

The Silenced Minority - How Integrated Audiences Limit Participation Across Platforms

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To protect the identity of participants - all names of people, places, institutions and events have been changed. When discussing content related to Wikipedia a second layer of confidentiality has been applied. If I spoke about a specific Wikipedia page during an interview, I modified the name of the page as well as their usernames. After you finish this dissertation, you'll know why that was important.

Introduction

If you Google “Sojourner Street”¹ you will see immense periodical coverage detailing the integral role she played in the commemoration of female African-American writers. Street founded two Museums focused on African-American literature, wrote a book on the history of Black women authors in the United States, ran two boutique bookshops, and wrote her own novels. Not only did her museums memorialize the contributions of some of the most prominent African-American authors, but Street also used the space to give free courses in writing, English, mathematics, and African-American history. Shortly after her death in 2007, Street’s daughter donated her collection of over 700 novels, 300 manuscripts, and 60 boxes of archived material to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. When she died, *The Washington Post* ran an obituary on Street, detailing her accomplishments and crediting her as a prominent figure in memorializing African-American history.

Despite the significance of Street’s contributions, she did not have a Wikipedia page until eight years after her death. While not particularly prolific, the editor who began Street’s page was knowledgeable of her legacy and deliberate in their actions using seven credible sources. Using basic information, Street’s life became instantaneously available on Wikipedia. Simultaneously, another editor moved the draft page to the “Articles for Creation” submission page citing this was the “preferred location for an Articles for Creation submission.” Exactly three minutes later, the same administrator declined the submission of Sojourner Street’s Wikipedia page noting that she “was a person not yet shown to meet notability guidelines.”

¹ As noted earlier, I have altered both the username as well as the description regarding this woman’s contributions to US History to protect confidentiality. Since Wikipedia is an entirely transparent platform, I did this to protect both the user who created the page as well as the user who rendered decisions on her page.

The person who deemed Street “non-notable” had not conducted a simple Google search. This is just one example of a larger trend I observed during a yearlong ethnography of Wikipedia, demonstrating that its standards for notability are rooted in systematic biases and arbitrarily enforced. As a result, articles on Wikipedia focusing on the contributions of women and people of color remain underdeveloped or entirely missing.

On a college campus in the Southeast of the United States, undergraduates and faculty members gather on the central quad. They are here for *Celebrate the Courtyard*, an annual event created by the University to forge a sense of unity and belonging among students, faculty, and staff. During student performances, smartphones glow like lighters among the crowd. As their peers perform, undergraduates livestream the event using Yik Yak – a smartphone app that allows users to anonymously create and view social media posts called “yaks.” The app is interactive and users can create their own yaks, comment on other yaks, and rate content (using an “upvote” or “downvote” function) with other users inside a five-mile radius. During the celebration, so many students were using Yik Yak the server crashed as it was unable to accommodate the spike in traffic.

Yik Yak amplified the number of students able to participate and comment on *Celebrate the Courtyard*, but not all narratives gained traction. Leah, a fast-talking senior double majoring in biology and computer science, was one of the students whose story did not prevail. In an interview, she describes how she tried to Yak three times that night about a group on campus with racist recruitment tactics. As she detailed the story, her voice grew louder. She wanted to use Yik Yak to call out the university for allowing a group that represented division to present at an event created to build solidarity. I understood why she was agitated. Despite the frequency of her Yaks

and my meticulous observations of the app that evening, I never saw her commentary. Few, if anyone, did. The first to witness her statements quickly downvoted her sentiments rendering her protest invisible since Yik Yak automatically deletes yaks with a cumulative score of -5. Using an algorithm designed to curb cyberbullying, a critical perspective remained on the fringes of a community's collective consciousness and a University's racist heritage remained unchallenged.² In Leah's own words, her voice was "literally erased from the conversation."

A thousand miles south, inside the Atchafalaya swamp basin, is a community deeply connected to their Cajun roots, which they describe as one's ability to "live off the land." These survival skills form an intense cultural bond within the community, providing a shared understanding of what it means to be a "real Cajun" in the town. A key element of these survival skills is one's ability to hunt alligator.

The day before alligator-hunting season opens in Louisiana's bayous, I ride along with Gilles and Claudine - a team of husband-and-wife alligator hunters. After pulling up to a one-room houseboat tied to a Cyprus tree, we quickly unpack and then get back into the boat to set and bait lines until dusk. The next morning, we head out before sunrise. Despite the early hour, the air is thick with heat and the alligators' red eyes dance across the surface of the swamp. Arriving at the first trap of the day, Gilles notices the bait is gone and slowly pulls up on a taut line, smiling in anticipation. Ever so slowly, the top of a scaly green head peaks out of the swirling muck. Claudine holds the wheel steady and Gilles aims his gun within inches of the alligator's head. He shoots once in the square of the eyes, then again for good measure. When the line goes slack, they work

² Introduced by Durkheim in 1893, a collective conscious represents a set of shared beliefs/moral attitudes (traditionally found through adherence to one religion). These shared values are used to shape a sense of common ground within a community thereby forging solidarity among its members.

together to pull the 600lb dead alligator back into the boat. Claudine takes their hunting tags out of her purse and Gilles slits a hole in the alligator's tail with a pocket knife securing to it a yellow plastic tag—one down, fifty to go.

Husband-and-wife teams like Claudine and Gilles are common. I observed several operating during Louisiana's 2012 Alligator Hunting Season baiting lines, setting traps, and hauling their catch into town. Nonetheless, their stories are completely absent from the show *Swamp People* – a reality television series which chronicles alligator hunters doing the same activities as Gilles and Claudine. Residents in the town who do not make a living from hunting are proud of *Swamp People* because it provides visibility to a cultural heritage from which they feel disconnected. Unfortunately, *Swamp People*'s representation of “living off the land,” a skill Cajuns cultivate as part of their collective identity, does not include women. Despite my ethnographic observations that indicate alligator hunting is a familial activity, town residents who no longer hunt for a living assert that alligator hunting is exclusively male, mirroring the narrative of *Swamp People*, which they describe as “real reality.”

A traditional concern of sociology has been the definition, reproduction, and building of community. Even though media images legitimate a cultural understanding of normality, fostering an agreed-upon notion of how the world truly exists (Meyrowitz 2010, Skeggs and Wood 2011), little sociological research has explored the connection between media representation and community identity formation. As these examples above illustrate, participatory platforms do not ensure that all can participate and minority perspectives can get isolated within a community. By looking more specifically at technological affordances rather than technological possibilities, my dissertation fills this gap drawing on Anderson's (1983) theory of “imagined community,”

connecting it to Eliasoph & Lichterman's (2003) theory of "culture in interaction." Drawing these theories into conversation with one another, I argue that the "style" in which a community is "imagined" is connected to the vocabulary, symbols, and codes that structure members' ability to think and act within a group (Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003).

Interactionists argue that interpersonal exchanges shape group norms and constrain individual action (Goffman 1959, Mead 1934, West & Zimmerman 1987, Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003). Normative order does not define "self," our identity emerges out of interactions with others and becomes rooted in a set of shared experiences (Husserl 1999, Mead 1934, Garfinkel 1967, Berger & Luckmann 1966). While interactional research is rich, it is analytically limiting because it focuses on face-to-face exchanges (Westbrook & Schilt 2014). Given that the line between what constitutes "real" and "produced" is increasingly blurred, it opens the possibility to study how media intersects and interacts with individuals, shaping what it means to belong. Studying how the media landscape has changed is of utmost importance for sociologists to understand because these shifts also affect what it means to constitute community.

Interactions between our on- and off-line "selves" are increasingly interconnected (Livingstone 2003, Baym 2010, boyd 2014, Marwick 2013, boyd and Marwick 2011, Jenkins 1992 & 2006). Since content we put on-line is persistent, searchable, replicable, and read by unintended lurkers (boyd 2007), our online participation is often constrained by our desire to maintain off-line interactions (Marwick 2013). While a great deal of work has looked at how individuals navigate these blurred boundaries, little work has been devoted to *communities* even though our individual actions are often constrained by a larger group structure (Goffman 1959, Mead 1934, Garfinkel 1967). More recently, media scholars have begun to study the role of "flagging" in mediated publics (Crawford & Gillespie 2014), but these studies lack a sociological perspective regarding

how inequality is embedded into one's ability (or privilege to) "flag" the content of others, and thereby police their actions.

While research on mediated identity is extensive, I am unaware of any studies to date that look at how a community's participation in the creation of a media product collides with their "sense of place" (Couldry 2007). In doing so, this dissertation sheds light on how power dynamics entrenched within communities mitigates the possibility for everyone to equally participate. "The media" is no longer separate from those who use it. Media is *integrated* with its audience. Using ethnographic observations, interviews, and focus groups within three respective communities, I untangle this concept of an "integrated audience," unearthing both the processes by which minority expression continues to be suppressed while at the same time also considering the implications of this silencing matrix.

What is an integrated audience?

The idea of an "integrated audience" applies a sociological framework to existing studies in audience analysis as a way of understanding how communities use media products to draw boundaries. This boundary management is important because media narratives determine which stories matter and which ones do not. In short, integrated audiences are communities where the creator of the media content and the audience are the same. However, it does not mean that everyone in the community creates content. Rather, the process of having the community involved with some of the content creation ends up creating a media product that holds what Fredrick Wherry would refer to as an "aura of authenticity" (2011). Most importantly, in an integrated audience, the subject of the media is the community itself. However, the community exists independent of the media content, i.e. *Swamp People* is about a community that exists outside of

the series, Yik Yak content about the University where it is being read, and Wikipedia articles are written about individuals, events, and places considered notable or representative to the community that subsequently consumes the content.

As I will further examine in Chapter 2, the concept of an integrated audience came out of my ethnographic observations inside the bayous of Louisiana. What this dissertation will assert is that integrated audiences are essential sites for sociological inquiry because they allow us to examine how mediated narratives have the potential to either reaffirm or shift the boundaries, bonds, and norms that constitute community membership. Understanding audiences as integrated with media purporting to represent communities provides a new avenue for investigating the interactive processes that creates and sustains inequality. Studying a community's existing power dynamics demonstrates there are still obstacles for equal participation in emerging media environments. Based on my findings from Chapter 2, I seek to explore the relevancy of integrated audiences in other contexts.

In total, this dissertation is based on data from three cases: 1) the reality television series *Swamp People* and one of the Louisiana towns where the series is filmed; 2) the smartphone application Yik Yak and its use inside a public university in the United States; and 3) the process by which articles are edited on English Wikipedia. Using comparative distinctions (Charmaz 2006), the data in each case was coded for similarities and differences that emerged from interviews and/or focus groups and compared with my field notes.³ Applying feminist theory, I draw heavily from the words, perspectives and worldviews of the people whose social positioning often renders them less “audible, less visible, and thus less able to shape the structures influencing their lives,” (Avishai, Gerber and Randles 2013).

³ See Appendix A for more details regarding methodology

Swamp People

Over the course of a year, I traveled to a remote community in the Atchafalaya Swamp Basin that was the center of the reality television series *Swamp People*. There I conducted hundreds of hours of ethnographic observations at boat launches, local restaurants, bars and live musical performances. In addition to my ethnographic observations, I also conducted a series of focus groups and interviews with residents where we specifically talked about the show *Swamp People*. Audio-recorded data consist of conversations with 64 participants including three focus groups of approximately five persons per group as well as in-depth interviews with 42 people.

Chapter 2 focuses exclusively on this case, arguing that because of the limited interactions between residents who hunt for play versus those who hunt for pay, mediated interactions influence community identity formation. Since women were markedly absent from the *Swamp People* narrative, it simultaneously erased the role of women in alligator hunting from the stories that those in town told themselves of what it meant to be a “real Cajun.” The results from this case ultimately shaped my understanding of what constitutes an integrated audience, laying the theoretical foundation of this dissertation.

Yik Yak

The data for this case consists of physical ethnographic observations of a public university on the East Coast and virtual ethnography of the Yik Yak feed associated with the same university. I combined participant observation with interviews and focus groups with 58 students enrolled at the same university where I conducted my ethnographic work. In Chapter 3, I demonstrate how Yik Yak influences feelings of belonging and exclusion. In doing so, this chapter pushes back on

the widespread ethos that anonymity provides a place for people to say whatever they want. Since Yik Yak is intimately connected to a physical space, I use this chapter to demonstrate that the norms on the app are largely restrictive and consequently suppress marginalized opinions. Like *Swamp People*, Yik Yak provides the opportunity for some to connect and build camaraderie through the app but does so at the expense of others whose contributions are not welcome.

Wikipedia

Wikipedia editors, colloquially known as “Wikipedians,” share a set of norms, values, and identities that constitute what Wikipedia is and what it is *not*⁴ and use a generally agreed upon code of conduct to decide what type of content meet the guidelines for inclusion on Wikipedia. Data for this case consist of physical ethnography during multiple edit-a-thons over the course of a year and virtual ethnographic observations on the Articles for Deletion Page and the “revision history” of Wikipedia articles mentioned in interviews. Similar to the previous two cases, I combined this ethnographic data with 36 in-depth interviews. In addition to my qualitative data, I worked with a computer programmer at the University of Virginia to download data from Wikipedia for quantitative analysis. To do this, he wrote a small script that would web scrape the Articles for Deletion daily log pages. I then analyzed exported data using descriptive statistics.

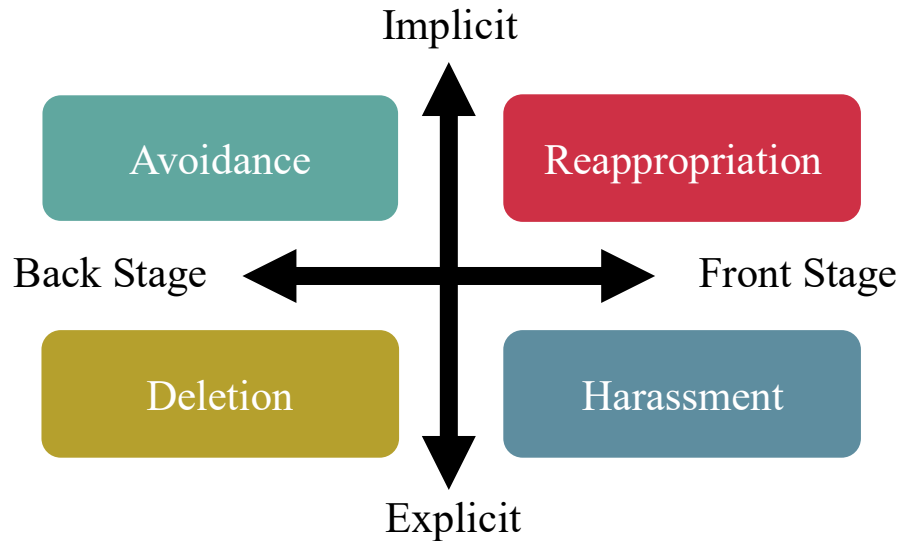
Using this qualitative and quantitative data, Chapter 4 demonstrates how the cultural practices within Wikipedia perpetuate wider systems of inequality. Relying on the cultural logics of Wikipedia that justify deleting content from the site, this chapter unpacks the culture of “deletionism” and how Wikipedia’s notability criteria and bureaucratic structure are part of the problem. Moreover, my data demonstrate that when deletions are challenged as discriminatory,

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:What_Wikipedia_is_not

these concerns are rebuked as “matters of clashing personality” (Hochschild 1989) rather than examining the societal contradictions embedded in Wikipedia’s notability criteria. While this process of deleting content might seem benign, I argue that because the process of deletion is not regulated with any formal rules, it sustains the problem of devaluation of women and people of color whereby they are more likely to be considered “non-notable.”

Silencing Matrix

Chapter 5 focuses on the role of content moderation, which refers to the practices of monitoring what kind of content will be included in the media. Closely linked to the notion of censorship, content moderators apply a set of rules to define what kind of content is afforded visibility. Using comparisons between my cases, I demonstrate how varying the role of the content moderator yields surprisingly comparable results. Specifically, I argue that whether the process of controlling content is tightly regulated or open to the public, communities used a variety of mechanisms across platforms to silence minority expression. These silencing tactics occurred across two cross-cutting dimensions (visibility and action) out of which four analytical categories emerged: *avoidance* - marginalized expression is ignored; *harassment* – resistance to marginalized expression escalates rapidly into violent responses and threats; *reappropriation* - marginalized expression is modified or subtly rewritten; and *deletion* - marginalized expression is systematically erased. By drawing across three cases with dramatic variation, I demonstrate that avoidance, harassment, reappropriation, and deletion are not platform-specific but rather generic processes that create and sustain inequality.



At the most inconspicuous level, silencing is avoidance. As previous scholars have demonstrated, editors have long avoided topics about those who occupy a lower status position in society from educational curriculum, news coverage, museum exhibitions, and theatric performances (DiMaggio 1982, Hill Collins 1998, Reagle & Rhue 2011, Starr 2004). As a silencing tactic, avoidance is important because it not only signifies non-acceptance, it also limits the visibility of subversive expression.

Counter to the passive behavior that underlies the silencing impact of avoidance, harassment is a form of silencing which is explicit, direct, and visible. Numerous reports have demonstrated that women and people of color are continuously at risk of harassment on-line (Pew Research Center 2014, Gardiner et al 2016, Eckert & Steiner 2013, Citron 2014, Phillips 2015, Paling 2016, Buni & Chemaly 2014). These studies focus on the problems women and people of color face online but tend to focus exclusively on visible forms of harassment, including unwanted

sexual advances or innuendo, repeated contact, verbal threats of violence,⁵ doxing⁶, revenge porn, and simulated rape.

Both avoidance and harassment are relatively well-studied concepts on their own terms. However, few people consider these forms of silencing as existing along a continuum and happening concurrently. By moving beyond the notion of harassment *or* avoidance happening in isolation, this chapter urges readers to consider how they might be related, coupled with other forms of silencing (reappropriation and deletion) that are working in tandem to isolate minority perspectives and limit historical representation.

The implications of integrated audiences are considerable, especially considering the historical role of media in shaping community. Rooting my arguments in a historical understanding of what it means to moderate content, I argue that integrated audiences only provide an illusion of equal participation. For while integrated audiences open the possibility for more people to participate, my cases also demonstrate that whoever can contribute content (and make content “stick”) is intimately connected to their position within their community. The connection between how a community’s social dynamics influence the creation of historical and intellectual records is increasingly important. It is not as though we have forgotten Sojourner Street’s life accomplishments, Leah’s frustrations with institutional racism, or Claudine’s arduous work on the bayous. We never heard, read, or discussed their stories to begin with.

⁵ These include threats toward a woman specifically but can also include the threat to harm public spaces as was the case when individuals threatened to bomb an event Anita Sarkeesian was speaking at.

⁶ publishing confidential information on the internet about an individual with malicious intent

Chapter 2

Integrated Audiences and the Movement of Women from the Bayous to the Kitchens

It is 6 o'clock in the morning. Spitonis, the local gas station, is humming. I sit among the retired men in this sleepy Louisiana town, in the hard booths which line the windows of the gas station. They sit close to one another on the uncomfortable seats, spilling over into the potato chip aisle. The lines around their blue eyes crinkle when they smile and hidden beneath their white-haired beards is a broad smile with a few teeth in the back gone missing. They gather like this every morning, some sitting and some standing while they sip on coffee and swap stories of their Cajun roots. As we sit, the other residents in town bustle in, pour themselves large cups of coffee in Styrofoam cups, grab a pre-made egg, cheese, and bacon biscuit and quickly say hello. Large pick-up trucks line up to fuel their tanks and then head out for another grueling day. Most residents in the town work in the sugar mill or the oil refinery and they commute about an hour each way. Before they head out, they mingle with those of us sitting at the few tables to the right of the cashier. The work they do might be hard, but the mood is jovial.

Those who make their living off the land are markedly absent. That is because most of them are already halfway through their workday. They rise by 4 am and begin work right away with little spare time to interact with others in their town. By 6 am they are hauling in, cleaning, and looking to sell what they have caught for the day. During the 2012 Alligator Hunting season, I observed their constant motion – taking their boats out in the morning to catch what waits for them on their lines, bringing their catch to market to sell, fueling up trucks and boats in the mid-afternoon, followed by a short rest. Afterward, they head back out to the swamp, pulling in their homemade catfish trap and filleting what they caught for dinner. Then it's back on the water again to bait lines before nightfall. Exhausted, they retire to their houseboats a little before midnight,

rinse off in a shower that pumps water from the swamp to the boat and collapse into bed for roughly five hours of sleep. While the town residents who work a more traditional 9-5 schedule have time to stop by Spitonis in the morning (or the local restaurant in the evening) and converse with other residents, those who make their living off the land are out on the bayous hoping to make ends meet.

It is because of this economic uncertainty that the people I spoke with at Spitonis chose to pursue what they describe as “more stable” work. Despite their decision for a more consistent lifestyle, they yearn to work on the bayou. On many a morning, the conversations between the retired and those on their way to work express a longing for the freedoms that comes from “living off the land:” no red lights, being your own boss, and not having to account for the number of hours worked. This desire to return to their Cajun roots is intimately connected to the early-morning Spitonis ritual. Over multiple cups of coffee and standing in line at the register, Spitonis’ clientele make their weekend plans to partake in hunting, crawfishing, shrimping and boating trips. These communal activities, like a crawfish boil in the spring or a shrimp boil in the summer, in addition to other kinds of hunting associated with their Cajun heritage (i.e. deer/rabbit/squirrel/duck), create intense cultural bonds.

Due to their sporadic schedules, very few residents who make their “living off the land” can participate in these cultural rituals. As a result, what it means to be a Cajun for residents who work in mills or on rigs is shaped by an *image* of what it means to live off the land. This image is not shaped by interactions with the residents but through the reality television series *Swamp People*, a show filmed inside their community for the last seven years. While few in the town are in front of the camera, many engage in a form of indirect participation driving boats or making

accommodations for the production crew. They also feel connected to the series because their town is now prominently featured throughout the world.⁷

Now in its eighth season on The History Channel, *Swamp People* claims to chronicle the lives of alligator hunters. On the website, the series is described as follows:

“Deep in the heart of Louisiana lies America's largest swamp--a million miles of inhospitable bayous, marshes and wetlands where nature rules and humans struggle to tame it. Many of its inhabitants are the hardened descendants of French refugees who were forced out of Canada in the 18th century and settled in this harsh yet majestic environment. Today, these people are known as the Cajuns, a group renowned throughout the world for their flavorful cuisine, distinctive music and vibrant culture. Resilient, self-reliant and fiercely independent, the Cajuns of the Atchafalaya Swamp still carry on many of their ancestors' trades and traditions. HISTORY follows these swamper through a time of year that is crucial to their survival: the 30-day alligator-hunting season. At its core, this is a uniquely American story of a proud and skillful people fighting to maintain an ancient way of life in a rapidly modernizing world, despite the many perils and trials that stand in their way.”⁸

When asked in focus groups or one-on-one interviews why they watch, the Spitionis crowd tell me how watching the show gives them access to life as it should be; as it was before times changed; and in their minds how life still is for those lucky enough to make their living off the land.

By understanding how *Swamp People* was received within the community in which it was filmed, this chapter provides a deeper understanding of the connection between modern technology and cultural preservation. As previous audience ethnographers have shown, interaction with and understanding of media is a varied experience in which one's own cultural and class position is critical to understanding one's place in the narrative (Hall 1973, McRobbie 2009, Liebes and Katz 1985, Press 1991 and 2001, Press and Cole 1999, Radway 1991, Shively 1992). Nonetheless, our

⁷ As of 2012 the show aired in the United States, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Norway.

⁸ “About Swamp People” - <http://www.history.com/shows/swamp-people/> (Official text on the website in December 2012. This complete summary is now gone from the website in favor of season summaries).

media landscape is changing and future studies aimed at understanding how audiences interact and engage with media must account for the increasingly blurred lines between audience consumption and participation (O'Reilly 2005, Livingstone 2003, Jenkins 2006, Baym 2010, boyd 2007, Marwick 2013). While more recent audience ethnographers have begun to consider how audiences and publics are increasingly interconnected (Livingstone 2005), they have yet to look at how notions of collectivity and exclusion are formed in a community through mediated interactions. Addressing this gap is important because more places are literally interacting between the filmed depiction of their lived realities and their town. These direct and indirect interactions impact what constitutes public and private actions (Gamson 1998, Meyrowitz 2010) in a concept I term “integrated audiences.”

An important aspect of the integrated audience landscape is bound to the rise of reality television programming that purports to offer unscripted glances at the lives of “ordinary” people (Holmes & Jermyn 2004). To date, most reality television scholarship focuses on representation of class, revealing the role television continues to play in constructing hegemonic discourse (Lizardo 2010). At the most basic level, reality television promotes a “stereotypical facsimile of lower-class life” exemplifying the moral dimensions of privacy explicitly tied to wealth – those of a certain class position do not star on a show like *Jerry Springer* (Grindstaff 2002: 251).

However, research on reality television primarily focuses on synthetic spaces – scenarios that remove participants from their everyday environment and places them in contrived, restricted, and monitored environments (i.e. *Survivor* or *America's Next Top Model*). By focusing more attention to series situated in identifiable communities (i.e. *Swamp People*, *Real Housewives of Orange County*, *Deadliest Catch*), sociologists can conduct ethnographies at the sites where the boundaries between audience and participator are blurred. Capturing how communities are

featured in reality television narratives filmed on location allows us to apply audience research that demonstrates how reality television is carefully orchestrated and precisely formatted (Couldry 2011, Stephens 2004, Morley 2009, Andrejevic 2011), while simultaneously accounting for how that narrative interacts and engages with the community on the ground. Focusing on the role of community also allows us to extend the very idea of what constitutes an audience. As you will see in the chapters that follow, the concept of an integrated audience is not limited to a reality television series filmed on location but instead opens the possibility to study myriad environments.

This line of research begins by engaging with Radway's (1991) central argument that "reception" is complicated by community engagement. Situating herself within suburban reading groups, Radway was able to understand how women's lived realities influenced their interpretation and connection to Harlequin romance novels. Radway argued that women who read them did not *share* their misogynistic views. Rather, fans turn to fiction as a way of navigating and dealing with the patriarchal situations they live in. Specifically, she describes how homemakers use romance novels as a way of carving out quiet time and personal space. By distancing them from their familial duties, reading the books served as a form of resistance as well as pleasure. Using her methods (participant observation, focus groups, and interviews) and focusing on community dynamics, this chapter expands and extends on Radway's seminal work for the community in which I was situated was tangled up with a media product *about their own lives*. Allowing them to use their language and space to describe what constituted the "reality" of their lives opens the door for thinking critically about what constitutes "audience reception" in the twenty-first century.

One town – two kinds of people

This chapter is based on data collected inside a rural Louisiana town with a population of approximately 3,000 with little diversity. Coincidentally, I was embedded in this community around the same time Arlie Hochschild (2016) was conducting her ethnographic work in the Louisiana town of Lake Charles. In many ways, there were consistencies with her findings, specifically regarding demographic breakdown. Similar to the town Hochschild studied, there was extreme racial segregation in the community where I conducted my work. According to the 2010 census, the town I observed is 98% white and almost everyone I interviewed identified as Cajun.⁹ However, my ethnographic observations revealed a class variation like the analytical categories found in Julie Bettie's (2003) work *Women without Class*, which drew from Joseph Howell's (1973) distinction between "Settled-living" and "Hard-living" (Bettie 2003: 13).

Settled-living (Listed Professions)	Hard-living (Listed Professions)
Teacher - Bank Teller	Fisherman / Commercial Fisherman
Truck Driver – Housewife – Secretary	Seafood Wholesaler
Electrical Coordinator – Antique Store Owner	Turtle Farmer
Plant Worker - College Student	Commercial Fisherman's Wife
Draftsman	"Domestic Engineer"
Military Service	"Musicerman" (musician & fisherman)

⁹ It is important to note that "Cajun" is synonymous with Whiteness. All but two respondents identified as Cajun and these two were the only Black residents who participated in my study.

Those who occupied a settled position in the town (i.e. the Spitonis regulars) describe a predictable and orderly lifestyle which offered “greater security, higher pay, and, at times, health benefits” (Bettie 2003: 13). As the above chart notes, these residents still occupy “working class” jobs (i.e. mechanics, truck drivers, secretaries, electricians) but everyone in this category had finished high school, with some having an advanced degree. As a result, this group was typically the landowners and homeowners in town, and their pay, while meager compared to the top 25% nationwide, provided them extra income and time to spend on leisurely activities in their community.

Those who “made a hard living” is a term which refers to respondents with occupations that deal directly with “living off the land.” Based on my ethnographic observations, those who hunt, fish, and shrimp for work were particularly “close” to the profession depicted on *Swamp People*. Their income was less stable and many lacked health insurance. The majority rented both their home and the land off which they hunted and fished, paying the landowners back a portion of their earnings. In addition to occupational similarity, most had minimal education (high school degree or less).

Like Hochschild, I too witnessed a “Great Paradox” regarding how residents in town viewed their place in relation to industrial sprawl. However, the paradox I observed was less focused on pollution and more intimately connected to gender and racial inequality. Over the course of a year, I observed an alternative “deep story” (Hochschild 2016) describing how Cajuns came to constitute their cultural heritage. Like Hochschild, this story was rife with contradictions. Yet my data extends Hochschild’s argument, demonstrating the influential role media plays in shaping what does and does not get included in that story. The story begins with a simple phrase, followed by an explanation, of what it means to “live off the land.”

Living Off The Land

In addition to being part of what constituted making a “hard living,” “living off the land” was also the phrase used by respondents to describe what it meant to be a Cajun. When I asked Cajuns to describe what “living off the land” meant, a pattern emerged whereby residents described how a “true Cajun” can survive with their natural resources if needed. By focusing on how being able to live off the land was synonymous with Cajun identity, residents used this skill to draw boundaries between themselves and “others.” “Others” included anyone who resided outside of the Atchafalaya swamp basin, who they termed “city folk” (i.e. New Orleans residents) or people who live “up north” (every state north of Louisiana). Ardoin, the owner of a local bait shop, described what it meant to be a Cajun while he, his wife, and his four children sat around the small kitchen table located on the trail adjacent to his store.

“To me, to be a Cajun would be ah...living off the land...I mean, we live off the land! When I need something fresh I know how to go catch it and that’s a true Cajun you know. Being able to live off the land...*you have to be born in it*... I mean when we was kids we were dirt poor...we’d go hunting at night, we’d get up in the morning, clean the animals before we went to school, went to school, come back – back out in the woods.... *That big city life*...people take food for granted...I’ve heard stories where *people up north* they get up in the morning and are like, um what’s you want for dinner tonight? You know they’ve got supermarkets down there loaded with fish, it’s not a problem for them to find the food! I mean me, right now, we don’t know what we’ll eat tonight – but if I need to go catch a fish, I can.

Claudine, who was part of the husband-and-wife team referenced in Chapter 1, cleans houses during most of the year but takes off during the first part of alligator hunting season to work with her husband on the bayous. She echoes Ardoin’s sentiment: hunting is a cultural activity that “we” do as part of the Cajun culture. “Most of the people around here, they’ve lived off the

land... We still do!... We live off the land, we eat deer, rabbit, we fish, alligator ...you eat frog legs, crabs, crawfish and that's all right here... and what you don't eat you sell."

Time and again, respondents make it clear that one's ability to "live off the land" not only bonds residents under the umbrella of Cajun identity but also separates them from non-residents who would not be able to fend for themselves if needed and take accessibility of food for granted. In this way, being able to live off the land was a signifier of one's cultural status. While they may live off modest incomes, their ability to live off the land and maintain their survival skills is a unique set of attributes they believe makes them special. This sense of dignity and meaning was also present in Grigsby's (2012) study of hand-fishers who considered it crucial to establish to outsiders that rural people were hardworking. Being able to make a living from the land was also a signifier of their economic independence – an important part of establishing the legitimacy of their work in a culture that values wage labor as a means of establishing independence from government assistance (Fraser & Gordon 1994).

Being able to live off the land was a prominent part of my interviews not just in the words spoken during interviews but also in their actions. For example, nearly every interview I conducted was inside the respondent's home. At the end of these interviews (Ardoin being the exception), the interviewee would give me a tour of their deep-freezer on their boat dock, next to the house on their back porch, or in their shed. With pride, they would open the freezer, displaying a completely full ice chest of deer, crab, squirrel, fish and crawfish that they had caught, shot, skinned, and filleted themselves. Similar to Ardoin's assertion that they could find what they needed for dinner straight from the swamp, these freezers full of food served as a cultural performance where they demonstrated to me that they were "true Cajuns."

Whether someone occupied a hard or settled living in this town, being able to “live off the land” was a form of cultural capital they used to identify with their ancestry and differentiate themselves outside of their town (Bourdieu 1986). While community residents might trade their cultural consumption for an enhanced economic position (as Claudine notes, what they don’t eat, they sell), “living off the land” is a skill Cajuns cultivate as part of their collective identity, providing a shared understanding of what it means to be a “real Cajun” and cultivating a sense of likeness among the community (G. Fine 1979).

Being able to “live off the land” was also an important way for all residents in the town to cling to a cultural heritage under attack from multiple fronts. This cultural erosion was particularly important for the residents who occupied a more settled living. While many of them now work within the companies that contribute to a limited connectivity to their outdoors, they would simultaneously lament the rapid changes going on around them, noting one’s ability to “be a Cajun” is rapidly disappearing.

Cajun Identity: An Ethnicity Under Siege

For the Spitonis’ regulars, the perception of Cajun disintegration rests on two major shifts in the local cultural landscape - one was the influx of oil and sugar plants to the area. While most residents profited from the jobs created in conjunction with these industrial shifts, working inside made it more difficult for residents who opted for a more settled life to connect to their ethnic identity through their day-to-day activities. As Alain, a truck-driver in his mid-forties, describes “People here were brought up pretty much fishing and hunting and all that...that was their livelihood.” His face is animated as he describes how his ancestors could connect with their culture through their day-to-day activities. Alain pauses for a moment, his blue eyes divert from mine and

he stares past me, looking off into the distance. When he begins talking again, he describes how now he no longer feels that same daily connection.

“For me, it was different. We went to work driving trucks and stuff and it was just different times.” Like the rest of the Spitonis crew, Alain no longer gets to make his living off the land. This lost connection to nature seems to be getting worse over time and Alain and other people his age complain about how kids today know very little about what it means to be a Cajun. Even though his parents and grandparents “knew more about the crawfishing and stuff, in other words – living off the land” he describes how his cultural landscape is continuously changing. In his words “living on the bayou is different, a lot has changed since I was a little kid.”

Juxtaposing the industrial encroachment was the Louisiana government, who systematically gentrified their hometown by passing state legislation in the 1920s that forbade the use of Cajun French in schools (Tidwell 2010). June, a woman in her mid-seventies who worked as a secretary for the school, describes how taking their language from them ripped the community apart. Over hot coffee, sitting on the deck of her home that overlooks the bayou, she turned her head to me slowly. “They’d warn you, [but] if you got caught speaking French then you’d have to write out and copy a couple of pages in the dictionary as punishment. Now, now, that’s taking something away from us... they took that away from us.”

Moreover, these changes to the town (perceived by those in settled positions as attacks to their cultural heritages) essentially created the analytical categories (hard and settled living) that I ultimately observed. Those now in a settled position had accepted the employment opportunities afforded by the influx of sugar mills and oil rigs, but these jobs took them off the land and indoors. Not only did these positions make them less capable of making a living off the land, it also made them less likely to speak the Cajun-French dialect. As Gergen (1996) describes, language is a

cultural form representative of the “collectivity of participants” (110). Since residents who occupy a “hard life” in town stopped going to school around sixth grade, they were better able to maintain the language of their ancestors and regularly spoke in a hybrid of French and English during our interviews. On the other hand, the residents who now work in the sugar and oil industry, because they stayed in school longer, were intimately connected to the effort to strip Cajun French from the school system. Unlike the people who opted to live off the land, those who occupied a more settled position were forced to speak English during the day as June described. As their grandparents passed away, English became the dominant language spoken in their homes.

Understanding the past as tumultuous and their future as bleak, those who work inside describe how they use activities that get them out into the bayous as a means of preserving their ethnic identity. Returning to this cultural pastime solidifies what it means to be a Cajun for future generations to come who still need to learn how to “live off the land” even though many no longer need the skills in their daily lives. For those who worked in the mills and on the rigs, hunting for play – as opposed to hunting for pay – became an important rite of passage for everyone in the community.

Preserving Cajun Roots: Hunting for Play As A Cajun Rite Of Passage

The ability to live off the land relies on the ability to hunt and fish thus to be Cajun – man or woman – means one needs to cultivate their hunting and fishing skills. As Ardoin describes of his life growing up, learning how to “live off the land” is something instilled in children at an early age. While the residents who work indoors no longer *need* to hunt to survive, they teach their children how to “live off the land” because it serves as an important cultural tradition, and is part of passing Cajun ethnicity down to the next generation. As one resident, Papite, describes: “I mean, you don’t need to [hunt], but it’s a tradition! It’s something people love to do, we go hunt squirrels,

and wild boar, and deer and rabbit.” I sought to understand what he meant by people. “Does everyone hunt?” I asked, or “it mostly just guys out there?” My line of questioning surprised Papite. “Oh no!” he responded, hands flung in the air, “a lot of girls hunt and women! Yeah! Oh yes.”

Other participants certified Papite’s claim that both men and women hunt. Take for instance a focus group discussion that transpired between two women who teach at the local school.

Stephanie: ... a lot of girls will go hunting with their dads.

Rose: Just for the bonding...it’s family time...The girls are excited to get their [hunting] licenses and the boys ...spending the weekend at the camp and when they going fishing.

Here again we see that those who hunt for play do so as a *shared* activity—a Cajun rite of passage not exclusive to boys. These sentiments were also echoed among residents who still make their living off the land. In an interview with a brother and sister who still make income trapping and hunting:

BJ: Women also hunt, men and women hunt together as well.
Megan: Together, yeah....and children and little girls too.
BJ: Dads teach their daughters and their sons and wives and...
Megan: How to make it....It's like a family tradition thing.
BJ: It's like Cajun dancing and everything...It's like I'm taking my kids, now my grandkids, and showing them how to hunt from a stand, and show them how to survive...to show them how to live off the land in case they need to live off the land....

According to existing scholarship, men escape to the wilderness to flee the confines of domesticity (Kimmel 1996) and use hunting to bond with their sons—taking rite-of-passage trips from which women are excluded (L. Fine 2000; Messner 2011). While this may be the case in some places in the United States, my data demonstrate how local context impacts gender

performance (Kazyak 2013). In this community, learning how to hunt is not a masculine rite of passage but a *Cajun rite of passage*—a way for parents, especially those who work indoors, to teach and connect with their children. By teaching their kids how to “live off the land,” a skill their parents taught them, they pass down a cultural pastime and heritage that those who work inside conceive as slipping from their fingers. Hunting, fishing, and outdoor adventures are not framed as an escape from feminine domesticity—but rather a way to cement their cultural heritage. Likewise, women in this community who hunt as a form of cultural play are not “acting like men” or trading in their femininity: they are “acting like Cajuns.”

However, those who hunt for play do not consider all forms of hunting as gender-inclusive. While women can hunt deer, rabbit, or squirrel without seeming transgressive, a different story emerges surrounding *hunting for pay* exclusive to those who do not hunt for a living. When asked to describe what living off the land meant as a profession, those who hunt for play described a narrative nearly identical to *Swamp People*, a series they described a “real reality.”

The Real Reality of *Swamp People*

Since many who work indoors feel that Cajun culture is rapidly disintegrating around them, they find *Swamp People* particularly appealing because it demonstrates to the world how life “really is” down on the bayous. It is for this reason why nearly everyone who occupied a settled position in town praised *Swamp People* for displaying what it meant to live off the land. As Rose, a middle-aged librarian at the local elementary school, described of the series:

“It’s almost like you’re watching visual uh, uh journalists...[like]watching the news in a different format, it’s present, it can be current, so something of the past and how we’re dealing with it now...again, it’s just something that is easy to understand. It’s real reality.”

Charles is a local resident who sells barbeque and purchases alligator from a nearby alligator farm to sell as a novelty item to the influx of visitors, now coming to meet some of the residents featured on *Swamp People*. He confirms:

“What they’re doin’ there? Oh yeah, that’s real. When we seen it, it’s like we’ve seen that already...to me, that’s the way it is – that’s not fake. “

Two respondents who took part in a focus group where we watched the series together echoed Rose’s and Charles’ sentiments:

Elise: This [Swamp People] is more capturing history, that a lot of people don’t realize, I think...and I guess why, I think and that’s why, I guess that’s why people think it’s more credible.

Jason: It is real though.

Elise: Yeah, and it is real, even if it’s staged.

In every interview and focus group conducted with those who hunt for “play,” *Swamp People* was described as the real deal and 100% of those interviewed had seen at least one episode of the series. Despite the consistent narrative that *Swamp People* was an accurate portrayal of their culture, none of my respondents who hunt for play seemed to notice that *Swamp People* is a “reality” absent of women.

This lack of female representation is clear from a simple content analysis of the series. From the beginning, the series creates an image that alligator hunting is for men only, making it seem like being Cajun is a *masculine* act and situating women who hunt alligator as cultural “transgressors” (Halberstam 1998). In Season 1, there are no female hunters and women only appear briefly as the spouses of the alligator hunters. Inside the boat, men are the captains and a typical patriarchal narrative unfolds. In all the boats, men are teaching their sons or younger men

whom they conceptualize as sons, tricks of the trade so they can take over the familial business one day. Two notable exceptions to this are the Guist brothers and Bruce. The Guist Brothers, an eccentric pair of older men,¹⁰ approached the livelihood with minimal use of modern technology. They are the only team who are featured hunting other types of animals (i.e. squirrel) and are regularly filmed walking barefoot through the swamps. Bruce hunts alone and is accompanied by his male dog Tyler.¹¹

In Season 2, Liz, the “Gator Queen,” joins the show as Troy Landry’s hired hand (i.e. supporting role) and then gets her own boat in Season 3. However, even when *Swamp People* affords women the opportunity to be central characters, it maintains and reinforces gender segregation. For example, Liz operates her boat with Kristi—who, according to professional alligator hunters, was hired for her television appeal and was not a “real” alligator hunter. The producers then use the “female only” boat to demonstrate struggle and difficulty. For example, the first time a winch (a tool commonly used by alligator hunters) is featured on *Swamp People*, it is in the opening episode of Season 3 as part of the audience’s first introduction to Liz and Kristi’s boat. In this same episode, the winch breaks and Liz and Kristi’s only airtime is centered on the struggle involved to get a 400lb dead alligator inside their boat. So, even when women are finally included in the series, they are marginalized; by portraying Liz and Kristi as incompetent and weak, the show creates an image of female alligator hunters as unfit to make a living off the land.

Through introducing token characters into the show and maintaining homosocial segregation, *Swamp People* seemed to open the space for participation, but did so in a way which

¹⁰ Mitchell Guist died on the bayou in an accident unrelated to the show in 2012. His brother, Glenn Guist, is still featured on the series but now hunts solo

¹¹ Tyler passed away in 2014. Bruce now hunts solo.

reinforced an image that “real” alligator hunters were straight white men. In the first three episodes, every character was white. The Knights, an African American family, were not introduced until halfway through the season and only appeared for a total of 40 minutes divided between two episodes (4 and 5) where they were featured as both lazy and incompetent. The Molineres, a Native American family, made their debut in Season 2. While they are still on the show, they are often portrayed as aggressive and narcissistic and participate in some of the more “primitive” behavior including jumping in the water or using their bare hands to catch live alligators. As a form of reappropriation, the introduction of these characters appears to “open up the space” for what constitutes a “real” Cajun. In the same way, the show depicted Liz and Kristi as incompetent hunters, *Swamp People* delegitimized rather than empowered those who made their living off the land who were not white men such as the Knight and Molinere families.

While my direct engagement with, and analysis of, the series ended after Season 3, my informal viewing of the show demonstrates *Swamp People* continues to maintain sex and racial segregation. Over the course of the last four years, Kristi exited the show (to have a baby) and Liz recruited her daughter to take Kristi’s place, thereby maintaining the token “female only” boat. Now in its eighth season, Liz and her daughter have retired from the series and Kristi is back leading her own boat. However, her description on the website is still intimately tied to her feminine identity. As noted under her bio “She’ll tell you what she thinks, but doesn’t take herself too seriously. Now that she has children, she’s grown into a bit of a mama bear....but down deep, she’s still quick to get out there and do it...whatever *it* is.”¹² While the Knight family has exited the series, a single African-American man has appeared. Gerard “Gee” Singleton is framed as the only hunter who does not “have a boss” because he bypasses the buyers and sells directly to

¹² <http://www.history.com/shows/swamp-people/cast/kristi-boussard>

customers out of his cooler.

For those who work indoors, alligator hunting is an exclusively male occupation. Even though they regularly included women in hunting game associated with “play” (squirrel, duck, deer), hunting alligator was different. When it came to hunting to “pay,” those with a settled position in town described an exclusively male profession. Their lack of discussion regarding hunters of color is also indicative of the wider problem of segregation within the town.

“Only Men Hunt For Pay”

In contrast to the relative lack of gender differentiation in hunting for deer, rabbit or other “play” species, respondents reported a distinct divergence in who could participate in the big business of alligator hunting. For those who make a living inside, the thought of a woman making a living off the land was inconceivable. Take, for example, a conversation between Tom and Carol, a married couple who are now retired. Tom used to work as an accountant and Carol was a homemaker. While they are quick to remember women who hunt deer, they have never witnessed a woman hunting alligator:

Carol: There are women—a lot of our friends, a lot of our friends' wives hunt.

Tom: Deer hunt, but not ... but not—you won't see a woman in hip boots, hunting in the spillway, no.

Carol: I've never seen that.

This paradox of differentiating between the types of hunting women were “allowed” to do was frequent, moreover those who described *Swamp People* as a “real reality” were also quick to dismiss Liz as an unusual case of a woman drawn to the profession. Take, for example, when I asked Carl if he believed that most alligator hunters were men. “Oh, I would certainly say if you put it in percentages, yeah absolutely,” he said, and continued:

“I mean just that Liz’s daddy was a tremendous outdoorsman. A guy who lived off the land, right?...Liz was born and raised in that environment and she knows—I think she’s quite unique. I will say—I just said that certainly men take their daughters....[but Liz] is a little—I’d say she’s probably not the typical.”

As this quote demonstrates, those in town believe Liz’s skills were acquired through the agency of men. By attributing Liz’s skills to her “daddy,” the “tremendous outdoorsman,” it diminishes her own qualifications as simply an extension of her father’s legacy. Liz is also described as a “unique case,” even though the above quote directly indicates that she was “born and raised in that environment.” Many of the settled residents I interviewed believe that men would probably teach their daughters to hunt alligator but that women just wouldn’t like it much. Alain also described how women “never” hunted alligator, reasoning that “your wife stayed home – you’ve got kids and all!” The idea that women were domestic homemakers and the men were the sole providers exemplifies the explicit gender binaries which individuals rely on when they are picturing sex-segregated spaces (Westbrook and Schilt 2014).

I argue that part of Liz’ inability to pass (Goffman 1963) as a “real” alligator hunter for those who occupy a settled position in the town is how she is portrayed on *Swamp People*. Not only is Liz often featured as a less capable hunter, *Swamp People* regularly refers to Liz’s father in the series, describing how her abilities were learned through observing his craft. The men in the show do not regularly attribute their skills to their father; however, they are filmed as “passing down” the profession to their sons only. In this way, the visual of homosocial boats reify that fathers pass down the profession to their sons exclusively and that Liz is an anomaly, not the norm. As described earlier, when Liz was finally given her own boat in the third season, they marginalized her into a “female only” boat, pairing her with a less experienced and much younger woman. The series’ decision to separate the boats by gender further fuels the masculine framework of hunting

as a form of providing, protection and play in a “separate sphere” from women. Moreover, it allows a comparison to form: for example, *Swamp People*’s narrator regularly comments on Liz’ ability to “keep up” with the men.

Since those who did not hunt for a living considered *Swamp People* to be “real reality,” they favored the mediated depiction of what constitutes an alligator hunter over the lived experiences of the residents who shared their zip code. This disjuncture was amplified when I interviewed those who still made their living off the land about Liz’s role in the show. Through my interviews, it became clear they believed *Swamp People* was a poor representation of their livelihood. In one interview, I spent the entire day with a couple who I ended up staying with during the first week of the 2012 alligator-hunting season. In a particularly long interview that lasted over four hours, we talked at great length about what it meant to make a living off the land. Around midnight, I circled back to *Swamp People*, asking Gilles if he felt there was anything missing from the show. He looked down at the table and crossed his hands, thinking pensively. As he looked up, his deep blue eyes had a slight glimmer. With a coy smile and a quiet voice, he made direct eye contact saying, “maybe, the truth?”

This was not unique to my interview with Gilles. When I asked those who made their living on the land about *Swamp People*, they repeatedly professed the problems with the show. However, they always agreed the only “true” hunter on the series was Liz whom they described as “real as they come” when it comes to alligator hunting. Freddy, a large man who is trying to get a swamp tourism business off the ground described to me the inconsistencies:

“I don’t wanna cut down nobody or nothing like this but ah, you know Troy [another central character who was Liz’s boss in Season 2], he’s a rookie. If you look good on the film, and you know, the way he’s staging his hook is not right at all. I’ve been doing this for about 38 years and this really is about his 6th year.”

Boudreaux, another hunter, agreed. “Liz is a good person and a good worker and she’s swamp people.”

People who hunted for play to connect to their Cajun roots repeatedly told me that *Swamp People* was real reality whereas those who hunted for pay repeatedly described how *Swamp People* only showed the easy parts of their job and did not spend enough time emphasizing their hard work. They were frustrated *Swamp People* insinuated those who make a living off the land only work 30 days a year. Repeatedly, professional hunters elaborated on the inauthentic parts during my interviews. Jackie, a slender middle-aged woman with graying hair and a deep voice, was the first person interviewed who brought up the inauthentic nature of the series. Placing her cigarette down to animate her story with two hands, she says gruffly “I mean a man is gonna take a 1,000lb alligator and put it in the boat himself!?” she crouches down, pretending to hoist a large alligator over her shoulder. “Hm..I’d like to see that!” She picked up her cigarette taking another long drag and as she exhales she speaks again, words entangled with the smoke, “there are just a lot of things that aren’t right on it and making it seem easy.”

Freddy explained the inconsistencies to me out in the swamps. Wearing a trucker hat with the logo of his tour services on the front, he points to various parts of the swamp that surround us, explaining “You can’t just go in and hunt whatever...just have some guy scout out a new piece of property...oh yeah, go fish there. The process is not like that, you have to get a lease. My tags (he points to a few areas to the left)...they are specific to the place you got the lease.”

Jake, a young man in his thirties, described how “you would starve to death” if all you made in a year is what you can make for a month of gator hunting. He is planning on taking over the family business once his parents are ready to turn it over and describes how this process of transition is complicated since he is one of 11 children. One of the more contentious parts of

passing down the business is the land. Since most swampers are not landowners, they pass down their leases to the next of kin.¹³ Holding his toddler in one arm as we walk down the aisle of a gas station picking up a few items needed for the house, Jake elaborates on the familial business more broadly “The way the show is depicted is all fun. It’s actually 90% work and 10% fun. They show the 10% fun on TV, but that’s the part that’s interesting to everybody.”

As it turns out, these inaccuracies are connected to how people were recruited to star in the series. Through my interviews, I learned the production company recruited individuals to star in the show based on contact information obtained through the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries department. To find what they thought were the most legitimate hunters, they obtained the information of the people who purchase the greatest number of tags. Unfortunately, this led producers to people who could *afford* to buy tags, not the people who make their living off the land.

Purchasing tags is expensive and is tied to landownership; those who hunt for pay work more like contractors. The landowners buy tags and then allocate them to hunters who rent houseboats off their land. Therefore, when producers contacted *landowners*, they essentially reached out to those who work indoors to represent those who make their living off the land. Part of the reason why the show emphasizes the “fun” is in large part because those depicted as doing the job usually only hunt for play.

Depicting landowners as authentic alligator hunters not only gives the power to those in a more affluent position to set the narrative for what it means to make a living off the land but it also cuts into alligator hunters’ profits. While hunting alligator could never sustain a family, it is - in the words of one professional hunter - akin to a “Christmas bonus” which has become significantly

¹³ This was also true for Gilles who received his houseboat and the land he leases from his mother after she passed away.

smaller since *Swamp People* has grown in popularity. Sitting on a tattered couch inside the office of the gentleman they sell their gator meat to, Gary and his wife, Christine, describe how their profits have dwindled. This was discovered when Gary started to describe how those who rent the land must pay the landowners out from their profits. He notes “With our tags, 70% we get and landowners get 30%.” Due to government regulations, the number of tags available for purchase is limited and now all the tags are going to the people who star in the show. Since the show’s participants are the *landowners*, it means they are no longer selling their tags to hunters and because the show is fronting the costs upfront, they can accumulate a large number of tags and take home all the profits. During the joint interview, Gary and Christine frequently talk over one another describing how “many people are losing their tags because the people on the show won’t take the money from the owners! Now [the owners are] getting 100% so now he’s getting all the tags. Now that money is going to them and not to us.”

This type of documentary error is particularly disingenuous to those who hunt for pay since the show airs on the History Channel. In a focus group with four people who make a living off the land, they describe to me their frustrations during a commercial break:

Jackie: “I understand that they’ve got a show they want to do, and they want to keep it interesting, but you know it’s the History Channel, and you think that what you’re watching on the History Channel is a little more along with the true lines of what really happened.”

Mike: “I think, I always thought History Channel was to show the younger generation the truth...the way of life! But it’s not like that. What are we teaching our kids?”

Since residents who only hunt for play describe *Swamp People* as a “real reality” and the show depicts alligator hunting as a distinctly homosocial activity and stars people who they regularly interact with (other people who hunt for play), those who hunt for play cannot

conceptualize women as individuals who make their living off the land even though my ethnographic observations repudiated these claims. Indeed, it was clear from my data collected during the alligator hunting season, as well as during my interviews and focus groups with people who made their living off the land, women are an intimate (if not equal) part of alligator hunting. Making a living off the land is a family business.

“Hunting Is “Our” Livelihood”

Only a small number of people in this Louisiana community hunt for pay and I interviewed most, if not all, of those who self-identified with the occupation. Of those with whom I spoke, a majority approached living off the land as a team activity. I first learned of this through casual conversation of a couple I met at a bar. This meeting turned into the long interview where I learned about how they pursued their profession as a family business.

Interviewer: So, you guys hunt together?

Claudine: Yes we do.

Interviewer: Can you tell me more about that?

Gilles: We do everything together really.

Claudine: It starts off when we get issued tags – we got 50 – we got them the week of the opening season...it’s a lot of preparation and getting ready for alligator season, we have to go cut about this big (puts up hands) from willow trees...And then...he ties the actual line to that and puts in on a platter.

The teamwork described exemplifies the coordinated efforts I experienced first-hand during the 2012 alligator hunting season. Staying on a houseboat in the swamps and riding alongside Gilles and Claudine, it became clear that baiting lines, shooting the gators, tagging the animal, and selling the hides was work many completed as a husband-and-wife team. Findings from my focus group with members of the community who live a more unsettled life (consisting of two husband and wife pairs) also described a familial approach to making a living off the land

and a joint interview of siblings (whose parents used to hunt for a living) depicts how professional hunters pass their skills (and their rented property) down to their next of kin:

- Interviewer: [Directed at Megan] So did you learn the crawfishing from your dad as well or is that...
- Megan: Mm-hmm, yeah, and I went with both of them.
- Interviewer: Okay, so it's not like dads only bringing their sons. They bring—
- Megan: Oh, no, we lived in a boat! I fell asleep on the front of the boat when I was little.
- Interviewer: Did your dad and your mom do it [alligator hunt] together?
- BJ: Yeah.
- Interviewer: Okay, and who did what? Like who did what when you were growing up?
- BJ: Yeah, they did everything together.
- Interviewer: No one did one thing, and then someone did the other thing?
- BJ: No, Daddy ran a trap. She might have baited the traps for him, things like that.

In this way, the dichotomy between hard and settled living members of the community ended up centering around a narrative that wove *Swamp People* inaccuracies into it. Everyone in the community had a unified understanding of what it meant to “live off the land.” For all residents, being able to “live off the land” was a central part of what it meant to be Cajun. However, once you factored in occupational identity and class position, gender identity became more salient and the community was clearly divided. For those who opted for a settled life, women were a welcome part of activities associated with iconic Cajun culture but there was a distinct difference among these residents regarding who could learn how to “live off the land” and who was capable of “*making a living* off the land.” For the residents who described *Swamp People* as “real reality,” women could only hunt for play; they weren’t capable or willing to hunt for pay.

Based on my ethnographic observations, I argue that it was the *lack of* interaction between those who “hunt for pay” and those who “hunt for play,” combined with residents’ interactions with *Swamp People*, that essentially erased women’s ability to make a living off the land. Since

those who hunt for play were more likely to engage and interact with an inaccurate portrayal of alligator hunting that reinforces traditional gender binaries, it ultimately affected what type of work (and class position) they considered suitable for women in the town.

Regulation and Isolation

Alligators were first harvested in Louisiana in the early 1800s for both their hides (used in fashion merchandise) and their oil (used to grease steam engines and cotton mills). By the early 1900s, the demand for alligator leather increased so dramatically that, by the mid-1900s, the hunting season closed for 10 years to protect the species from extinction. Today, Louisiana adheres to strict harvesting guidelines to ensure alligator survival; this effort includes an annual report that must demonstrate a “no detriment” effect to the state population. Since only a small number of tags are issued, to protect their endangered status, the tags are worth a great deal. In fact, the alligator industry is a lucrative business generating around \$8 million a year for the local economy.

However, those who *hunt* the alligator only receive a small portion of the profits and their earnings fluctuate. On our first night in their houseboat, Gilles describes why this happens: “When the price of alligators are up [life is good]... 1993 was a record year, we got paid \$64/foot. This year, the 12ft and over are only \$25/foot. We filled our 144 tags ... but on most of them 20% goes to the landlord...then you’ve got the boats you gotta run, 4WD trucks, you gotta have mud boots to go into the boats, bringing the help along...skinner...you know...it’s a tough life. We’re working through the crawfishing season and just with the insurance and everything, to go out there...to go out there and make a living, it is very, very tough.” Gilles pauses. He wipes the sweat from his forehead and glances at Claudine who takes his hand across the table. He continues, “And you know, to make that...to be like a squirrel and go out there and get that nut every day, it’s just very, very hard...”

In my conversations with Gilles and Claudine during our ride from the bayous to the weigh station, it became clear they were anxious about what the price-per-foot was going to be that year. Up until the first day of the season, it is unknown. Not only does the price per foot fluctuate, the price of the hide varies depending on the age and length of the alligator. Alligators which measure greater than 8 feet are the most lucrative because they net the highest price but younger alligators are preferred because their hides are less weathered. During a particularly tough season, hunters have been known to cut the line and “throw back” smaller gators so they do not waste a lucrative tag on a small payback. While it is unknown if these alligators survive, they are left with a large hook inside of their stomach that they are unable to digest.¹⁴

State interventions, including the sale of public land to oil refineries, is also affecting the ability for those who hunt for pay to continue to make their living off the land. These refineries dam up parts of the bayous and cause detrimental environmental effects. As professional alligator hunter participants discussed in a focus group:

Jackie:The life we have is going to be over.

Mike: It's getting worse almost every year.

Jackie: You just can't make a living out there like that any more.

Interviewer: What's happening, what is going on?

Jackie: Everything is siltin' up, with the corps of engineers making those pipelines and spillways and all that crap.

Mike: Filling up with sand! The bayou is going to be gone! There are places out there where you had to have a boat to go down. Now we could take you out there and you could walk across it just like that, not even get your pants wet.

Interestingly, this quote demonstrates how those who make their living off the land blame the government rather than the corporations for the pipelines that encroached on their land. Similar to the “Great Paradox” observed by Hochschild (2016), those who make their living from the

¹⁴ This practice is illegal and I did not directly witness this activity in my ethnographic observations.

environment see the government as part of the pollution problem. This deflection of “the market” being a major part of the problem with their livelihood was also reflected in the “No Posting” signs in the bayous. Frequently on our trips, I would notice these signs and ask those who I was hunting with about their prominence. While discussion regarding the government regulation of hunting tags was frequently part of our conversation, the role private industry and the part they play in their inability to hunt was never voluntarily addressed.

Despite whoever they conceptualize as the problem, the squeeze on their wallet is very real; so much so that nearly all who still make their living “off the land” have encouraged their next of kin to pursue alternative professions or higher education. At the same time, those who continue to make their living off the land are increasingly isolated because of their irregular hours and extended periods on the bayous and they earn less than those who opted for other types of work (i.e. truck driving or working at the sugar plants). I observed this constant motion firsthand, but Boudreaux, a man in his late sixties with little hopes of retiring, detailed the same relentless pace when he narrated what his days were like. “Well I get up at like 5:30 in the morning and then I go out, I put lines out, catfish lines or gill nets, and then I gotta pick that up in the morning, I get through at 11, then I go sell my catch, and then I come out and go do the same thing again, and then do the same thing again the next day, and over and over... it’s like a job, but it’s hard work.” Boudreaux’s statement exemplifies what it means to make a living off the land in the swamps of Louisiana: isolation and low socioeconomic positioning. The “jobs” indoors are not as “hard” and as a result they get to hunt for “play” but for those who do, they do not see hunting as a “job” to begin with. Returning to the vignette that opened this chapter, those who make a living off the land miss out on the daily interactions with others in their community which would allow them to challenge those misconceptions about their work. Combined with their decreased earnings over

time, it means that those who make a living off the land have a lowered class position within the community. As a result, those who only “hunt for play” must rely on “imagined interactions” (Westbrook and Schilt 2014) fueled by media depictions of the profession.

As an analysis of the media portrayals demonstrate, these narratives perpetuate threat folklore and exclude women. Similar to Westbrook and Schilt’s (2014) findings, the “imagined interactions” create a space whereby the community relies on explicit understandings of gender (predicated on the idea of a distinct gender binary) rather than integrate an understanding of gender in their community that includes women as valid hunters. Like previous findings on imagined interactions, these iterative engagements are predicated on media representations propagating the idea that alligators are an imminent threat to community safety.

Even though alligators are clearly an endangered species that rarely disrupts daily life, threat folklore surrounding the species persists—specifically around “nuisance alligators” that hunters can kill out of season. Threat folklore maintains the image of hunting alligator as a heroic act associated with community protection, signifying the “core symbols” of masculinity: strength, independence, and bravery (Schneider 1968). In addition to institutional practices, threat folklore is the focus of *Swamp People* which promotes the image of alligator hunting as extremely dangerous and better suited for men.

Media plays a distinct role in shaping this dominant ideology (Williams 1973) and contemporary media representations have long perpetuated the idea that hunting is a male-only activity. However, media representation of hunters as exclusively masculine did not always exist. In fact, content analysis of widely-circulated hunting magazines demonstrates that, before World War II, hunting magazines advocated the inclusion of women into the sport (Smalley 1995). It was only after the magazine began to target the working-class that the language and labeling of hunting

became distinctly “masculine” to sell ads. As Smalley’s (1995) seminal analysis reveals, class and race defined early sportsmen’s magazines; not gender.

Nonetheless, television has reified hunting as a distinctly working-class male ritual through a series of shows that chronicle and glorify frontier masculinity as the working-class norm. *Swamp People* exemplifies this practice but it is not the only reality television narrative to do so. Other examples of shows include (but are not limited to): *Sons of Guns* – “America’s most skilled and creative gun workers”; *Deadliest Catch* – chronicling “the real-life adventures of Alaskan King Crabbing boats”; *Ice Road Truckers* – truck drivers “hauling critical cargo across the most dangerous terrain yet”; and *Dirty Jobs* – paying homage to “the unsung American laborers who make their living in the most unthinkable — yet vital — way.” These shows play an important role in normalizing masculinity as associated with adventure, danger, aggression, and courage (Donaldson 1993) and reify the notion that working-class identity is synonymous with white, masculine, identity (Bettie 1995) by casting men as the lead characters.

Swamp People’s continued representation of the profession as dangerous is extremely important because it creates the ideology that alligator hunters put themselves in perilous positions even though alligator attacks are rare and alligators are generally afraid of humans.¹⁵ While any profession involving a firearm can be life-threatening, the hunting practices I witnessed were not nearly as dangerous as projected on *Swamp People*. Each night, hunters go out and bait extremely large hooks with expired chicken. Since alligators are nocturnal and do not chew food, they simply swallow the meat and hook whole and then remain stuck on the line overnight until the hunters return the next morning. Season hunters attested to this, noting alligators only put up a fight if you

¹⁵ The notion that alligators have a “natural fear of humans” was taken from The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries under the tab “Nuisance Alligators.”

pull up on the line too fast, otherwise they typically rise to the surface with little resistance.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the state website promotes the need to have “nuisance” alligator hunters whose role serves as community “protectors” and this fear mongering is perpetuated on *Swamp People*.

The Implications of Integrated Audiences

Those in the town who have limited engagement and interaction with the practices that shape what it means to be Cajun now regularly hunt for play in their effort to maintain that cultural heritage. In these practices (including hunting, fishing, etc.), women are an integral part passing down the skills to their next of kin as a way of preserving their ethnic identity. Girls learn how to hunt and fish alongside boys and women who do so are not “acting like men” but are “acting like Cajuns.” By learning how to “live off the land,” residents in this town (regardless of their class position) can differentiate themselves from outsiders. Living off the land serves as a way of preserving their ethnic roots and bonds residents rather than fracturing the community by gendered identity.

Nonetheless, even within a community that widely accepts female hunters as legitimate subjects, there is a difference between living off the land and *making a living* off the land. While women are regularly accepted as part of the “hunt for play” narrative, women are still excluded from *the perception* of what constitutes an alligator hunter but only among those who occupy a settled position in the town. Since they do not regularly engage and interact those who hunt for a living and instead rely on *Swamp People* to shape what it means to constitute someone who makes a living off the land, women alligator hunters are rendered invisible. This invisibility has long-term implications when one considers this town relies on oral history, passed down from one

¹⁶ These observations should not undermine the fact that alligator hunting is dangerous. However, the danger is magnified in *Swamp People* while simultaneously deflecting the *arduous work* described by professional hunters (i.e. long hours, hard labor, inconsistent pay).

generation to the next.¹⁷ As my data indicate, this cultural transmission is typically done through hunting and fishing trips (i.e. hunt for play activities). Since the number of people who are making a living off the land is slowly dwindling, the narrative regarding the role of women as individuals who make a living off the land will also likely shift. As a result, women intimately connected to the profession are erased from the historical accounts of what it means to be a Cajun. Those who work indoors symbolically moved them from the bayous into the kitchens. Nonetheless, they are still working side-by-side with their husbands. Like the hard work erased from the show, women who occupy a lower status position in the town are also rendered invisible.

This invisibility ties back to Fraser & Gordon's (1994) historical analysis of the word "dependency" in American culture. They argue that women's dependency in preindustrial society was less gender-specific. In effect, women who hunt alligator are reimagined through the interactions between *Swamp People* and those who occupy a settled position in the town – transformed "from partners to parasites" (Fraser & Gordon 1994: 318 referencing Land 1980). Similar to the preindustrial period, alligator hunting (like farming) is dependent on a landowner, while women in this profession are still subordinate to men and the social relation of that subordination is melded with their spouses who also hold a lower-class position in the town. While their labor is still controlled by others, their contributions are "visible, understood, and valued" (Fraser & Gordon 1994, pp. 332) among those who still make their living off the land. Yet these residents are not part of the *Swamp People* narrative and since those who control the narrative carve their own *independence* from the devaluation of women's unwaged domestic and parenting labor, they have a vested interest in maintaining that gender segregation (Fraser & Gordon

¹⁷ During my final trip, I met a man who is compiling a local history book. However, he did not make a living off the land and he too found *Swamp People* to be accurate. He described the series as his "inspiration" for the book.

1994).

Such a finding is akin to Bettie's (2003) central argument that "working class" life is perceived as distinctly white and male. For those who only "hunt for play," the idea of a woman living an unsettled life is inherently contradictory, making such women invisible in their world which is amplified in *Swamp People's* depiction of the profession. Residents' limited interactions with those who "hunt for pay," combined with images fueled from *Swamp People*, allows those in a privileged class position to ascribe living off the land as gendered. Similar to the comparison Hochschild (2016) made to British anthropologist Sir Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, *Swamp People* is part of the cultural authority which decides which ancestors are remembered and who will be forgotten. Since those who describe *Swamp People* as the "real reality" are also the oral history authorities in town, their conception of what constitutes "real" Cajun identity creates an environment where women who hunt alligator are slowly being forgotten. As a process of "media-in-interaction" *Swamp People* acts as a form of cultural erasure whereby women are no longer seen as legitimate subjects in a cultural pastime they have partaken in for centuries.

In an environment where "the media," "the audience," and "the community" are increasingly intertwined, more research is needed to better understand how media depictions of communities represents and misrepresents them and, more importantly, how these mediated interactions influence, and perhaps transform, community identity. As this chapter demonstrates, *Swamp People* plays a key role of connecting those in the community who feel distanced from their cultural heritage. While reality television is, in its most basic form, a hyper-reality that "threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false,' between 'real' and 'imaginary'" (Baudrillard 2001: pp 169-171), this simulacrum has long-term implications when it comes to reifying gender segregation and inequality. Even though a series such as *Swamp People* purports to offer a "real-

life” glance at the lives of ordinary citizens, the script is still formatted to fit an expected storyline: conflict and resolution. In doing so, *Swamp People* presents audiences with images that legitimate a cultural understanding of normality. However, the “audience” in this case are also residents of a town featured on-air. Because of their direct and indirect involvement, *Swamp People* has become an intimate part of how residents who no longer make a living off the land relate to and see the world around them. Just like an interaction or exchange with a “real” person, *Swamp People* has become an important part of how individuals in this town who hunt for play construct and define reality. Rather than assume a “true” self exists independently from mediated exchanges and interaction, this study found shared meanings of what constituted “the self” within their society were intimately connected to the mediated depiction of their cultural realities (Mead 1934). Such a finding extends the notion that what we take to be the “natural” state of ourselves and our environments is simply a social construction with the most salient interactions resembling what we believe to be our everyday life: (Berger & Luckmann 1966) an important contribution to audience studies as well as sociological theory. While previous research has demonstrated that “an audience” is fluid and does not fit neatly within institutionally-defined boxes (Ang 1991), my findings go further arguing that because audience and creator are increasingly intertwined, we must broaden the very concept of what constitutes an audience to understand the consequences of what is *missing* or *absent* from what a traditional audience can consume.

In the past, scholars have demonstrated how reality television can open the possibility for those traditionally barred from media participation to share their stories (Gamson 1998). For those who occupy a settled position in the town, *Swamp People* did just that. It provided a level of visibility to their town and a life traditionally obscured from mainstream media. In an attempt to cling to their Cajun roots, *Swamp People* gives people who have had their cultural connections

taken from them a sense of pride and authority to see their town featured on networked television. They described this connection using statements such as “claim to fame” or expressed gratitude for the show in putting their small town “on the map.” Jenny, a waitress at a local bar, described the phenomenon well. We conducted our interview at her place of employment before the bar opens to the public. As she took barstools off the counter she tells me her connection to the series: “I love it, I used to have to say [about where she is from] it’s just this little town between Baton Rouge and New Orleans...and now we just say—Do you watch *Swamp People*? Yeah! That’s where I live.” As she talks I notice the televisions that surround here are all playing *Swamp People*.

Individuals who occupy a settled position in town also described how fans of the show now reach out to them on social media because their hometown is affiliated with the series. Elise mentioned this phenomenon in the focus group and others agreed. She described:

“...like Facebook, if they see in my...uh...my background that I’m from [name of town] people will pop up: “Do you know the *Swamp People*?” People I don’t know have sent me several requests, they are just like do you know the swamp people? I actually use the show as a way to connect with others outside of the community.”

This process of connection and identification is important because it reasserts that what they are watching is “real reality.” Since *Swamp People* airs on The History Channel, they trust the series to be an accurate representation of their daily lives. While it is true that *Swamp People* has provided a level of visibility not traditionally afforded to rural America, it also obscured the fundamental role of women in a profession that very few engage with regularly, even residents in the town where the show was filmed. *Swamp People* did open the possibility for participation for those who make a living off the land and already occupy a marginalized position within the community. Instead, the producers recruited residents extremely disconnected from their life to represent them. As a result, *Swamp People* further isolated their experiences, erasing women from historical accounts of those who hunt for pay.

The rise of the Integrated Audiences

What this chapter demonstrates is the importance of studying what I term “integrated audiences.” As featured in *Swamp People*, integrated audiences are communities where the creator of the media content and the audience are the same. However, it does not mean everyone in the community creates the content. Rather, the process of having some portion of the community involved with content creation ends up creating a media product which holds what Frederick Wherry (2011) would refer to as an “aura of authenticity.” Most importantly, in an integrated audience, the subject of the media is the community itself. Building off audience reception theory, my findings demonstrate a need to push the concept of “an audience” further to understand how collaborative media products collide with community identity.

Part of doing so draws from fandom scholarship that studied how “diffused audiences” (Longhurst et al. 2007) interact with media objects in myriad ways, changing the meaning to fit their own cultural logics and even form communities around these new narratives (Jenkins 1992, Baym 2000, Bielby et al. 1999, Gray et al. 2007). Fandom scholars such as Nancy Baym (2000), Denise Bielby (1999) and Henry Jenkins (1992) have demonstrated audiences can interact with media objects, changing the meaning to fit their own cultural logics and even form communities around these new narratives. While these studies are essential for understanding the implications of the increasingly blurred space between producer/consumer, it fails to account for the role of existing community dynamics and how this might influence what stories are told and the impact of those stories. Drawing on “convergence culture” (Jenkins 2006) can help explain how fragmented audiences are empowered through collaboration but fail to consider how other audiences might not be afforded the same opportunities to participate.

By turning to “integrated audiences” (Tripodi 2017), we can combine media studies with sociological inquiry. Integrated audiences are essential because they allow us to examine how mediated narratives have the potential to either reaffirm or shift the boundaries, bonds, and norms which constitute community membership. They also provide a new avenue to investigate the interactive processes through which inequality is created and sustained by studying how existing power dynamics entrenched within communities present obstacles for equal participation. They focus on the role of content moderation regarding what stories can persist. Due to faulty recruitment tactics, those who represented the community in *Swamp People* were the landowners and already occupied a higher socioeconomic position in the town. Since landowners more frequently interacted and engaged with a mediated representation of swamp life, those in a higher socioeconomic position ended up providing a representation of what constituted unsettled life in the town. As a result, those already in positions of power ended up pushing out, erasing, and otherwise rendering obsolete the lived experiences of female alligator hunters.

Given the findings from this first case, I sought to find other examples of integrated audiences to better understand the extent by which the content moderator complicates what stories prevail. I also wanted to extend out from examples of integrated audiences rooted in reality television narratives. For while this case illuminated how the integrated audiences shape a community’s perception of itself, I also felt the role of the content moderator needed to vary. In this case, those awarded the opportunity to determine the dominant narrative were still rooted in more traditional media practices. Even though those in the town could directly and indirectly participate in the content creation, they still held relatively little power regarding who was able to develop content. Based on these findings, I sought to answer the following question: What are the consequences of content mediation when a media product has the power to shape a community’s

perception of itself? Does the narrative shift when the role of the content moderator is more infused within the community?

To answer these questions, I identified two more cases: Yik Yak and its use inside a college campus, as well as content added to Wikipedia in conjunction with edit-a-thons. These additional cases were selected because of the varying degrees of distance between the content moderator and individuals who considered themselves community members. The content moderator in my *Swamp People* case was extremely removed from the community in which the show was filmed and subsequently watched. Given the fact the production team who crafted *Swamp People's* narrative lived so far outside the town where the series was centered, it is not particularly surprising that the narrative of what constituted “real life” for the town was littered with inaccuracies. What was surprising was that, within a town of 3000, those who resided there favored the televised narrative over the lived experiences of their neighbors because they had more direct access, engagement, and interaction with both the televised show as well as with the people in their town chosen by producers to star in the show.

Like *Swamp People*, Yik Yak claims to represent the culture of the college where it is being used, but the content moderator is more diffused, and those who are capable of moderating content are thereby multiplied. There is not one authority (i.e. a producer or director) shaping the narrative. Rather, everyone who uses the app can add and remove content. Nonetheless, Yik Yak still controls the algorithmic programming that decides how information is organized and what kind of information remains visible. Wikipedia's moderation decisions are the most “organic” to the community. As one of the founding principles of the site, Wikipedians have ultimate control regarding what kind of information is added. With Wikipedia billing itself as the “free encyclopedia that anyone can edit,” the narratives which persist are shaped entirely by those who

use it. As such, Wikipedia is the most completely integrated audience. Given these differences concerning how content is moderated and who makes the decisions regarding what content is afforded visibility, I expected to find differences across my cases. I was surprised instead to find a core similarity: a pattern of inequality that emerged that was not platform-specific or dependent on the proximity of the content moderator.

Chapter 3

Reaffirmation and double marginalization: Integrated Audiences on a College Campus

It's the first few days of "rush" – a series of social events and gatherings where students (primarily freshmen and transfers) consider joining one of the various sororities and fraternities on their campus. For a week, the campus swells with young women in short dresses chattering about which sorority they hope to join. They move together in large crowds, the sounds of their high heels clicking in cacophony along the pavement. Along "fraternity row", large houses loom over a grassy area where students play flag-football and young women sunbathe in bikinis. Top-forties hits blare from the windows and young men drink cheap beer in red solo-cups. At the end of the week, the fraternities and sororities will offer "bids" to the students they think are the best fit for membership. Culminating in what is colloquially referred to as "bid day," women open envelopes to reveal where they have been selected. Running out of the auditorium, they are welcomed by a sea of balloons, cheering, songs, and hugs from their new "sisters." Boys receive bids later that evening at parties which take place at their houses. Swells of young men spill over their balconies and onto the sidewalks that line their houses.

The rush experience is equally ubiquitous on social media and consumes the feed of Yik Yak, a smartphone app that students on the campus refer to as an "anonymous Twitter." Throughout the week, post after post refer to rush. Some Yaks offer satirical advice like "Guy Rush Tips" or "Girl Rush Tips" joking that men should try to hook up with "a brother's girlfriend" to "prove you spit more game than him" and that women should "ask directly about any rumors" to show their "knowledge about their sisterhood." There are also words of encouragement, suggesting people give other houses a chance even if they were dropped from their top choices. Young women express frustration and sadness over not being selected by what they refer to as the "top tier" sororities. Other students express their support for women who no longer feel good

enough. In one post, someone writes: “Hey Girls – you’re all still beautiful”; another Yak asserts that women frustrated with the process should “hate on the system” and not the girls in sororities. There are even pleas from students to focus on something else “STOP ALL THIS RUSH TALK,” someone writes. “It’s giving me PTSD from my own horrible rush experience.” On and offline, Greek life permeates the campus even though a mere 35% of the student population is a member of a fraternal organization.

In the last chapter, I drew on my data to demonstrate how *Swamp People* acts as a form of community camaraderie by reaffirming what it means to be a “Cajun” for those who can no longer make a living off the land. At the same time, my data also demonstrate how *Swamp People* acts as a form of “dual marginalization,” rewriting the roles and responsibilities of those who once forged a living from the bayous. I argue that these cultural inconsistencies are linked to editors, directors, and producers of the series being unfamiliar with the cultural norms they were hired to represent. If those who controlled the narrative (i.e. content moderators) were more integrated within the space, the story may have changed. For example, were the content moderators connected to the culture of the community, they would have known the contact information of the people obtained through the Wildlife and Fishery offices were not the “real” alligator hunters. Like all content produced for television, the creators had a vision of what would “sell” and were not particularly concerned whether this was representative of “real” Cajun identity. Were more people afforded a chance to participate in the production of the series, *perhaps* a different story would have emerged.

On YouTube, Yik Yak has a promotional video where a student dressed as a magician feels isolated by what seems to be the students who surround him. By Yacking the simple phrase “Any other magicians out there?”, he finds “his herd” when another classmate notifies him of the Magic Club meeting happening that night. This idyllic vision of Yik Yak fosters a sense of belonging to

the magician who once felt so alone. In my own observations, I also saw this form of camaraderie via Yik Yak. For those taking part in fraternity and sorority rush, Yik Yak was another outlet to navigate the rush process, ask about different houses, and learn about the parties happening throughout the week. However, those feelings of reaffirmation were only for those who already held a high-status position in the community. At the same time, a form of algorithmic suppression was taking place, bringing to the surface a much larger issue of inequality in the college campus I was studying. For the students who already felt marginalized in their day-to-day activities, Yik Yak was simply another outlet from which they were excluded.

What is Yik Yak?

Yik Yak is a social media app, described by many as an anonymous version of Twitter. The app is free to download and requires no user name or login information, creating the illusion of complete anonymity.¹⁸ Once the user opens the app, they are immediately placed into the physical community which surrounds them based on geolocate technology.¹⁹ Since college students created the app, the “community” in which a user is placed is tied to the nearest college campus. For example, in the city of Boulder, that app connects you to University of Colorado; in the city of Syracuse or Elon you would also be automatically connected to the local university.

¹⁸ Since my data collection period (2013/2014 academic year) the platform has shifted and now requires users to create a profile although still retains anonymity. I use the word “illusion” because users connect to the app through a series of data points (i.e. the Apple App store or geolocate services) and the company knows who you are. This is made explicitly clear in the Terms of Service agreement whereby it states that Yik Yak will “collect your IP address and generate or collect a unique identifier for your mobile device, which will serve as your user ID.”

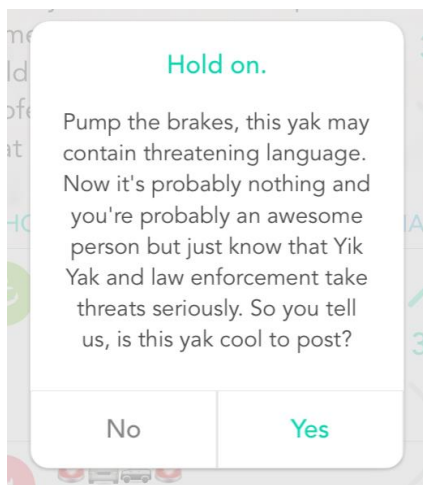
¹⁹ Geolocation is the wireless detection of the physical location of a remote device. As a noun, *geolocation* refers to the physical location itself; as a verb, it refers to the process of detecting that location. Depending on the method used, a geolocation can be as general as the continent the user is connecting from or as specific as a geographic position. <<http://searchmobilecomputing.techtarget.com/definition/geolocation>>

Content on the app is divided into two categories: “new” and “hot,” with the “new” list set as the default. Content is listed chronologically on the “new” and is organized by upvotes on the “hot” list. While all content on Yik Yak is ephemeral, content on the hot list persists for longer.

Once inside the app, users can participate in a variety of ways. They can create their own Yak, comment on other people’s Yaks, and upvote/downvote content. Users are also able to read Yaks without directly participating; however, the app encourages user participation by keeping track of one’s “Yakarma,” a numerical score based on how frequently a user Yaks, replies, votes, or shares content on the app. Users are also able to “peek” into other places by using the search feature or by clicking on one of the communities randomly featured from week to week. For example, during football season, Yik Yak featured University of Southern California when they were playing a particularly contentious football game. However, the geofencing affordance only allows users to post, comment, and vote if they were within a five-mile radius. As a result, you could not post, comment or vote on a feed that you were “peeking” into. The one exception to this was when users set a home base (titled “My Herd”) which allowed users to designate one location where they participated even when they were outside that physical location. This service was particularly popular for students traveling home during the holidays or summer, or studying abroad, as it allowed them to stay connected to what was happening in their college community while they were away.

Yaks are limited to 200 characters and, as of July 2015, users could also add photographs. While most content is immediately available, there are a few programmatic features designed to curb hateful or hurtful content: 1) photographs require moderation before posting; 2) text content using names is not allowed; 3) if text content contains what Yik Yak deems “threatening language” (for example “I wish they would die”), a pop-up will emerge requiring the user to verify that

content is safe to post (see Figure 1); and 4) content that receives a score of -5 is automatically removed from the board. While not explicitly stated, Yik Yak is clearly aiming for a college audience since it was originally promoted using fraternity connections and indicates in the Terms of Service agreement that users under the age of 17 years are not allowed to use the service at any time or in any manner. Unlike many other social media platforms, Yik Yak is a completely ephemeral space. Content constantly refreshes and, depending on how many users are contributing to the app, content is typically only available for a few hours.



(Figure 1)

For the purposes of this dissertation, I classify Yik Yak as a semi-integrated audience because while it is more open for participation than *Swamp People*, individuals outside the community of users also make content moderation decisions. This is done in a couple of ways: firstly, through the design layout of the app. Yik Yak's programmatic decisions determine how information is ordered and made visible. For example, during my data collection period, this organization of information changed. When I first began research, the app opened to "new" Yaks which were rank-ordered by timestamp. However, as the app began growing in popularity, Yik Yak changed this function making it so that the "hot" list became the default. The hot list was organized based on the number of upvotes with the Yaks that were rated highest appearing first.

This shifted the attention of the reader away from the newest contributions and instead drew readers to the content that was the most popular.

Yik Yak also moderated “flagged” content and whether content was ultimately removed or not was up to the discretion of a Yik Yak employee. Yik Yak also designed the algorithm that would remove content with more than a cumulative score of -5. Finally, Yik Yak hired campus representatives (“campus reps”) and rewarded them monetarily for promoting the app on their campus. Based on interviews with a campus rep, Yik Yak would periodically ask reps to “test content” and then report back to the company about how well those test posts were received. For example, in one email shared with me by a campus rep, Yik Yak requested reps post compliments to see how well they fared, and report back on their hypothesis that users prefer positive Yaks. As a way of marketing their product, Yik Yak employees also regularly toured Universities on buses akin to the kind of vehicles typically reserved for rock stars. On these “tours,” Yik Yak employees gave away promotional products including buttons, cups, and socks and encouraged more students to use the app.

Since my data collection period, Yik Yak has largely faded from use on campuses nationwide, including the one where I conducted my study. Part of the reason why I believe the app failed was because of its design upgrades. One of the central findings in my research was students liked the app because it was extremely easy to use and liked that they did not need to create an account or a profile. While Yik Yak still afforded users anonymity, they ultimately shifted the platform to mimic Facebook, requiring users to create a permanent handle/profile. What the company didn’t realize is what students liked about the app was that it was *different from* Facebook. By making the interface more complex, it ultimately deterred students from engaging with the app. That is not to say that because Yik Yak is gone, anonymous forums are also gone.

Yik Yak was also an iteration – the successor of Juicy Campus, a website focusing on gossip, rumors and rants that were aggregated by University.

New Name/Old Problem

Yik Yak was one of the first smartphone apps to combine geolocation with anonymous communication but it was by no means the first medium to facilitate anonymous communication. Prior to Yik Yak taking colleges by storm, websites such as College Anonymous Confession Board (ACB) and Juicy Campus provided a way for college students to gather online and post information in a way that could not be traced back to their offline identity. This ability for individuals to disconnect their on- and off-line “selves” harkens back to early internet scholars who theorized that people use online spaces to play around with their identities. Turkle’s (1995) seminal work found that the anonymity of the internet allowed people to be many selves at once, providing the opportunity for people to play around identity like a series of open computer windows (Turkle 1995). This notion of being able to “play” online has been recently challenged by scholars arguing the boundary between on/off line spaces is increasingly blurred (Livingstone 2003, Baym 2010, boyd 2014, Marwick 2013, boyd and Marwick 2011, Jenkins 1992 & 2006). They argue that since social networking sites are increasingly interconnected, they perpetuate “publicity culture” whereby one’s status is linked to openness and tied to authenticity (Marwick 2013). To cultivate that authenticity, individuals must constantly monitor their performance, creating a “self” entertaining enough to garner followers but simultaneously conveying continuity between on- and off-line personas (boyd and Marwick 2011).

Nevertheless, anonymous interaction is different as it still affords users the chance to play and this feature is ultimately why apps such as Yik Yak and its predecessors are so popular. Yet

even though anonymous forums like Yik Yak hide the poster's identity, the subject is frequently identifiable. An example of being "called out" in a Yak would be "to the guy who just spilled coffee on himself all over the stairs of the library, I feel you." While the poster retains their anonymity, and no personal name is used, the other person becomes visible. This idea of posting content (most often about other people) in a visible space, is not exclusive to online forums. Nora Draper at University of New Hampshire describes what is happening on Yik Yak is akin to the conversations that were taking place on bathroom walls for decades. Researchers who studied graffiti in the 1990s found content similar to what we see today. Draper reasons what is different is that Yik Yak created a platform that made participation in these conversations more accessible and created a wider audience (Bush 2015).

It is, perhaps, this wider reach and scope that has spurred hysteria among mainstream reporters coalescing around a single narrative when it comes to environments that enable anonymous participation such as College ACB or Yik Yak: users should be wary because people will say hurtful things under a veil of anonymity (Dewey 2014, Barbash & Moyer 2015). Armed with this ideology, many high schools have banned Yik Yak in an effort to curb cyberbullying and opinion writers are urging college campuses to do the same (Mach 2014). On the other hand, the creators of Yik Yak argue that anonymity is essential for creating a level playing field. They believe it makes Yik Yak a more democratic social media network than an environment such as Facebook or Twitter because users do not need a large number of followers or friends to have their posts read widely. Moreover, the creators argue that since users are protected by anonymity, they can speak more freely and openly about subjects they might not normally discuss in front of their family and friends. Both perspectives are predicated on the idea that anonymity provides the

opportunity for users to play around with their identity and push back on otherwise restrictive community norms.

This chapter challenges that mantra by unpacking how Yik Yak is another example of an *integrated audience*. In my data, users described they often feel constrained and too anxious to post to the app because they were wary of feeling rejected by their peers. I did not find anyone who Yakked provoking text simply because they were anonymous. Rather, students who actively Yakked were much more inclined to create posts they thought would garner “upvotes” from their peers or shared personal information because they felt like Yik Yak facilitated a sense of trust among its users.

However, a more nuanced understanding of the type of content users felt comfortable posting is sociologically important. Like my *Swamp People* case, by studying the interactional effects between content on Yik Yak and a college campus in which it is embedded, I can focus on the question of whose story is afforded visibility. What I found is that those who already felt like they belonged on the campus used Yik Yak to reaffirm their place within the university and used their participation on Yik Yak to reinforce their sense of belonging within what they perceived as the dominant “group” on their campus. However, the same algorithmic platform that fostered belonging (i.e. voting and commenting on content) ultimately constrained the kind of information regular users felt free to post while simultaneously regulating and removing content that deviated from the formulaic content which routinely performs well on the app.

A Network of Networks

All the respondents who used the app found out about it through friends and started using it as it came up in conversation so frequently. In a focus group, two seniors, both wearing oversized

sweatshirts with their sorority's letters on them, described how they found out about the app from one another.

Julia: I think it's almost more like social networks. Like I started using it cuz your whole [sorority] house is using it, and my whole [sorority] house uses it. It might be more like if your friends all use it, then you have it. I don't know if they would be like—

Emma: I think most of the people I know do have it. Yeah. I don't know if I'm just making that up, but I feel like people bring it up in conversation. Like, "Oh, did you see that funny thing on Yik Yak," or whatever.

The fact that these women heard about the app through the Greek system is not coincidental. As Max, a blond haired, blue-eyed, senior majoring in communication divulged, the app was first promoted through his fraternity and was almost exclusively "Greek" when it first rolled out in spring 2014. Max came to the interview dressed more formally, in what many of the men on campus wore to their classes: a button-down shirt, khakis, and slip-on loafers. During this interview, he described how Yik Yak used a form of guerilla marketing to attract fraternity clientele. "I first heard about Yik Yak through an email they actually sent to my fraternity...[the founder of Yik Yak] sent an email to fraternities and sororities nationwide, saying "Hey, want to help some rad dudes out? We are launching this app, like an anonymous Twitter. If it takes off, we'll bring some beer by the house."...That was like the catch to get people to download it. I didn't download it immediately but eventually I started hearing people talking about it, and then I downloaded it...a lot of talk was like "Hey, did you hear about what they said about that person on Yik Yak?" Despite Max's and his friends' use of the app, the promise of beer never materialized.

Yik Yak's origins in "Greek Life" are significant. Fraternities and sororities are historically places of privilege and as Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) demonstrate, these spaces are used to discriminate by appearance, wealth, and race. The problem with this "party pathway" is that lower-

income students become further isolated from the connections necessary to succeed after college is over. Yik Yak's creators were also in a fraternity while undergraduates at Furman. Marwick (2013) echoes Armstrong and Hamilton's findings demonstrating how the privileged position of Yik Yak's creators (and tech entrepreneurs more widely) is important. Interestingly, in public interviews, the creators described how they sought to make the space anonymous so it would foster a more democratic space, one where people did not need a large number of followers or friends to have their opinions widely read. In their words "When we made this app, we really made it for the disenfranchised" (see Mahler 2014 for full interview). Unfortunately, their desire to create a space for the "disenfranchised" was immediately erased when targeting places of privilege (i.e. fraternities and sororities) – unsurprisingly, the creators were also part of the Greek System on their college campus (Mahler 2014).

Eventually, those who found out about Yik Yak through their fraternities passed it on to those outside of the Greek System. As Bailey, a senior majoring in Communication, described: "First my friend [who was in a fraternity] had it, then he started taking screen shots and sending it to all of us in my apartment. Then more people had it and then before I knew it, it was like everyone had it." Students who also resided in dense networks, such as dormitories, were much more likely to use the app. As Jacob, a freshman who had yet to declare his major, described "it just seemed like everyone was talking about it. Like people would always be saying 'hey, did you see that Yak...'" While this use inside of spaces like dorms or fraternity houses might seem innocuous, it effectively isolates those enrolled at the University who do not participate in Greek life or reside on campus.

Considering who uses the app and why they like it is related to the words used to describe why they enjoyed using Yik Yak (frequently using terms like "relevant" or "relatable" or

“camaraderie.”) During an interview with an African-American woman who was affiliated with one of the well-respected student groups on the campus, she described why her Yaks are popular. A junior majoring in chemistry, Aaliyah had posted her first Yak during finals week, bemoaning the difficulty of her exams and the smell of the library toward the end of the semester. She proudly showed me this Yak, demonstrating it was one of her highest rated Yaks. When I asked why she thought that one did so well, she felt like the success was due to its relatability. “Because people can relate,” she said with a shrug of her shoulders, “I think when people saw it they thought it was funny because they think the same way.”

In addition to being “relatable,” a successful Yak is also dependent on a large group network. Since content on the new list disappears quickly during “high-traffic” times, described by many respondents as the times when people are studying/partying (between 10pm-2am) or ten minutes before the hour (when people are walking between classes), respondents rely on their off-line networks to upvote their content during this time so it can crossover to the hot list where it will gain more visibility. One such bolstering technique was described during the focus group of four white women, each of whom were in a sorority and two were in the same sorority. Madison, a senior with light brown hair and a magnetic smile, described the sense of urgency one feels to get upvotes immediately after posting something. “Yeah, cuz if it doesn't catch on, it goes away in a minute, so you have to get momentum going really fast. We [pointing to the other girl in her sorority] got everyone in our [sorority] house, which is a large house, to upvote it, seeing if it would catch on. It got 35 downvotes and went away within a minute.”

The success of one’s Yak depended on the general mood of the campus and if one could pull in topics of concern to what users described as “the University community.” Not only did posting about notable events such as when one of the sports teams would win ensure one’s Yak

would be successful, it also created a sense of unity between those who used the app and the others around them. Emma, another one of the respondents who was in the same focus group as Madison, described:

Yeah, there's like—during finals and stuff I feel like there's camaraderie because everyone's like, "Oh, eff this, I'm at the library, this sucks."

Those who found the content "relatable" or "relevant" also relied on the app to keep up-to-date on information that related specifically to their campus. When events or inclement weather was happening, users looked to Yik Yak as a way of staying informed on situations unfolding around them. Thinking of Yik Yak in this context resonated for me after hearing a story from Sarah, a particularly driven and high-achieving junior. Sitting at a coffee house, she told me of a time when she heard what she thought was the sound of gunshots outside her window in the middle of the night. With wide blue eyes, she described the concern she felt for her safety since she was living on the ground floor of an apartment complex at the time. Staying in bed, she grabbed her phone but did not call 9-1-1. Instead, her first instinct was to open Yik Yak. Shortly after refreshing her screen, she learned the fraternity house next to her was being vandalized and the sound she heard was rocks being thrown through a window. It was Yik Yak that kept her informed and calmed her nerves. Shortly thereafter, she called the cops to report the incident, telling them that someone was throwing rocks through a window next door. After calling the police, she fell asleep. She no longer felt scared and did not have to wait for an established news outlet to break the story the next day. Sarah learned about the who, what, where, when, and how of the incident that concerned her most as it was happening.

Sarah's story was not unique. Yik Yak users regularly described how they felt more connected and attuned to what was happening at the University because of their engagement with the app. For example, during the winter, many students checked Yik Yak to see if classes were

cancelled and trusted Yik Yak over the University website because of its ability to deliver timely content. In interview after interview, users reiterated that Yik Yak was often a first source of news and information because of its immediacy and relevancy. During my research, students told me they found out about a series of locally notable events through Yik Yak including (but not limited to): an outbreak of mumps, the death of two students who committed suicide, a knife fight which took place in the early morning hours of a 24hr sandwich shop, a snake loose in the Engineering building, free ice cream for freshmen, protestors on the quad, and therapy dogs in the library as support for students during finals. The app also gave them updates for other schools. For example, when a shooting happened on another campus, users both checked their school and peeked into where the shooting was happening to stay informed.

“You can say whatever you want”

Even though students found out about the app from their friends, they also described how Yik Yak was different from Facebook because their identity was concealed. While users described how they liked Yik Yak because it could give them a read on what was going on around them, every respondent also said that despite it being located within their community, anonymity provided users the opportunity to post anything that would come to mind. Paralleling the language used by Yik Yak to promote the product, students described how they could share their thoughts with the people around them while maintaining privacy. As many users described, the draw of the app was how easy it was to begin using since one did not need to create an account; and that because it was anonymous, one did not need to think about what was posted. David, a freshman who had yet to declare a major, was particularly attracted to the ease of use. “You don’t even need an account, you can just write a post and hit enter. It’s like the best part is that it’s very accessible,

you don't need to log in, you don't need to link it to an account such as Facebook or whatever, it's completely anonymous and completely unattached, you just download the app and *you can post whatever.*"

While there was consensus regarding the fact that Yik Yak allowed people to post whatever came to mind, there was variation regarding if that anonymity was positive or negative. Some felt the anonymity was dangerous because people would say hurtful things under a cloak of anonymity. Amy, a blond woman with a loud voice and infectious laugh, turned serious when I broached this subject. As a senior double-majoring in gender studies and public policy, she has thought a lot about the implications of anonymous expression. "I have a problem with internet comments and anonymity anyway and I feel like putting that in a college culture where depression is a problem and suicide rates are so high and so prevalent...I think a lot of people use it as a way of expressing their emotions and people would be able to respond negatively." However, Amy also mentioned this anonymity could provide the opportunity for some to play. In her words "it allows people to be freer in both directions." She went on to describe this tension:

"So I think people are more themselves on an anonymous forum in both people are more likely to be more open and kind and also negative and judgmental but generally more the later....But I think it can destroy stereotypes in a lot of ways like when OPs [the original poster] will post details in the comments about themselves to get context and it will be a question about dating something...and turns out to be a man...like once I saw a bunch of men talking about their female crushes it was interesting to me that a guy would even say crush but maybe because it's only on an anonymous source"

Amy was not alone in her opinion of Yik Yak as being both "safe" and "dangerous." While it provided a haven for people to express feelings they might not normally say "in public," it also provided some an opportunity to spew hate. However, each of these narratives described the option for Yik Yak users to breach societal norms and test the boundaries of what was acceptable within

the community. Yet when I asked users about their personal posts, the sentiment changed. While users believed that Yik Yak facilitated a space where anyone could post whatever came to mind, individuals I interviewed refrained from taking those same liberties. I untangled this contradiction by asking users directly, later in the interview, if they felt comfortable Yakking about whatever came to mind. Upon asking this question, an overwhelming majority of users disagreed, stating they thought carefully and critically before posting a Yak fearing that what they posted would be rejected by their peers.

The insecurities in anonymity

Even though all my respondents believed Yik Yak was a place where anyone could say anything they wanted, they were ambivalent regarding their own Yakking habits. While every user had posted at least one Yak, none of them posted immediately after opening the app. Rather, users described how they would take their time to learn the norms of the space and moved slowly in their participation. First, they would just read Yaks, occasionally voting on the content. Then, users described how they would begin commenting on other's Yaks to, in the words of numerous interviewees, "get their confidence up" before posting any original content. When they finally did work up the courage to post their own Yak, they were nervous about how well it would be received. This feeling was expressed in detail during the focus group of sorority women after I asked them to describe how they felt after posting their first Yak:

- Riley: I was nervous. Like my thumb and my finger was like shaking.
Emma: Because you don't want to get—
Riley: Downvoted.
Emma: Downvoted (said at the same time as Riley). Yeah, I mean even though it's anonymous, so no one's going to know it's you.
Julia: I definitely remember, I don't even know what it was about, but I remember discussing it with Riley beforehand...Like do you think this is funny, like will people think this is funny?

Riley: I remember texting you asking how many upvotes yours got to see how it did afterward.
Julia: It's just that fear of not being funny.
Emma: I mean, I think about a post if I ever post, I think about it for a while. I probably have a draft of it on—I think about it for a long time. I want it to be good, even if they don't know it's you.
Julia: Yeah.

The fact that this was a focus group of all women is important, as they more frequently described Yakking with caution or being nervous and uncertain about their posts; but fear of Yak rejection was not exclusive to women. Male respondents who did not express trepidation before posting a Yak described a different kind of rejection apprehension. Take for example Aiden, a freshman majoring in computer science. A lanky kid with brown floppy hair, he asserted that he did not get nervous when he posted a Yak. Yet in the same interview he revealed that he deletes any Yak that does not score at least 50 points, what he describes as “rejection.” Even though the Yak itself will likely disappear in less than an hour, Aiden's desire to have his Yak upvoted by a minimum of 100 students indicates that he takes seriously how well his Yak is received by other users. He is literally ashamed – even with the anonymity Yik Yak provides – to have authored an unpopular Yak.

Max, the senior mentioned earlier, also deletes Yaks that are not received well by other users. When I asked him to elaborate on what it felt like to have a Yak do so poorly, he relayed to me feelings of disappointment. “It's like you want to be accepted by the community around you, and that's what's so unique about Yik Yak. It's just the people around you. I think if you feel that what you're posting is getting downvoted, it's kind of like you're getting negative attention from the community or you're not fitting in, or you're not upholding the standards of the community...I would feel bad about myself if I had something that had negative four... You don't want to feel like, “Everyone hated what I said.””

As a way of ensuring that their Yaks will not get rejected, users post content that follows an almost formulaic manner. Monica, a freshman majoring in computer science, has spent a great deal of time considering what this entails. The time she has spent considering this surprised me as her outward appearance gives an air of not caring what others think. With a deep voice, red streaks in her hair, multiple piercings in her ears, and dark eye makeup, Monica asserts self-confidence. Yet, she too wants her Yaks to be upvoted and reveals to me the recipe for Yak success: “My most popular posts are vaguely inspirational things about [the University]...If you praise [the University] at the right time, [and] there is definitely a right time, people will upvote it. If you write oh yeah [University] this is why we’re super awesome [you will get upvotes].”

Respondents in my sorority focus group echoed this sentiment, describing how they even experimented with the formula, testing out different Yaks to see which type would rise to the top.

Julia: One time me and my friend last year we were just sitting around, and we posted I think it was three different yaks to see what would happen. We posted one that we thought was super dumb...we were like, “Super beautiful day at the best university in the whole fucking world.” I think that’s what we yakked. Then we thought it was so dumb. Then we posted one that we actually thought was funny. I can’t remember what it was. It was just like—I have no idea, but it was something that was more real. Then the one that was really dumb and about [the University] got way more upvotes.

Emma: Yeah, the school spirit thing always does well.

In another focus group with four seniors, they all agreed that people who posted were primarily trying to craft content that would get the most upvotes. Steve, an Asian man planning on continuing his MA in public policy after graduation, summed it up nicely. “ People are just out there to make something—they're there to pick up those upvotes or whatever. They're trying to throw out a lot of jokes out there, and a lot of them are hit or miss, I think, and that's why there are really terrible jokes and sometimes, you get a good one. People are looking for that sense of

approval, I think” After saying this, the other three in the group (two women and a man) nodded their heads in agreement.

Described by Goffman (1959) as stigma, users want to avoid being rejected from their group and try to avoid breaching the established norms of their imagined community (Garfinkel 1967). As a result, they tend to post “safer” content they know will be well received, and think carefully about what they want to Yak beforehand, soliciting friends to upvote their content so that it will persist and potentially crossover to the hot list. In addition to carefully formulating content, users repost reused or recycled content from other sites. Diane, a senior majoring in foreign affairs, had become disenfranchised with the app given students’ propensity for posting unoriginal content. She had come to our interview right after the gym, her long dark hair was pulled up in a ponytail and she rolled her green eyes when she described how she “found that a lot of the jokes that people were making that were supposed to be funny that were upvoted and stuff like that were really recycled, and I had seen them six times before.”

Diane’s annoyance with hackneyed content was echoed on the app. When content was unoriginal, users would post comments calling out users for trying to blatantly up their “Yakarma” posting statements such as “I too read Reddit,” the phrase “Reyak,” or simply posting three recycle emoji to signify they knew the content was unoriginal. One can see further evidence of copied material by peeking into other universities and looking at their hot list. Typically, at least one of the Yaks on the hot list can be seen on another university’s hot list or has been only slightly modified for the community where the feed is located. For example, rival schools (i.e. University of Texas and Texas A&M; University of Southern California and UCLA; or the University of Virginia and Virginia Tech) make similar remarks just modifying the name of the school. Other frequently seen jokes are typically cross-posted on websites such as Reddit or Tumblr.

Through my ethnographic observations and interviews, it became clear that active users did not use Yik Yak to post whatever came to mind. Instead, they were much more concerned with the feedback from whom they considered their peers at the University. As one student (Amy – quoted above) described, she now prefers to Yak verse text because of the personal gratification of seeing people upvote her material – in her words:

It's like a heightened Facebook. Like when I post something on FB you get that weird rush when someone likes it, like someone is paying attention to you, someone cares. Whereas with Yik Yak it's like someone chuckled or was like that's right...just a rush of being acknowledged.

In this way, what is deemed funny or relatable content is iterative and based on their daily interactions both on campus but through Yik Yak. Students who used the app reinforced their sense of belonging within the campus as a result. Even Amy who was first afraid that the anonymity of Yik Yak would make people say hurtful content because they were afforded anonymity, changed her mind once she started using the app. As she described later in the interview:

I post things that are more emotional. Like, I need to express something but I don't want to burden friends or family with it, if that makes sense. They always get 40 or 50 upvotes which is I think really interesting...I use it as more of an outlet of sorts.

As much as formulaic and re-used content appears on the site, there is also a space for genuine emotional disclosure and for those seeking social support. It is this sense of belonging through interactions within the physical campus and on Yik Yak which allows students to form a sense of trust in Yik Yak and share highly sensitive information, even if it won't garner upvotes. Not only did this trend of revealing information about oneself show up in my interviews, it regularly surfaced during my ethnographic observations of Yik Yak.

Sometimes the self-disclosure was reflective of the pressure students felt to constantly be working. For example, students often disclosed they binge-watched Netflix instead of studying for

their exams and, in my interviews, students described how seeing these posts were good for their psyche. In a campus with a culture of over-work, students described the sense of solace they found in Yik Yak when they learned they were not the only ones feeling burnt out. On a more serious note, this sense of a community of trust was demonstrated in the prevalence and reaction to suicide threats regularly made on Yik Yak after the hours of 11pm. In the midnight hours when many students on the campus were feeling alone or scared, their cries for help were answered in a supportive and committed way – with students sharing the numbers for university resources and even their personal email addresses as a reminder that no one is really “alone” within their community. Even though this sense of community reaffirmation sometimes came in the form of recycled content, it also provided a space of trust to post content they did not want to share with others around them allowing them to share things they might not normally say in public.

At the same time, users also saw their performance on Yik Yak as a gauge concerning how well they “fitted” within their community. Given that Yik Yak was so ubiquitous in their physical environments (as described earlier, many in their peer groups discussed content they had seen on Yik Yak in face-to-face situations), users described how they took time to think before they posted, trying to craft content they thought would be well received by their peers. However, for those who already did not feel like they belonged at the university, Yik Yak ended up further marginalizing these students from their campus community.

Yik Yak – “Not a place for me”

While users found out about Yik Yak and were subsequently inclined to download it because of the frequency with which it was discussed in conversation, non-users failed to see the appeal in the app for similar reasons. This first resonated with me in an interview with Justin, an African-American man who was set to graduate that spring. At the time, I had largely focused on

how students were using the app to find out about information on the campus. When he told me he had heard about the app but never used it, I asked if he felt out of the loop.

“I feel like it's kinda hard for me to answer that question because I feel like there is a difference here between what African-American students here do and what white students here do...I just know that I'm out of the loop when it comes to a lot of things...and Yik Yak is just one of those things...I just feel like there is a part of [the university] that I don't want to be in the loop in and I'm not in the loop in and that's kinda how I see a lot of apps, it's really trendy and fratty, it's more of a lifestyle. I feel like if you're using Yik Yak at [the university] you're also more likely to be...you're more likely to *not* be me. I think it's something that you're just around. So, people that *should* know, get on Yik Yak, and I guess what I'm saying is that nobody that I am close to that I see every day is talking about Yik Yak so I really didn't have any interest in it.”

As we can see, in the same way that Max, a white man in a fraternity, felt inclined to get on Yik Yak because all his friends were going on, Justin felt inclined to stay away because his friends, most of whom also identified as African-American, were not. That is not to say that those who felt marginalized from Yik Yak failed to see the content altogether. Alicia (an African-American woman majoring in American Studies and Foreign Affairs) and many others who refrained from using Yik Yak were still able to see Yik Yak screenshots on other social media sites (i.e. Facebook or Twitter). Seeing the nasty commentary on the screenshots from Yik Yak reaffirmed for her that, like Justin, Yik Yak was simply not a place for her. As she described in her interview:

I mean everyone knows that a typical [university] student is a white student, who is middle upper-class or wealthy, they wear similar things, like a Longchamp bag, running sneakers, running leggings, [sorority/fraternity] attire on their backpack or shirt... and from what I've seen from what people have posted [to Yik Yak] I get the image in my head of someone I described, wealthy, white, privileged and used to getting their way and are irritated that anyone is less than that or working towards injustice...and it's clear that the white community and the black community have totally different issues. It's like while black twitter is upset about someone shooting this person, white twitter is upset that someone got their name wrong on their cup at Starbucks and they can choose not to be aware of certain issues [on Yik Yak]

everyone was celebrating [an event on campus] and we were like no, you can't just pretend nothing happened.

Another African-American respondent, Hailey, found content at the top of the hot list offensive. Like Alicia, she also refrained from accessing Yik Yak directly but frequently saw screenshots from the app on her Facebook newsfeed. In one Yak, Hailey described how students at the university were comparing black students to farm equipment. Yet the frustration with racism was not exclusive to African-American students. Matt, a white male majoring in Spanish and communication, also stopped using the app because of the persistent racism he kept seeing.

“Some things just go away immediately...the really horrifically racist ones generally went away. But the ones that were kind of like micro-aggression, like...“Well good for you and your rights”... To me the sense of entitlement in that was really unnerving. At least in that instance, Yik Yak became for me a body of evidence with which I could indict the school, indict the members of my student body for being ignorant, for being kind of racist, or selfish, or whatever.”

Jake (a white male majoring in history) echoed Matt's sentiments of privilege. He too saw the content indirectly through screenshots of the university's Yik Yak on a news website. In a focus group, he described his frustration as he saw the posts displayed for the world to see.

My opinion on that matter in particular, it's like, there are all these stereotypes regarding [the university]... I feel like the culture here is homogeneous...but, like over time, I really loved it here. I've had a great time, and I've made it something that's great for me. But, seeing all those Yik Yaks released just made those stereotypes real. Then you realize that that bubble I created was just a bubble, and [the university] does have a lot of problems.

While the outward racism that these respondents were referring to was explicit, not all the content was so aggressive. Matt, described earlier, referred to these instances as “micro-aggressions.” Emily, a mix-raced woman majoring in sociology, found these kinds of posts particularly problematic. In a three-hour interview, we looked through her phone together, allowing her to point to instances of what she termed “PC Racism.” Using Emily's cues, I began

flagging similar kinds of content and over the course of the year found multiple instances of PC Racism at the top of the hotlist. Take, for example, one yak with a score of 200+ upvotes that read: “Dear Asians – it’s customary for us to exit the elevator before you all rush on to it.” Another Yak that fared similarly well was a response to a photograph posted of a black toad with extended vocal chords “ewwww” the user yakked, “it looks like a black guy’s nut.” Another PC racist Yak included a picture from a *Dora the Explorer* episode with the caption “Young Latina rides huge cock” (see Figure 2) receiving 160+ upvotes. Another user commented on the Dora picture writing “this will do, ‘unzips pants.’”



(Figure 2)

A voice for the disenfranchised?

Despite non-users distaste for some of the content on the app, none of them used Yik Yak to discuss their frustrations. Moreover, they did not take to the comments section as a way of policing behavior they found particularly appalling. When asked why, a common theme emerged: when they disagreed with Yik Yak majority, their sentiments were deleted using the same algorithm designed to curb cyberbullying. As Leah, whose experience Yakking about racist recruitment

tactics at a university event from the beginning of this dissertation, described of her Yakking experience:

It's not a dialog right, so if you have an unpopular opinion on Reddit...everyone down-votes you until you're at the bottom of the page...when you are down-voted off of Yik Yak you are gone, your voice is lost from that conversation. Your voice is literally erased from the conversation.

Leah described the frustration and hurt that came with her Yaks getting continuously voted off. Eventually, she found her voice was so stifled that having the app was pointless and she deleted it from her phone. In a different interview, a young woman named Audrey told me how hard it was for her to be a transfer student. Now a senior majoring in communication, Audrey transferred from a community college just a few hours south of where she goes now. An attractive white woman who seemed to be the archetypal university student, I was surprised to hear she didn't feel like Yik Yak was a place where she could vent her frustrations. In her words:

I guess, you know, some people could look at that as an outlet. I just feel like it wouldn't make me feel better and I don't think I'd get much of a response out of this area anyway because no one knows what transfer students go through and no one really cares.

Yet I quickly learned her frustrations were linked to her inability to obtain financial aid over the summer for her to complete the credits she needed to graduate a year early. As a young woman from a small rural town, her desire to finish quickly to avoid another year of paying for tuition was not a concern that those on Yik Yak valued. This made sense when I realized other students who had transferred from other four-year institutions did not express the same frustrations with the app. Unlike Audrey, many of them were familiar with the platform and used it at the school they had transferred from.

Tina, a senior double majoring in communication and computer science and an international student from India, revealed she had never posted because she was unsure if her jokes

would be well received, and that she didn't feel compelled to discuss her problems as publicly as is common in Western culture. This idea of reception, or thinking that what you say will not be well received by the others in the community also concerned Ellie. A junior majoring in psychology and photography with the goal of going to medical school, Ellie described how the black student organization she belonged to organized protests. It typically used other social media tools, besides Yik Yak, she said.

So usually it's word of mouth or a text thing...usually an email is sent out or a text or something is posted on Instagram and then we all gather ...[A different organization] mostly did e-mail or Facebook...the thing about it is that you could post stuff like that to Yik Yak but it would just get downvoted and then it would just disappear so, I don't know...

As my data demonstrate, on this campus Yik Yak did not provide an outlet for the marginalized, regardless of the source of their marginalization. Even patterns of exclusion that seemed to reflect the structure of the university were intimately related to processes of structural inequality. For example, some might think that it is different to feel excluded because of transfer status rather than race, but it was the intersectional oppressions that determined whether students used the app. Take, for example, Aaliyah who I mentioned earlier. Her experience differed from my other African-American respondents because she was heavily involved in a well-connected group on the campus that was difficult to gain entry too. This was also clear with Audrey who stereotypically fitted the kind of woman who thrives on the campus but who does not have the social or economic capital to feel like she belongs. Although Droll and Buffington intended to create a filterless space where everyone's voices could be heard, they did not consider how their algorithms might be used in unexpected ways and since they recruited users through historical places of privilege that they themselves shared, they encouraged an environment wherein only some could participate which many actively avoided.

These sentiments, as well as the others divulged in individual interviews, are important because they indicate the marginalization Alicia and Justin felt is not isolated to Yik Yak. For them, there is a *subset* of the community using the app and, in their words, those who frequent the app are from a privileged position. While students who use Yik Yak are drawn to the space for its relevancy or support, students like Alicia, Justin, Audrey, and Leah become, in a way, doubly marginalized because Yik Yak increases the visibility for those who already occupy a majority position on the campus. Even though Yik Yak is now largely obsolete, the importance of these findings are still tantamount. For just as Yik Yak replaced its predecessor Juicy Campus and College ACB, anonymous forums such as WhatsGoodly? have already taken the place of Yik Yak. Therefore, the technology itself is superfluous and the findings from this case are not unique to Yik Yak.

Similar to the findings from *Swamp People*, those in the majority could wield the dominant narrative rendering some stories hypervisible while simultaneously hiding from view positions that did not fit the normative view of the community. In doing so, it created a sense of common identity and reaffirmation for those who already felt like they belonged on the campus. For students who enjoyed a sense of trust within their college campus, Yik Yak reinforced their connections. Yik Yak allowed students to commiserate over final exams or particularly difficult professors. It provided students the opportunity to bond over a basketball game or rationalize their decision to watch Netflix instead of study. For those who tailgated before the football game or got together at the local bar to watch when the basketball team was on the road, it amplified their feeling of unity.

Not only did it reaffirm their place within the community when times were good, Yik Yak provided a special place for students to realize they were not alone during a time of need and allowed them to express grief over the passing of a relative or thoughts of suicide. While it is true

that students professing bouts of depression or thoughts of suicide might not normally say these things “in public,” when they shared their desires to end their life, they were met with support from the community of users. For that sense of belonging on Yik Yak to take place, students had to feel some level of trust with peers on their campus who used the app. Part of how students cultivated that sense of belonging was by figuring out what kind of content got upvoted and since many users felt a sense of reaffirmation when what they posted got upvotes, these users seemed to gravitate toward content that they know would fare well. Overwhelmingly, my findings suggested regular users refrained from posting content that they thought might not garner the support of the majority. What about the minority voices?

Since students found out about it through their friends and wanted to feel accepted by their peers, students used Yik Yak to post what they believed was noncontroversial content, favoring “relatable” posts that would ensure upvotes. Given the propensity with which users heard their friends talk about Yik Yak in conversation, they described it as a harmless distraction with humorous content that created a sense of camaraderie on campus. The algorithm that deleted content with a cumulative score of -5 empowered the community to regulate content and, as a result, Yackers reasoned that even though Yik Yak could be mean-spirited at times, particularly hateful comments were almost always erased immediately.

Moreover, students who disagreed with sentiments on Yik Yak or tried to post critiques of their university were downvoted so quickly that their opinions were erased from the common conversation. Such a finding was surprising. I had selected Yik Yak because I thought it would provide a level of access and visibility not afforded to the women missing from *Swamp People*. Even though Yik Yak content was moderated by “insiders”, this was still intimately connected to “outsiders” who built the app. Yik Yak programmers and/or campus reps did not downvote per

se; they still designed the app and manipulated the content that was visible. Even though Yik Yak's content moderators were more integrated than *Swamp People*, they were still guided by the invisible hand of the algorithm which gave them the power to delete content through downvoting sentiment they did not agree with. While Yik Yak's creators claimed that downvoting and anonymity were designed in the spirit of inclusivity, it ultimately created an environment wherein only the majority position survived. This middle-range case only ended up opening more questions than answers. To further investigate the pattern of exclusion emerging, I sought to find a case where the barriers for entry were even lower than Yik Yak and less controlled by opaque algorithms. To do so, I turned my attention to the encyclopedia that bills itself as a source of information that "anyone can edit": Wikipedia.

Chapter 4

Sign(s) say Keep Out

It is late afternoon, and the sunlight that has been pouring into the windows of the public library throughout the day is beginning to dim. Unaware of the waning daylight, volunteers continue to type busily on their laptops. They arrived at the public space that morning with a purpose, donating their entire Saturday to improving one of the world's largest sources of information – Wikipedia. They sit in small groups of three around square tables adjacent to the information desk at the local public library. There's a whiteboard at the front of the room with a list of 22 names: biologists, neuroscientists, anesthesiologists, botanists, and chemists who have made major contributions to the field of science by inventing pharmaceuticals and materials that many of us rely on today. They have published widely, taught at prestigious institutions, and served as presidents of international scientific organizations. Despite their notability, they have limited-to-no presence on Wikipedia. Every person on the list is a woman.

The volunteers each pick a name and initial next to the scientist whose page they will improve or create. They do so as part of an “edit-a-thon,” an informal gathering of individuals committed to improving Wikipedia's content. This edit-a-thon was sponsored by the city's local Wikipedia chapter and the goal is to increase the number of notable women scientists on the website. Before the session begins, those new to Wikipedia receive a brief lecture on how to edit. As a group, new editors create usernames and learn about Wikipedia's editing procedures and notability criteria. Then, with the help of a few seasoned veterans, or “Wikipedians” (a colloquial term for individuals who have been editing Wikipedia for a long time), the volunteers work as a unit to try to decrease what Wikipedians refer to as the “gender gap” (LaVallee 2009).

In the last chapter, I used Yik Yak to demonstrate that even when the line between who creates and consumes content is blurred, participation and access remain tightly regulated. I argue that despite Yik Yak billing itself as a space for the disenfranchised, community dynamics - not the app - determine who gains visibility. Those in a majority position could use Yik Yak's programmatic features to silence expression in the same way the producers of *Swamp People* erased the stories of female alligator hunters. As a result, the white wealthy perspective dominated the app. For the students on the campus where I conducted my study, Yik Yak simultaneously reinforced the sense of belonging and camaraderie they already felt on the campus. At the same time, students' ability to control the narrative which persisted further marginalized students already in a minority position in the campus, reifying existing patterns of inequality.

While students could manipulate Yik Yak's algorithms to determine what kind of content remained visible, Yik Yak's creators still held authority regarding how information was displayed. As a company, Yik Yak determined if the "new" or the "hot" list was the default. Yik Yak also hired campus representatives to post content written by the company. These hiring and organizational decisions were not transparent. In this way, some of the content on Yik Yak was still moderated by those outside of the community of users. Therefore, I sought to find a third case that was less controlled by a third-party and an even more "integrated" audience.

Started in 2001, Wikipedia has become one of the world's largest sources of information containing more than 35 million articles created by volunteers. Within its first month, unpaid editors all over the world created 1,000 articles and during its first year, Wikipedia contributors (self-identified as "Wikipedians") created over 20,000 encyclopedia entries. English Wikipedia

alone has over five million articles,²⁰ and as of October 2016, Wikipedia was the fifth most frequented website in the world.²¹ The goal of the site when it was created remains the same today, and their ideology is embedded in their slogan: “the free online encyclopedia that *anyone* could edit” (emphasis added). True to its mission, Wikipedia is run through a democratic process whereby disputes and decisions are handled among volunteers. While the Wikimedia Foundation owns the Wikipedia domain, its goal is to be as hands-off as possible, allowing Wikipedians to vote on decisions. As a result, Wikipedia remains one of the largest open access bodies of knowledge in the world.

Given its organizational structure, I expected this case to have the highest level of content equity. I was even concerned that by situating myself in spaces designed to increase coverage of people currently missing on Wikipedia (i.e. edit-a-thons), my data might indicate a level of equity and inclusion not representative of the wider community. Unfortunately, I found a pattern of meticulous exclusion far more systematic than what I first witnessed in rural Louisiana back in 2011. Similar to Yik Yak, it was clear the Wikipedians who held a majority position within the community were using their enhanced position to target content they felt was not “worthy” of inclusion.

Wikipedia’s Gender Gap

A 2011 study found the majority of Wikipedia’s editors are tech-savvy white men in their thirties and a 2013 study estimated that male editors make up 87% of the community (Wikimedia

²⁰ Articles are constantly added and deleted. For the most up-to-date article count visit Wikipedia directly. For the purposes of this dissertation I have only studied English Wikipedia – all findings and statistics are specific to English Wikipedia.

²¹ Website ranking is calculated monthly using a combination of average daily visitors and pageviews over the past month. The site with the highest combination of visitors and pageviews is ranked #1. <<http://www.alexa.com/topsites>> (last visited November 5, 2016).

Foundation 2011, Zara 2013). Qualitative and quantitative researchers have determined that Wikipedia's interface is part of the problem. They argue that because Wikipedia's standard markup language and cultural jargon are not readily accessible to newcomers, women are at a disadvantage because they are more likely to *be* newcomers (Hargittai & Shaw 2015, Jemielniak 2014). Described as a "second-level digital divide" (Hargittai 2002), a technical skills deficit explains why women are less likely to edit Wikipedia. This editorial gap also translates into a content gap with many scholars finding content about women is underdeveloped and underrepresented (Adams & Bruckner 2015, Lam et al. 2011, Wagner et al. 2015).

The Wikimedia Foundation, the non-profit organization which supports and operates Wikipedia and the other free knowledge projects (i.e. Wikibooks, Wikisource, and Wikiquote), is acutely attuned to this problem. One solution commonly used to close this gap is an "edit-a-thon." An edit-a-thon is a meet-up sponsored by Wikipedia chapters designed to encourage new people to start editing Wikipedia. During the edit-a-thon, people meet up in a physical location and edit Wikipedia as a group. An edit-a-thon lasts about eight hours with the host providing refreshments, meals, and technical support throughout the day. When edit-a-thons first began, they did not have altruistic motives and were simply partnerships between large institutions looking to increase the visibility of their archives. These kinds of edit-a-thons still exist today – for example, the Guggenheim has hosted two edit-a-thons to increase the coverage of artists on Wikipedia and increase the visibility of their collections. Over the past few years, the goal of the edit-a-thon has shifted, with more attention and focus on encouraging women and minorities to learn how to edit Wikipedia. In addition to hosting edit-a-thons to help improve the diversity of editors, edit-a-thons are also used to improve content disparities. During women's history month, edit-a-thons devoted to creating articles about women took place around the globe.

Edit-a-thons have also shifted in geographic location to broaden the reach and scope of the initiative. Started in 2014, *Wiki Loves Pride* began organizing virtual edit-a-thons where users around the globe could connect to Wikipedia pages and improve LGBT+ content across several projects. These events were focused during June and October to amplify celebrations around lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities on the ground. In 2015, a similar initiative began to improve coverage of women when a group of prominent editors (mostly women) created an initiative called *Women in Red*. The goal of the group was to turn “red links” (a signal on Wikipedia that a page does not yet exist) into “blue ones” (i.e. a hyperlinked Wikipedia article). Neither *Wiki Loves Pride* nor *Women in Red* have hosted a physical meet-up.

Edit-a-thons have become so widespread that there is now a “how to” guide for how (and why) to run an edit-a-thon.²² Nonetheless, my data indicate that not all Wikipedians are convinced by the efficacy of edit-a-thons. Mainly, Wikipedians question whether new editors drawn to the event ever come back or subsequently edit on their own. There is also the question as to whether the events produce new content and if the minimal content added really address the chasm in coverage between men and women on the site.

While the internal debates regarding edit-a-thon efficacy are important, my data reveal a more troubling concern. Combining my ethnographic observations at edit-a-thons with data analysis of articles nominated for deletion, I find biographies about women encounter difficulty *persisting* after they are added, even if they meet Wikipedia’s own notability criteria. By unpacking how edit-a-thons are structured as well as an underlying culture of “deletionism,” I demonstrate how Wikipedia reifies a pattern where women and people of color are unworthy of inclusion.

²² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:How_to_run_an_edit-a-thon

Uninviting Interface

Wikipedia is not an intuitive platform. Similar to Hargittai & Shaw's (2015) and Eckert & Steiner's (2013) findings, I found that inexperienced users refrained from adding content to Wikipedia because the interface was daunting. This was one of the main reasons new editors had come to an edit-a-thon, so they could ultimately figure out how to edit Wikipedia. Unlike Wordpress or Facebook,²³ Wikipedia uses a text editor similar to HTML programming language. The new users felt extremely uncomfortable using Wikipedia's text editor even during the edit-a-thon. Because they remembered it as hard to do (even with Wikipedia mentors available), they were less inclined to go home and try it on their own. Veteran editors also acknowledged the text editor was not intuitive. Judy, a retired woman who now edits Wikipedia in her spare time, sums up the barrier nicely: "You have to code the article as you're writing it, which is not a skill that most people actually have. It makes it very difficult. You're constantly saying 'I have no idea how to do this. Can somebody help me?'" Jack, another retiree with white hair and a warm smile, also acknowledged the difficulty new Wikipedians have with text editor. As an avid participator in edit-a-thons, he described why he thinks this is actually a barrier when trying to recruit new editors: "Wiki code looks like HTML. The process takes about a month to learn to start to feel comfortable, but for the average new person? It's an additional burden and a hurdle to get over." Scholars of Wikipedia back Jack's intuition, demonstrating the small number of female editors is linked to the fact that computer programming skills and jargon are not readily accessible to newcomers (Jemielniak 2014).

²³ What computer programmers call a "WYSIWYG" (what you see is what you get),

To combat this problem, the Wikimedia Foundation created a visual editor (akin to Wordpress) which those new to Wikipedia can set as their writing default. Even people who have edited before now have the option to switch over to the visual editor and there is a disclaimer that “anyone can edit and everything helps.” Nonetheless, changing the default to this user-friendly interface was not easy, mainly because Wikipedians adamantly disagreed with Wikimedia’s decision to change the default. Part of this struggle was due to an early rollout. In my interviews, I learned that when the initial visual editor was launched, it was filled with bugs which frustrated long-time editors. However, the continued resistance to an interface that invites inexperienced editors to contribute is also a signal of the broader culture within Wikipedia. This pushes back on Hargittai & Shaw’s (2015) findings that the gender gap is not something that stems from *within* the group. While it is true that most women might lack the skills necessary to edit Wikipedia, the existing community of Wikipedians seemed less willing to implement changes that could fix this problem.

Even though the visual editor makes it *easier* for new people to make edits, it still does not make editing Wikipedia intuitive. Deciding to edit a page means the user must actively click on the “edit” tab at the top right of a Wikipedia article, and if they run into trouble, there is not an easily accessible “help” button. Even if someone were to venture into the “talk” tab to post a question or try and collaborate with other editors, the interface design is clunky and difficult to navigate. While it is true the Wikimedia Foundation is a non-profit and Wikipedia itself is run by volunteers, therefore making design budgets less than other large social networking sites, it also seems that Wikipedia intentionally maintains a critical distance from a site where the everyday individuals can gather, socialize, edit, and have fun. As Dave, a well-respected Wikipedian and subject matter expert with thousands of edits in the field of science, described: “Wikipedia is more

like Web 1.5. It kinda embraces the crowdsourcing idea but at the same time it very explicitly at times rejects the user-friendly, hyper-social kind of community that you get on places such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr." Lisa, an animated woman who regularly hosts edit-a-thons to improve racial diversity, makes an important connection regarding the interface and overall editorial diversity, arguing that keeping the mark-up language hinders newcomers from joining. "There is something about Wikipedia that isn't attracting the same women and children who apparently dominate Facebook," Lisa describes "they're very present there [on Facebook/Twitter] whereas the Wikipedia interface is kind of repellent, quite frankly, to that same demographic."

The uninviting, difficult-to-navigate interface is also problematic when it comes to the success of an edit-a-thon. In all the edit-a-thons I observed, Wikipedia was the only platform used to publicize and sign up for the event²⁴. As a result, many those I spoke with at edit-a-thons found out about the event through a Wikipedian they knew. While this "strong tie" (Granovetter 1973) network might help insure a new editor who signs up for the event comes, it also confines the growth of Wikipedian editors to a small, well-defined group. By opening recruitment to more social media spaces (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, EventBright, or even SnapChat), edit-a-thons could harness the power of "weak ties" in the form of broader social media networks as well as tap into the structural holes (Burt 1992) currently missing from the relatively homogeneous group of existing Wikipedia editors.

In addition to closing off potential recruits to the event, limiting registration through Wikipedia precludes the ability to adequately track who is planning to attend as well as verify who did so as many of the people interested in coming do not know how to edit the Wikipedia interface. It also limits the ability to conduct future communication – since email addresses are not gathered,

²⁴ For an example of what an edit-a-thon event signup page looks like visit:
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Meetup/LA/ArtAndFeminism_2016/LACMA>

additional correspondence must take place through Wikipedia. When I asked Ian, a white man in his mid-forties who organized many edit-a-thons, why they used Wikipedia to publicize and register attendees instead of a service which collected emails addresses, I was surprised that this decision was purposeful. A soft-spoken man with rimmed glasses, Ian ran his fingers through his hair as he described to me why Wikipedia-based recruitment of edit-a-thons was purposeful. For him, a longstanding Wikipedian, other platforms were superfluous – not only could you receive notifications via Wikipedia, you can also privately message on Wikipedia. He reasoned that communicating with editors exclusively through Wikipedia provided continuity throughout the community. It did not occur to him that those unfamiliar with navigating the space might appreciate other forms of communication (i.e. an email).

In my interviews, it was clear new editors wanted that follow-up and they described how frustrated they were that they had not received any communication since the edit-a-thon had ended. When I asked if they had been back on Wikipedia to see if they had received messages there, most did not even know this was a functionality of the site. Moreover, none of the new editors I interviewed remembered their passwords and were unsure how to reset them. A few were also frustrated with the layout of the edit-a-thon. While working with well-established Wikipedians committed to opening equity on Wikipedia seemed like an effective way to teach newcomers, new users felt inadequate due to their skill deficit. Jared, an older man looking to donate some of his knowledge of world affairs to the site, described to me how uncomfortable it felt for him to be such a novice. He had held a prominent position at the World Bank for several years and did not think the edit-a-thon fostered a “safe place to demonstrate utter ignorance.” Unfortunately, this is a broader problem with trying to recruit subject-matter experts. Many of those who have the knowledge Wikipedia is trying to capture are flustered by feeling so ignorant in the space. Not

only is the interface daunting, there are clear cultural barriers that impede unfamiliar users from jumping in and creating content.

Naomi, a young woman with wild hair, funky glasses, and bright lipstick was acutely aware that new editors were highly monitored. In an individual interview, she described her trepidation the first time she tried to edit Wikipedia content. As an avid motorcycle enthusiast, she knew she had something to add to many of the articles. However, the first time she and a friend sat down to edit, they were nervous. She described, “there's a fear, whether the fear is I'm going to break it, or I'm going to not really know what I'm doing, or I'm going to feel out of my depth with this, or I'm going to feel overwhelmed...I'm not even sure where to start. It was mysterious and intimidating and I just didn't know whether it was even appropriate for me to add information on what the standards were. I felt like I was breaking into someone else's club.”

Other editors echoed Naomi, noting that Wikipedia has a culture of exclusion. The process by which it took to create a new article is a daunting task, one that requires not only a solid command of *how* to edit Wikipedia, but also a firm understanding of what Wikipedia is and what it is not. Matt, a young white man in his thirties who is widely respected within the community, describes how inexperienced users needed to familiarize themselves with policies of Wikipedia before they jumped into creating new articles. He noted while the visual editor might make it easier for someone to create a new Wikipedia page, Wikipedia as a body of knowledge isn't something someone learns overnight. In his words “it takes a lot of time to not only learn the policies but also to learn the culture.” Matt's statement is essential and highlights two of the central problems I observed regarding edit-a-thons. Considering the deep cultural knowledge required to feel comfortable on the site, I found it contradictory that the two most common functions of an edit-a-thon are to create a user-name and to try to create new content.

What's in a Name?

Even though you do not need to create an account to edit Wikipedia, one of the first points of business under the *How to run an edit-a-thon* Wikipedia page is to take time to help new editors create an account.²⁵ Based on my observations, this is typically a rushed process in the hopes of getting individuals to edit as quickly as possible. As a result, many new editors use a derivative of their given names or usernames which links back to other on-line personae (i.e. their Twitter handle). Unfortunately, this decision may end up having disastrous repercussions, especially for women who were the overwhelming majority in all the edit-a-thons I observed.

Numerous reports have demonstrated that women are continuously at risk of harassment on-line (Pew Research Center 2014, Citron 2014, Phillips 2015, Buni & Chemaly 2014). A recent study of data collected by *The Guardian* found that eight of the top ten most abused journalists were women (Gardiner et al 2016) and another editorial specifically investigating Wikipedia similarly found that users who identified as women were more frequently targeted for harassment (Paling 2016). As *The Atlantic* reported, women who are the subject of harassment are often left with few resources to combat the problem, and this treatment of women has led to many leaving Wikipedia altogether (Paling 2016). Becky, a middle-aged white woman who regularly resolves internal disputes from the comfort of her living room, told me in my interview with her over Skype: “I would say don't use your real name, and don't make it easy for people to find you. If [a woman] wants to fly under the radar, I would probably advise her to use a gender-neutral name and to just generally avoid [certain places].”

²⁵ Part of this is to avoid new edits being targeted for deletion. There is a Wikibot (i.e. a computer program) which detects all new edits created by anonymous users. These are then flagged and more routinely scrutinized as they are often the source of malicious content.

The harassment of women online and how it might translate onto Wikipedia are not discussed during edit-a-thons. I did not even learn that username selection might be a problem until I started conducting individual interviews. On three separate occasions, women disclosed that they had wished they had picked a more discreet name. Jeannie, an older woman who was surprised by the transparency of her Wikipedia volunteerism, first realized how exposed she was when she Googled herself and saw her name "popping up over and over." Immediately after that realization, she changed her username to hide her identity. When I asked for her thinking behind this reasoning, she described how her gender made her a more likely target for negative attention. In her words, "I changed it[her username]...because I'm a woman, I felt exposed and worried a bit for my personal safety." Judy, a retired woman who spends her free time editing Wikipedia, also wished she had created a username that was gender-neutral. Over a Skype interview, she told me, "If I could do it over again, I wouldn't [use an identifier with my username]. Knowing what I know now, having seen some of the very personal, very pointed attacks that other female editors have experienced, I wouldn't have used anything that could tie it to me." Throughout the interview, she shared her screen with me, demonstrating the extent of these attacks. Margaret, a young woman with a quiet voice but fierce determination, was the subject of such attacks. It got so bad for her that she "finally changed my user name so I could dissociate my username with my real name...I was becoming a target." Over the course of our interview, Margaret revealed she had received messages threatening physical violence but also many messages from men she did not know asking to go on dates or for sexually explicit photos.

Not only did the women with feminine-sounding usernames I interviewed receive unwanted attention, a recent study also demonstrated that it makes them more vulnerable to deletions (what Wikipedians colloquially refer to as "reversions") or having their account

indefinitely blocked (Lam et al 2011). This is particularly troublesome when one realizes that changing a username or disassociating from a previous name is harder than one might imagine. To prevent an individual editing under multiple accounts -- what Wikipedia refers to as “sock puppetry,” English Wikipedia has a widely-accepted policy that each editor should only have one account. Therefore, even though Margaret and Jeannie changed their usernames, all the edits associated with their previous names are still accessible in their user history.

While some of the editors I spoke with described how they had chosen feminine-sounding usernames to “claim space” on Wikipedia and demonstrate their ability to edit content, this was a clear decision they made knowing the potential repercussions. This was never a discussion that I witnessed at edit-a-thons. The events I attended also failed to inform new editors that the spaces they were stepping into might be culturally charged and that their actions might elicit a negative response. Two long-time Wikipedians described in their interviews how they avoided certain spaces because they knew they would face retaliation for their edits. Olivia is a vibrant young woman whose personality is infectious. A self-described feminist, she regularly organizes edit-a-thons on her college campus. A tireless crusader for gender equality, she focuses her time and attention on creating and improving biographies about women. We first met at a Wikipedia conference and I had followed her blog posts and opinion pieces for some time. Given her can-do attitude, I was surprised to learn that even she was worried about “bringing more women to Wikipedia.” As she described, she is worried “they might stray out of the bubble I’ve created for myself and find those toxic places. There are just places where I don’t go on Wikipedia because they are a shit storm.” Naomi echoed Olivia’s concerns telling me about how she also avoids “articles that are really, really popular, which have a lot of visibility.” Even though neither of these

women strike me as wallflowers, Naomi, like Olivia, is hesitant when editing Wikipedia, choosing to work “in the quiet corners” to avoid the wrath of deletionist logic.

Deletionist Logic

The *ability* for a new editor to create a new Wikipedia article (particularly new biographies) takes more than simply learning how to master the technical skills to navigate the platform. It also requires understanding the culture of Wikipedia and how to create content that won't be challenged on two crucial grounds: as non-notable or non-neutral. According to Wikipedia guidelines, a topic is only presumed notable if it has received significant coverage in reliable sources that are independent of the subject.²⁶

Part of maintaining these credibility standards is done by meticulous Wikipedians who constantly monitor changes to existing pages or new articles added to the site. Janet, a short woman and fast talker, described how deleting content from Wikipedia is not necessarily nefarious. As a professor trying to integrate Wikipedia into the classroom, she described how Wikipedia can be used as a pedagogical model and that deleting content is essential to "debunk the myths out there that Wikipedia is unreliable." She elaborates, "We [Wikipedians] want to demonstrate that it has quality control, so librarians, teachers, and professors stop saying don't use it." Unfortunately, this effort to delete content which Janet describes as “crappy articles done by teenagers,” has unintended consequences. The scope of nominating content for deletion and categorizing biographies as non-notable is rooted in a set of problematic assumptions that I will get into below. Moreover, a subset of Wikipedians, self-identified as “deletionists,” have taken the goal of deletion further, motivated by a desire for Wikipedia to focus on “significant topics.” To do so, they

²⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Notability>

regularly nominate for deletion articles they feel are promotional propaganda, trivia, not of “general interest,” too short, lacking in “suitable source material for high quality coverage,” or unacceptably poor in quality.²⁷

Relying on Wikipedia’s “Five Pillars,” deletionists use Wikipedia’s own quality-control standards to justify, make sense of, and defend their actions. In this way, deletionists rely on “cultural resources” (DiMaggio 1997, Lamont 1992, Lareau 2003) when nominating an article for deletion, treating the Five Pillars as a “toolkit” (Swidler 1986) to navigate new situations and resolve problems. Their tactics are particularly interesting since the process by which content is nominated for deletion relies on cultural frameworks that can contradict themselves.

When a Wikipedian deems an article “non-notable,” the editor nominates the article for deletion. Once nominated, it is moved to the “Articles for Deletion”²⁸ page, or what Wikipedians colloquially refer to as “AfD,” where other editors debate whether an article should be kept, deleted, or merged with another article. Nominated articles are up for a review period of at least seven days, although through my observations I learned sometimes the nomination process could take longer if there is a substantial debate and a decision-maker feels more time for discussion is needed. Articles nominated for deletion can be closed quickly if they constitute a clear case of self-promotion or vandalism. In our interview, Matt explained how decisions in the Articles for Deletion space are rendered. He is an expert on these matters since he spent years “lurking” on Articles for Deletion before rendering any decisions himself. He tells me of the process. First, “an administrator²⁹ who is not involved [with the original nomination nor the subsequent discussions]

²⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deletionism_and_inclusionism_in_Wikipedia

²⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Articles_for_deletion

²⁹ Based on my ethnographic observations, anyone can render a decision as to whether an article should be deleted, kept, or merged. However, if a non-administrator closes the case it is labeled as “non-administrator.” To become an administrator, you must first be nominated, or nominate yourself for the position. Then over the course of about a week, current administrators and editors review your editing history and your answers to three main questions that Matt (in his interview) summarized as: 1) Why do you want to be an administrator? 2) What are your best

will evaluate what has been said in the discussion and they will look at arguments and weigh them against the policies, notability being the main one...[they will ask], have they made a strong and persuasive argument, and is that consistent with our policies?”

In theory, all articles nominated for deletion are done so in good faith. Before nominating an article for deletion, editors should click on the sources available to assess the quality of the content, as well as search elsewhere to determine if more sources are accessible. Matt elaborated on this process in detail. Before you tag something as non-notable or nominate it for deletion, you “are supposed to put in a quick search to see what the sources say about a topic...there is a set of criteria you should follow where basically you should make a good-faith effort to search and see if the topic has some coverage in independent and reliable sources.” Ken, a slender man with large eyes and a bigger smile, described how Wikipedians rarely deviate from this effort and because of their routinized structure are unlikely to subjectively nominate content which does not deserve to be deleted. “Wikipedians are institutionalized,” Ken reasons, “they are like robots. What they're looking for are two sources. I don't think it's ever happened that somebody's article has been deleted if they had two sources which featured their subject. It just needs two sentences.” He pauses to reflect then lifts two long fingers. “Two sentences, two citations.”

While it seems that decisions rendered are clear-cut, my research demonstrates that how notability is established is opaque, open for interpretation, and rooted in systemic bias. Take, for example, the tension between maintaining a neutral point of view (“NPOV”) and establishing notability. Wikipedia NPOV policy indicates that articles must be written “fairly, proportionately,

contributions as an editor? 3) And how have you dealt with conflict? However, the administrator who closes the discussion must decide which is consistent with existing discussion – doing otherwise would be considered inappropriate and grounds for removing administrative privileges. While anyone can render a decision, only an administrator can reverse that decisions. For example, if a page is deleted only an administrator can “un-delete” the page.

and, as far as possible, without editorial bias.” For an article to have an NPOV, “all of the significant views that have been published by reliable sources on the topic” must be included.³⁰ On the other hand, as previously observed, notability is established by a subject and/or person having “significant coverage” in “reliable sources” that are “independent of the subject.”³¹ However, concepts such as what constitutes significant coverage or a reliable source is subjective (and therefore non-neutral).

As a way of illustrating this point – look at how academic notability is achieved.³² For an academic to be on Wikipedia, they must pass a “professor test.” Some of these requirements are straightforward and include holding a named chair at a major university or presiding over a prestigious scholarly society. However, other criteria are more opaque and open for interpretation. For example, the person’s academic work must make “significant impact in the area of higher education” or “significant impact outside of academia.” Not only are these conditions non-neutral, they are also rooted in systemic biases when one considers that women and minorities remain underrepresented in top-tier university jobs and knowledge associated with women or African studies remains underfunded and undervalued (Feber 1986, Rossiter 1993, Duan 2016).

It is also problematic outside of academia when one considers that women are relatively underrepresented in many fields. For example, during the opening presentation at an edit-a-thon I attended which focused on increasing coverage of female artists, Wikipedians acknowledged the extra work editors must put in to establish women as notable subjects. Lisa, a Wikipedian devoted to improving racial diversity on the site, describes how “what constitutes a ‘credible source’ is itself very charged. For artists, there is an extra layer – they need to have two major exhibitions at

³⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Neutral_point_of_view

³¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Notability>

³² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Notability_\(academics\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Notability_(academics))

‘two *major* museums,’ but many women artists or artists of color aren’t granted the same affordances when it comes to being featured in a museum.” Margaret, a woman in her early twenties, put it a bit more bluntly; “most art institutions are run by white men and their collection strategies have mostly collected white males.” Since women artists and artists of color are often barred from “prominent” art museums, they don’t count as “notable” artists. While they can exhibit their work in alternative spaces, those are not afforded “mainstream” (white male) validation.

Drawing on Althusser’s (1971) concept of *overdetermination*, Wikipedia essentially reinforces criteria of notability that are already tainted with sexism and racism. As Judy (mentioned earlier) describes: “there is a gender gap in all of history, not just Wikipedia” – meaning that finding secondary sources which cover the accomplishments of influential female scientists is more difficult than finding sources about male scientists. In this way, Wikipedia maintains the dominant position rejecting alternative and oppositional cultural forms (Williams 1973: 10).

By linking traditional forms of accreditation to Wikipedia’s criteria for establishing notability, Wikipedia continues to marginalize women and people of color under the same exclusionary practices used in the arts, sciences, history, and journalism (Chambers et al. 2004, DiMaggio 1982, Hill-Collins 1998, Reagle & Rhue 2011, Smith 1998). Jack elaborated on the systemic bias embedded in what constitutes secondary sources, describing the impact of digital archives that also favor white men: “There is an online bias to Wikipedia. If something's digitized or it's online, it's easy to incorporate, but if it's not [on-line], it makes it harder to incorporate a source. That is a bias against women's history, or minority histories.”

The omissions in digital archives are concerning since sources are less likely to be questioned by Wikipedians if they are readily available on-line. According to my interviews and observations at conference proceedings, when sources that establish a person’s notability are not

“linkable,” the article is more likely to be scrutinized and nominated for deletion because editors are not able to check the validity of a source by reading it for themselves. Therefore, a reliance on digital sources favors some biographies and puts others at a disadvantage.

Jeannie gets fired up when we talk about these continuing problems related to gender representation. Her work within the community is heralded as a success and, when others in the community learned of my research, they often suggested I reach out to her as a point of contact. During our interview, she elaborated on this problem – “The policies [regarding deletion on Wikipedia] are important but are they what we need in 2015 versus 2005? How about notable people who don't have books written about them? How do we access that information? If it exists, but not in a book published by MacMillan Press, how do we access it?”

Wikipedia creates and defines the rituals, actions, and practices that justify deleting content from the site. Ironically, the site also requires one to write articles in a “neutral” way (or “from a ‘neutral’ point of view”). However, what constitutes “notability” can never be “neutral” because the very concept of notability ultimately protects discriminatory practices by adopting a practical attitude towards exclusion. Nonetheless, the culture of Wikipedia sees NPOV and notability as separate entities and frequently cites notability as a reason for deletion.

Moreover, my data demonstrate that *even women who met Wikipedia's notability threshold* were still marked as “non-notable” and nominated for deletion. This was the case for Sojourner Street – the woman denied entry into Wikipedia and whose story opened this dissertation. As a quick reminder, Street created institutes and museums memorializing the role of African American women writers. If you Google “Sojourner Street”³³ you will find links to periodical coverage celebrating her life and an obituary which ran in the Washington Post detailing her

³³ Reminder this is a pseudonym to protect confidentiality.

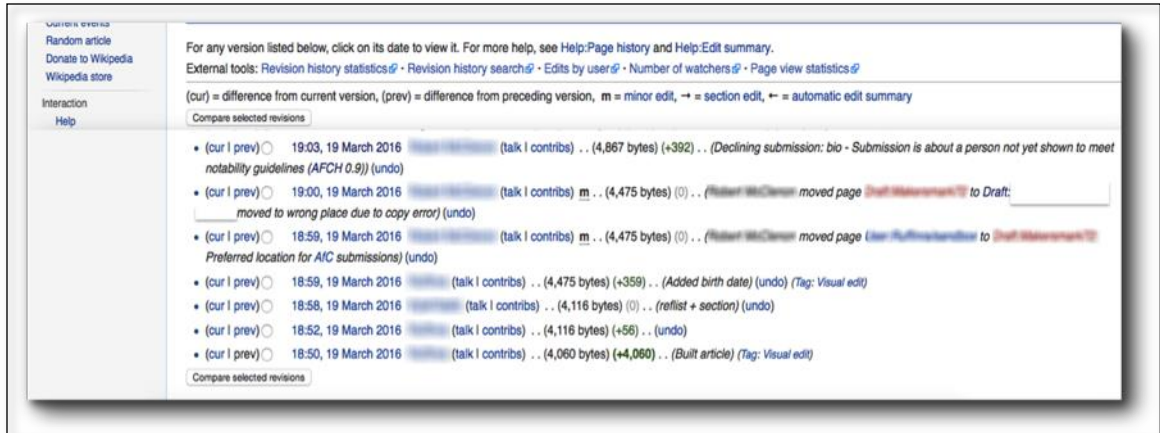
accomplishments and crediting her as a prominent figure in the history of literature. Nonetheless, Street's page was declined after it was submitted to the "Articles for Creation" page with a note that stated she "was a person not yet shown to meet notability guidelines" (Figure 1).



(Figure 1)

What is particularly telling about this case is that her article was *rejected* for submission despite the fact the article included more than two citations from reliable sources that were independent of the subject (the threshold for establishing notability Ken outlined for me by raising two fingers while we spoke). Analyzing the revision history revealed a few more concerns. First, Street's Wikipedia page was created during an edit-a-thon designed to increase the number of biographies about notable minority women and to train minority editors. Second, a new Wikipedia editor created Street's page.³⁴

³⁴ I can make this assertion though date matching. Street's revision history notes her page was created on the same day as an edit-a-thon designed to increase coverage of African-American women on Wikipedia. Moreover, one can see the username is a variation of the last name of a woman who signed up for the edit-a-thon taking place that day providing further evidence that Street's page was created in conjunction with an edit-a-thon. When I Googled the name of the person who signed up for the event, pictures from their social media accounts, it indicated she is a black woman – meaning the incident in question also impacted the gender and racial imbalance of Wikipedia's editors since she has not edited under this username since this event took place.



(Figure 2)

According to Figure 2, one can see that another editor (with administrative capabilities) moved Street’s draft page out of the new editor’s private “sandbox” (a place to work on articles before they become visible) to the “Articles for Creation” submission page *while they were editing*, citing that this was the “preferred location for an Articles for Creation submission.” Exactly three minutes later, the same administrator declined the submission noting Street “was a person not yet shown to meet notability guidelines.” This specific use of notability as a mechanism for erasing content about a woman during an edit-a-thon designed to increase visibility about women and encourage the participation of female editors demonstrates how the process of deletionism is intimately linked to processes of discrimination. What is particularly disheartening about Street’s case is that she made her life’s work out of memorializing the contributions of African American women. Yet, her own contributions were rendered invisible by someone unwilling to learn more about her legacy through a simple Google search.

When I discussed these discrepancies with Matt, he relayed to me his own observations from when he spent extensive time volunteering as an administrator in Articles for Deletion. He too found content concerning women’s interests seemed to be unfairly targeted – especially

women's biographies. Based on information from him and others who I interviewed, it was clear that what happened to Street's page was not an isolated case.

“Just in my experience of going through AfD on certain topics, I think it is the case - whether it is intentional or not - that topics which deal with women generally or biographies in specific are more scrutinized when compared against a similar kind of biography for men. I think the discussions on women³⁵ they can be, but not always, are just longer and there are more people saying things about them and kinda weighing in on the discussion so they take longer to parse through because more things have been said. I think there are things both in the nomination and the discussion itself that reflect this higher level of scrutiny relative to biographies on men. I think when we're looking at the question of are these sources reliable or not - there is more analysis of that question for articles on women than compared to men. So, if someone has created an article and there are a bunch of sources on it already, I don't think an editor is as likely to thoroughly look at those sources for reliability compared to an article about a woman. And my evidence, based on my experience in articles for deletion, is that I see more time dedicated to that kind of discussion than when I see biographies of men who are brought to attention.”

Some of these editorial decisions which repeatedly target women as non-notable might have to do with how sources pertaining to women are assessed. As Judy describes of her involvement with *Women in Red*:

“I don't think they [people who revert or delete articles] have any idea how to evaluate sources. People don't know how to access information especially when it comes to women. We had a guy last month who questioned why a scientist had some documents that listed her name as Jane Doe but later documents carried her name as Jane M. Smith. This seems like a totally normal woman naming thing to me. Her name was probably Jane Marie Doe and she started publishing but then got married so then she called herself Jane Doe Smith. He's like 'I don't understand this. It makes no sense to me.' I'm like 'If you don't even understand the naming conventions that women use, how can you possibly assess whether a file should be deleted or not.' He was like 'It doesn't make any sense. If they were professional, they wouldn't change their name.' He didn't think the sources added up because he didn't understand naming conventions associated with women.”

However, my data also demonstrate that in some instances deletion may be more nefarious. Margaret, another passionate editor who regularly hosts edit-a-thons, described how an article

³⁵ This refers the earlier process of how a decision is made on an article nominated for deletion.

about a feminist activist she wrote was nominated for deletion for being “non-notable” despite the national press coverage regarding the woman’s involvement in feminist protests. She recalls of the situation, “My friend had a photo of her from a protest and I wrote her Wikipedia article because of her press notability. The article was subsequently flagged after a few hours and pushed into 'articles for deletion' AfD. There were [sic] a strain of arguments that basically said we can't [sic] add her yet because we can't tell if she's going to be historically notable, so we can't add her yet.” While some might argue the merits of an activist could be questioned as notable, this pattern was seen in a variety of biographies, as, for example, a biography of a woman who pioneered [a specific technology].³⁶ Her page was nominated for deletion shortly after a long-time editor, Brenna, created her page. Brenna told me the story in an interview. As she recalled what happened, she got more animated, her flowing hair shaking along with her hands in frustration. “I came across her work in some really great archived newspapers and I made a Wikipedia page about her. Within a couple of hours, it was flagged for deletion because they, on the talk page, were like: ‘Um she's not a notable figure. Why is she important? I don't think this is worthy of Wikipedia.’ I had found all these credible sources from local newspapers and journals. I also had a source from an oral history project. The person who flagged the article said the most compelling source seemed to be 'the little stories' she wrote about herself or something like that. I was mad.” Brenna pauses. Even though we were conducting this interview via Skype, she was unable to make direct eye contact. After taking a sip of tea, she continued, “I mean, not only was she notable, the person who flagged the article also de-legitimized oral history, which has been used to record feminist, or minority, opinions that were not afforded the same tools and privileges. I had to dig deeper and find even more archival newspapers that made the article indisputably notable and then eventually it was

³⁶ As a reminder, Wikipedia is a completely transparent website. To protect the confidentiality of those interviewed I tried to remove as many identifiers as possible.

featured on the front page of Wikipedia! But it just sucked because, you know it's kind of like, I feel like this is a recurring story...*you have to work twice as hard to prove that the content is valuable and is worthy of being in.*”

Brenna’s observation – that editors had to work “twice as hard” to prove the notability of female subjects—is not exclusive to biographies of living people. As my research on the Articles for Deletion page revealed, even Wikipedia pages about characters in television shows that were more popular among a female audience also seemed to be disproportionately targeted for deletion. Take, for example, the page about Serena van der Woodsen – a character from the book and television series *Gossip Girl*. Even though this page was created over a decade ago (July 15, 2005) the pageview traffic averages about 653 views/day.³⁷

Despite these statistics, Serena van der Woodsen’s page has been nominated for deletion *twice* since its creation (once in August 2008 and again in April 2016). In both instances, the editors nominating her page used the rationale that the character was “non-notable” and did not deserve a stand-alone page despite it having significant coverage, in reliable sources, independent from the subject. While both nominations ultimately ended in a decision to “keep” Serena van der Woodsen’s page active, this is just another example of how Wikipedians interested in improving the gender gap must work “twice as hard” to keep women from disappearing from the site. The examples expressed in both my interviews and my own observations of Articles for Deletion explain why Margaret lamented the entire process of Articles for Deletion. The subject of unrelenting harassment and unwanted attention Margaret believed is a central problem in the culture of Wikipedia which could be traced back to the debates happening in articles for deletion. In her words, “these debates are fucked up. Many will say that AfD is one of the most male spaces

³⁷ The statistics of page views over a 10-day period represents the period of 6/13/16-6/22/16

on Wikipedia. It's one of the most sexist spaces, which is crazy because that's where a lot of decisions about whether articles stay up or not happen. The rules which pertain to AfD are, in my opinion, already so sexist and discriminate against people that have a problem with how AfD is run.”

These poignant examples from my interviews combined with my own observations suggest that even women who meet the threshold of notability established by Wikipedia are still being labeled as “non-notable” and nominated for deletion. While many of these situations are resolved in AfD and the article is kept, it is exhausting for editors to have to continuously justify the notability of female biographies. It also presents barriers for edit-a-thon success since new editors who are not aware they need to star/track the articles after they are created are responsible for many of the pages created during edit-a-thons but, by neglecting to follow their progress, the articles may disappear. Moreover, editors driven to working on equality within Wikipedia must devote time to monitoring pages which already have clear notability established rather than using their limit to create new content necessary to help close the gender gap.

You're just too sensitive

Unfortunately, when editors go up the chain of command within Wikipedia to broach the problem of discriminatory concerns, they are often told they are being too sensitive or protective over their content, not unlike women in the workplace who were called over-sensitive for resenting sexual harassment (MacKinnon 1986). When these editors took their claims to arbitration, they were urged to see how deletions are not necessarily a challenge to the editor and told that sometimes people they feel are worthy of Wikipedia simply do not meet notability guidelines. By rebuking discriminatory concerns as “matters of clashing personality” (Hochschild 1989: xxi)

rather than examining the societal contradictions embedded in the fact that Wikipedia's notability criteria were created in a male-dominated environment, Wikipedia prevents the legitimate investigation into whether women and people of color are being disproportionately targeted for exclusion.

I too received pushback in my interviews with Wikipedians who felt they were being targeted as "bad seeds" within the community and that this resulted from user affiliation, rather than content itself. However, I kept seeing a trend in Articles for Deletion in which it seemed there were simply more notable women than men being consistently nominated for deletion. As a way of testing the hypothesis that content about notable women was more likely to be nominated for deletion, I teamed up with the head of research and development at UVa's Scholars Lab³⁸ who wrote a small script which would web scrape the Articles for Deletion daily log pages. The entries were then filtered to look for tags or phrases which indicated the entry in question was a biography. Using that data, I manually reviewed the articles in question, tracking the reason behind the nomination, the voting period, the gender affiliation of the person, and the decision rendered (i.e. keep, delete, merge).

This was a lengthy process involving two layers of analysis. First, I followed the AfD link. Using a summary regarding why an article was nominated for deletion, I assigned the biography gender based on pronoun use. Using language from the article, I would determine the country of origin (i.e. "Pakistani politician) and Google the individual for available images. Using information from the pages, I would also try to glean their country of origin and ethnicity. If none of that information were available, I would work with images available via Google to help

³⁸ I am forever indebted to Eric Rochester who, at the time, was Head of Research & Development at the Scholars' Lab. He has since moved on but periodically helps me track, scrape, and export data for analysis. If it were not for his generous devotion of time, I would not have the numbers I do to back my claims.

determine race.”³⁹ If the article was voted on to “delete,” I would also use Google to conduct a simple search of their potential notability. Using Ken’s notability criteria, if the subject had been referenced in two or more sources independent of the subject, I would indicate that they technically met Wikipedia’s own notability standards. My findings reaffirmed my interviewees’ suspicions that biographies about women were being disproportionately targeted for deletion under the guise of non-notability.

During the week of January 9, 2017, 34% of the biographies nominated were women. This proportion is already telling considering that, to begin with, less than 17% of existing biographies on English Wikipedia are about women. This means the deletion rate of women is not proportional to available biographies. However, looking more critically at the content nominated for deletion is even more concerning. In addition to coding data for race and gender, I also classified the decision rendered on the article. I classified a biography as “notable” if the decision rendered by Wikipedians was to “keep” the article. When considering if articles were “kept” or not, 31% of women nominated for deletion were ultimately found to meet the threshold of notability. When you compare these statistics to those concerning men, only 14% of men nominated for deletion received a “keep.” While one might be encouraged by the system moving to “keep” women who are notable according to Wikipedia’s own standards, it is also clear biographies of notable women are being nominated for deletion far more than those of notable men. Mapping out nearly identical to Brenna’s observation, notable women must work “twice as hard” to remain visible on Wikipedia.

As a way of verifying these statistics, I ran the numbers again using a second set of data scraped during the week of February 9, 2017. For this week, 23% of biographies nominated for

³⁹ I realize this is problematic. What I was trying to tease out, however, were the ways in which race factored into whether articles were nominated for deletion.

deletion were women. While this is lower than the 31% observed in the week of January 9, it is still higher than the proportion of men to women on the site. Of those nominated for deletion, those who received a “keep” vote once again supported a 2:1 ratio. For this week, 23% of women were kept versus 13% of men. Again, the idea of keeping an article might seem like a positive finding. However, in the context of Articles for Deletion, it means that more notable women than notable men are being nominated for erasure. The fact that more women than men are “kept” means that more women than men are considered “non-notable” even if they are meeting Wikipedia’s threshold of notability.

Of those deleted, 9% of women had a presence on Google that seemed to indicate they should be included on Wikipedia. For example, Sheilah A. Coley, the first woman to lead the police department in New Jersey’s 125-year history, and Evita Robinson, a female entrepreneur who launched an online community to connect diverse travelers, were both deleted. However, when you Google their names, ample sources demonstrating their notability are available. Stories about Ms. Coley ran in the New Jersey paper and the Associated Press. Oxygen wrote an article on Ms. Robinson detailing her company “Nomadness Travel Tribe.” Ms. Coley and Ms. Robinson are both black women.

When looking at the same notability criteria for men who were voted to delete, only one of the 112 men deleted (less than 1%) might have been able to establish notability using a Google search. Similar to the week of January 9, the only trans/non-binary biography (Joshua M. Ferguson) was deleted even though they were heralded as a budding cinematographer and had been written about in the Huffington Post and Beyond the Binary (a magazine for UK Non-Binary People).

As both the qualitative and quantitative data demonstrate, women who meet Wikipedia's notability standards *are* twice as likely as notable men to be nominated for deletion. When taking race into consideration, we see the role of intersectionality regarding how difficult it is for people who are not white or cis-gender men to prove they are "worthy" of a Wikipedia page. For example, of the women whose biographies were nominated for deletion but ultimately kept, more than half were non-white women and only one was from the United States. As we can see in the other examples throughout this dissertation (Street, Coley, and Robinson), the discrimination happening on Wikipedia exemplifies Crenshaw's (1989) central argument of how black women are impossible subjects – too similar to be different, to different to be the same. Despite these women's contributions to the fields of fashion, public safety, and entrepreneurship, their pages were denied visibility because editors are unfamiliar with their achievements and not making a "good faith" assumption for inclusion. While we cannot compare these statistics to a more general racial bias on Wikipedia because we do not have the numbers as we do on women's biographies, this does indicate that further research must control for other variables besides gender as a way of further understanding how this impacts the ability for a biography to remain visible on Wikipedia.

More troubling still is that my data indicate a pattern regarding the targeting of edit-a-thons. Since Wikipedia is a completely transparent platform, one can trace when articles were created. Using my scraped dataset, I also found that many articles were nominated for deletion on the same day they were created, indicating they were created as part of an edit-a-thon. Such a pattern calls for a more critical analysis, especially since edit-a-thons are one of the central ways Wikipedia is working to try and combat the underlying problem of gender bias.

Integrated Audiences: Problem *and* Solution

In the end, not all is lost when it comes to the potential for gender equality on Wikipedia. Edit-a-thons can and have been used to make substantial inroads into gender inequality on the site. During my yearlong ethnography, the *Women In Red* campaign made steady improvements to the number of biographies about women on English Wikipedia, bringing them from 15% to 16.48% of the total (as of September 18, 2016). The Wikimedia Foundation is also working to eradicate the problem of gendered harassment on Wikipedia and is continuously providing grants for researchers devoted to this problem. A few devoted Wikipedians have also joined forces with Wikimedia to create a Gender Task Force committed to understanding the prevalence of harassment and finding solutions to eradicate the problem. At the same time, edit-a-thons continue to try and create a “safe space” for new editors to feel comfortable contributing to the site and are aimed at improving the number of biographies regarding women still missing from Wikipedia. For example, Art+Feminism hosted a series of concurrent edit-a-thons during the month of March to maximize awareness of the problem during women’s history month.

Nonetheless, my data suggest that for edit-a-thons to be effective, more support and resources are needed. First, edit-a-thons must start utilizing platforms outside of Wikipedia to market edit-a-thons and recruit attendees. In doing so, they could reach a larger scope of individuals and provide easier access to forms of communication which could facilitate follow-up and editor retention after the event is over. Second, more education regarding username selection and the problems with notability criteria must be discussed during the edit-a-thon. Spending more time on unpacking the problem of harassment on Wikipedia is essential for new editors (primarily women) to understand before picking out a username that will stay with them permanently. Not until users are fully informed, should they be expected to create a username (especially since edits can be done anonymously for first-time editors).

As this chapter demonstrates, part of the problem is the standards of notability are rooted in systemic bias. To combat this problem, Wikipedians must open the door for how notability criteria are established. I realize this is no easy task, but I believe it is something that Wikipedia, as a leader in knowledge production, has the capacity to take on. By harnessing the power of an integrated audience, Wikipedia could organize a more systemic way to challenge notability standards. Indeed, this is already happening to an extent. Open discussions regarding the problem of establishing notability was a central topic for many of the panels and keynote speakers at a recent conference I attended. As a way of extending this conversation, Wikipedians could expand on these problems during edit-a-thons, opening the possibility for new editors to think creatively about how notability criteria could be established in alternative ways. If the goal of edit-a-thons is to encourage increased and sustained participation on the site, then it is imperative for new editors to have all the information before selecting a username. This also should not be a rushed decision and the reason why it is rushed circles back to the way edit-a-thons recruit attendees to begin with. Were organizers to use alternative methods for recruitment and registration, they could inform those planning on attending that they should come prepared to create a username and provide brief information on the pros and cons of selecting a username affiliated with their off-line identity. By approaching the problem with a crowdsourcing solution, Wikipedia, as a leader in knowledge production, could utilize its own strengths to overcome its weaknesses.

However, a larger problem is how existing standards of notability are arbitrarily enforced and, to some extent, used as a form of gender discrimination and harassment. The data I have collected thus far indicate women who are considered notable by Wikipedia's own standards are twice as likely as men to be nominated for deletion. This statistic is particularly alarming when we consider that women constitute less than 20% of available biographies. Such a stark finding points

to the need for more research to better understand the extent to which biographies about women are targeted for deletion.

While edit-a-thons can help curb the problem of the missing figures on Wikipedia, they will not effectively close the gender gap, if content created during these events is simultaneously targeted for removal. The “how-tos” for conducting an edit-a-thon must reflect the existing gender imbalances when it comes to username discrimination and how notability of subjects is ascertained. We must also work to publicly acknowledge women and people of color are more likely to be considered “non-notable” even if they meet the already discriminatory threshold of notability. Doing so opens the conversation regarding how communities are using participatory media platforms to reify gender, racial, and sexual inequality.

Chapter 5 The Dynamics of Silencing

Thus far, I have used each of my cases as separate examples to demonstrate how integrated audiences reproduce inequality in myriad ways. Each chapter also details the unique ways in which those in a dominant position within the community studied could constrain expression. Through these acts of media manipulation, integrated audiences subsequently shaped the lived realities at each site. At the same time, community engagement with the creation of the media product created a sense of camaraderie. In the case of *Swamp People*, those who occupied a more settled position in the town could connect with their cultural heritage through a mediated representation of what it means to live off the land. Unfortunately, those who moderated content in that space had insufficient knowledge regarding who participated in alligator hunting. As those who make a living off the land decreased, the image of what constitutes what it means to be a “real” Cajun was subsequently replaced with the image projected on *Swamp People* - homosocial and exclusive to men.

In the Yik Yak case, those who resided in the community had more autonomy regarding content moderation decisions. To share jokes and post “relatable” subjects, students who already held a dominant position on the campus reified what it meant to belong at their university. However, those fighting racial and gendered injustice were rendered invisible on the platform. This was partly through how those in the community utilized the platform, but this silencing was also largely because of the technical affordances of the app (i.e. how information was organized). In the Wikipedia case, the moderation of content was the most democratic and yet the silencing practices were also the most targeted. While I cannot determine the intentions of those who nominate content for deletion, my data makes it clear that those who occupy a majority position in “Articles for Deletion” are nominating individuals who meet Wikipedia’s own standards for

inclusion. Failing to conduct even a simple Google search, the majority in AfD more routinely scrutinizes and nominates for deletion women who met Wikipedia's own threshold of notability. As a result, women occupy less space on the most widely referenced historical and intellectual authority in the world.

Focusing on one case per chapter illuminates the unique problems exclusive to each media platform. By examining each case separately, this dissertation demonstrates the important connection between the content creator(s), the content moderator(s), and the technical affordances of the media platform. Only a few residents in the town could directly participate in the creation of *Swamp People* and outsiders made content moderation decisions. Nonetheless, that chapter demonstrated the importance of *indirect* participation and the process of media-in-interaction. Since the show was filmed on location and starred residents they knew, residents were engaged with the series because it legitimated their cultural existence. At the same time, the series also shifted the image of what constituted an alligator hunter away from the lived realities of those who made their living off the land to those who claimed to on *Swamp People*.

Wikipedia and Yik Yak provided an increased possibility for both content creation and moderation. Given the lowered barriers for participation (there is no audition process for Wikipedia or Yik Yak), I assumed I would find increasingly democratic opportunities for expression. My data told a different story. Students of color, LGBTQ+, and transfer students from community colleges witnessed their contributions routinely deleted. In part due to Yik Yak's algorithmic design and in part due to how students utilized programmatic functionality, their perspectives were not afforded the opportunity to be seen and discussed. While Wikipedia bills itself as the free encyclopedia which "anyone can edit," user interface and cultural barriers make it difficult for newcomers to instantaneously create content. Despite the content moderation

decisions being made entirely by the community, the notability criteria Wikipedians rely on limit inclusion because they are rooted in systemic bias. Even women who meet Wikipedia's stringent notability standards are still twice as likely to be flagged as "non-notable" and nominated for deletion than their male counterparts. Clearly, the hurdles for equal participation and representation are unique to each case. However, these chapters are also strung together by a common thread: whoever occupies a majority position in the community holds the power to determine what narrative persists. The "settled" residents in a small rural town, the white, wealthy students on a college campus, and the tech-savvy male editors on Wikipedia were all able to dominate the camera, down-vote dissent, and delete individuals they considered unworthy of inclusion.

Given the prevalence of silencing in each of my cases, it became clear the process of obscuring information from public view is not a unique phenomenon. While analyzing my cases as separate examples of integrated audiences illuminated the numerous ways silencing can occur, this chapter thinks critically about the *similarities* between cases. By drawing across the data, a pattern of inequality materialized, cutting across the dimensions of visibility and action. Using these conceptual categories (Charmaz 2006), an analytical framework emerged including the following concepts: *avoidance* - marginalized expression is ignored; *harassment* - resistance to marginalized expression escalates rapidly into violent responses and threats; *reappropriation* - marginalized expression is modified or subtly rewritten; and *deletion* - marginalized expression is systematically erased. This chapter is devoted to unpacking this silencing matrix, considering how processes of avoidance, harassment, reappropriation and deletion obscure the contributions of those who already occupy a minority position within the community.

Implicit and Explicit Silencing

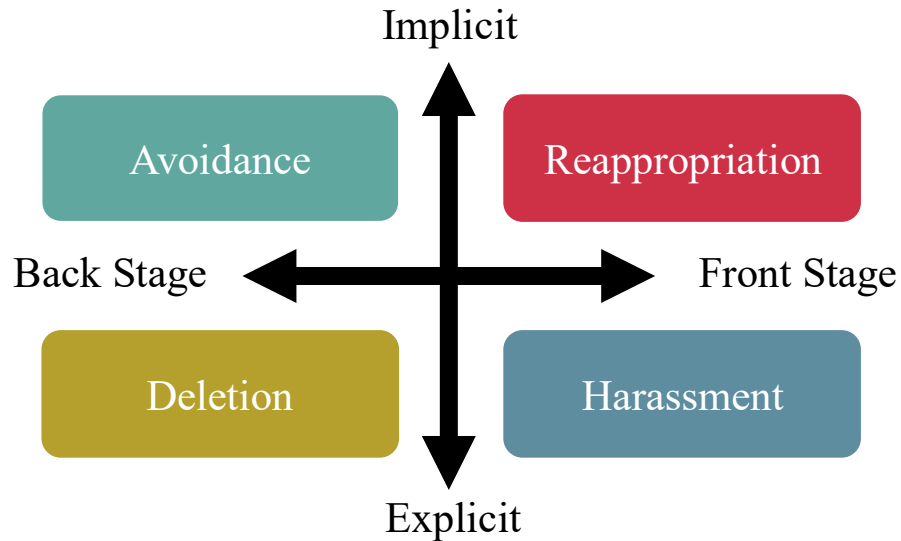
Using Stuart Hall's distinction between overt and inferential racism (1981), I first classify silencing as either an implicit or explicit action. According to Hall, overt racism is an open and favorable support for positions which elaborate racism. Inferential racism on the other hand refers to the "naturalized representation" of racism that enables it to persist by not calling attention to the underlying ideologies which allow it to persist. Expanding this concept to consider how racism (and sexism, classism, and homophobia) works to silence or prevent equal participation, I consider how actions which facilitate silencing fall along a spectrum of either explicit or implicit actions. Explicit actions draw attention to the underlying inequalities within a community; for example, harassing people who disrupt social norms or deleting contributions which challenge the status quo call attention to the underlying inequalities that those who are pushed into silence are fighting against. Implicit silencing is different - by simply avoiding topics or reappropriating subversive expression, these silencing tactics de-escalate contentious situations. Circumventing the underlying racism/sexism or homophobia in question, implicit silencing allows existing inequalities to remain unchecked.

Front Stage and Back Stage Silencing

Visibility has to do with whether the implicit or explicit actions are done in the front or backstage. Mediated interactions such as those facilitated through *Swamp People*, Yik Yak and Wikipedia are exchanges which construct our sense of "real reality" (Goffman 1959). Akin to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework, "real reality" is an amalgamation of "front" and "back" stage interactions. According to Goffman, the front stage consists of our ascribed characteristics, the *visible* aspects of our identity (i.e. age, gender, race) as well as the

institutionalized stereotypes associated with those traits—what Goffman refers to as the "collective presentation" (1959: 37). The "back stage," on the other hand, is the environment we believe to be unencumbered by an audience. Yet what Goffman demonstrates is our actions backstage are still heavily restricted by the internalized expectations of others even if they are *hidden* from public view. As my data demonstrate, expression is also constrained through mediated exchanges and these constraints take place both front and back stage.

Processes of reappropriation and harassment are front stage, visible as one's ascribed characteristics. Back stage processes of avoidance and deletion are more inconspicuous and, like back stage interactions, are normally hidden from view. In a traditional sense, the "audience" is not made privy to the editorial decisions that cut news stories or avoided coverage of topics. What is fascinating about *integrated audiences* is more people now witness invisible forms of content moderation. In *Swamp People*, community residents were privy to the editorial decisions made by producers. In emerging media environments, the possibilities for studying backstage forms silencing are even greater. As boyd (2007) aptly noted, content online is *persistent* and this traceability provides the opportunity for sociologists to further interrogate both front and back stage forms of silencing.



Avoidance

Avoidance is an implicit form of silencing done backstage. The concept is particularly problematic as it takes two forms; the first is through content moderation. By failing to engage or ignoring expression, avoidance deems certain subjects or people “unworthy.” It might seem passive but exclusion through forms of content moderation is purposeful. As previous scholars have demonstrated, editorial decisions have long excluded women, people of color, or those who occupy a lower status position in society out of the educational curriculum, news coverage, museum exhibitions, and theatrical performances (DiMaggio 1982, Hill Collins 1998, Reagle & Rhue 2011, Starr 2004).

Chapter 2 discussed how *Swamp People* rendered women in a lower status position within their community (i.e. female alligator hunters) invisible by failing to include them as legitimate subjects in the series. On Yik Yak, avoidance also limited visibility as the app organized information by popularity. Failing to engage with a Yak in the form of a comment or vote meant it received an overall lower score and was less likely to be read. Extremely “hot” content (Yaks with multiple comments and a large number of upvotes) could remain visible for days. Low scoring

content could not transition to the “hot” list and during high-traffic times content on the new list was refreshed and replaced within an hour. Since most respondents only spent a few minutes in between classes on the app and the app’s default was set to “hot,” few even checked the new list unless a major event was happening on the campus. In this way, content that students avoided engaging with (either through comments or votes) was effectively silenced because Yaks with low scores would fail to achieve the numerical threshold necessary for sustained visibility.

As I have already noted, there are a disproportionate number of biographies about men than women on English Wikipedia. Women scholars who merit a biography based on Wikipedia’s own notability criteria remain missing or overshadowed by their spouses who were comparable in academic and worldly contributions (Luo et al., forthcoming). The trend of existing editors to “avoid” the topic of women scholars is not exclusive to the field of academia. Biographies that do exist about women are underdeveloped and underrepresented (Adams & Bruckner 2015, Lam et al 2011), and women’s biographies are more likely to feature gendered language (i.e. wife of, daughter of) that indicates the person is a woman. This use of gendered pronouns *exclusively* in female biographies perpetuates the bias that articles of notable people are, by default, about a man unless otherwise stated (Wagner et al 2015). Articles about women are also less likely to link to men’s pages than *vice versa* (Wagner - *ibid*). Not linking to other content might seem innocuous, but another quantitative study found that edits work like “magnets,” attracting more editors to the page (Seiler & Aaltonen 2015). If other editors are less attracted to their pages, women’s biographies are less likely to develop over time and gain less traction on Wikipedia. For example, articles on the main page of Wikipedia are voted on by the community and are representative of what the community deems “Wikipedia’s very best work.”⁴⁰ Featured articles require a lengthy

⁴⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Featured_article_candidates

nomination process and Wikipedia recommends that before one embarks on trying to get an article featured, they seek the involvement of a mentor to prepare and process the nomination. Articles that are not well developed, or do not have the assistance of a mentor, will never become featured article candidates. In other words, it is less likely that biographies about women will be featured on Wikipedia.

While not specific to the cases I studied as part of this project, one can also see examples of avoidance on Instagram accounts created to promote “body positivity.” The body positive movement is rooted in the idea that people should be more accepting regarding what constitutes beauty with the goal of improving overall health and wellbeing. In October 2015, BuzzFeed created a list of the 13 Instagram Accounts that you “need to be following.”⁴¹ However, when you visit these feeds (@beautyincurves, @healthyisthenewskinny, @projectheal, and @aerie), they are filled with images of white, conventionally attractive, thin women. By avoiding images of people outside the normative standards of beauty, it further marginalizes those who do not feel represented by thin, white, women.

Avoidance is important because it not only signifies non-acceptance, it also limits the visibility of subversive expression. In an era of binge-watching, status update alerts, scrolling newsfeeds, and trending news *vis-à-vis* storylines and upvotes, avoidance has disastrous consequences. If a user’s content/expression does not garner immediate attention, it won’t circulate. To get content to “stick,” it must be “relatable” and to be relatable a majority must actively engage and agree with the sentiment. Up until now, we have primarily considered avoidance through the theory of information bubbles or silos (Thorson 2008, Putnam 2000, Sunstein 2007, Carr 2010). These scholars argue that filtering promotes polarization and an

⁴¹ https://www.buzzfeed.com/kyled30/13-body-positive-instagram-accounts-you-need-to-be-cn8i?utm_term=.nrAYXOIXz#.jby8Q7vQR

“argument culture,” driving like-minded people together and different deliberating groups further apart (Griswold 1994, Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999, Sunstein 2007, Thorson 2008). Borrowing Malcolm Gladwell’s (2002) concept of “tipping points,” polarization creates a cascade effect, facilitating like-minded action rather than testing beliefs. The “echo” of concurring ideas creates the illusion of deliberative democracy when in fact people are relying on assertions from others who agree with them (Pariser 2011, Sunstein 2007). However, these theories assume that technology (in the form of algorithms or RSS feeds) is an autonomous cause of social change (Lazarsfeld 1943, Williams 1974) without considering the ways in which communities *use* the technology. By actively avoiding topics, those in a dominant position can wield the conversation affording only some visibility. Avoidance is part of the silencing process not just the outcome. While clearly is intimately connected to the technological affordances of the platform, my data also demonstrate how communities manipulate platforms building the chambers that resonate our echoes.

The notion of filter bubbles, information silos, and/or echo chambers are also predicated on the idea that individuals do not seek out information they disagree with. While this may be true for some, I have also found that people do dabble in spaces they may not agree with. My data also demonstrate that when they try to engage in those places, their perspective is met with avoidance, harassment, reappropriation, or deletion. As a result, those in the minority position began *avoiding* participating in integrated audiences altogether. This brings me to the second kind of avoidance I observed, which takes the form of self-censorship or retreat. For example, residents who found *Swamp People*’s depiction as disingenuous began practicing a form of fragmented viewing, changing the channel during the show to avoid the parts which featured “settlers” while still supporting those who they felt were representative of their livelihood (i.e. Liz the “Gator Queen”).

However, by season 3, no one was even doing that. They were simply avoiding the series altogether. Students of color began to avoid Yik Yak as a place to publicize their events because they knew their sentiment would be erased and that people who would be interested in their events would not read Yik Yak anyway.

Not only would respondents avoid direct engagement with integrated audiences that excluded their perspective, they also formed *media enclaves* either within or outside of the environments I studied. For example, Wikipedians who focused on improving coverage of women and women's interests started to avoid certain space, working in what they described as the "quiet corners" of Wikipedia. Take Angelica, for example, who focused on improving articles about women in STEM fields. As she described:

"I've been very careful to stay out of conversations like that [referring to GamerGate] ...I see myself as being a stealth feminist in that I'm not one of the people who speaks loudly but in doing so I maintain my ability to talk to people who are really anti-feminist."

Olivia, the infectiously determined young woman referenced earlier, is also acutely aware of the places to avoid on Wikipedia. A regular organizer of edit-a-thons, she frequently advises new editors to stay away from "feminist areas," encouraging them to write about low-stakes content where "no one will bother you, ever."

By avoiding topics which solicit a charged response (see the next section on harassment), or avoiding spaces where their sentiments are modified or removed (see sections on reappropriation and harassment) these individuals are still empowered through participation. In some cases, these acts of retreat form new integrated audiences altogether, a kind of walled garden where their perspectives are granted visibility and traction. While it is clear why avoiding such spaces and retreating to the "quiet corners" is necessary, creating walled gardens also limits visibility. By avoiding certain spaces (both through contributing to content and through action),

alternative perspectives ultimately fall off their radar and become increasingly marginalized in the spaces they left. Since integrated audiences reify the cultural realities that surround them, avoidance through both moderation and self-censorship has long-term implications.

Hochschild (2016) recently touched on this issue, underlining how the “deep story” shared by those who ultimately voted for President Trump is shaped through an *avoidance* of certain spaces. On multiple accounts, Hochschild describes the pain Southerners felt from being described as “rednecks” or “idiots” because they did not agree with climate change or immigration reform. In the same book, Hochschild argues that part of the reason why *Fox News* thrives is because those working in their own “quiet corners” (many of whom hold low levels of socioeconomic status) feel pushed out and unable to get their own concerns heard. Since their story does not integrate, they are unable to take part in the integrated audience. Like those in this study who removed themselves from engaging with *Swamp People*, reading/posting to *Yik Yak*, or challenging the norms that keep biographies about women in the minority on *Wikipedia*, “strangers in their own land” (Hochschild 2016) also form media enclaves where their sentiments are shared by others. Because of this shared understanding; their integrated audiences validate their perspectives and afford their concerns visibility. My data make it clear that many do seek out information they disagree with. However, my data also indicate that when people openly disagree with an alternative sentiment, a dynamic public dialogue does not ensue. On the contrary, perspectives which challenge the dominant position are avoided and this signaling of non-acceptance shuts down future conversation. In addition to passive forms of silencing such as avoidance, the reaction can also be aggressive including violent and prolonged attacks.

Harassment

Counter to the ways in which avoidance operates as a silencing technique via passive behavior, harassment is a form of silencing that is explicit, direct, and visible. Sometimes, it is short-lived. For example, Yik Yak users I spoke to frequently described how their friends would look out for each other and downvote Yaks where people they knew were mentioned by name. However, Yaks such as this were rare as the detection software would often prevent the publication of Yaks where a person's name was used. Nonetheless, I regularly witnessed harassment on Yik Yak where people were not referred to by name but instead harassed via a code name. For example, rather than using the phrase Francesca Tripodi is a cheater, users could write something like FT=CheaT. While the cryptic language would sidestep Yik Yak's algorithm, the identifiers used were so specific and targeted that it was clear to other users who the Yaks were referring to. One example of this kind of harassment took place in May 2014 when a young woman was repeatedly targeted for talking too much in class. This student, referred to on Yik Yak as the "Platinum-Blond Bitch,"⁴² was a topic over conversation throughout the summer. Some of the Yaks directed at this woman included the following:

- "platinum blond bitch is wearing red pants today and dyes her hair and her eyebrows. Makes me wonder if she dyes her pubes...#stillwontshutup"
- "I'm about to break my laptop over the platinum blond bitch's head. She is making about 5 comments per slide right now and she needs to be knocked the fuck out"
- "Done with the platinum blond bitch for the weekend #yay #fuckthatbitch"
- "Platinum blond bitch was asking questions during a test #nevershutup."

The harassment of the "Platinum Blond Bitch" was so common that Yackers started referring to her by an acronym (PBB). It so frequent that one user even proclaimed "Summer Yackers have bonded over a mutual hate for the PBB." According to my analysis, this woman's largest offense

⁴² This was not the exact name of the user mentioned but to protect the anonymity of the school where I conducted my study I modified the name slightly. "Bitch" was used and because of the shade of her hair color she was clearly identifiable.

was asking “too many questions.” What is particularly interesting about this example is that a woman’s actions off-line were ridiculed through the app, demonstrating the fluidity and interconnectedness by which those on the app built camaraderie at others’ expense.

This type of harassment was also noted on Wikipedia. For example, a well-respected administrator was routinely harassed for settling disputes between editors in arbitration. She described how she was frequently harassed when she made administrative decisions with which other editors disagreed. She believed she was frequently a target of harassment because her username included a gender identifier (i.e. “LadyJane”). When I asked her to elaborate, she described how one user found pictures of her child on-line and proceeded to send her screenshots of her children with comments about their attractiveness. In another example, a woman described how she finally “came to terms” with the fact that she had chosen a username with a gendered identifier. When asked why she felt that way, she detailed numerous occasions where she received unsolicited attention and rape threats from other users upset about the content she was adding to Wikipedia. What each of these examples demonstrates is a visceral form of backlash (Faludi 1994) aimed at women who have garnered powerful positions in male-dominated spaces.

Both harassment and avoidance are relatively well-studied concepts on their own terms although we rarely consider how avoidance also works as a form of self-censorship or how processes of silencing exist along a continuum, happening concurrently. For example, it is clear those who are frequently harassed are often left with little resources to combat the problem (Paling 2016). To stop the harassment, they start avoiding the spaces altogether. In this way, harassment and avoidance can go hand-in-hand. However, this chapter also urges scholars to consider how other mechanisms for silencing are also at play. The remainder of this chapter will focus on these two understudied concepts, arguing that more attention needs to be paid to processes of

reappropriation and deletion. As you will see, my findings indicate these subtler silencing tactics further isolate minority perspectives, erasing the historical accounts of their lived experiences.

Reappropriation

Sociologists and anthropologists use the concept of reappropriation to refer to the process by which a group reclaims artifacts or terms that were previously used in a disparaging way. However, my silencing matrix draws on intersectional and gender theorists to analyze how concepts created to empower disenfranchised groups are diluted in the spirit of inclusivity (Alexander-Floyd 2012, Bilge 2012/2013, Bridges 2010, Crenshaw 1993). As a silencing tactic, reappropriation flips the power of the expression back in favor of those already in a position of privilege effectively muting or de-politicizing subversive expression. Because reappropriation deals with the outward manipulation of content, it is front stage but, like avoidance, reappropriation is implicit and not overtly disparaging.

An apt example of reappropriation which many are familiar with is the modification of the phrase *#BlackLivesMatter* to read *#AllLivesMatter*. While this subtle action still allows the original hashtag to persist, it also effectively creates a canned response that is in opposition to the BlackLivesMatter movement. By creating a phrase such as *#AllLivesMatter*, which on the surface seems like its use is done in the spirit of inclusivity, the hashtag alters the meaning of *#BlackLivesMatter*, making it seem exclusionary and aggressive. Again, drawing on this “naturalized representation” (Hall 1981) of racist sentiment, *#AllLivesMatter* enables racism to persist by refusing to engage with social and political issues (i.e. police brutality and racial profiling) which allow racial inequality in the penal and judicial system to go unchecked.

After #AllLivesMatter was coined, this phrase was reappropriated again, taking many different forms. One was a meme with two Labradors; a black one had a sign around its neck reading “Black Labs Matter” the other (a yellow lab) wears the sign “ALL Labs Matter” (see Figure 1 below).



(Figure 1)

In addition to Labrador memes, a recent movement which has surfaced is “Blue Lives Matter,” an organization which seeks to “honor and recognize the actions of law enforcement, strengthen public support, and provide much-needed resources to law enforcement officials and their families.”⁴³ Not only did #BlueLivesMatter reappropriate the phrase, the website also reappropriated the stories behind the #BlackLivesMatter protests. Take, for example, how the site describes the death of Michael Brown:

⁴³ <https://bluelivesmatter.blue/organization/>

“On August 9 2014, Ferguson PD Officer Darren Wilson was doing his job as he stopped Michael Brown who had just committed a robbery of a local convenience store. Brown attacked Officer Wilson in an aggravated assault. Officer Wilson was forced to defend his life by shooting Brown. In the months that followed, agitators spread outright lies and distortions of the truth about Officer Wilson and all police officers.”

As this example illustrates, police organizations have taken the meaning of “lives that matter,” reversing the power of the message back in favor of who #BlackLivesMatter sought justice from.

On Yik Yak, reappropriation was more nuanced, requiring a holistic approach to understand how users engaged with the app. By drawing together content analysis and contextual analysis (number of votes received and how the tone of the conversation shifts over the course of comments received) one can see how a woman’s sentiments regarding abortion were reappropriated from a radical position to one which conveyed a more politically correct tone.



(Figure 2)

Take, for example, analysis of the conversation that ensued following the above Yak (Figure 2): “To the people who wrote ‘women regret abortion’ all over [Campus]: I don’t.” This user is directly engaging in a debate about a woman’s right to choose, arguing she did not feel regret over her reproductive rights and decisions. This post initially drew my attention because it was engaging with a second-wave feminist expression that women should not feel regret for an abortion. I found the sentiment itself surprising since it contradicted post-feminist scholars who argued this kind of expression no longer exists on college campuses (Douglas 2010, Gill 2007). Not only was the sentiment unexpected, it also garnered a large number of upvotes. After just four

hours, the Yak had a cumulative score of 757.⁴⁴ By way of comparison, students I interviewed on the campus felt their Yak was a “success” if it hit 100, so nearing 1000 meant the second-wave feminist expression resonated with many students.

However, a closer analysis reveals a powerful example of reappropriation. Shortly following the original post are a series of comments diluting the initial sentiment that women should not regret their abortion. As you can see in Figure 2, the second comment immediately downplayed the original Yak, illustrating that even if one were to feel no emotional regret, they might still regret the procedure since it is so unpleasant “for the mother (and the fetus).” In a comment shortly thereafter (Figure 3), a user argued that women *do* regret their abortion but that they “probably regret unwanted children more.” Here, the original sentiment is reappropriated from an initial focus on a woman’s lack of regret to a narrative regarding the circumstances where regret is or is not acceptable.

⁴⁴ It is imperative to understand what this number means. 757 does not mean the Yak received 757 upvotes, it means it has received 757 *more* upvotes than downvotes meaning it is likely that more than 1000 students in the area weighed in on this Yak. Not only does this number demonstrate how the message was received within the campus, it also indicates the reach and scope at the time I was conducting my data collection. It is clear many students had the app on the phone and while they may not have been regular contributors, they were clearly checking the app and weighing in on what they considered to be “important” discussions. See Appendix A for more information regarding how I conducted my virtual ethnography in this space.



(Figure 3)



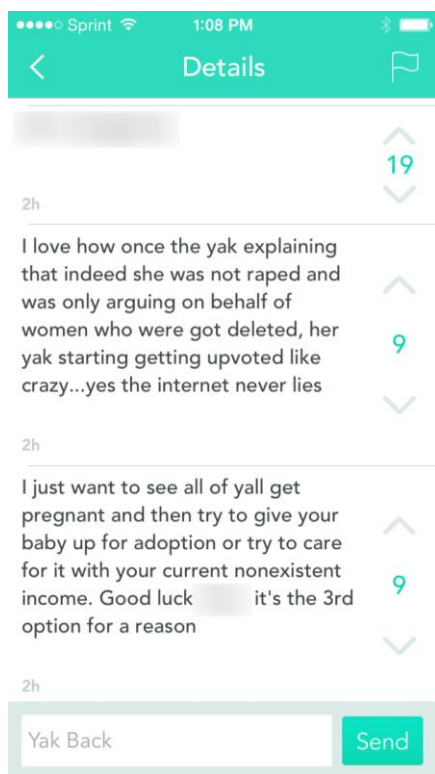
(Figure 4)

As you can see in Figure 4, about an hour later, another person joined the debate, responding bluntly to the statement regarding regret over unwanted children. They stated: “Yeah, I totally regret my rapist’s fetus.” This comment is pivotal because even though the commenter was agreeing with the original Yak, it further obscured and reappropriated the original comment’s meaning which did not refer to rape at all. While this Yakker was trying to counter the belief that women “regret” any part of the abortion, this comment effectively repositioned the role of abortion as a case for instances of rape only. Even though this Yakker was ultimately supporting the position of “no regret” from the original Yak, they were doing so under the contexts of rape – a more conservative position that is more generally supported by the wider public.⁴⁵

After evoking the idea of “rape” as part of the reason for “no regret,” a series of Yaks were written and a debate unfolded as to whether the original poster was raped or whether she was speaking on behalf of rape victims who decided to have abortions. At the bottom of Figure 4, approximately two hours after the initial Yak, another Yakker attempted to clarify whether or not a rape occurred and if this is why people feel regret over an abortion. This Yakker commented: “She wasn’t raped, everybody, as you can read she’s stating her opinion based on how she feels true rape survivors would feel.” However, the original Yak never mentioned rape. This post shared no information regarding the circumstances under which she had become pregnant nor did the Yakker indicate that they were speaking on behalf of rape survivors. If anything, the Yak is claiming she did not feel regret when she had an abortion.

⁴⁵ According to a 2011 Gallup Poll, 75% of people surveyed believe abortion is appropriate in cases of rape or incest <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/1576/abortion.aspx>>

The comment analysis also indicated that there were other posts, both from those claiming to be the original poster as well as others weighing in on the debate.⁴⁶ For example, the second post on Figure 4 reads “Sorry that was referring to one that got deleted.” In this way, deletion is a critical part of the reappropriation process. In deleting affirmation, it allowed the possibility of the reappropriated story to persist. This is clear in the second to last comment of the thread (Figure 5) where someone writes “I love how once the yak explaining that she was *not* raped got deleted, her yak started getting upvotes like crazy...”



(Figure 5)

⁴⁶ During this time of data collection and analysis, Yik Yak did not have any kind of identifier so posters would often write “OP” for “original poster” if they were commenting on a Yak they had posted. In later upgrades to the app, users would be randomly assigned a symbol (i.e. a red balloon or a blue shovel) and the original poster would be tagged as “OP” if they were to respond to their Yak. Therefore, we can only assume it was the original poster and that they had written “OP” to indicate as such but it is unclear if that person was in fact the “real” poster. As I indicate in Appendix A – this changed over time. As a quick reminder detailed in Chapter 3, Yik Yak has programmed the app so content with more than a cumulative score of -5 is automatically deleted from the app. This applies to both original Yaks and comments

The reappropriation of the initial poster's sentiment calls on Cerulo's (2000) theory of "story elaboration." She argues that since most citizens do not move past headlines, story leads, or sound bites, consumers process these brief media summaries and then proceed to fill in the blanks guided by the rules and scripts inside their sociocultural context. Similar to a newspaper headline, the original Yak professing "no regret" over her abortion was then "filled in" by the remaining users, creating a dialog which is compatible with broader sociocultural opinions. However, because Yik Yak is an *integrated audience* rather than a newspaper, the process of story elaboration allows those who fill in the blanks to modify and shift the meaning of the story for other people who are consuming it at the same time. As a way of returning to Cerulo, in this case of reappropriation, the modified headline becomes part of the story that then other people read thereby cementing the elaboration as "real reality."

Similar to the connection between avoidance and harassment, reappropriation is facilitated through processes of deletion. Circling back again to the example of #BlackLivesMatter/ #AllLivesMatter / #BlueLivesMatter, for reappropriation to effectively alter meaning, it must first *delete* part of the original narrative. Replacing deleted content in the spirit of "inclusivity" shifts the power scale, pushing out perspectives which seek to alter the status quo.

Deletion

Deletion works as an explicit form of silencing but, unlike harassment, it takes place in the back stage and is relatively invisible. In the past, uncovering deletion as a silencing mechanism required access to the space where content was produced. Take, for example, *Swamp People*. One of the more settled residents noticed how the editorial decisions framed the show's participants as less wealthy than she knew them to be. During the focus group, Elise leaned over during the

screening as though she was telling me a secret. In a lowered voice, she whispers: “So it is all reality TV we hear, [but it] is not 100% reality, it is still staged, you know and that to me is the only upsetting part.” Elise glances back around the room to see if anyone else is listening, but they aren’t. Just in case, she covers her mouth with one hand, pointing at the screen with another, “because that [signaling to the character in their town walking down his dock] to me, is portraying us as these backwards kinda people....they [the camera crew] just could go a little more and they could see his house, but they never do. I mean...it’s a three-story house, you know. And it just blows my mind.” Elise also witnessed this firsthand when she overheard producers telling people on the show to remove their false teeth before filming.

While this respondent later backtracked on her sentiments among the group reaffirming that *Swamp People* is “real, even if it’s staged,” what she is getting at here is the decisions the editors make to *delete* aspects of their reality from the narrative have implications. What Elise rightfully noticed is that the show deliberately makes it appear that the stars hold a lower socioeconomic position than they do in “real life.” However, Elise had to be present to witness these decisions.

Deletion was also frequent on Yik Yak but the process of deleting content was well known throughout the community of users and these content moderation decisions played out in real time via the app. In every interview, respondents were aware of the algorithmic design of the app and knew once content had a cumulative score of -5 it would be removed. Frequently, students described how they would take joy in downvoting a Yak at the -4 threshold since they knew this meant the content would be erased. Since students on the campus used Yik Yak as a gauge for determining their place within the campus, the implications of deletion through downvoting is important. However, the exclusion on Yik Yak is still relatively minor when one considers there

are many other sources of information available on a college campus. Wikipedia deletions seemed just as targeted as Yik Yak with much larger implications. According to Alexa.com, Wikipedia is regularly one of the most frequented websites in the world, typically hovering around #5. However, the reach of it is much greater when you consider the shadowboxes immediately available after you conduct a Google search are made up of Wikipedia content.

The process of voting on information is important for considering how we procure knowledge and information more generally. In today's digital media environment, what is the most popular (and subsequently the most visible) translates into forms of positive acknowledgement. Shows with good ratings get renewed and placed at prime time, content which gets the most upvotes is rank-ordered to be on top, and we are alerted when news/information/tweets are "trending." Nevertheless, not all stories trend. History demonstrates that what doesn't trend are the problems, issues, and opinions of the not so popular. As my research on *Swamp People*, Yik Yak, and Wikipedia demonstrates, stories of the historically disenfranchised are systematically removed before they even have a chance to gain traction and visibility.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

New media environments, such as the ones studied in this dissertation, are everywhere; but what constitutes an integrated audience is not limited to the cases I've presented. "Live-streaming" is no longer restricted to reality television programming. People throughout the world are using YouTube to chronicle their lived realities in ways that used to be exclusive to series like *Swamp People*. After returning from the hospital, new parents use Facebook to connect with other parents in their zip codes and these mediated interactions create a shared understanding of what constitutes a "good" mother (or father) within the communities where they reside. At Google, programmers are deciding what content does and does not validate a legitimate inquiry through their search engine. Depictions of reality are rooted in identifiable communities, smart phone applications which enable geographically-bound connections, and interfaces that give users the option to manipulate content. Integrated audiences abound.

These environments open the space for both content creation and moderation and this participation is connected to the proliferation of the tools needed for an integrated audience to form. According to a 2015 Pew Research study, nearly 70% of US citizens had a smartphone,⁴⁷ meaning that while broadband internet connections in the home have plateaued, data use on personal devices has risen.⁴⁸ This steady increase in individuals' ability to record, upload, and share content contributes to the steady growth of integrated audiences. When traditional barriers of entry such as high production and distribution costs decrease, the possibility for media participation, expression, and visibility increases.

⁴⁷ <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/10/29/technology-device-ownership-2015/>

⁴⁸ <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/12/21/home-broadband-2015/>

Take, for example, the #BlackLivesMatter movement. The problem of police brutality is something that traditional media platforms (such as television news or periodicals) have historically ignored. By circulating videos via Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube of unarmed black men being shot by police, #BlackLivesMatter started a conversation about racial injustice which was long overdue. After “trending” on Twitter, #BlackLivesMatter also started getting covered by newspapers and television networks. A wider circulation of the story increased the movement’s visibility and scope. It started with a Tweet.⁴⁹

Likewise, feminist scholar Anita Sarkeesian began producing videos about the negative tropes of women in media out of her own living room. She would then upload these videos to YouTube and link them to her website *Feminist Frequency*. Using Kickstarter, an online crowdfunding platform, she raised money to professionalize her content. Now her videos garner over two million views each. #BlackLivesMatter and *Feminist Frequency* are promising and these two cases support the utopian vision that emerging media is a haven for freedom of expression and subversive points of view.

Nonetheless, the previous chapters in this dissertation demonstrate the sheer possibility of expression does not guarantee visibility. More frequently than not, integrated audiences reify a normative order rather than open a space for people to challenge the *status quo*. What Chapter 5 illuminates is that when individuals in a minority position try to harness the power of integrated audiences to make their positions visible, their contributions are routinely ignored, modified, removed, or met with aggressive intimidation tactics. These efforts at silencing expression create a barrier for alternative positions to gain visibility. As a result, those in a minority position within the community avoid contributing to content that matters to them to circumvent negative attention.

⁴⁹ <http://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/>

Rather than providing an open forum for participation, my research on integrated audiences indicates one's ability to harness the power of participatory media is intimately connected to other interlocutors who are also vying for their own narratives to persist. In fact, the repeated use of social and algorithmic silencing happening across my cases was surprising. While one might expect constrained participation in an integrated audience such as *Swamp People*, I was surprised to find the same kinds of content moderation in an integrated audience billed as "open-access." What this dissertation makes clear is that while the technology may provide the opportunity for expression, *the community* determines whose expression gets seen, read, or heard. Taking into consideration the key role of existing power dynamics, this project demonstrates we can no longer separate emerging media environments from the communities which use them.

Despite my findings that minority perspectives are routinely pushed out of integrated audiences, my findings also demonstrate those in a minority position try to voice their opposition. Residents who found *Swamp People's* depiction as disingenuous began practicing a form of fragmented viewing. Likewise, students tried to actively post Yaks that would draw attention to their university's racist heritage. Chapter 4 demonstrated the ways that Wikipedians are trying to host edit-a-thons to close the "gender gap." Nonetheless, because of the technological affordances within these spaces, their interjections are rarely seen, read, or discussed. Such a finding extends and complicates Noelle-Neumann's (1984) "spiral of silence" which asserts that because mass media focuses more attention on those holding majority opinions, people holding minority positions remain silent for fear of isolation and retaliation. On the contrary, my work demonstrates a desire for those holding minority positions to challenge the *status quo*. Unfortunately, because they occupy a relatively small percentage of the community, their perspectives and contributions are systematically marginalized and erased and, as a result, they begin to avoid contact with

integrated audiences which shut out their expression favoring instead media enclaves that support their positions.

Integrated audiences should theoretically open a space for dynamic public discourse, yet some perspectives (frequently those of the historically disenfranchised) are still suppressed. Varying the level of authority over content creation and moderation does not significantly alter the message that prevails. Drawing on reality television literature, I expected *Swamp People* to follow a formulaic storyline (Grindstaff 2002, Couldry 2011, Stephens 2004, Morley 2009, Andrejevic 2011). The work to obtain what Grindstaff (2002) refers to as “the money shot” reinscribes the “long-standing hierarchies between high and low culture, expert and ordinary knowledge” (Grindstaff 2002: 17). My data back these findings, demonstrating how *Swamp People* reified gendered hierarchies within the town regarding what kinds of cultural rituals women were “allowed” to participate in. While I was surprised to find some residents favored the reality television narrative over the lived realities of their neighbors,⁵⁰ I expected editors and directors to limit women from equal participation. By selecting two subsequent cases where content moderator(s) were increasingly infused, I expected to see variation regarding who could participate. I hypothesized that, as the boundaries between producer and consumer became increasingly blurred, what constituted expert and ordinary knowledge would lax and an environment favoring inclusion versus exclusion would surface. I also expected that, as the audience became increasingly integrated, the mediated representation would be increasingly accepted as “true and/or authentic” (Goffman 1959). I was wrong on both assumptions; visibility

⁵⁰ I explain this phenomenon through the process of media-in-interaction, detailing why the very concept of an “integrated audience” is essential for further sociological inquiry. In doing so, I also contribute to the field of reality television scholarship whereby I extend on the process of manipulating media narratives in spaces where the reality television series is filmed on location (i.e. *Swamp People*, *Real Housewives of Orange County*, *19 Kids and Counting*, etc.)

was still determined by hierarchical patterns of inequality. In each case, it was clear that one's class, gender, and racial position still matter. Moreover, *Swamp People* was more regularly referred to as "real and authentic" in the town while Yik Yak and Wikipedia were still seeking to establish themselves as legitimate sources of information. Such a finding contributes significantly to the field of audience ethnography demonstrating how increasingly integrated spaces still reify patterns of inequality.

In closely analyzing my data, it seems exclusion and inequality are closely linked to establishing legitimacy. In *Swamp People*, producers went searching for the "real" hunter by recruiting through the Department of Wildlife and Fishery. By filming on location, *Swamp People* differentiated itself from existing reality television series as more authentic, proclaiming a "real-life" glimpse into Cajun country. Unfortunately, producers' "outsider" knowledge failed to see how their misplaced recruitment only afforded landowners visibility. Yet this pattern of exclusion through legitimation was also present in my Yik Yak and Wikipedia cases and, while the producers' mistakes in recruiting for *Swamp People* was accidental, the process of exclusion witnessed on Yik Yak and Wikipedia was much more scrupulous, purposeful, and exclusionary.

Yik Yak sought to differentiate itself from websites such as "Juicy Campus" and College Anonymous Confession Board (CollegeACB). Previous research found sites similar to CollegeACB were particularly problematic because individuals' real names were used and the only way to delete content from the forums was to flag it (Press & Tripodi 2014). Since the company held the ultimate authority as content moderator, removal of defamatory posts was at their discretion. While users could flag content deemed "inappropriate," a backlog of requests meant

content would remain on the site for days or even weeks before it was taken down.⁵¹ Yik Yak sought to remedy these problems by creating algorithms to detect the use of specific names to curb targeted yaks and facilitate students on the ground to remove content they found disagreeable. As detailed in Chapter 3, the company created a program which automatically removed content with a cumulative score of -5 and the users I studied prided themselves on how quickly they could utilize this functionality to censor content they described as “racist.”

Yet Chapter 3 also demonstrated how the algorithms created to make Yik Yak a more legitimate space than ACB did more than remove discriminatory content. In addition to downvoting overt racism, yaks about racial inequality were routinely downvoted. Despite the elaborate mechanisms designed to stop cyberbullying, it did not become a more inclusive space. Yik Yak’s efforts to try and combat racism, sexism, and harassment was valiant but algorithmic design alone cannot curb deep-seated societal conflicts. Not only did students find a way to bypass many of the functions designed to prevent cyberbullying, the ranking order of the app favored content the general student body found “relatable” or “funny.” By studying the community in which the app was embedded, we can see how what is humorous to some is deeply offensive to others. However, when students tried to protest offensive content, their contributions were downvoted/deleted. As a result, disenfranchised opinions were suppressed and “PC Racism” was provided an environment to thrive.

Wikipedia’s problematic notability criteria discussed in Chapter 4 is also tied to its desire to establish legitimacy. In this case, Wikipedia’s goal was to be considered as credible as its hardbound predecessor – *The Encyclopedia Britannica*. According to a study published in *Nature*,

⁵¹ Due to the site’s quick closure, many lurid and identifiable comments [i.e. First Name Last Name gives the best blow job on campus] were still accessible until the website was finally closed. In a recent search, traffic to “CollegeACB” is now rerouted.

Wikipedia's standards have done just that (Giles 2005). However, the way Wikipedia maintains that credibility is through the volunteer efforts of meticulous Wikipedians who constantly monitor changes to existing pages or new articles added to the site. This process for maintaining quality control is essential to, as one Wikipedian described, "debunk the myths out there that Wikipedia is unreliable or it doesn't have quality control so librarians, teachers, and professors stop saying don't use it." In addition to deleting entire pages, many Wikipedians volunteer a substantial number of hours to combat what they describe as "vandalism" to Wikipedia. One administrator described how reversions are used as a concerted effort to erase defaming content: "There is racist vandalism being added to articles about black sports figures; you see a lot of vandalism, really nasty, mean stuff." In the same vein as the algorithm designed by Yik Yak, the notability criteria described in Chapter 4 were cultivated to help improve the site. Deletion is not rooted in nefarious activity. On the contrary, expanding the possibility for others to revert content helps reduce vandalism on the site. Unfortunately, the disproportionate demographic make-up of Wikipedia simultaneously creates an environment where women and people of color are more routinely seen as "non-notable" and, not unlike content that scores -5 on Yik Yak, are frequently on the cusp of erasure.

By creating the concept of integrated audiences, I have addressed a missing sociological focus among audience and media researchers and furthered academic understandings of the relationship between emerging media technologies and class, gender, racial, and sexual inequality. My silencing matrix illuminates how forms of silencing exist along a continuum and happen concurrently. By outlining what constitutes avoidance, harassment, reappropriation, and deletion and demonstrating what these forms of silencing look like on *Swamp People*, Yik Yak, and Wikipedia, I demonstrate how implicit and explicit forms of silencing maintain hierarchical patterns of power and authority. I also demonstrate how acts of avoidance are twofold – in some

ways silence through the avoidance is an active process by those trying to maintain their dominant position. In the other, avoidance is a defensive act whereby those who are avoided/harassed/deleted/reappropriated silence themselves. I argue that, while we currently focus on the most visible forms of silencing, sociologists need to pay more attention to deletion and harassment to understand how media enclaves are formed and how this shapes the narratives that persist.

This focus on silencing is not unique to my work. As English scholar and classicist Mary Beard argues, silencing and its relationship to the public sphere has been around since the beginning of Western civilization.⁵² Drawing on textual analysis of *The Odyssey*, Beard asserts this claim using the story of young Telemachus, Odysseus' son, silencing his mother Penelope when she attempts to confront a group of guests that have congregated in her home. Looking at Penelope, Telemachus banishes her back "upstairs," to private chambers, saying: "speech will be the business of men, all men, and of me most of all; for mine is the power in this household" 1, 358-9, quoted by Beard (2014:11).

Beard's use of Homer indicates an important rite-of-passage for men was demonstrating the ability to take control of public speech with the specific target of silencing women. In this way, some of the men's silencing technique is an intimate part of shedding the markers of boyhood. Beard continues, "...the actual words Telemachus uses are significant too. When he says 'speech' is 'men's business', the word is *muthos* – not in the sense that it has come down to us of 'myth'. In Homeric Greek, it signals *authoritative public speech* (not the kind of chatting, prattling or gossip that anyone – women included, or especially women – could do)" (Beard 2014:11 – emphasis added).

⁵² <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n06/mary-beard/the-public-voice-of-women>

While Beard's primary analysis is on the silencing of women, historical studies of content moderation demonstrate the myriad of ways power, subjectivity, and visibility go hand-in-hand. Part of Benjamin Franklin's desire to become the first Postmaster General was linked to his understanding that publication circulation in the Colonies was contingent upon the postmaster agreeing with the sentiment (Zuckerman 2016). Also consider how laws such as The Comstock Act were created to "protect" the public from content deemed obscene or indecent. In the case of Comstock, "obscene" content included any printed material that provided information on how to procure contraception or an abortion (Starr 2004, pp 243). What is fascinating about integrated audiences is that, even though the number of people who can moderate content has increased, the authority for determining what constitutes "obscene," "notable," "worthy," and/or "relatable" content is still tied to structural systems of inequality. Moreover, who (or what) is making moderation decisions is increasingly opaque. While few were privy to the decisions behind what the Postmaster General would exclude from circulation, the public still knew who the Postmaster General was. If everybody is responsible, no one is responsible.

By considering the role communities play in the production and consumption of media representations of their culture, it opens the space for researchers to expand on what constitutes "an audience." Rather than continuing to think of an audience as one-dimensional, I demonstrate how more research attention is needed to environments where "the media," "the audience," and "the community" are intertwined. Integrated audiences can ignore, change, remove, or intimidate minority positions using aggressive attacks. Even platforms that protect anonymity or tout openness can push minority perspectives to the margins, relegating them less visible. In an era of integrated audiences, who holds the power and authority to determine what content will prevail is increasingly complex and more difficult to discern. One would think that, as more people have the

power to create and moderate content, mediated representation would become more democratic. My cases prove otherwise, demonstrating that what stories prevail are still determined by those who hold a majority position within the community and that what gets removed is just as valuable for sociological inquiry.

A central contribution that this dissertation opens is the possibility to study these absences. Even deleted content on Yik Yak and Wikipedia can still be data mined and analyzed.⁵³ By studying deleted data, Chapter 4 demonstrates that women who meet Wikipedia's notability criteria are twice as likely to be nominated for deletion than men. This finding only begins to scratch the surface of the deleted data available for analysis; mediated publics (places such as Twitter, Yik Yak, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Wikipedia) are ripe with possibilities for sociological inquiry because what we discussed in these spaces is persistent, searchable, and replicable (boyd 2007). Companies store what we post indefinitely on large data servers we conceptualize as clouds.

Right now, researchers use data analytics to focus on what "trends" and companies follow suit. Facebook, the App Store, and even news sites, steer us in the direction of what is "trending." While popular voice is important, the majority voice can be a marginalizing force. Therefore, this dissertation urges readers to begin to pay attention to what doesn't trend, and seek to steer other media sociologists to analyze both media representation *and* content not afforded visibility. Just like the astrophysicists who noted the importance of studying *absence*, we need to shift focus to these societal "black holes." Black holes in our universe are not visible because they are so dense that not even light can escape. As a result, astronomers have had to use indirect and unorthodox methods for extracting information about them. What their research has taught us is that black

⁵³ 4Chan is constantly uploading photos obtained from SnapChat of semi-naked women demonstrating the persistence of even the most ephemeral spaces <<https://www.reddit.com/r/snapleaks/>>

holes are everywhere - not just in our galaxy. We know more about our universe and ourselves because astronomers dare to study what once seemed inaccessible – they seek to explain that which we cannot see. Now it is time for social scientists to do the same.

Appendix A – Methods

A modern understanding of how communities construct their shared reality requires a qualitative lens. Ethnography provides the opportunity to explore how communities practice their cultural heritage in the “every day” utilizing both in-person and mediated interactions. The qualitative data for this project took place over the course of six years at three separate locations. At each site, I began with participant observation of the community relying on “episodes of heightened importance,” what Hochschild (1994) termed “magnified moments” to deeply investigate how their participation in integrated audiences shaped their social realities. As I detail below, I collected hundreds of hours of ethnographic observations on-the-ground and spent thousands of hours observing mediated interactions and exchanges using virtual ethnography. As a way of explicating my findings, I also conducted individual interviews and focus groups with 158 participants. I transcribed over half of these interviews and relied on professional transcription services.⁵⁴

During data collection for my *Swamp People* and Yik Yak cases, I also mentored two undergraduate students. These women helped transcribe seven interviews (two *Swamp People* and five Yik Yak). The undergraduate I worked with on the Yik Yak case also conducted five interviews herself and we analyzed the content in regular meetings together. The average interview time was one hour with focus groups lasting approximately two and a half hours. No interview used in this dataset was under 50 minutes; approximately 10 interviews lasted much longer, upwards of four hours.

I coded my field notes and transcriptions in two stages; firstly, I did an open coding (Charmaz 2006), consisting of listening to recorded interviews while reviewing my field-notes and

⁵⁴ Services used were Landmark Associates and Rev.com

writing down emergent ideas on a series of notecards. Secondly, I arranged these cards in clusters, identifying which themes were the most salient. After flagging particularly salient “*in vivo* codes” (Charmaz 2006), I conducted a more focused coding, determining the accuracy of the threads identified. Comparing the trends identified in my observations with trends found in interviews/focus groups allowed me to triangulate my findings. Since each case engaged with a different kind of participatory media, the observation of the spaces varied slightly. To avoid any confusion regarding the technological nature of the spaces studied, I have broken down the details of my methods for each case below.

Swamp People

From 2011-12, I traveled to a remote community located in Louisiana’s Atchafalaya Swamp Basin. Since the television show *Swamp People* films five communities throughout southern Louisiana, I concentrated my data gathering in one community featured on the show to protect the anonymity of those who participated. I visited this town three times for approximately two weeks per visit. Before I arrived, I used the Chamber of Commerce website to find accommodation. On my first visit, I stayed in a rustic set of cabins along the bayous but, in the spirit of Southern hospitality, those who I interviewed and met during this visit subsequently opened their homes to me and I stayed in one of their trailers in one visit and in a guest bedroom in another. My ethnographic observations of the town included going to local restaurants and bars, hanging out on people’s porches, at boat launches, in local gas stations, and attending town gatherings. I read the local newspaper and talked casually to residents in the town regarding their lives and the series.

In addition to informal conversations, I also conducted in-depth interviews and focus groups. The owner of the cabins I stayed in gave me a list of names of people who “made their

living off the land” to interview. In addition to his suggested contacts, I also got in touch with people I knew in the area who introduced me to those in the town who lived a more settled life. Before interviews began, I asked participants to tell me their age, gender, and race. The racial demographics of those I interviewed were close to the 2010 census data. According to the census, the town has a population of approximately 3000 and 98% are white – of those I interviewed, 60 identified as white or bi-racial (white and African-American) and two identified as African-American. Thirty-eight participants were men and 26 were women. Over half had a high school degree or less (11 respondents stopped going to school after middle school) and three respondents had graduate degrees (in education and business respectively). I conducted the interviews one-on-one, but because, of the proximity to others in the community, family members were often present. When I met participants at local restaurants, people they knew often interrupted us. I came to realize that this closeness is a product of their socioeconomic status. Most the people I interviewed lived in small homes or trailers making an isolated place for an interview more difficult. As a result, respondents’ spouses or children would listen in during the interview or want to join in halfway through our conversation. To utilize this closeness, I conducted 10 interviews as pairs (husband/wife, brother/sister, and father/son).

In addition to formal interviews, one interviewee hosted a crawfish boil during my trip in the spring and a shrimp boil during my trip in the summer, giving me a taste of what he termed “Cajun pride.” Another couple invited me to join them on the first few days of the 2012 alligator hunting season. During this trip, I stayed with them for a week in their one-room houseboat observing first-hand what it meant to make a living off the land. This opportunity was essential and, through these observations, I learned that the first day of the season is the most critical for hunters because they try to fill their tags as quickly as possible to avoid extended fees associated

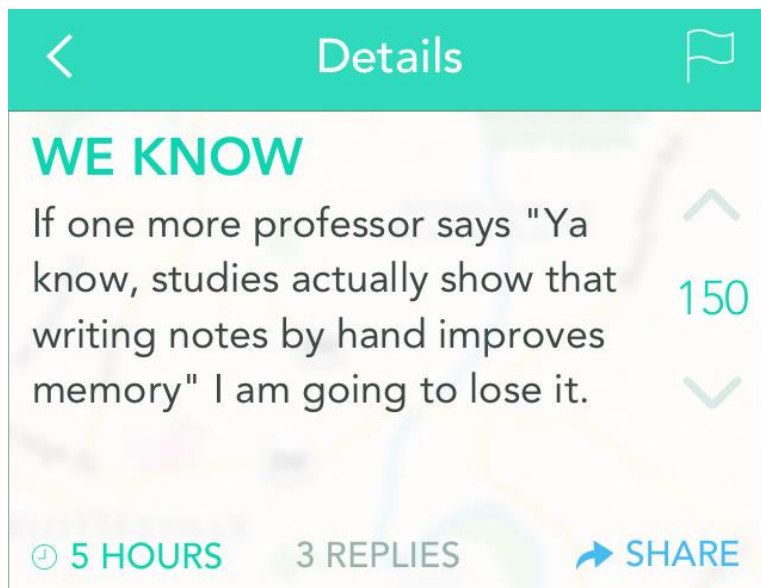
with hunting (mainly gas for their boats). Staying on their houseboat and accompanying them into town to sell their catch also facilitated casual conversations with others who made their living off the land and is how I came to realize how central women are to make it in this profession.

Finally, I conducted an analysis of the first three seasons of the show *Swamp People*. I conducted this analysis in two stages. First, I watched the first season in its entirety before my initial visit. This was important for me to understand the show as well as select episodes to screen during my focus groups. Following my first visit, I did a more focused analysis of Seasons 1-3 paying attention of the role of women on the series. I flagged points in the series that did not “match up” to the observations I had just recently conducted. Similar to my physical observations, I used magnified moments (i.e. the opening of Season 3 when Liz and Kristi struggle to get the alligator back in the boat) to unpack and highlight inconsistencies between the televised narrative and my participant observation. I then used these inconsistencies in my interviews to better understand the ambivalence between the “real reality” settlers described and those which I observed first hand.

Yik Yak

Observations on campus took place during events, in classrooms, and in large public settings (the library or the “quad”). I conducted my virtual ethnographic observations on the Yik Yak feed associated with the same university where I conducted my physical observations. I spent a minimum of three hours a day on the app from May 2014-May 2015 going on in the early morning hours, afternoons, and evenings, totaling over 1,000 hours of ethnographic observations. For those unfamiliar with the app, I have included a screen shot (Figure 1) to demonstrate how I conducted this analysis.

First, I analyzed the content of the Yak in relation to its relative score. In Figure 1, the cumulative score of 150 means that 150 *more* students upvoted than downvoted the content. I also paid attention regarding the number of replies (the example below had 3) as well as how long the Yak had been visible on the app. I then compared the overall time spent on the app (in Figure 1 the Yak had already been visible for 5 hours) with the time stamp of the replies (referred to in my interviews as comments).



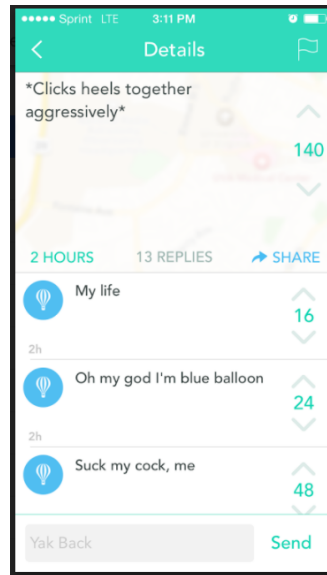
(Figure 1)

Virtual ethnography was extremely complicated because the app was continuously evolving. Over the course of the year, the app changed the default setting of how information was organized from new to hot. Sometimes the technological changes in the app helped with analysis. For example, at the beginning of my study there was no differentiation between who was commenting. Some of those I interviewed even speculated the number of unique visitors was much lower than the number of comments. However, Yik Yak rolled out an upgrade halfway through my project that began identifying users with a symbol (this would change depending on the Yak

one was responding to). It would also label who the “original poster” was using the symbol “OP” (see Figures 2 and 3). As a point of reference, this labeling system was not available in the example used for reappropriation. If it had been, the analysis would have been much easier.



(Figure 2)



(Figure 3)

In addition to the platform modifications, I was also working in a space that was completely ephemeral. Depending on the volume of users, content on the “new” list would frequently refresh (approximately every hour) and older content would disappear. When large events took place (i.e. sorority/fraternity rush), I had to monitor Yik Yak more frequently to ensure my analysis was as accurate as possible. In addition to data timing out, I also paid attention to content that was close to the threshold of deletion. For example, the Yak in Figure 4 indicates that this overtly racist Yak was on the threshold of disappearing. By taking screenshots of my data, I could capture it before it was erased either due to a time lapse or downvotes. Unfortunately, proprietary laws blocked my ability to scrape data from the app for a more systematic analysis of how Yaks were organized and erased. Although I repeatedly requested deleted data, the company was unwilling to provide any for analysis.



(Figure 4)

I also conducted 45 semi-structured interviews and three focus groups with undergraduates (totaling 58 participants). All interviewees were enrolled in the university where I conducted my virtual and on-the-ground ethnography. I recruited participants using fliers around campus as well as sending out mass emails through various departmental and housing listservs. The recruitment language used was purposefully vague asking the simple question: “Have you ever heard of Yik Yak? Want to talk more about it? If so, please contact me to see about participating in an interview or focus group.” I purposefully used this language so I could attract both users and non-users to participate in the study.

Respondents ranged from freshmen to seniors and were from a variety of majors including biology, psychology, international affairs, communication, sociology, computer science, and engineering. Twenty-three respondents were male and 35 were female (a ratio close to the

demographics at the campus where I conducted my ethnographic observations). Most students interviewed were white (80%) while 20% identified as a racial minority including African-American, East Asian, South Asian, or multi-racial. This ratio is only slightly less than the overall percentage of minority students reported on the university website.

Wikipedia

Wikipedia is a hybrid community because Wikipedians primarily collaborate virtually and regularly meet at conferences and group editing sessions colloquially referred to as “edit-a-thons.” I began my ethnographic observations in person at edit-a-thons in a metropolitan city along the East Coast. Over the course of a year, I attended many edit-a-thons but used ethnographic data from 10. During my time at the edit-a-thons, I spoke casually with Wikipedians, the event organizers, and new editors. I was transparent regarding my place at the edit-a-thon and made a quick announcement before each event regarding my research. From these informal conversations, I would recruit people to interview. My interviews with Wikipedians and new editors ranged in age from 19-65, 85% identified as Caucasian and 10 were men. In total, I spoke with 30 self-identified Wikipedians and six new editors.

In addition to my physical observations and interviews, I also conducted virtual ethnographic observations of Wikipedia. First, I would star content on Wikipedia that was created during the edit-a-thons I observed and then monitor the revision history of these pages. One can “star” a page by clicking the star button in the upper right corner of a page (see Figure 5). Doing so tags the page so you can easily monitor any changes made to these pages on your “Watchlist.” Figure 5 is also a screenshot of what a page’s revision history looks like. I used University of Virginia as a point of reference but I never conducted ethnographic observations on this page in

my dissertation.

The screenshot shows the 'Revision history' page for 'University of Virginia' on Wikipedia. At the top, there are tabs for 'Article' and 'Talk', and buttons for 'Read', 'Edit', 'Edit source', 'View history', and 'More'. The main heading is 'University of Virginia: Revision history'. Below it, there is a 'View logs for this page' link and a 'Browse history' section with filters for 'From year (and earlier): 2017', 'From month (and earlier): all', and 'Tag filter:'. A 'Show' button is next to the tag filter. Below the filters, there is a legend explaining symbols: '(cur)' for current version, '(prev)' for preceding version, 'm' for minor edit, '→' for section edit, and '←' for automatic edit sum. It also provides links for 'External tools' like 'Revision history statistics', 'Revision history search', 'Edits by user', 'Number of watchers', and 'Page view statistics'. A 'Compare selected revisions' button is present. The main list of revisions includes: 1. 08:08, 1 February 2017 by RaphaelQS (119,632 bytes, 0 changes). 2. 17:43, 31 January 2017 by Quenhitran (119,632 bytes, -9 changes, reverted by 209.232.146.25). 3. 17:41, 31 January 2017 by 209.232.146.25 (119,641 bytes, +9 changes). 4. 23:22, 29 January 2017 by Contributor321 (119,632 bytes, -11 changes, copy-edited). 5. 21:45, 29 January 2017 by Omnibus (119,643 bytes, -24 changes, Grammar dab). 6. 22:57, 27 January 2017 by Corkythethehornetfan (119,667 bytes, -10 changes, updated colors). 7. 22:55, 27 January 2017 by Corkythethehornetfan (119,677 bytes, -1 change). 8. 22:55, 27 January 2017 by Corkythethehornetfan (119,678 bytes, +21 changes, rotunda logo renamed). 9. 21:50, 26 January 2017 by Contributor321 (119,657 bytes, -20 changes, Undid revision 762135869 by 107.). 10. 21:49, 26 January 2017 by 107.77.194.184 (119,677 bytes, +20 changes, Added Notable alumni to UVA page).

(Figure 5)

In addition to starring pages, I also conducted regular observations on the Articles for Deletion page (Figure 6). Each day, approximately 100 articles are nominated for deletion. I paid attention to the voting process taking place on pages, as well as the decision rendered (Figure 7). Please note that in keeping confidentiality, Figure 7 was chosen at random and was not included in my dataset.



(Figure 6)



(Figure 7)

In addition to my qualitative data, I teamed up with a talented computer programmer (Eric Rochester) who wrote a small script that would web scrape the Articles for Deletion daily log pages either for a specific day or for all the pages linked to the index of open AfD. In the spirit of transparency, this script is available at GitHub.⁵⁵ The entries were then filtered to look for tags or phrases which indicated that the entry in question was a biography. These filters included the

⁵⁵ <<https://github.com/FTripodi/wikip>>

following:

Authors-related
Businesspeople-related
educators-related
filmmakers-related
People-related
Politicians-related
Sportspeople-related
Women-related
WP:ACADEMIC
WP:ANYBIO
WP:ARTIST
WP:BIO
WP:MUSBIO
WP:MUSICBIO
WP:NACADEMIC
WP:NACTOR
WP:NSPORT
WP:TEACHER

Entries which passed this filter were written to a comma-separated value (CSV). After we exported the data from Wikipedia, I manually reviewed and investigated the data using Excel and descriptive statistics. I wanted to look specifically at the notion that women had to work “twice as hard” to stay on Wikipedia. Therefore, I paid attention not only to the number of articles about women nominated for deletion but also to those who received a “keep” vote. While the notion of “keeping” an article might signify to some a positive association, I utilized this category to analyze the proportion of “notable” men to women nominated for deletion.

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