but upon discussion, it was suggested that perhaps the only the line “ta-ta-ta-TUM” of the symphony may qualify (p. 2). The line of the symphony is inarguably memorable and easy to transmit – for example, even in attempting to convey the line in writing, the average reader would understand and recall the musical sounds referenced. By contrast, the symphony itself is much more difficult to transmit, reducing its copying-fidelity.) High copying-fidelity renders a gene potentially near-immortal; it is a “long-lived replicator, existing in the form of many duplicate copies” (p. 37).

In essence, Dawkins (1989) reduces a gene to any entity which possesses the qualities of “longevity, fecundity²⁰, and copying-fidelity” (p. 37). Heylighen and Chielens (2008) describe these qualities as such:

- *longevity*: the longer any instance of the replicating pattern survives, the more copies can be made of it. A drawing made by etching lines in the sand is likely to be erased before anybody could have reproduced it.
- *fecundity*: the faster the rate of copying, the more the replicator will spread. An industrial printing press can churn out many more copies of a pamphlet than an office-copying machine.
- *copying-fidelity*: the more accurate or faithful the copy, the more will remain of the initial pattern after several rounds of copying. If a painting is reproduced by making

²⁰ Fecundity refers to the capability of producing offspring.

photo-copies from photocopies, the picture will quickly become unrecognizable. (p. 5)

Very simply, a gene must be able to replicate itself, and these replicas must adhere to the most significant qualities of its original. Such outcome defines the success of genetic transmission.

Dawkins (1989) then carries over the notion of genetic transmission (genes) to cultural transmission (memes), arguing that elements of human culture (such as language) evolve in a similar way to genes (p. 204). After establishing the value of replicability in genes, he argues that such laws are deemed to apply “all over the accessible universe” (p. 205), and that we today face a new kind of replicator, still in its infancy: the new primeval soup of human culture (p. 206). Such a type of replicator he has called a “meme” and has defined as “a noun which conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation” (p. 206).

Using the examples of “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases” and others as memes, he states that memes propagate themselves through transmission from mind to mind. An idea is passed on from person to person (verbally, visually, and so on) through what is, in a “broad sense”, imitation (p. 206). “When you plant a fertile meme in my mind,” he says, “you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for that meme’s propagation [...]” (p. 207).

However, Dawkins notes that while memes must *generally* reflect the genetic qualities of longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity, these qualities should be somewhat adapted. For example, longevity is somewhat less important for memes than for genes, fecundity is much more important (p. 208). Dawkins also notes that memes have low copying-fidelity, with every transmission of an idea likely to change, and memes being

“subject to continuous mutation” (p. 209). The concept of competition is also modified: memes have no “opposites” per se, and rather than seek a spot in a chromosomal slot, they still appear to be “floating chaotically free” (p. 211). However, Dawkins believes that as memes propagate through the human brain, and the brain “cannot do more than a few things at once,” memes are in fact competing with each other to occupy the attention of the mind (p. 211), resulting in more time spent by the human actively transmitting the meme to others (p. 213).

Dawkins dedicated only a small portion of *The Selfish Gene* to memetics, and Blackmore (1999) expands on this concept in *The Meme Machine*. In the foreword of the text, Dawkins himself notes that over two decades after the publication of his work, the term “meme” was included in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “an element of a culture that may be considered to be passed on by non-genetic means, esp. imitation” (p. viii), a form of recognition which suggests that the concept of the meme has considerable staying power.

Blackmore (1999) argues that humans are different from other animals in part due to our disposition to imitate (and in fact, our ability to learn languages are customs through imitation), a feature which is rare among other species (p. 3, 7). “Everything that is passed on from person to person [through imitation] is a meme,” says Blackmore, drawing on examples such as words, stories, and habits (p. 7). Regardless of the usefulness of a meme, it will spread “indiscriminately” if it possesses the right qualities (p. 7). Such qualities are “heredity (the form the details of the behaviour are copied), variation (they are copied with errors, embellishments or other variations), and selection (only some behaviours are successfully copied)” (p. 51).

Blackmore's text considers the role of communicative technology in assisting the copying-fidelity of memes, making it a useful transition toward our understanding of the Internet meme. The author states that "as soon as memes appeared they started evolving toward greater fidelity, fecundity, and longevity", and that in our attempt to communicate such memes, we developed "better meme-copying machinery" (p. 204). (We can see here not only the parallel between genes and memes, in that they are both self-serving, but also the link between semiotics and memes: the emphasis is placed on the functions of the objects rather than the individual, who merely acts in accordance with what seems to be common sense.)

Such technology includes writing (chiefly due to its ability to promote the longevity of memes – as Dawkins noted with scribes, copying-fidelity is not guaranteed), the printing press (which aided in fidelity), and other media such as television and radio (p. 205, 209, 212). However, Blackmore's consideration of the computer serves most useful, as she notes that "[d]igitising information is a good way to increase fidelity because it reduces errors in storage and transmission" (p. 213). Digital systems also may offer instructions for making the products, rather than merely copying the products themselves (p. 215). The Internet allows for increased digital accessibility and transmission of memes, and such accessibility also allows the human brain to retrieve the meme when it is needed, rather than attempt to store it mentally (p. 216).

Blackmore's study of memes is a complement to the establishment of the meme made by Dawkins; however, Blackmore's book unfortunately predates the creation of what is popularly defined as the "Internet meme". As *The Meme Machine* was written before the arrival of Web 2.0 and increased opportunity for user-generated content, Blackmore focused

frequently on the Internet as method of transmitting pre-existing memes, rather than considering the arrival of news forms of memes which have now arisen. The following section explores the concept of the Internet meme, which has unique characteristics which contribute to our understanding of how memes are perceived today.

The Internet meme

The idea of the Internet meme is based on Dawkins' (1989) description, and refers to a text (a phrase, image, et cetera) which grows quickly in popularity and is spread throughout the Internet (Bulik and Kerwin, 2006, ¶ 1). Despite little academic research on the topic, the meme is a well-known concept among those engaged in Internet culture. *Know Your Meme*, a website dedicated to researching and collecting memes, defines a meme as “a piece of content or an idea that's passed from person to person, changing and evolving along the way” (Know Your Meme, n.d., About). They also make the point of differentiating between a meme and viral content, stating that “[a] piece of content that is passed from person to person, but does not evolve or change during the transmission process is considered viral content” (About).

Bulik and Kerwin (2006) define the meme as “any cultural information transmitted from one mind to another,” though they admit that this is a very simple reduction of a complicated concept (¶ 1). “Web citizens use the term,” say the authors, “in its loosest form meaning an “Internet phenomenon” where something—an idea, art, person, joke, even advertising—goes from unknown to extremely popular very quickly” (¶ 1). Although I agree that the “something” which Bulik and Kerwin reference does grow quickly in popularity, in the context of the popular definition of the Internet meme, I would disagree that something

such as a joke or an advertisement can serve as one; *Know Your Meme* makes a clear distinction when they state that there must be some kind of evolution of the idea made. This evolution retains more exactly the idea of the meme posited by Dawkins – imitation by persons of the original artefact is a critical element of the meme, and memes are subject to mutation. (Of course, Dawkins was writing *The Selfish Gene* in a time before the popular use of the Internet, an era in which artefacts can be digitally copied and circulated without any modification of, or compromise to, the digital. However, as Dawkins emphasizes the ability for a person to replicate something, I believe it is fair that this refers more to an adaptation of the original rather than what would be, in this context, *merely* a digital circulation without any imitative aspect.)

A meme will only be successful if audiences enjoy it enough to pass it along, and in most cases, create their own. “[T]he essence of an Internet meme is that it's driven by popularity and consensus,” state Bulik and Kerwin (2006). “That is, if consumers like it, they pass it along, and along and along” (§ 3). Modern examples of an Internet meme include Advice Dog, an image of a dog with a caption providing amusing tidbits of advice. Web-savvy users are able to generate their own images of Advice Dog and publish them to communities which might understand them, such as Reddit. (We might here be able to apply Blackmore’s (1999) argument about digital systems which include instructions on how to copy a product (p. 215) – tools such as memegenerator.net allow web users to create and share their own Internet memes. The end result is that while the memes mutate, meaning that copying-fidelity is low, the longevity and fecundity are greatly increased.) Advice Dog was so popular that it spawned a wide variety of other Advice Animals, ranging from Annoying Facebook Girl to the semi-professional Business Cat (see example on page 61).

The Advice Animal memes are identifiable as part of a series due to the similar formatting, typically containing a ray-patterned background and white, upper-case text. In this sense, they retain the original idea, which Dawkins has stated was necessary for successful transmission. Standards of this nature are common for memes: Shirky (2010) notes that lolcats also have “internally consistent rules” surrounding appearance. “[T]here are ways to do a lolcat wrong,” he observes, “which means there are ways to do it right, which means there is some metric of quality, even if limited” (p. 18). These unwritten rules are critical for the meme’s successful transmission.

The Internet meme affords us new means of investigating memetic transmission. Leskovec, Backstrom and Kleinberg (2009) developed a framework for “tracking short, distinctive phrases that travel relatively intact through on-line text” which allowed them to “identify a broad class of memes that exhibit wide spread and rich variation on a daily basis” (p. 497). Although focusing mainly on transmissions within the news cycle, rather than Internet memes as they are popularly defined, the authors provide food for thought. Their algorithms include an analysis of “recurring patterns in the growth and decay of a meme” (in other words, patterns in its transmission) and the circulation of memes across the blogosphere and mainstream media (p. 498). Jain et al (2011) also considered the transmission of memes via “cross-pollination”, in which units of information are shared across social media such as Facebook, Flickr, and YouTube. To understand the transmission of memes online, the authors differentiated between “foreign” and “local” memes, the former being “posted URLs embedding [a] meme belonging to another [social media] service, and the latter being “all other types of memes generated and diffused within one [social media] service” (p. 1). These examples are merely being cited to argue that the

accessibility and relative transparency of the Internet as a mode of communication make it possible to approach memetics in new ways, to gather further information on our habits of transmission. Despite retaining the critical qualities of Dawkins' meme, the concept of the Internet meme is markedly unique, and provides food for thought when considering memetics in the age of user-generated content.

The Internet meme, EWTs and semiotics

It is useful here to note the value of comparing the idea of the meme to the realm of EWTs. In some cases (such as *I Can Has Cheezburger?*), the EWT site is a collection of memes which originated elsewhere and were then eventually collected through the means of a dedicated website. (In other cases, memes will circulate through social media sites (Facebook) and non-dedicated aggregator sites (Reddit) and gain popularity without being collected. Texts may also be created or captured when witnessed with the purpose of becoming a meme by being posted to an EWT site.) This study posits that the main difference between a meme and an EWT is the dedicated website: it is one thing to see a series of cute, irrelevant images floating through cyberspace, and it is another thing to dedicate a website entirely to one type of these images. Dedicated websites display particular information architectures, standards of practice, and other elements which create a unique frame around the texts and create a particular experience/event. More importantly, the idea of replicability and evolution applies in the same way to EWTs as it does to memes: users must be able to transform and disseminate the content for the meme to evolve and continue to exist. The study of memes can assist us in understanding the context in which EWT sites have been formed, and the practices surrounding memes relate closely to those of EWTs.

A number of academics have connected the concept of ‘memetic transmission’ to semiotic theory; such a comparison and incorporation is helpful in establishing a foundation for a semiotic analysis of the EWT experience.

James Black (2007) analyzed the meme (in his case, his analysis was based on the jokes of killing babies which were popular in the early to mid 2000s) to determine that “evolutionary pressures” on the meme included: experience (in that someone must be able to identify with the meme, in some sense, to remember the meme); emotional connection (whether the meme generates anger, sadness, or amusement); distinction (it must be unique to increase its odds of being circulated); and a precursor belief of value – in other words, “the evolution of a meme can be traced back to how the idea connects with other ideas already within the public sphere” – the meme does not exist spontaneously and independently (pp. 8-10). A similar idea is conveyed in Peirce’s *The Law of Mind* (1892).

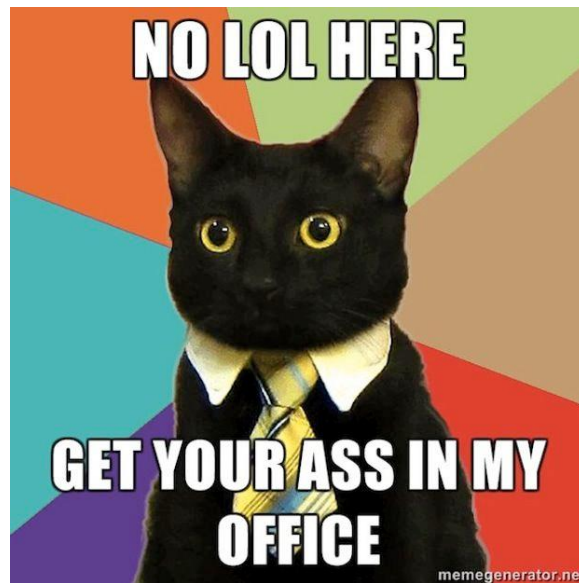
The logician argues that

there is but one law of mind, namely, that ideas tend to spread continuously and to affect certain others which stand to them in a peculiar relation of affectability. In this spreading they lose intensity [...] but gain generality and become welded with other ideas (*EP1*: 313).

This idea relates to the meme in two senses. First, as Black (2007) indicated, our ideas are influenced by pre-existing knowledge (other ideas), and so to find a meme significant (and consequently, to pass it on) it must relate to what we already know; this pre-existing knowledge is not only a relevance to something in our outside world which is referenced to create the humour of the meme, but is also the knowledge of the meme itself (as memes, according to Dawkins (1989), must maintain the idea of the original). Peirce’s “law of mind” also posits that we are cognitively able to create generalizations which

connect some ideas to others, supporting Black's suggestion that there are these evolutionary pressures on memes which make them transmissible.

To apply Black's (2007) criteria to an image, let us consider this image of Business Cat (*Fig 2.1*):



Source: <http://s3.amazonaws.com/kym-assets/entries/icons/original/000/005/099/business-cat-07.jpg?1297798957>

In this image, Business Cat meets multiple criteria. Users may identify with Business Cat on several levels: they may own a cat (and may perhaps enjoy dressing the cat), or they may have a difficult superior at work (and Business Cat may make them look with amusement at their own workplace scenarios). Furthermore, audiences may recognize the lolcat reference ("No LOL here") and/or the Advice Animal format, and may identify with the meme on this level (this identification also relates to the idea of a precursor belief of value). Furthermore, there are several levels on which an emotional reaction may be created: amusement may be generated from the cat itself, or from the juxtaposition of the cat and the text. As referenced through a description of Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974, pp. 38-39), unusual juxtaposition

(for example, deviant behaviour in a typically rule-moderated environment) can make texts noteworthy, and this is valid for memes and for EWTs.

Kilpinen (2008) also relates the meme to the sign as it is studied by semiotic theory, making it particularly relevant to this study. Kilpinen, like Black, stresses the importance of a precursor belief in the spread of the meme, and as a result is critical of Blackmore's book, *The Meme Machine* (1999), for being too focused on imitation. "Imitation simply cannot be a basic form of human action, it has to presuppose something to be imitated, a more basic kind of action," Kilpinen says (pp. 219-220). He argues that if "human action were mere imitation, this would excise its connection to the surrounding material environment," making quite clear the fact that memes are rooted in our experience (p. 220).

Kilpinen's (2008) central argument is that the meme is merely "an underdeveloped special version" of Peirce's definition of a sign (p. 221). He asserts this due to the fact that the meme, like the sign, exists as an external symbol, an interpretant of thought. Peirce himself, long before the popularity of memetics, wrote the following:

You hear a new slang word: you never ask for a definition of it; and you never get one. You do not get even any simple example of its use; you only hear it in ironical, twisted humorous sentences whose meaning is turned inside out and tied in a hard knot; yet you know what the word means much better than any abstract definition could have informed you (quoted in Kilpinen, 2008, p. 221).

This idea is what prompts Kilpinen to say that "[t]he meme, whatever its eventual merits and demerits, is no new thing but the old semiotic idea of sign, in somewhat new clothing, and reintroduced with some bombast" (p. 220). Kilpinen's assertion that a meme falls well into the realm of semiotics, is relevant to this study, as we interpret a meme-like phenomenon based on the signs present within and across them. If we revisit Peirce's (CP 2.246) concept

of the replica and the legisign, this linkage between memes and signs can be clarified: With the expedient flow of information (included memes and EWTs) online, acting as replicas which are continually created and shared, the complexity of interpretants is increased, and the legisign resulting from quick-moving online replicas is in constant growth. Any signification of the legisign occurs through the application of a “replica”: a sinsign (Secondness) which embodies both the Firstness and Thirdness at once (Nöth, 1990, p. 44).

To apply this theory to EWTs and memes alike, it is best to first consider the actual text (the image or text excerpt which constitutes a “post” to an EWT site) as the replica: the replicas, growing in number as they gain popularity, exist as embodiments/occurrences of legisigns. It is the collection of these texts which allow internal rules to develop, and then be transformed into a cultural or social phenomenon²¹. (In this study, we consider specifically the role of the iconic legisign – as experiences resemble each other, they create and facilitate a particular type of experience which reveals a social function.) In other words, the rules governing what constitutes a lolcat or any other meme function as legisigns in Peirce’s conception of the iconic sign. Lolcats are created and re-circulated in popular culture, and the rules which define a lolcat image are formed by the collection of memes. As stated by Ransdell (1997), “[t]o speak of something as being a “law” or “rule” is to speak of a triadic relation, which can be construed dynamically as a general form of relating” (§ 35). Rather than existing independently, these legisigns exist as a class of signs which classifies kinds of Representamen according to the categories of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness; in other words, they allow us to “[identify] the proper interpretant [Thirdness] of the legisign’s replicas” (§ 42). In reference to the interpretant, Peirce states: “Thirdness is the mode of

²¹ In the EWT phenomenon, this sort of occurrence could take place twice: first, as individual sites’ texts develop internal rules, and then as *all* EWT sites show similar tendencies, creating the phenomenon that I recognize in this study.

being of that which is such as it is, in bringing a second and third into relation to each other” (CP 8.328); in this sense, we are able to more clearly understand the idea of internally consistent rules which are present in the Internet meme.

It may be useful here to offer an example of how the EWT as a semiotic structure gives rise to an interpretant, in order to explain the case of the kind of semiosis at work in EWT sites. Peirce describes the interpretant as the idea, feeling or behaviour which arises from a sign (CP 1.339). As EWT sites function as signs, their significant properties are manifested in replicas which carry certain qualities; as will be explored in analysis, those shared qualities include the topic of a banal aspect of daily life (e.g. shopping at Wal-Mart), amateurish and authentic content (e.g. cell phone photos or text transcriptions of events), and visible encouragement to participate in the experience by submitting one’s own content. The sign also has a systemic (not subjective as in someone’s conscious or unconscious intention) purpose, which exists as “the final cause of the process of semiosis”, and this purpose is to create an interpretant of the sign (Nöth, 2010, p. 87) - a particular idea which makes the sign successful. In this study, the systemic purpose at hand would be the act of neo-phatic communication as it is enabled through the websites. The achievement of this systemic purpose is linked to the symbolic dimension of the sign; a symbol “represents its object and creates its interpretant”, whose potential effect is rooted in “a habit of interpretation” (Nöth, 2010, p. 85) in which conditions are achieved which regularly elicit a certain response and become conventional (see pages 99-100) . Ultimately, “a purpose is precisely the interpretant of a symbol,” (EP2:308, in Nöth, 2010, p. 86), meaning that the goal of a sign is to create an idea which contributes to its desired end, and it achieves such a goal through the successful development of a habit. As Nöth (2010) writes,

“[...] those who interpret the symbol are not free to endow it with any meaning they might wish to associate with it, but have to comply with the meanings associated with them through the habits that determine the interpretation of the symbol. [...] Being determined by the habits of the symbols they use, the symbol users, in a way, turn out to be the instruments of the symbols they believe to use and whose message they convey in the process of semiosis” (pp. 87-88).

Specifically in regards to the study at hand, then, the aforementioned properties of the EWT structure when it is construed as a sign, along with other aspects of the sign (as determined in analysis), give rise to particular ideas which essentially contribute to the desired purpose of neo-phatic communication. Such ideas might be that there is pleasure to be had in the exchange of signs as exhibited by the sites; that the situations depicted within the sites are relatable and could happen to the reader himself; that it is technically easy to engage with the sites; and thus, that the reader should participate in the site, as it is so easy and enjoyable to do so. Thus, the typical idea (i.e. the immediate interpretant) which likely develops from the experience as a sign structure, having been afforded by the qualities of the experience, reflects the purpose of the sign which readers are led to enact. (Such a concept also illustrates the linkages between the gene, the meme, and the EWT, in that these objects circulate in a way which furthers their purpose, the latter of which is neo-phatic communication rather than mere circulation of the object.)

Another look at the meme, albeit not identified as such, is provided by Sperber (1984) in “Anthropology and psychology: Towards an epidemiology of representations”. Sperber likens epidemiology (the study of the spread of disease) to a suggested methodology by which one could study the spread of cultural representations (for example, myths). Sperber argues that some representations (like Little Red Riding Hood, his own example) have properties which make them “more easily comprehended and remembered – and

therefore more likely to become cultural” than other representations (p. 78), and that an epidemiological approach which studies the pathology of representations is necessary to understand “the causal explanation of cultural facts” (p. 79). The conclusion that Sperber (1984) reaches is that what makes a representation tenacious is that it is *evocative* in light of our adaptive cognitive and communicative abilities; if a representation is relatable to our other mental representations, yet cannot be given a final interpretation, it becomes a *relevant mystery* which creates an evocative cognitive paradox (p. 85). We can trace a clear connection between Sperber’s argument of cultural representation and the Internet meme – the cultural representation may be a concept to which we relate (and therefore, something in which we can participate), yet also something whose beginning and end eludes us as it continues to circulate across cyberspace.

One final consideration to note in our relation of the meme to EWTs, and subsequently to semiotics, is that the theories surrounding memes give ultimate credit to the meme itself for transmissibility, rather than to the individuals who receive and transfer the memes. This view complements the triadic semiotic perspective of this study that, despite the affordance for interpretation and creativity found in today’s communication environment, signs themselves are responsible for their own effective reception. As Brodie (2009) states, we are experiencing a “paradigm shift [...] in the science of life and culture” in which we “look at cultural evolution from the point of view of the meme, rather than the point of view of an individual or society” (p. 4). Heylighen and Chielens (2008) make a similar claim, when they argue that

The memetic perspective on culture [...] focuses on the characteristics of the individuals and groups communicating rather than on the characteristics of the information being communicated. This does not imply a "memetic reductionism", which would deny individual control over what you

communicate. It just notes that in many cases the dynamics of information propagation and the ensuing evolution of culture can be modeled more simply from the "meme's point of view" than by analyzing the conscious or unconscious intentions of the communicating agents. (pp. 3-4)

Despite the fact that Internet memes and EWTs afford the public some creativity in their interpretation and continued dissemination, and that the interpretation of a sign to some extent is influenced by individual experience, meanings are developed and propagated within the signs themselves. Heylighen and Chielens's (2008) argument also highlights the link between memetics and neo-phatic communication, in that the very act and some of the characteristics of communication dominate the understanding of the content. One might even argue that neo-phatic communication itself serves a memetic role: like a gene, it uses host bodies (EWT sites) to propagate itself, taking advantage of willing communicating agents who engage in this form of computer-mediated communication..

By means of Peirce's theory of semiosis, supplemented with the social organization concepts of Goffman, we are now in a position to explore the iconic, indexical and symbolic dimensions of EWTs construed as a text and gain an understanding of the social function afforded by the potential or plausible interpretation of such texts.

Findings

According to Liszka (1996), a sign uses its "presentative characteristics", also known as the "ground" of the sign, to establish a correlation between the sign and the object which it represents (p. 37). Such presentative characteristics, identified by Peirce (CP 2.299), are the iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs, and through an identification of these dimensions apparent in the sign of the EWT experience, we are able to understand the function of the EWT semiotic structure as a possible means of facilitating neo-phatic communication.

The iconic dimension

The structure of EWT sites has an iconic dimension, as the sites display similarities in their organization and their content that influence the experience they facilitate. The object of the sign (our desire to communicate) is represented as a potential communicative experience through the sites, and thus, the iconic dimension of the sign is reflective of the object: “an icon can also be similar to its object when the relations among the elements in the sign are isomorphic to relations among elements in the object” (Liszka, 1996, p. 37); in respect to this study, the similarities across sites proposes an experience which represents our desire for communication regardless of substance or any depth. The following section identifies the iconic aspects of EWT sites as a semiotic composition, and relates the qualities discussed to the kind of communication called here ‘neo-phatic’.

It is important to note that, for elements of iconicity apparent in both information architecture and in content, the features outlined in this section will appear in varying degrees across EWT sites. The iconic legisigns create and manifest the overall “rule” for what constitutes an EWT site and has implications for the experience facilitated by the sites; however, as each website will have certain wandering characteristics (to use Ransdell’s (1997: ¶ 43) words), some sites will perfectly exemplify some tendencies while being a less than ideal example for another tendency. However, these tendencies are to some extent present across EWT sites.

Iconicity in information architecture

EWT sites are not designed to generate dialogue between users. Unlike some websites such as Reddit.com, whose interface encourages conversation among users, EWTs are not designed for dialogue – the focus is on the submissions posted and the encouragement of

participation via submission. (Although some sites (such as *Awkward Family Photos*) contain comments sections where users can discuss the photos, comments are not threaded²² and commenters do not have accounts, suggesting that in-depth dialogue is not a priority to the site). Consider a site such as Reddit (www.reddit.com), which allows users to post content but also hosts a high volume of online discussion: ranked 113th in Alexa rankings and 51st in the United States (Alexa, n.d., Reddit.com site info), Reddit has over 900,000 registered users²³. Each submission to Reddit has a threaded comments section, where popular posts can collect thousands of comments from users (Redditors). Each Redditor has a Reddit.com account where their comments to all communities can be seen, and users can add each other as friends on the site. Users can also send each other private messages separately from the dialogue in comment sections of the site. In contrast, EWTs have none of these features, aside from (in some cases) allowing comments. Typically, comments do not appear in thread form, so users cannot respond to one another; as a result, comments are insular. Because no accounts exist on EWT sites, messaging cannot occur, nor can a user be notified if someone references their comment later on.

Sites are based on user-generated content which is somewhat or completely anonymous.

The information architecture of EWT sites does not allow their users to “build a profile” – in two senses of the term. As sites are designed in such a way that submitters do not have accounts or profiles, their content is not easily traced to them, making it difficult to establish any kind of identity as a participant within an EWT site. For example, *Overheard in New*

²² “Threading” is a means of displaying user comments on a website. Comments are staggered to indicate the direction of discussion, and who is responding to whom. In this sense, threaded comments are indicative of discussion-oriented content; EWT sites lack threading, which downplays the value of the comments because it is significantly more difficult to generate true dialogue; comments are presented in isolation instead of in relation to one another.

²³ This number is based on the number of subscribers to Reddit’s main “sub-reddit” (community): <http://www.reddit.com/r/reddit.com>

York will allow users to self-identify, but when users do this, no profile is created.

Furthermore, submitters will often select identifiers which are not traceable to them, such as “Connor A.”, or refer to their actions (overheard by “Laughing my ass off” or “snickering into my magazine”) (Overheard in New York, 2011).

The lack of user account also denies the opportunity for users to build site-specific fame through any sort of collection. On Reddit, for example, users might collect “karma points” from “upvotes” awarded on their submissions by fellow users. A YouTube participant may be able to build status through the number of subscribers or video views associated with this account. By contrast, the information architectures of EWT sites do not allow participants any such status indicators.

Considering these qualities, it becomes apparent that the semiotic structure of the websites encourages a focus on the unsubstantial communicative aspects of the sites. Regardless of whether one is submitting content or merely reading it, the focus is on the transmission of the messages rather than affording users any opportunity for in-depth communication or the forging of interpersonal relationships. The social function of this sign structure is predominantly one in which messages are contributed, and then mediated and sent out through the site as author, with little to no practical dialogue resulting from the act. However, this neo-phatic communication is not manifested exclusively through the information architecture of the sites; the content itself also represented by the iconic dimension of the sign, and illustrates the social function of the phenomenon.

Iconicity in content

Sites are focused on one specific type of banal event. The content of EWTs is based on one kind of banal occurrence of everyday life – as previously mentioned with reference to

Featherstone (1992) and Morreall (1991), content tends to focus on banal, often cutesy, occurrences and activities. Consider the following examples:

Overheard in New York

Title: Aren't You Glad We Can Talk Like This?

Girl #1: Would you rather have diabetes or whatever that disease is that Stephen Hawking has?

Girl #2: Well, I don't want either!

Girl #1: But if you had to choose...

Girl #2: Diabetes, I guess.

Girl #1: Me too.

--1 Train

Overheard by: Harris

Passive Aggressive Notes

Title: I Can't Believe It's Not (My) Butter

[Tommy in Norway](#) isn't the only one getting butt-hurt over butter. From the U.K...

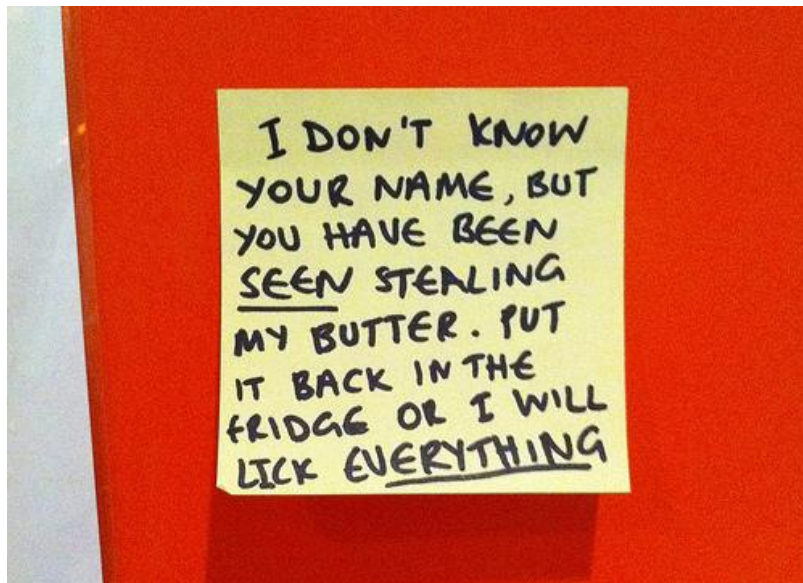


Fig 3.1

Not Always Right

Title: Sum Dim Customers

[Coffee Shop](#) | Austin, TX, USA | [Food & Drink](#), [Language & Words](#)

Me: "What can I fix for you today?"

Customer: "Uh, I'll have a Tai Chi."

Me: "A...what?"

Customer: “A Tai Chi!”
Me: “Oh, you mean a Chai Tea!”
Customer: “No, it’s a TAI CHI!”
Next Customer: “Ma’am, Tai Chi is a form of Asian exercise.”
Me: **to first customer** “Here’s your drink.”
Customer: **snaps up her drink and rushes out**
Next Customer: “Whatcha got in an aerobic latte?”

People of Walmart
Title: Seeing Double



Fig3.2

There really is nothing crazy/creepy/gross/whatever about this picture. I’m really just curious to hear all of your comments regarding at what age does twins dressing alike stop being cute and fall under weird? Talk amongst yourselves....²⁴

Arizona

²⁴ This question and encouragement to discuss the topic seem largely rhetorical, rather than genuine – the post received 13 comments, only two provided an opinion on twins dressing alike, and no comments were in response to previous comments on the post. The communication is an exchange of opinions or small anecdotes, but without any one comment relating to another, or any further ideas or in-depth thought developed as a result of the exchange.

These examples are drawn from occurrences which are experienced as a part of daily life: overhearing banter on public transit, navigating the politics of the office refrigerator, and the often jested-about situations of ordering from specialty coffee shops or seeing adult people dressed alike.

The tags and categories by which EWT organize themselves reveal the scope of the interactions of the e-relevant texts. *Overheard in New York* includes places (at the airport, on the subway, Laundromats, “Ew, Jersey”), topics often overheard (plastic surgery, family ties, height, office politics) and people involved in discussion or referenced in discussion (boyfriends, A-, B- and C- list celebrities, blue collar workers, old people); *Not Always Right*, given the context of customer service, allows you to browse entries by profession or location (coffee shop, call centre, restaurant, supermarket). More niche EWT sites such as *Clients From Hell* (dealing with clients while working in the creative and tech industries) cross-reference posts through links, which identify common situations encountered in the field (clients who want to infringe on copyrights, for example, or clients who seem incapable of using modern technologies, much to the frustration of the submitter). *People of Walmart* situates readers in the most banal environment imaginable to showcase what are seen as “lowest common denominator” situations and people. In considering both the content and the way it has been organized, the banality of the websites becomes apparent; EWT sites poke fun at the experiences we encounter in our day-to-day goings-on, that nonetheless draw our attention (due to amusement, frustration, and at times, it would seem both).

When considering the banality of the content in light of the desire for neo-phatic communication, it appears that the lack of substantial content reflects the dominant function of communication within the websites. By focusing content on everyday activities, anyone is

able to participate in the experience and communicative aspects of the site without the hindrance of intellectual reflection or seeking a practical use for the information. The function is purely a social one in which barriers to access are removed and engagement becomes simplified.

Sites are titled to reflect the content. One unique element of EWTs is that the sites are titled based on the content that they feature. Unlike the short and catchy company names which dominate the Internet (Google, Facebook, YouTube and Yahoo are the most popular websites by Alexa metrics) (Alexa, n.d. Alexa top 500 global sites), EWTs seem to reject the conventionally-held notion of the catchy entirely. Instead, *Awkward Family Photos*, *My Mom is a Fob*²⁵ and *Overheard in New York* tell web users exactly what to expect before they even visit the site. However, when this rejection of the short and catchy online brand name is intentionally avoided, this very rejection displays a different sort of catchiness in its own right. This different sort of catchiness is used to emphasize the cute and playful nature of the site, with the pedestrian titles making participation in the sites more relatable to viewers (for example, “anyone” can overhear a conversation in New York, and “everyone” shops at Wal-Mart). The use of catchy titles extends into many of the posted texts, which often include wordplay and clever pop culture references, furthering the down-to-earth appeal of the sites. Such quirkiness adopts a sort of “hipster” style; Mark Greif (2010) states that “contemporary hipsterism has been defined by an obsessive interest in the conflict between knowingness and naïveté, guilty self-awareness and absolved self-absorption” (p. 2). In regards to cultural aesthetic, Greif sees hipster art as based partially on the “aestheticization of the mode of pastiche” and “blank parody” (p. 3). In other words, hipster

²⁵ For those unaware, “Fob” is a colloquialism referring to immigrants who are “Fresh Off the Boat” (FOB).

aesthetic is based on a sort of ironic kitsch in which content is knowingly and perhaps indulgently both quirky and popular. The contemporary hipster aesthetic gained popularity between 2004 and 2009, according to Greif (p. 1, 4), at roughly the same time in which EWT sites grew most in popularity. In contrast to these relatively niche, quirky sites, larger online organizations often coin their own terms by which to identify their sites (e.g. “Google”) which are not rooted in any previous knowledge, making the idea more empiric and less immediately understandable to the user. In this sense, the content of the sites as they exist through labels serve as an encouragement for users to experience the sites and participate in their communicative affordances.

Sites are self-referential. In the same way that EWT sites are informationally irrelevant and do not instill in participants intellectual reflection, they also do not lead to any “real-life” gain. Many user-generated online activities are conducted with the intention of information, opinion-sharing and/or justice: for example, in the case of Dog Poop Girl (a South Korean woman who let her canine companion defecate on the subway, and who subsequently suffered when her face was posted online), the woman was engaging in an act which defied norms and was clearly inappropriate. Her images were posted online as a means of social justice, and the woman eventually dropped out of her university due to public shaming (Solove, 2007, p. 2). However, the same cannot be said of those whose interactions are posted on EWTs – often, their identities are secret (because they are referenced only in text). Even on sites such as *People of Walmart*, where photographs of patrons are posted to be ridiculed, there is no larger agenda on the part of EWT sites to pursue “real life” follow-up. No online vigilante justice is to be had from the texts; rather, the framing of the sites seems

to emphasize an enjoyment of the experience of the sites and the means for communication that they provide, rather than inspire consideration of larger social or personal implications.

Sites are based on content generated from multiple users. Despite the lack of dialogue occurring on EWT sites, texts are generated by a variety of users rather than one single poster of content. However, it is possible that an EWT site can be moderated by one user, or even that posts are made to the site by only one user (effectively a moderator), as long as it is indicated that another participant has made the contribution. (For example, *Clients From Hell* collects submissions through an online form, and then selects and posts appropriate stories).

In considering the semiosis at work in EWT sites, which shapes expected outcomes, it is reasonable to infer that the ideal user's understanding of EWT sites is developed in part from the recognition that many people are participating in the act of communication. Given the dominant sociosemiotic function of the website, and the ways in which it encourages participation through undemanding and uninvolved commenting and submitting, the openness of the content is critical to affording users neo-phatic communication.

Sites are populated with authentic, original content. Although the genuine source of online content is always in question, the spirit of EWTs rests on the assumption that the content is original; that is, that images or text featured on the site were uploaded by someone witnessing first-hand the occurrence that is being featured on the site. EWT sites present submissions as generated by the submitter (as in the case of *Overheard In New York*, where submissions are credited to the eavesdropper through the "Overheard by" line, or in *Clients From Hell* (www.clientsfromhell.net), where site visitors are asked to submit their story and the Terms of Service indicate that you "represent and warrant that you own all rights to any

content submitted”) (Clients From Hell, n.d.). The authenticity of the content – in other words, the conveyance of the notion that the activity witnessed was captured in its “here and now” actuality or true existence, relates to the indexicality²⁶ of the phenomenon by highlighting the physicality of the strips of activity which are shared. Such a physicality renders the EWTs seemingly inseparable from the very act of witnessing the activities, and extends the act of playing witness to the web user through the aesthetic of authenticity afforded by these sites.

The importance of accessibility aside, there appear to be cases in which the everyday occurrences posted seem to have been derived from popular culture. For example, consider the following examples, which could be potentially faked or exaggerated entries:

Overheard in New York

Title: USDA Choice Wednesday One-Liners

Guy to girlfriend: We should get some pastrami. I've always found it to be the most sensual of the cured meats.

--St. Mark's Market

Not Always Right

Title: Waste Not, Bag Not

[Retail](#) | Ontario, Canada |

(In Canada, we charge five cents for each plastic bag used, which goes to environmental fees or charities. Every store except Walmart has charged for bags for 3-4 years now.)

Customer: “You guys charge for bags?! You’re kidding me!”

Me: “Yup, we do.”

Customer: “It’s ridiculous!”

²⁶ Recall that the indexical dimension of the sign is that which catches our attention, i.e. attracts our senses. As Peirce states: “The index is physically connected with its object; they make an organic pair, but the interpreting mind has nothing to do with this connection, except remarking it, after it is established” (CP 2.299). An example might be a bullet-hole in a wall, leaving evidence of a shot (CP 2.304).

Customer's Daughter: "But mom, we're not going to need bags anyway."

Customer: "I know, but it's just so greedy! I'm not going to shop at all these stores anymore if you guys keep charging for bags!"

The *Overheard in New York* post references a line made in the sitcom *Seinfeld*, and brings into question the authenticity of the post, as it is not certain if the person quoted chose to make the reference, or if the person who submitted it fabricated having witnessed the conversation (in spite of not having heard it). In the second example, the claim that "every store except Walmart has charged for bags for every 3-4 years now" is an exaggeration which, for those not aware of the exaggeration, makes the customer's surprise seem much more unreasonable.

Such instances are worthy of consideration, as they affect the potential or plausible experience of the EWT sites. If a larger margin of the sites' content was borrowed from popular culture, the concept of the sites as being grounds for sharing genuine, everyday occurrences is altered and the appeal of participation by submitting one's own experiences could potentially be diminished. That said, given the small fraction of questionable posts, one could assume that most visitors to these EWT sites consider the nature of the experience that the sites afford us as being legitimate, i.e., authentic, and this impression is based on their textual properties.

Content is (seemingly) unedited. Similarly to the previous remarks on authenticity, we also assume that content has not been edited, although there exists potential for images to have been manipulated, and recounted stories to have been fabricated. When we consider unedited content, it is with the intention of taking into account the "naturalness" of the texts – the extent to which the images and texts create the feeling of one having witnessed the

event themselves, rather than in having the content thoroughly adapted by the submitter. The natural feeling of the texts (which is more relevant to visual posts than to textual posts, although the latter can be interfered with by heavy commenting by the submitter) lends itself to the effortless banality of the experience. For example, *People of Walmart* often features images snapped with a cell phone; such a means of capturing the experience is immediate and therefore makes the experience more relatable and plausible to the ideal readers of the site. The media phenomenon is thus perceived as user-friendly, as the EWT sites' structure and textuality create an impression that anyone with a cell phone is capable of engaging in the experience.

Captions are potentially one example of visual manipulation which, rather than alter the meaning of the raw texts, may function as an extension of the frame of EWT sites. For example, lolcats (as found on *I Can Haz Cheezburger*, www.icanhazcheezburger.com) are one of the most well-known examples of an EWT site, and consists of photographs of cats that have had captions added directly to the image. (Clay Shirky (2010) describes a lolcat as “a cute picture of a cat that is made even cuter by the addition of a cute caption, the ideal effect of “cat plus caption” being made to make the viewer laugh out loud (thus putting the *lol* in *lolcat*)” [original emphasis] (p. 17). However, the captions, rather than altering the frame of EWT sites, are merely a continuation of such a frame. In the case of lolcats, the captions maintain the expectations of cuteness, frivolity and banal irrelevance found in the site; if the captions are removed, there is no harm done – the frame remains the same.

As with the other tendencies mentioned, the iconic aspects of the EWT sites often contribute to the relatable nature of the content as well as the user-friendly medium of transmission, factors which afford the true sociosemiotic function of the sites; the low barrier

to understanding encourages participation. Even in the cases of memes such as lolcats on *I Can Haz Cheezburger*, in which a simple manipulation shapes the experience, such actions are now easily undertaken by “meme generators” and similar templates.

The similarities which appear across EWT sites, both in architecture and in content, work together to create an identifiable phenomenon and illustrate how EWT sites serve as a means for neo-phatic communication. What becomes clear through this examination is that the textual and semiotic properties of EWT sites, mediated through the sites as frames, display certain tendencies which shape an expected outcome of engagement, functioning as a sort of “rule” for how the sign structure is to be interpreted. This interpretation essentially governs the successful outcome of the general kind of engagement with this sign structure, which is to deliver on our desire for neo-phatic communication.

In semiotic terms, these aspects of the iconic dimension of the sign function as iconic legisigns – signs which “represent likenesses in a predominantly conventional way” (Liszka, 1996, p. 50). As Ransdell (1997) describes it, an iconic legisign might be apparent in a semiotic process “in which a certain form or quality persistently maintains itself” despite the changes that might occur to each subsequent embodiment of the sign (§ 39); its chief value is in having an ordering power. In this case, an understanding of the iconic dimensions of the sites reveals the over-arching rules of this sign structure and enables visitors to grasp and enjoy the semiosis process at work in EWT sites.

Each embodiment of a legisign, however, also has “a certain sinsign identity,” says Ransdell (1997), in that the sinsign functions to actualize the legisign (§ 35). When we consider the EWT structure as a semiotic composition and examine the distinctive features

of the genre, what we observe are the embodiments of the iconic legisign – these are iconic sinsigns, and each embodiment is a “replica” of the rule, to put it in simpler terms (§ 35, 38). Thus, when we speak of the iconicity of the EWT insofar as it acts as a sign, we consider not only the identifiable similarities themselves, but also the way in which these tendencies behave as a “rule”, a legisign, which derives from the experience but also governs it. However, it is important to not consider the rule or the replicas in a vacuum. Ransdell (1997) argues that “every iconic sinsign [...] can be regarded as asserting itself, simply in virtue of such things as “standing its own ground”” and “in impressing itself upon the attention” (§ 53) – he also makes it clear that these actions involve indexical and symbolic aspects (§ 53). Thus, to fully understand the EWT sites from a semiotic standpoint, it is important to consider the other equally important dimensions of their sign composition. The following section considers the indexical dimensions of the sign; it is clear that the sites must capture our attention, and in considering the indexicality of the sign we also consider *what* about the possible experience is designed to achieve this function. Such an aspect of the content clearly has an iconic dimension, as the authenticity and relatability of the content are qualities shared across the experience offered by the sites and contribute to their formation as a genre; however, as these qualities are found across the individual strips of activity which “impress [...] upon our attention”, to use Ransdell’s (§ 53) words, they also have a clear indexical aspect. As will be discussed below, the indexical relates to “here and now” material elements which attract our senses, and thus, the qualities which I relate to the iconic legisign and sinsign are not fully separable from the indexical component in everyday life, only the analysis can do that. This relationship illustrates the layered and multidimensional nature of the media phenomenon under study as well as the thorough understanding of it

afforded by a semiotic perspective. While the analysis of the sign structure is done by breaking down the iconic, indexical and symbolic components, it is important to consider the sign's triadic structure as a complex whole to fully appreciate its social function. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind the aforementioned iconic aspects of the phenomenon even when considering analytically its indexical dimension.

The indexical dimension

We now understand, having examined the iconic dimension of the EWT sign structure, that certain rules govern how the sites would most likely be experienced – this becomes apparent through the identifiable similarities across the sites which are a part of the phenomenon at hand. As mentioned above, the element of the iconic sign found within our semiotic analysis manifests itself not only through embodying the rule of the sign, but also in impressing itself upon our attention. In considering the drawing of attention aspect of the semiosis at work in the EWT phenomenon, we are dealing with the indexical dimension of the sign.

Peirce describes an index as a sign which “forces the attention to [its] particular object intended without describing it” (CP 1.369). The key aspect of the indexical sign is that there is a real physical relationship between the sign and its object (CP 8.335, 1.372) in which the sign is actually affected by its object (CP 2.248), which must exist. Unlike in the case of a symbol, the connection between the index and its object has no reliance whatsoever on interpretation or an agreed-upon meaning (CP 2.299); the index is rather understood or rather perceived/grasped based on its “spatial or temporal location, its “here and now”” (Liszka, 1996, p. 38).

Thus, we are able to comprehend the indexical dimension of EWT sites through an analysis of which identifiable aspects of the experience force our attention to the object. In other words, we must consider what concrete aspects of the EWT sites draw attention toward the function of neo-phatic communication. To achieve this understanding, we will be examining -- through the theoretical lens of Goffman (1974) and others – thematic aspects of EWT content which capture our attention, in addition to a re-examination of the sites’ general information architecture, which together serve to draw our attention toward the social affordances of the phenomenon.

Indexicality in content

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, our attention is drawn toward abnormal occurrences, meaning that we are unconsciously aware of what is normal by social standards (Goffman, 1974, p. 39). In considering the content submitted to EWT sites, it is remarkable in that it deviates from what we deem socially acceptable, even though in the grand context of noteworthy events, the texts posted to EWT sites may still be seen as quite banal.

The paradoxical nature of content which is at once banal and remarkable requires some consideration, as it may be a fundamental appealing characteristic of this genre of sites. The banality of the sites is clearly emphasized by the sites’ titles and submissions, which situate the reader in the everyday environment or the kind of experience around which the site is based: shopping at Wal-Mart, dealing with unpleasant customers as part of a service job, or listening to one’s parents, among others. To have websites dedicated to such banal activities is a subversion of the most idealistic ambitions which have been had for the Internet, and reflects the sort of aforementioned “hipster” aesthetic which is motivated

partially by dedicating attention to something deemed unpopular or uninteresting through actions of indulgent kitsch²⁷.

The EWTs showcased within their respective sites are still somehow remarkable, given the forgettable context in which they are situated. Everyday activities are punctuated by minor events which capture attention and elicit a particular amused reaction from the witness or eavesdropper (that is a term used often by Goffman (1981, p. 9) when he describes the kind of activities that people get to watch or hear involuntarily or more or less voluntarily, because these events take place in a public space); as explored below, the events may be displays of harmless incompetence or taboo behaviour which have no real impact on the witness aside from providing, perhaps, a distraction from the otherwise uninteresting circumstances in which they find themselves at that moment. To then have these occurrences captured and displayed on EWT sites therefore creates content which is banal in the grand scheme of things, but remarkable in that particular context (a context in which most people can situate themselves); such juxtaposition may be seen as amusing. Furthermore, the mere existence of the sites, which seem to lack any practical use, reflects the Web 2.0 shift toward self-publication and creativity – users may also gain pleasure from the exchange of signs afforded by sites such as EWT sites. In this sense, amusement is found in sharing moments that would be seen as remarkable in a relatable, everyday context; the kind of occasion that is shared is banal compared to web content such as news, multi-million-dollar music videos, and ground-breaking research published by those with traditional media power. One similar phenomenon would be the plethora of YouTube videos posted for the sake of sharing the

²⁷ Congdon and Blandy (2005) state that while “kitsch” can be defined in numerous ways, “objects identified as kitsch are usually associated with items integrated into the everyday lives of people”, with items considered kitsch perhaps being “appreciated with a sense of irony” (p. 197). The term originated among art dealers in 19th century Germany to describe “bad art” or “aesthetic rubbish”. “While (good) art is thought to require effort and seriousness, kitsch is linked with pleasure and entertainment,” the authors explain (p. 198).

amusing behaviour of pets, children, and so on; for example, as of my writing, searching for “my cat” in YouTube yields over six million results. As Strangelove (2010) states, arguing in favour of YouTube’s compelling nature: “After all, it is you, it is me, it is our neighbours, our families, our friends (and, all too often, our dumb kids) who can be seen on YouTube. It is ever more of the world brought to our computer screens by amateurs and everyday people [...]” (p. 3). The real or perceived authenticity of YouTube videos, and the openness of the platform for distribution, create a virtual pop museum for those seeking unpolished amusement; EWT sites provide a similar source of entertainment.

It is also worth noting again that the act of submission to an EWT site is likely to be done because a) the activity witnessed was remarkable in some way and b) there was an awareness of the EWT experience that encouraged someone to gather content to post. There is an awareness on the part of the submitter that the content is remarkable and thus falls within the scope of the site to which content is submitted; the act of submission is also an act of ‘lamination’ in which ‘the strip’ of activity, as Goffman (1974) calls them, is plucked from reality and re-purposed in a particular way to achieve the social function of neo-phatic communication through the participation in the websites. This reminder serves merely to remark that, despite the easy and “natural” feeling of the texts and potential acts of participation, there is a frame which defines the genre and expected interpretation of EWT sites that works to achieve a particular goal by facilitating neo-phatic communication. The activities undertaken by participants of the EWT experience both stem from, and continue to shape, the indexical aspects of the sign which work toward achieving the intended interpretation of the experience (which is the symbolic component of this practice). In

considering the indexical dimension of the sign, we seek to identify what about these sites' textual properties captures the attention, to understand how the intended interpretation is actually achieved. Here, we attempt this through determining what aspects of content predominate across the sites that embody the distinctive characteristics of the genre.

Content captures our attention when it exhibits one or more of the following remarkable qualities:

- *Harmless incompetence*
- *Cultural knowledge (popular and sub-group)*
- *Taboo behaviour (discrimination, illegal or unusual activity)*
- *Erratic behaviour*

Generally, the first two content types may be perceived as primarily cute, funny or clever, while the latter two may be seen primarily as taboo or erratic; however, as examples will illustrate, such categories are not mutually exclusive. It is common, for example, for questionable activities to be cast in a light which rendered them harmless and cute. Certain websites displayed certain aspects more than others, although each website displayed at least some positively and negatively abnormal content. Furthermore, while the categories were developed to cast a wide net over the tendencies observed across sites, a fraction of texts may not be reflected by any one of these categories.

In analysing the texts selected for study, it emerged that the content of the EWT genre is made up of strips of activity that are at once banal but paradoxically remarkable. The context of the strip of activity is decidedly everyday (as described earlier, this may be at the grocery store, or in school), but the strip selected to be posted is deemed noteworthy. The activity should elicit a positive or negative response, indicating that it is remarkable, as what is normal would receive no response at all – what is normal is typically not remembered, having been seen but then forgotten to make room for other possible risks or interesting elements in the environment. , These normal not remembered occurrences only gain

relevance when they are contrasted against something, when an abnormal or unusual activity is witnessed. This textual property suggests that we will all witness an activity of this nature at some point in our lives, and that upon witnessing it, we could even communicate it to the public through EWT sites, if we wanted. Like a stand-up comedian who might keep an arsenal of anecdotes for use in a routine, individuals now have the ability, if so desired, to share these joke materials with those who share an interest in these stories. Such an impression allows neo-phatic communication to proliferate, as the variety of EWT sites in existence map out a large variety of banal experiences of a peculiar kind to which we might relate.

Harmless incompetence

As discussed with reference to Morreall (1991), cuteness could be understood as a quality displayed by something which is small, clumsy or incapable (pp. 40-42, 45) and as having a certain colloquial or casual feel (p. 39). The conception of cuteness, then, can be related to our juxtaposition of the banal and the remarkable – EWT content is of a sort of cute, trifling nature, and a certain appreciation can be had in enjoying that type of communication even though it lacks a practical purpose. In the case of the content of EWT sites, a significant portion of content would fall under this type of cuteness, with interactions focusing on harmless but charming incompetence of those being observed. Some websites which focus most on this incompetence are *Not Always Right* (as content comes from the perspective of those in client-facing roles), *Overheard in New York* and *Unnecessary Quotes* (which is dedicated to pointing out poor use of punctuation). Consider the following example:

Not Always Right
Title: Aging is a Zero Sum Game

[Retail](#) | Quebec City, Quebec, Canada | [Extra Stupid](#)

(Our store has an aisle with toys as well as celebration stuff for birthdays, including candles for birthday cakes. I am filling up this aisle when a lady in her late 50's comes up to me.)

Customer: “Excuse me, do you carry candles that are numbers?”

Me: “Yes, let me show you.”

(I show her the candles we have, from 0 to 9.)

Customer: “Oh, they don’t carry 55. My husband is going to be 55.”

(I think she’s joking, and laugh a little.)

Me: “Well, you can just buy two 5’s, and that’ll make 55.”

Customer: **disgusted** “I don’t know why they hired you!” **leaves without buying anything**

People of Walmart
Title: Make it Rain



Fig 3.3

She kept hearing all the young kids saying that they were going to “make it rain”, so she came prepared.

Kentucky

Because such forms of incompetence are relatively harmless, they are chalked up to the reader as something seemingly unimportant (thus banal – such mistakes happen virtually

every day, at least as the sites suggest) and merit a chuckle. The strip of activity is cute in that it is clumsy, relatable but at the same time an everyday occurrence (small in scale relative to “larger than life” content that exists elsewhere online, and also amateurish in how it is shared). The strips of activity are remarkable for having displayed a sort of incompetence that defies the level of competence that we assess and experience constantly. Of course, such an appreciation of clumsiness or mediocrity is not new in the media – in addition to our usual example of the stand-up comedian (“So what’s the deal with airline food?”, Jerry Seinfeld once said, reflecting the clichéd notion of seeing comedians lament everyday let-downs), video bloopers were quite popular in the 80s and 90s on cable. While bloopers do not share all of the qualities of EWTs, they both reveal a certain enjoyment in the relatively harmless missteps of seemingly normal strangers. There is something mildly amusing not just in seeing others trip and fall or get a baseball in the groin, but also in knowing that a) the content is provided by everyday people such as oneself, and b) that if desired, you could likely catch an equally humorous scenario on film and submit it to the show. There is a certain amusement or fun to be had in seeing one’s peers’ displays of incompetence shared for harmless public enjoyment.

Cultural knowledge

I would extend Morreall’s (1991) analysis of cuteness, in this context, to include clever submissions often regarding cultural knowledge. These quips are cute given that they are innocent in nature, and the speaker is often in casual conversation with a friend rather than, for example, standing on the stage as a comedian. (The latter frame would give a clever comment a particular purpose and intentionality, rather than emerging from an everyday

person in an everyday circumstance. The small scale of the quip gives it a particular cuteness.) For example:

Overheard in New York

Title: Wednesday One-Liners *hic*

College girl to another: I knew you were drunk because every time you opened a beer can you said a Snapple fact.

--Columbia University

Overheard by: Nicole

Passive Aggressive Notes

Title: Or I'll call the cops, maybe?

By the end of the summer, could [Carly](#) be the new [Kanye](#) of passive-aggressive notes? She does have the [Beliebers](#) behind her...



Fig 3.4

Such small references to popular culture give the texts a certain relatability (for example, the song referenced in the *Passive Aggressive Notes* entry is widely known among certain demographic groups and is often parodied), while the nature of the sites creates a feeling of “cuteness” by reminding the reader that a regular person is making the joke.

As with clever quips, many texts whose humour is primarily rooted in cultural knowledge often relate to particular ethnic or sub-groups or to popular culture. In some instances, a misunderstanding of culture is demonstrated; in others, it is the knowledge or

humour of understanding culture which elicits a certain reaction from viewing the text. The examples below illustrate how the types of content outlined are not mutually exclusive – for example, the second example below would also qualify as harmless incompetence.

Overheard in New York

Title: Only 1% Finds It Funny Anymore.

Suit: Are you guys from Occupy Wall Street?

Hipster in apparent squatters' camp: No, we're waiting for SNL tickets.

--49th & 6th

Overheard in New York

Title: Wednesday What-Liners?

Waspy 20-something girl to friend, walking by a menorah on 5th day of Hanukkah: Ohmigod! They just put that thing up! Why are some of the lightbulbs already out?

--42nd & 11th

My Mom is a Fob

Title: Self-congratulatory card

My birthday card from my parents looked very fancy, with a ribbon and everything, until I opened it...

“our son a result of good parenting.”

“Signed,
Mom and Dad.”

The above examples illustrate how cultural knowledge is central to the appropriate interpretation of EWTs: it may highlight the incompetence displayed by those whose speech was documented; it may also be required to appreciate the intent behind the text as it was shared. More generally, cultural knowledge helps formulate our conception of the everyday against which EWTs are contrasted. As readers, our cultural knowledge informs our view of normalcy and thus of abnormal behaviour; because the websites are rooted in such banal and relatable contexts, they contribute to a low barrier of participation and assist the sign in eliciting a desired response.

It is again worthwhile to consider through the above examples the layers of iconic, indexical and symbolic properties of the sign composition which are at play simultaneously. The reason the submissions are seen as humorous or noteworthy is due to their reliance on cultural assumptions and social tropes, which exceed the merely indexical aspects of the experience. Berger (1999) suggests that semiotic theory might argue that “humor is best understood as dealing with communication, paradox, play and the resolution of logical problems”, noting that this might also be seen as also in the realm of cognitive theory (p. 4). In this sense, a sort of intertextuality is at play in which both rhetoric and cultural knowledge play a role. As Bakhtin (1981) states, “...prose discourse – in any of its forms, quotidian, rhetorical, scholarly – cannot fail to be oriented toward the 'already uttered,' the 'already known,' the 'common opinion' and so forth” (as quoted in Strauss, 2004, p. 161). Such logic relates to the process of semiosis, by which understanding and expectation are formed through the knowledge developed through prior sign experience²⁸; cultural knowledge accrued over time is foundational to the understanding of the joke. Berger (1999) also suggests that jokes relate to our enjoyment of “playing with language”, such as in puns, where “a pun can be seen to be a signifier that stands for two signifieds” (p. 45). As it relates to our socio-semiotic study, we are then able to see the appreciation of EWTs as an amalgamation of the pleasure of exchanging signs, playing with the rules of normal social organization, and also the incongruity or deviance from expectations (i.e. surprise) which can make jokes humorous. As Berger (1999) states, “at one stroke, the punch line in jokes gives us the information which, if the joke is a good one, tells us about the world, strikes us

²⁸ Peirce uses the term “collateral observation” to describe the interpreter’s “previous acquaintance with what the sign denotes” (CP 8.179). Such an acquaintance is an essential component of sign interpretation, as the interpreter must be familiar with the qualities referred to as a “prerequisite for getting any idea signified by the sign” (p. 8.179).

as funny, and functions as a meta-communication (that tells us that what we have heard is “unreal”)” (p. 5).

But as I have tried to explain above, EWTs vary slightly from the traditional joke utterance, making it an interesting case to study. For one, EWTs derive their appreciation in part due to the perceived authenticity of content – where a joke being told may be clearly fictitious, the EWT’s “here and now” content contributes in part to its relevance to users, and therefore its humour as it relates to cultural understanding. Secondly, we can consider the joke not only from the perspective of the “strip” as an EWT, but of the joke occurring in and of itself; the examples from *Overheard in New York* shown above could be considered jokes before being shared online. The examples reflect a subtext suggesting that the people who are witnessed asking the questions fail to clue in to the cultural agendas influencing the activity in which they are involved, a form of incongruity which lends itself to the humour of the joke. The “here and now” of relevant cultural knowledge and occurrences are critical for the understanding of the EWT; at the same time, the EWT is humorous because (in the examples referenced) the person witnessed is not aware of that cultural agenda, making him/her the object of attention and jest. Ultimately, what is shown in the strips reflects not only the norms of social organization and the ways in which deviance attracts attention, but also the joy of exchanging signs in banter, and the relevance of semiosis in establishing the expectations that feed into our understanding of humour.

Taboo topics and erratic behaviour

Content can also be submitted to an EWT site when the activity or discussion witnessed may be deemed taboo or erratic; such a reaction falls more closely in line with the notion of social

or cultural deviancies, in which behaviour is remarkable for being unusual in contrast with what is regularly perceived as appropriate. Texts may elicit a negative or surprised reaction (either from the witness of the activity, someone on the receiving end of the offensive behaviour, or the ideal reader – though the latter may react with amusement given the nature of the experience); however, many of the taboo or erratic behaviours captured by the texts are harmless and may elicit a positive reaction from the reader. Consider the following examples:

Overheard in New York

Title: When Nurse Jackie Was a Kid

Father: I'm so stressed, it has been a long day.

10-year-old daughter: Dad, you need to go home and take a Xanax.

--6 Train

Not Always Right

Title: Reading is Addictive

[Bookstore](#) | Colorado, USA | [Children](#), [Parents](#)

(Two kids in the 10 to 12-year old range come to the register with 3 different marijuana-themed magazines.)

Me: “Um, I don’t think I can sell you those.”

Kids: “But our mom says it’s okay.”

Me: “Is she even in the store?”

(Their mother comes over a few minutes later and buys the magazines.)

Mother: “As long as they’re reading, right?”

Passive Aggressive Notes

Title: Happy Valentine’s Day!

xoxo, PAN

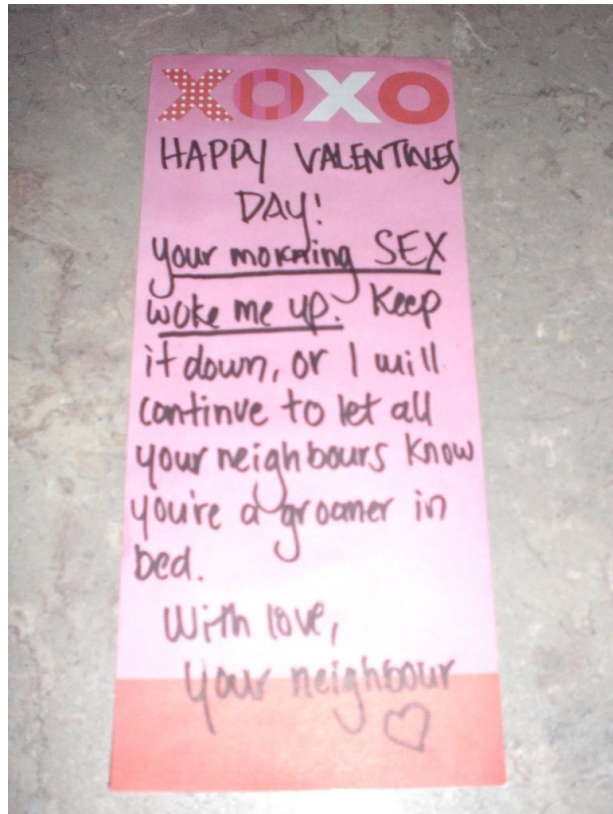


Fig 3.5

Overheard in New York

Title: ...And At Whom?

Crazy woman screaming out of window in Spanish accent: You motherfucking bitch! Hey, you motherfucking bitch. You motherfucker! You motherfucker!

Woman: Where is that elegant woman yelling?

--145th St & Lenox Ave

Overheard by: Gardiner Comfort

People of Walmart

Title: Curious George



Fig 3.6

Everyone loves the man in the yellow go-go boots!

Texas

Such texts often address topics that are often kept out of everyday conversation; examples include drug use (prescription and illegal), mental illness, sexual behaviours, bodily functions, and inappropriate jokes. In some cases, the taboo topic or behaviour is being discussed rather than being witnessed and captured for submission as it is enacted. In the cases of erratic behaviours, popular behaviours captured include frequent profanity, public drunkenness, screaming, or other behaviours which attract attention; typically, the behaviour itself is the primary act which attracts attention, rather than the content of the strip of activity.

Such texts are likely to draw a visitor's attention to topics which are almost universally understood, but which are not usually discussed in the public sphere. Across the

sites, the texts illustrate instances in which the taboo topic is publicly addressed, and the sites further address the issue in the online public sphere. In this sense, texts are at once remarkable and banal, as they take a somewhat relatable experience (albeit a noteworthy one) and present it in a way which is likely to capture the visitors' attention. If we compare EWTs to the previous example of stand-up comedy, it is worth noting that the events possess some indexical or factual elements that are bound to make them remarkable, tellable in an anecdote or joke later on. The witness of the event has the ability to pick on something utterly mundane and transform it into the very opposite, i.e., a good joke. However, in the example of the comedian, the focus is on the utterer, and not on the cuteness or potential ridicule of what was witnessed. The comedian also has the possible advantage of adding rhetorically to the witnessed event through hyperbole, taboo language, and so on. By contrast, EWTs instead present the humorous event without the gloss of the comic, lending to the sites an amateurish appeal.

What primarily draws attention about the EWT sites is the way in which the everyday phenomenon draws us and allows us to participate by presenting us with content to which we can relate via a user-friendly medium. The user will see the activities displayed as falling within the realm of everyday possibility, of verisimilitude, thus encouraging him to participate and consequently engage in neo-phatic communication. The indexicality of the phenomenon is not found exclusively in the call of attention, but also in the existential status of the genre of EWTs (which is shaped through iconicity as well, making it akin to stand up comedy but also significantly different from it); as the semiotic structure of the sites shares resemblances, expectations of the site include not only the concept of the "here and now"

from a purely indexical perspective, but also of the “here and now” conveyed by “strips” of authentic moments of time, captured by everyday witnesses in amateurish fashions. Such an authenticity contributes to the genre and differentiates EWT sites from possibly similar sites, such as those which gather jokes; such sites, while humorous and participatory, also exist as a sort of popular fiction. The indexical dimension of the EWT phenomenon has been understood through considering the actual appeal of the content, of its meaning or ‘immediate interpretant’ (CP 8.134; 8.315: “The Immediate Interpretant consists in the *Quality* of the Impression that a sign is fit to produce, not to any actual reaction”) as a means of determining how the content is designed to draw the type of attention desired (engagement with texts, evolving into an understanding of open participation), thus resulting in the achieved social function of the sites (communication which is unencumbered by the difficulty of determining a substantial topic of dialogue). In other words, the everyday and amateurish nature of the site allows the ideal reader to feel that s/he can participate, and as a result of his/her participation, neo-phatic communication is offered. Thus, the end goal of the object is met. However, this goal cannot be met with certainty without establishing a semiotic habit by which readers know to participate. The symbolic dimension of the sign will be explored to allow us to begin to understand the sign as it relates to eliciting a conventional response.

The symbolic dimension and the EWT sign structure

Peirce describes a symbol as being a sign which is a “law or regularity” (CP 2.293) which is “denoted by whatever set of indices may be in certain ways attached to it” and “is represented by an icon associated with it” (CP 2.295). The symbolic dimension of a sign

allows us to understand how a sign tends to achieve its desired end – a symbol corresponds to a purpose and how certain means are put toward achieving that purpose, based on the prediction (or dream) rooted in experience that such a means are effective. As Peirce says, “the being of a symbol consists in the real fact that something surely will be experienced if certain conditions be satisfied. Namely, it will influence the thought and conduct of its interpreter” (CP 4.446). As such, when certain conditions are enacted to achieve the desired influence, and those conditions prove effective, a habit is formed. Liszka (1996) puts it in clear terms when he states that “if the sign establishes its correlation with an object primarily through the [...] law-like presentational characteristics of a sign, then the sign becomes a symbol” (p. 37). A symbol embodies a correlation between the dream or imagination and the acts taken toward realizing that dream in the shape of habitual and intended reactions from those who experience the sign through its iconic and indexical properties.

It is important to note that a symbol derives meaning not from any natural or physical correlation to its object, as the icon or index might; instead, “[t]he being of a symbol consists in the real fact that something surely will be experienced if certain conditions be satisfied” (CP 4.447). Peirce explained this through drawing on the example of the word “man”, written as three “patches of ink” (letters) on a page: the word is interpreted properly based on the “working general rule that three such patches seen by a person who knows English will effect his conduct and thoughts according to a rule” (CP 4.447). When particular conditions are met and certain circumstances encountered, it is likely that this particular word – and any other, for that matter - will be correctly interpreted and this translation is responded to accordingly.

Thus, when the ideal reader engages with and consequently interprets EWT sites, their meaning would shape a particular means of responding to the site as a sign or representation. When faced with the possibility of experiencing EWT sites, when our attention is drawn to the sites and to their particular aspects, we tend to, as a general way of acting, engage with them as a suitable means for engaging in a kind of neo-phatic communication. Such is the intended outcome or purport of the EWT sign structure: just like a symbol is a general (habitual) way of thinking about something, as with reading the word “man”, we habitually engage with EWT sites because the conditions and circumstances have allowed for such a tendency. The result of the sign system, with the aforementioned conditions in place, is that our conduct is “rational and enables us to predict the future” (CP 4.448); in other words, we can reasonably assume that certain conditions lead to certain communicational behaviours through regular association, thus favouring the formation of a semiotic habit or tendency.

It is important to note that a symbol, on its own, asserts nothing; rather, “the significative value of a symbol consists in a regularity of association” (CP 4.500). The symbol acts through such a habit (CP 2.249), embodied in “replicas or instances of itself” (Liszka, 1996, p. 40) – in this case of this study, the actual websites themselves function as replicas.

Peirce describes symbols as being signs that grow (CP 2.302), and suggests that concepts such as ideas are in fact symbols. Symbols, he says, “come into being by development out of other signs, particularly from icons, or from mixed signs partaking of the nature of icons and symbols” (CP 2.302). As a symbol, “once in being, spreads among the peoples,” its meaning grows as it is used and experienced (CP 2.302). In the context of the

EWTs construed as symbols, as their sites (acting as replicas) expand in number, breadth of topic and popularity, the effectiveness of the sites as a means of communication continues to grow. Such an effect promotes the continuation of the sites and also prompts the development of further sites, and the experience of neo-phatic communication (the intended purpose of the experience) thrives. Such a result is the outcome of the various properties (or features) of the sites considered as a sign structure, as previously described: their tendencies in information architecture and content establish a means of interpreting them which encourages users to engage them in a determinate way as the most plausible one. The law-like effect of the sign is embodied and subsequently put into action.

We have previously established that the symbols develop out of usage with the purpose of causing a particular reaction from those encountering it; specifically, the symbol has developed out of our desire to communicate – as Peirce notes, “a purpose is an operative desire” (CP 1.205). However, one may note that it seems a stretch to immediately relate the experience at hand to this desire. Peirce explains that

a desire is always general; that is, it is always some kind of thing or event which is desired; at least, until the element of will, which is always exercised upon an individual object upon an individual occasion, becomes so predominant as to overrule the generalizing character of desire. Thus, desires create classes, and extremely broad classes. But desires become, in the pursuit of them, more specific (CP 1.205).

In considering ideal²⁹ user interaction with, and the interpretation of, EWT sites, we might then see that one desires communication, but without a specific or predetermined notion of how, or what about (though they are aware of what this type of communication is *not* about – controversial aspects of topics such as politics, sex, religion, and so on) – this is (in part)

²⁹ The phrase ‘ideal interaction’ relates to the concept of the implied reader presented earlier in the study (p. 8). In this study, the EWT sign structure is established to enable an ideal reading uncovered through analysis. The ideal user of EWT sites is one who interprets this sign structure in a way which achieves the intended purpose of the sign (neo-phatic communication).

what defines neo-phatic communication, in that the central aim of the communication is the act itself, rather than any more content-focused or practical aim. As desire is somewhat vague (CP 1.207), when the EWT site is presented, as are the circumstances (shaped by the sign) allowing for the achieved goal of communication, the desire is satisfied. The conditions need not be perfect; as we are not entirely sure of what we want given the generality of desire, it is relatively easy to compromise (CP 1.207).

Due to both the fact that symbols owe their power to regularity of use³⁰, and the relation between the purpose of a sign and the actions taken toward realization of that purpose, the symbolic dimension of the sign is invariably connected with the phenomenological category of Thirdness. Based on Peirce's conception of the symbol, as well as on our examination of the iconic and indexical dimensions of the sign, we are able to understand how the EWT structure functions as a sign which serves the sociosemiotic function of enabling neo-phatic communication. However, a more comprehensive understanding of the semiotic process behind the realization of this function is best achieved through a discussion of the phenomenological category of Thirdness in the triadic relationship. Such a discussion will allow us to review the full semiotic process at work in EWTs and also contrast this process with the Internet meme and with other related media phenomena, in order to determine where critical differences between these phenomena lie, and for what possible reasons.

³⁰ According to Joseph Ransdell, the nature of the symbolic sign reflects that "meaning is fixed by future confluence in interpretation, tending asymptotically toward agreement in all matters affected by such agreement or disagreement" (Andacht, 2003, ¶16). To make clear the distinction between the conventionalist perspective (in which sign relationships are based on "an act of will") and a Peircean perspective (in which "the social dimension is taken for granted"), one might better understand the effectiveness of the symbolic sign through the "regularity" of use, rather than conventional or "act of will" use (Andacht, 2003, ¶11-16).

Discussion: The Triadic Relationship and the EWT Sign Structure

Peirce used the cogent analogy of a cook baking a pie to describe the triadic relationship as it relates to achieving a purpose; we might relate this analogy to the semiosis at work in EWT sites in order to understand how their structure functions as a sign.

In his analogy (CP 1.341), Peirce establishes a scenario in which a cook's master desires an apple pie. The cook thus sets out to bake the pie, following the "collection of rules" in her recipe book. Having been directed to take apples, she recognizes apples based on their common qualities, and collects them from the cellar using "whatever bowl or basket comes handy, without caring what one, so long as it has a certain size, is clean, and has other qualities". Once selecting a particular bowl and selecting particular apples, she then intends to make a pie with them in order to realize her desire to serve an apple pie to her master. The analogy allows us to understand the triadic relationship by which a desire is connected with an object of experience.

Peirce notes that "we seldom, probably never, desire a single individual thing. What we want is something which shall produce a certain pleasure of a certain kind" (CP 1.341). In this analogy, we understand that what is desired is the realization of a certain quality – to have the "dream of eating an apple pie" realized (from the master's perspective), or that the dream of eating the pie is realized through connecting it with an "object of experience" (the master, from the cook's perspective) (CP 1.341). Consumption of the pie is a "single experience of pleasure," says Peirce, "but the pleasure itself is a quality" (CP 1.341); thus, it is critical to differentiate between the desire, which is a general quality and cannot be

reduced a singular occurrence, and the experience itself, which is a vehicle for experiencing what is desired.

Peirce notes that although an apple pie is desired, it is not any particular apple pie. The pie which is desired merely needs to be “a good apple pie, made of fresh apples, with a crust moderately light and somewhat short, neither too sweet nor too sour, etc.” (CP 1.341); while made for a particular occasion and with a particular goal in mind, the pie itself is a more general dream which can deliver an experience of pleasure, a desire to be achieved. The steps made toward the actualization of that dream are where particularities are enacted. As Peirce describes, the cook goes to the cellar in search of apples; knowing how apples look and what qualities they have, she selects those which are “uppermost and handiest”, knowing that “as long as they are sound and fine, any apples will do” (CP 1.341). In this case, Peirce says, the cook desires “something of a given quality; what she has to take is this or that particular apple”; the quality itself cannot be taken (CP 1.341). This same logic applies to selecting a bowl into which the apples can be placed; as mentioned, the cook takes what is convenient, without imagining a particular basket in the first place, but rather knowing what qualities it should possess in order to achieve her purpose. Peirce explains:

She pursues an idea or dream without any particular thisness or thatness [...] but to this dream she wishes to realize in connection with an object of experience [...] and since she has to act, and action only relates to this or that, she has to be perpetually making random selections, that is, taking whatever comes handiest (CP 1.341).

Thus, we see the universal categories of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness, which are at the basis of all sign activity, in play: Firstness is found in that quality which is desired, a possibility; Secondness relates to the concrete actions taken to achieve a particular experience of desire; and Thirdness “brings [experience or] information into the mind, or

determines the idea and gives it body” – it is the act of cognition (CP 1.537). As Peirce explains more simply, the dream itself is the first; the “object of experience as a reality is a second. But the desire in seeking to attach the one to the other is a third, or medium” (CP 1.342).

Through his analogy of the cook preparing the apple pie, we can understand how the three phenomenological or phaneroscopic categories (CP 8.305) of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness interact logically in a triadic relationship, by which actions are taken to achieve a particular purpose which is, however, inseparable from fantasy or dream activity and desire as a general way of acting about the world. Having outlined this relationship, we will now consider each of these elements individually in the context of the present study.

Firstness

The desire sought through EWT sites is a kind of communication – specifically, neo-phatic communication, which arguably demands less from individuals than more substantial acts of communication: neo-phatic communication is non-dialogic, voluntary, and facilitated by technologies that only partially reflect the principles of interactivity that have made popular other manifestations of Web 2.0 technology.

The reason that this study argues that specifically neo-phatic communication is desired is based on not only the popularity of EWT sites (see *Appendix A: Rising Popularity of E-Relevant Web Texts*), but also the identifiable and shared qualities of EWT sites which shape the way that the phenomenon is likely to be interpreted, as well as the fact that many alternatives for substantial communication exist. Such alternatives clearly do not satisfy

what is desired, as otherwise we would not recognize such a phenomenon of the neo-phatic as we have.

As revealed in our examination of the iconic dimension of the EWT as a sign, the sites share many qualities which are designed to afford or facilitate neo-phatic, rather than substantial, communication: comments are unthreaded, static usernames and profiles typically do not exist, and so on. The topics on which the sites are based, according to both the iconic and indexical properties of the phenomenon, are relatable, thus designed in such a way that anyone would both understand the content and feel encouraged to participate. The result is that only a particular type of communication is enabled by the sign structure: communication which is brief (reduced to basic “strips” of activity), banal, and does not even encourage dialogue, which is what the traditional phatic function of communication is all about. Such is the purport of neo-phatic communication.

It is clear that neo-phatic communication is sought out; unlike the traditional concept of phatic communication, which often takes place when people find themselves in uncomfortable interpersonal circumstances in which they communicate to put themselves more at ease, users of EWT sites put themselves into a context which enables/requires neo-phatic communication. In fact, users of EWT sites, have their expectations shaped by the characteristics of the EWT genre, so they are mandated by the genre of these websites to reject not only the idea of *not* communicating, but also the possibility of communicating substantially. Forums exist for discussion on hundreds of subjects, as do sites such as Reddit, which host multiple forums as sub-reddits; creating a blog for writing and discussing entries has been rendered simple by platforms such as Blogspot or Wordpress; social media sites such as Facebook can also be used, as desired, for dialogic purposes. Opportunities for in-

depth communication abound; however, those who engage in EWT sites do so because of a specific desire for a certain *type* of communication, one which has a lower barrier of entry and is less demanding than others.

It is also worth contrasting the EWTs ‘cousin’, the Internet meme, to the semiotic structure of EWT sites. One key difference between the Internet meme and the EWT is that EWTs have dedicated websites, resulting in a collection of related strips of activity, and providing for users a filter of a variety of web texts to focus on particular banal events. What this suggests is, despite the ‘lightweight kind’ of communication afforded by EWT sites, there is a difference to users between simply creating and dispersing memes through social media or forums such as Reddit or 4chan, and submitting them for publication to an EWT site. The differences between the affordances of Internet memes and the affordances of EWT sites reflect that users engage with EWT sites due to a desire for a more structured, and perhaps more user-friendly, means of experiencing similar types of content; this concept is explored in the subsequent section, which relates to the concrete elements of the sign.

Ultimately, the sign composition of EWT sites affords users a distinctive type of desired communication: one which is relatable based on its content themes, amateurish texts and the encouragement to submit content through a user-friendly mechanism; and one which allows readers to focus specifically on the light content and not on potential dialogue that may have arisen from such content.

Secondness

Just as the cook must take concrete steps toward achieving the desired purpose of the apple pie, so users of EWT sites must visit and navigate the websites themselves. As Peirce

explains, “the second is an existent thing without any mode of being less than existence, but determined by that first” (CP 1.536); in other words, the human desire for neo-phatic communication guides people to visit the website, and Secondness is found in the identifiable “here and now” aspects of their actions and with what they engage.

As such, Secondness relates mostly to indexicality, which is the means by which a sign forces itself upon our attention. As mentioned in the semiotic analysis, the content is generally relatable, being situated in banal environments or contexts and often to do with interpersonal interactions which spur a particular reaction from witnesses or participants.

In contrast with the Internet meme, EWT sites seem to more uniquely focus on this form of content, indicating a desire to communicate about what is banal and relatable. A meme may relate to behavioural oddities in the same way as an EWT might; for example, one might relate to banal ideas shared through a Good Guy Greg or Annoying Facebook Girl meme. However, the structure of EWT sites is different from that of memes in several key ways:

- A dedicated website provides structure to the strips of activity, whereas memes, even when housed in a common area, are often unstructured. Such a structuring serves to provide context for EWTs, whose unspoken rules may be less identifiable than Internet memes. Often, Internet memes make use of the same repetitive images and arrangements; an Advice Animal may be identified from the colourful background and animal head, or a Scumbag Steve meme³¹ may be identified by use of the hat worn by the original Steve. By contrast, EWTs consist of “strips of activity” which have been drawn from witnessed events and are typically unmodified, existing as images or text excerpts with minimal contextualization.

³¹ See <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/scumbag-steve>.

The end result is that while Scumbag Steve's hat may be recognized anywhere, and the context of the meme communicated by the mere presence of the hat, EWTs have less inherent structure. Thus, the dedicated websites serve to shape the semiotic process at work by embodying, more or less, such a structure. In Goffman's (1974) terms, the notion of "keying" might apply in this instance: the "key" refers to a "set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else" (pp. 43-44). Goffman's full definition of keying indicates that those involved "are meant to know and to openly acknowledge" that such a transformation is undertaken, yet it may "only slightly alter the activity" taking place (p. 45); furthermore, a keying has set parameters indicating its beginning and end (p. 45). The keying surrounding Internet memes and EWTs is significantly different: for the former, the particular "meme" is an item created specifically for transformation by individuals, yet the nature of the meme rarely escapes its original intention, which is its very memetic circulation. In the case of EWTs, a social event is witnessed – one which, as a primary framework, does not exist with the intention of circulating online – and then captured (thus keyed by an observer who decides to use the event for a purpose outside of its intention) and shared online, having been removed from its original essence. The Internet meme, by nature, maintains its context, whereas EWTs rely on the structure of their respective websites to create a new framework for the strips of activity which have been isolated from their actual social event and keyed for a new purpose.

- EWT sites focus on one specific, banal activity that typical users can relate to, given the content themes found across EWT sites. As mentioned, a meme may also relate to an understood, banal situation, but memes are typically dispersed. Furthermore, EWT sites are

often more focused and more niche-like than memes. One might look at the website *Clients From Hell* and consider it as a website of Scumbag Steve scenarios, but all relating to dealing with clients in a particular field of work. If one goes browsing for memes online, one will have access to a plethora of typically disorganized memes relating to a variety of topics, or perhaps no real topic at all. By contrast, EWT sites offer a different structure in which even the URL of the website offers a sort of promise that a very particular banal circumstance will be offered/exhibited. Other mechanisms for exploring banal circumstances, such as the forums and other media previously mentioned, clearly do not allow for the particular type of communication desired. Thus, the EWT site provides a unique mechanism by which neo-phatic communication can flourish, perhaps providing a sort of medium ground between free-floating Internet memes and the more dialogic forums.

- EWT sites also have easily identifiable means of encouraging participation by submitting a similar strip of activity. Virtually all EWT sites will have a readily apparent link for submitting content. Such an encouragement makes the EWT media phenomenon more participative than Internet memes. The latter are often circulated via social media or through forums; as a result, readers may not know from where memes originate, or may face the perceived burden of registering for a website and creating a user profile in order to participate. The perceived barrier for EWTs is a lower one, in which one must merely be able to capture a strip of activity and send it to the website (often via e-mail account, which is more common to possess than an account on a specific website) from a link on its front page – no meme generator is required.

Based on these noteworthy aspects, in addition to those identified in the semiotic analysis, we are able to understand that the identifiable qualities of EWT sites offer what is required for a desire for neo-phatic communication. In the particular actions afforded by the sites, which have been shaped by our desire for a unique form of communication, we can take action toward achieving this purpose.

However, this action alone does not complete the process by which our desires are met and the social function of the websites realized. As Peirce indicates, it is impossible for mere action or mere desire to go unaccompanied by Thirdness in a sign phenomenon (CP 5.90), which he defines as “the character of an object which embodies Betweenness or Mediation in its simplest and most rudimentary form” (CP 5.104).

Thirdness

Peirce emphasizes that Thirdness, as a sort of law, is embodied in the determination of a habit (CP 1.536). It determines Secondness, which, as concrete activity, could be taken as “law as an active force” (CP 1.337); however, “order and legislation” are an element of Thirdness that dictate conduct and develop a habit. Thirdness (our desire) acts as the sort of mediator between the relationship of Firstness (our “dream” or fantasy involving a neo-phatic kind of communication) and Secondness (the concrete actions of visiting/participating in EWT sites), which determines the idea that such aspects should be connected in the achievement of our desire, and that such a connection is logical.

The function of a habit is this logical connection, but as Peirce (CP 1.538) stresses, the operative state of Thirdness is one of which we are not aware, despite our involvement. Rather, in instigating the actions of Secondness, we might take the actions as fairly natural or

unprompted, without consideration of the cognitive judgment which takes place in the process (CP 1.538). “The third brings about a Secondness,” says Peirce, “but does not regard that Secondness as anything more than a fact” (CP 1.538). Hence, our perceptions or actions are habitual – instigated without being aware of thought, although thought occurs- and over time and regular application, an experience becomes one which is reasonable (i.e. common sense) within our minds (CP 1.538). This is how we might understand a habit – as we experience something over time, Thirdness (the logical mediation which shapes a cognitive connection between the first and second) shapes a perception of what is reasonable, a “Reasonableness to which we can train our own reason to conform more and more” (CP 5.160). We ultimately anticipate a particular experience, which satisfies a particular purpose – but the logical processes which shape and mediate our understanding are at work without our recognition. As the cook goes to work in preparing an apple pie, she is able to select apples because she has frequently seen “things which were called apples, and has noticed their common quality”; she desires that she acquires something which has those qualities, and takes concrete action to take those things which embody them (CP 1.341). However, the cook does not recognize that she has engaged in a process of judgment to identify and select apples based on the desire to acquire things with particular qualities; rather, this process is part of her common sense attitude towards the world. “[The dream itself] is whatever it pleases,” says Peirce, referring to Firstness. “The object of experience as a reality is a second. But the desire in seeking to attach the one to the other is a third, or medium” (CP 1.342). In other words, as the cook engages in the aforementioned process, Thirdness is that established habit or “general rule” which will tend to be followed, by virtue of processes of signification that “render inefficient relations efficient” (CP 8.332). It is a law which is

reflected as a habit in the cook's ability to take seemingly automatic or routine actions to achieve her intention, a process which is normal for activities which have become second nature to us. Of course, such ignorance is not meant as a criticism of the users, but is rather part of all our dealings with semiotic phenomena. To be able to ignore the underlying mechanism of such phenomena allows competent semiotic agents to engage in regular behaviour without the burden of too much self-consciousness. To not take note of the interpretive processes at play allows us to be efficient and to function 'normally' as competent dwellers of a certain social realm.

In the context of this study, then, we understand that the concrete actions that could be taken in the use of EWT sites are shaped by Thirdness, which forms the idea that if we engage in such sites, we will tend to achieve our desire for neo-phatic communication. The user of the sites can approach this process with only a basic level of awareness proper to most communicative acts, making actions which are commonsensical; like the cook selecting apples, the actions taken may be "perpetually random," (CP 1.341), carried out based only on what presents itself as available. Thus, a habit is formed, as we continually experience the phenomenon and grow to expect a particular result, taking it as an instance of our common sense. The semiotic structure of EWT sites determines the possibility of an experience of neo-phatic communication for their users, one which is based on the qualities presented in a concrete/indexical context or situation. To their users, the experience offered may be one which is seemingly a light-hearted bit of fun.

Conclusion

This study set out to understand the social function of EWT sites, in consideration of the fact that the potential experience for which these sites were designed has little perceived

practicality but persists as a phenomenon. I began with a brief description of the phenomenon, including one of its most noteworthy aspects: despite the fact that the content included in the websites is largely banal in scope, the individual strips of activity captured within the texts were deemed, in some way, to be remarkable.

Based on this intriguing detail, I proceeded to establish a theoretical framework which would best allow for a solid analytical foundation on which to conduct a semiotic analysis of the sign structure of EWT sites. I first emphasized the value of semiotic as a point of view as opposed to a method, and proceeded to describe the relevant work of Peirce and Goffman in order to construct a means of understanding the phenomenon through a socio-semiotic lens. In particular, the theoretical framework was designed to lead the thesis into an analysis by which a) elements of the EWT construed as a sign could be studied to describe the social function of the sites, and b) social deviance was confirmed as a concept which renders social events remarkable, on account of society's chronic awareness and evaluation of normalcy. The sociosemiotic aspect of this framework was then reinforced with an explanation of neo-phatic communication as a variation of the more traditional concept of phatic communication developed by Malinowski (1923) (and later Jakobson (1960). Neo-phatic communication was revealed as being a particular form of communication in which efforts and importance are focused on the openness of lines of communication, rather than on any informational relevance of the message being communicated.

As the EWT phenomenon was one identified within this study, the literature review sought to develop an understanding of the phenomenon by reviewing literature on a phenomenon which is akin to the EWT, known as the Internet meme. Literature sought to

share the history of the concept of the Meme, a term coined by Dawkins (1989) in reference to a unit of culture with high transmissibility. From there, the literature review examined how the meme was carried over to the concept of the Internet meme – a unit, such as a particular image with text -- which is transformed by Internet users and carries certain contexts and internal rules. The Internet meme was then compared to the EWT (the latter of which has a dedicated website, a key difference between the two phenomena) and the review delved into confirming the relation between the Internet meme and semiotics. One essential link between the two concepts was that of the meme and the replica, in that a meme carries with it – at once shaped by, and continuing to shape – particular rules, just as a replica would stand as an embodiment of a legisign. This link was deemed transferrable to EWTs and their websites, which display law-like tendencies which serve to shape the interpretation of the EWT sign structure.

Due to the identifiable similarities in Peircean semiotic and on account of the relevance of Peircean semiotic to consider EWTs as sign manifestations, the subsequent semiotic analysis served to look at the EWTs through their iconic, indexical and symbolic properties. While the semiosis at work in these websites cannot be adequately understood by absolutely separating the signs' qualities into these groups and considering each in isolation, this form of analysis was undertaken to understand the EWT as a sign from multiple perspectives. This approach ensured that various elements of this potential communicational experience were explored with appropriate detail.

In this analysis, the iconic dimension of the EWT was revealed as the way in which the EWT's semiotic structure manifested itself presentationally across sites, due to the tendencies that work logically across the sites. Such similarities included information

architectures which failed to enable in-depth dialogue or user profiles/identities; a focus on specific, banal topics; and content which is user-generated and original. Considering the importance of these similarities in defining the “genre” of EWT sites and thus the plausible expectations of users when it comes to experiencing the sites, aspects of the iconic dimension of the sign were determined to function as iconic legisigns – signs which have as their chief value an ordering power. The tendencies shared across sites were determined to be a key element in shaping the way the sites could be interpreted, as they enable the formation of certain expectations and uses among participants.

The indexical analysis of the EWTs from a textual standpoint was grounded on the understanding that the sites were able to catch our attention, and also to convey a sense of authenticity (being the result of a real act of witnessing and capturing the strip shown) and of light-hearted fun; as the texts can act as a force upon our senses and our cognition so as to elicit a particular response, the indexical analysis sought to understand *what* about these texts, construed as signs, particularly catches the visitors/readers’ attention. Here, the analytical model of Goffman (1974) was applied to argue that social actions which deviate from our sense of what is socially appropriate catch our attention because they defer from the norm; using his concept of “strips of activity” and applying them to EWTs, we sought to look at the texts of the websites to determine what social deviances were captured. What was discovered is that the vast majority of the strips could fall under one of four broad themes: harmless incompetence (focused on the inoffensive stupidity of the person witnessed in the strip, which could be deemed either cute or at worst slightly frustrating); rooted in cultural knowledge (either based on a sub-culture or on ethnic group); taboo behaviour (such as discrimination, illegal activity or merely unusual activity – strips of taboo behaviour often

were not offensive), or erratic behaviour (which might catch the witness' attention for simpler reasons than the previous themes – for example, a loud speaking voice or gesticulations). The prime value of content was in its relatability in content and its user-friendly medium of transmission: content was rooted in environments and contexts which are almost universally experienced in everyday life, or of which everyone would at least be aware. Normal environments (on the bus, at the grocery store) or contexts (attempting to order a coffee at a specialty shop) essentially reflect a phenomenon in which a user might feel encouraged to participate, as seemingly anyone might be able to witness such an experience, capture it via a cell phone photo or notebook transcription, and send it into a site for submission. As a result, the textuality of the sites is one which is defined by the ease and openness of transmission, with content that (being banal and light-hearted) enables neo-phatic communication.

Analysis of the symbolic dimension of the EWT structure was based on the understanding that symbols develop out of usage with the purpose of causing a certain predictable, regular interpretative reaction from those encountering it. In the case of the phenomenon under study, the symbol has developed out of our desire to communicate. It was noted that desires are always general, held without a concrete notion of exactly how they may be realized – in fact, in our desire for communication we do not even have a concrete interest in any particular topic of communication, except that it be trivial, mundane, light, etc, making it thus a case of 'neo-phatic communication'.

Given the close logical relation between symbols and Thirdness, the study led into a discussion of the triadic semiotic relationship, considering each element in relation to the phenomenon and also allowing for a comparison between the distinctive characteristics of

the Internet meme and those of EWT sites. In this discussion, Firstness was explored as our dream-like or fantasy component of the human desire for neo-phatic communication. It was argued that the identifiable and shared qualities of EWT sites reveal from a qualitative perspective a desire for a type of communication which is not satisfied through other media or experiences. While the experience of Internet memes or social media may allow for some aspects, to a lesser degree, of neo-phatic communication, the properties of EWT sites were determined to be specific. Relatable content, a user-friendly medium of transmission, amateurism, emphasis on participation and almost inexistent dialogue as a follow-up (e.g. YouTube comments or video-responses) were unique to the experience under study.

The discussion of Secondness – the “here and now” aspects of the sites which attract attention– revealed that the concrete aspects of the EWT sign structure uniquely afford the user the actual opportunity for neo-phatic communication, and differ significantly from the affordances of Internet meme in several ways. The key difference between memes and EWTs – the existence of dedicated websites – allows for: the provision of structure and context to EWTs in a way which does not materialize for memes; a focus on one banal activity, often a niche one, making EWT content more focused and this more relatable and user-friendly; the easy submission of content, as opposed to memes, which often “float” in cyberspace. This contrast establishes the structure of EWT sites as different from similar experiences in facilitating neo-phatic communication.

Finally, Thirdness was discussed as the logical mediation between Firstness and Secondness: it is the general goal or purport of what is expected to be accomplished by the achievement of a desire through the concrete actions taken in order to experience the phenomenon. While the working of Thirdness was not unique to the phenomenon under

study, this element of the discussion was critical for making clear the semiotic process through which a habit of this particular kind (the potential use of EWTs) is formed. It was argued that EWT sites are visited because, based on the qualities identified through visiting them, they are designed so as to allow people to achieve their desire for neo-phatic communication; as the websites continue to deliver on this process, the ways in which visitors engage in the experience (through visiting desired sites, reading, and submitting) are habitually formed. There is an amount of user awareness of EWT sites and their use, as EWT sites could be identified as a “genre” of site; Fiske (1988) defines “genre” as culturally-understood boundaries which organize textual relations. EWT sites could be seen as belonging to a genre (identifiable by their shared iconic properties, such as user-generated authentic content and a “hipster” aesthetic), a schematic conception which manages expectations and guides use of the sites.

In considering the breadth of user-generated content found online for a variety of social, informational, and other functions, much remains to be understood about the ways in which members of society leverage the opportunities provided by the Internet as a communication tool. Not only do EWTs and their sites continue to evolve as a phenomenon, but means of sharing seemingly banal content – as well as the sort of banal content deemed e-relevant – are expanding. This study has provided just one glimpse into the ways in which, as a society, we learn more about ourselves and others through the new media technologies.

It is hoped that the semiotic analysis undertaken in this study has provided insight into related phenomena, such as memes, as well as generally serve as one example of how Peircean semiotic might be applied to online activity. At its core, this study aimed to

illustrate how user-generated content with minimal face value might be under-valued as a cultural artefact, although this diminutive or meaningless reputation is perhaps is a key to its current success.

In the interests of the collective endeavour of research done in communication science, it is worthwhile to consider the possible contribution made by this study, more specifically to the field of media studies. For one, it is hoped that this study has served the purpose of developing a socio-semiotic analytical framework which may be used for study into other areas of popular culture/media, such as memes, YouTube videos, social media interactions, and so on. As Internet technologies continue to evolve at a fast pace, such a framework may provide a method to consider the affordances of digital social spaces and how the technologies are leveraged in everyday circumstances.

Secondly, relevant linkages might be made between the insights gathered here and other theories of communication which were outside of the scope of study mostly for practical purposes. For example, if it had used functionalist theory, this research could have offered insight into the new interactions between media and consumer and such a social arrangement may respond, with mutual benefit, to the needs of social organization and individuals. As McQuail (2005) explains, functionalism sees media as (to some extent) essential to the “‘normal’ operation of any social system”, contributing to its overall cohesion. Several functions of communication have been supposed, ranging from Lasswell’s (1948) ideas of surveillance and cultural transmission to Wright’s (1960) suggestions of relaxation and reward (McQuail, 2005, p. 97). However, McQuail notes that ‘normality’ it itself problematic (p. 556), posing a limitation for a theory which supposes that a “normal”

society exists. This limitation of functional analysis to address times of social change is noteworthy given the context of this study, when more traditional practices of mass media have ceded somewhat to amateur creation and distribution of content via the Internet. Given that functionalist theory “depicts media as essentially self-directing and self-correcting” (McQuail, 2005, p. 97), several questions can be raised by considering this perspective: What socio-cultural changes or needs might have brought about EWT sites and their kin (the Internet meme, YouTube videos, and so on)? What aspects of mass media were dissatisfactory? Alternatively, should we assume that dissatisfaction is the root of these new means of communication, or could we consider that EWTs and other Web 2.0 communications might have gained popularity primarily because the technology became available? Functionalist theory may offer a perspective which situates the EWT phenomenon within the changes occurring in the media environment, since the creation of the World Wide Web, providing a holistic view of the social and technological circumstances which might have influenced neo-phatic communication.

Alternatively but complementarily, this research may benefit those interested in the uses and gratifications theory through its claim that niche amateur content such as EWTs fulfil unique needs which correlate to the rise of Web 2.0, and thus it could offer insight into how nuanced forms of communication such as neo-phatic communication might offer media users cultural control and personal satisfaction. Uses and gratifications theory, as expounded by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) builds upon the assumption that people select the medium that best fulfils their needs (as cited in Sepp, Liljander and Gummerus, 2011, p. 1481). Many studies have adopted uses and gratifications theory in an attempt to develop an understanding of Internet use. For example, Leung (2009) developed a framework of

motivations for producers of online user-generated content which included “recognition needs” (establishing identity, gaining respect, etc.), “cognitive needs” (gaining knowledge, being aware of current events, etc.), “social needs” (self-expression, sharing one’s situation with friends, etc.), and “entertainment needs” (passing time, curiosity, etc.). Leung found that depending on the activity, users were seeking particular gratifications; for example, blogging and posting to YouTube were more associated with recognition needs than other online activities, hinting at the complexity of the Internet as an environment for communication and personal satisfaction. Quen-Haase and Young (2010) conducted public opinion research which identified the perceived gratifications of Facebook as “passtime, affection, fashion, [to] share problems, sociability, and social information” (p. 350). In reviewing uses and gratifications studies in Internet usage, LaRose, Mastro and Eastin (2001) note that the iconic theory of Katz, Blulmer and Gurevitch (1974) has been recently revitalized to “stress comparisons between the gratifications sought from a medium with gratifications obtained”, as “gratifications sought do not in themselves predict media behaviour” (p. 396). Instead, by looking at media use as an “iterative” process by which “initial expectations” of media use are “modified through observations of the gratifications actually obtained” (which then influences further expectations and uses of the medium), the value of uses and gratifications theory is increased (p. 396). Such a development of this theory, as applied to Internet communications, would be particularly beneficial when taking into account the high number of media available for horizontal communication (ranging from the circulation of a meme on Reddit to a sending a Facebook message). Considering the subject of this study from a uses and gratifications perspective may provide insight into

why EWT sites and similar phenomena are adopted as a means of communication, in a way which complements the socio-semiotic analysis conducted.

Ideally, this research will contribute to a cross-section of communication research areas and provide further understanding into the sociotechnical environment in which we now live.

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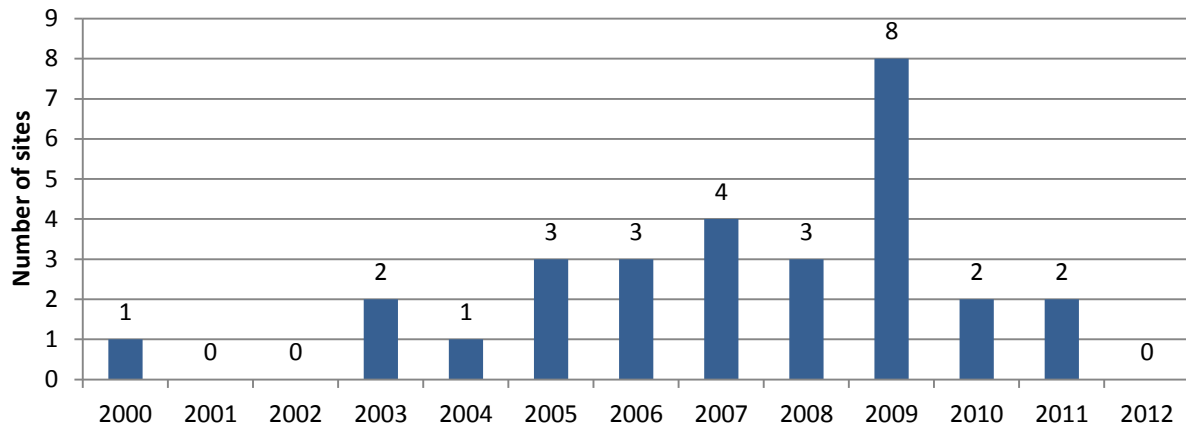
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Appendix A: Rising Popularity of E-Relevant Web Texts

This timeline is based on the time in which the domain name was registered, as this is the most consistent objective measure of when these websites took shape. Information on when the domain was created was obtained through Better WHOIS, a website which provides domain-related information.

Number EWT sites (domains created), by year





EWT sites created, by year

It is important to note that sites created in 2009 need significant time to be developed and generate a following; thus, a 2009 site may be created, launch quickly, and gain immediate popularity, or 1-2 years may be required to achieve recognition. However, it is worth noting that the sites appear to be in decline, an occurrence which may be worthy of further study.

2000	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Phoons	Over-heard in New York; Over-heard at the Office	Post Secret	Stuff on My Cat; Apostrophe Abuse	Over-heard at the Beach; Stuff on My Mutt; Hot Chicks with Douchebags	I Can Has Cheez-burger; I Has a Hot Dog; Passive-Aggressive Notes; Not Always Right	My Mom is a Fob; My Dad is a Fob; We Have Lasers	People of Walmart; Clients From Hell; Texts From Last Night; Unnecessary Quotes; Awkward Family Photos; F My Life; This is Photobomb; My Parents Were Awesome	Photo-shop Disasters; Shit My Kids Ruined	Look at my Fucking Red Trousers! Awkward Transit

Appendix B: Breakdown of EWT Site Collection

 Sites used for analysis

 Sites referenced

No.	Site name and URL:	Found via:	Comments:
1	People of Walmart www.peopleofwalmart.com	Pre-existing knowledge	People of Walmart has grown very popular, but has also reduced the amount of “regular” posts with supplementary content and increased commentary. To accommodate the value of the concept of the site while reflecting its origins, and ensuring that content analysed is of high quality, the first six months of People of Walmart content was used (August 2009 to January 2010).
2	I Can Has Cheezburger www.icanhascheezburger.com	Pre-existing knowledge	Content-wise, has a relatively wide reach, rather than being concentrated into one area. The UGC nature of the site is increasingly questionable, as some photos are of stock quality and/or of exotic/non-domesticated animals. Only some entries are suggestive of the everyday.
3	I Has a Hot Dog (subsidiary of above - http://dogs.icanhascheezburger.com/) or www.ihasahotdog.com	Alexa Related Links (I Can Has Cheezburger)	The fact that this site is less popular than the one for cats is likely the reason that its content seems more dog-focused, and submissions look to be more genuinely UGC. However, like with the cat site, this site isn’t necessarily focused on a menial event.
4	Overheard in New York www.overheardinnewyork.com	Pre-existing knowledge	This site may be useful for several reasons: first, it is truly focused on everyday basic interactions (on the street corner, on the subway, and so on). Second, its longevity has made it a paradigmatic, iconic example of an EWT site. Third, it’s quite content-rich: there are a range of gestures, “characters”, and situations in which interactions occur. There is added value in considering the “overheard by” feature and the names that submitters select for themselves.
5	Overheard in the Office http://overheardintheoffice.com/	Alexa Related Links (Overheard in New York)	The content is generally less interesting and diverse than that in Overheard in New York.
6	Overheard at the Beach http://www.overheardatthebeach.com/	Alexa Related Links (Overheard in New York)	The content is generally less interesting and diverse than that in Overheard in New York.
7	My Mom is a Fob www.mymomisafob.com	Pre-existing knowledge	My Mom is a Fob includes a variety of submissions (photos, excerpts from text messages and e-mails, dialogue), making it data-rich. The interactions are amusing and relatable to a wide audience, and the concept deals with the banal. The site is also very popular, though not frequently updated.
8	My Dad is a Fob http://mydadisafob.com/	Alexa Related Links (My Mom)	This site is less frequently updated than the former, and the content is somewhat redundant.

		is a Fob)	
9	Photoshop Disasters http://www.psdisasters.com/	Pre-existing knowledge	The concept of PS Disasters may stray too far from the concept of an everyday/menial occurrence. There is also more emphasis on comments/captions in the submissions.
10	Clients From Hell www.clientsfromhell.net	Pre-existing knowledge	Clients From Hell is interesting in that its content is extremely menial and relatable to those in the field; however, these types of interactions could be better included by perhaps using a wider-reaching site, such as Not Always Right.
11	Look at my Fucking Red Trousers! http://lookatmyfuckingredtrousers.blogspot.ca/	Pre-existing knowledge	While undeniably menial, this site generally relies on its captions/commentary from the moderator, making it too blog-like.
12	Texts From Last Night www.textsfromlastnight.com	Pre-existing knowledge	Texts from Last Night is well-known and has many submissions to draw from in data analysis; however, it may be too wide-reaching. It does not particularly fall into the idea of a specific, menial aspect of daily life because texts often aren't contextualized.
13	Stuff on my Cat www.stuffonmycat.com	Pre-existing knowledge	Stuff on my Cat is less popular than I Can Has Cheezburger, meaning that content is more likely to be submitted by users. However, the submissions may have been created specifically for the site (unlike in other sites, such as Unnecessary Quotes, where users clearly came across instances of errant behaviour).
14	Stuff on my Mutt http://stuffonmymutt.com/	Alexa Related Links (Stuff on my Cat)	The value of this site is already reflected in Stuff on my Cat.
15	Passive-Aggressive Notes	Pre-existing knowledge	Passive Aggressive Notes offers a rich concept for consideration, in that many individuals have left or read similar notes – it is a fairly banal, yet amusing, aspect of daily life (at home, in the office, and elsewhere, as the content suggests). The site is updated frequently, with a variety of submissions, and the likelihood that content is UGC is high (though we might consider the possibility of faked notes).
16	Apostrophe Abuse http://www.apostropheabuse.com/	Alexa Related Links (Passive-Aggressive Notes)	Both Apostrophe Abuse and Unnecessary Quotes are equally valuable, and either could be used. They are reasonably well-updated, and both fit within a menial/everyday occurrence context. Likelihood of UGC is high and both have a particular cuteness about them. However, Unnecessary Quotes is more popular, and therefore more likely to provide more (and higher quality) data overall.
17	Unnecessary Quotes www.unnecessaryquotes.com	Pre-existing knowledge	
18	Awkward Family Photos www.awkwardfamilyphotos.com	Pre-existing knowledge	While this site is fairly well-known, the likelihood that content is derived from users' own encounters is extremely unlikely.
19	Not Always Right	Pre-existing	Not Always Right covers a wide range of customer

	http://www.notalwaysright.com/	knowledge	service experiences. Many gestures are included, and posts are more anonymous and less discussed than on other sites. The idea of the locations posted (“Bakery”, “Gas Station”, etc) may be an interesting aspect to include (may be complemented by Overheard in New York).
20	Shit My Kids Ruined http://www.shitmykidsruined.com/	Alexa Topsites: Recreation > Humor	This site is not frequently updated, and often, the story cannot be told without the story submitted by the creator. However, likelihood of UGC is high.
21	F My Life http://www.fmylife.com/	Pre-existing knowledge	Like Texts from Last Night, F My Life does not particularly fall into the idea of a specific, menial aspect of daily life because texts often aren’t contextualized and can be wide-ranging.
22	Phoons http://phoons.com/	Alexa Topsites: Recreation > Humor	This website is certainly unique, and is appealing in the sense that it is very accessible (anyone can participate). However, data is not very rich. As a concept it is interesting, but not useful for data collection.
23	Post Secret http://www.postsecret.com/	Pre-existing knowledge	PostSecret is very popular, and clearly user content populated. However, it lacks a menial cuteness or specificity of topic and/or location, even while relatable.
24	Awkward Transit http://awkwardtransit.com/	More Of It – Sites like People of Walmart	While the subway posts seem promising, the content is somewhat too wide-ranging, and the inclusion of some submissions on the site is unclear. This site generally lacks the focus/specificity of its peers.
25	Straight Cash Homey http://straightcashhomey.net/	More Of It – Sites like People of Walmart	“Straight Cash Homey” does not reflect the content in a way typical of EWT sites. However, the likelihood of UGC is high, and the concept is very banal. It is almost like an even more specific version of People of Walmart, without being so popular that its content has been overshadowed.
26	This is Photobomb www.thisisphotobomb.com (Note: re-routes to http://thisisphotobomb.memebase.com/)	More Of It – Sites like Awkward Family Photos	Likelihood of the content coming directly from those present in/taking the photos is unlikely.
27	Hot Chicks with Douchebags http://hotchickswithdouchebags.com/	More Of It – Sites like Awkward Family Photos	This may be worthy of mentioning as an example of a title which perfectly reflects content. However, like other examples, the degree of commentary and moderator integration makes this site more akin to a blog than a UGC site.
28	We Have Lasers http://www.laserportraits.net/	More Of It – Sites like Awkward Family Photos	We Have Lasers isn’t ideally titled, but perfectly encapsulates the idea of cutesy, everyday content. The generation engaged in EWT sites is very familiar with the laser backdrops of school portraits.
29	My Parents Were Awesome http://myparentswereawesome.tumblr.com/	More Of It – Sites like Awkward Family Photos	While well-titled and UGC, the content does not reflect a particular menial aspect of daily life as well as other sites have managed to.