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(re)Making Worlds Together: Rooster Teeth, Community, and Sites of Engagement

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(re)Making Worlds Together: Rooster Teeth, Community, and Sites of Engagement

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the ones who make my life a richer, more beautiful experience through our mundane and not-so-mundane experiences together.

To my parents, without you, this journey would not have even begun. Your encouragement for me to pursue my passions and investigate the world around me helped foster my inexorable curiosity. When you both confidently told me I could do anything I wanted to, I *believed* you. Mom, you taught me how to be creative, caring, and empathetic. Dad, you demonstrated, by example, the dedication it takes to build a future for the people you love. You have both given me everything I needed to arrive at this moment in my life and prepared me for all the moments I have yet to encounter.

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And finally, to the Rooster Teeth Community. You have made this daunting task enjoyable. I hope this work helps all of us better understand how we build our world together.

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ABSTRACT

My research examines the communicative practices by which fans of the entertainment brand Rooster Teeth (RT)—with millions of members around the world engaged with one another through in-person meetups, as well as a variety of digital spaces — constitute community. I study these moments in communication in terms of sites of engagement, or real-time windows where actions occur through the intersection of people, mediational means, and social practices. My research is important for a contemporary understanding of communities, as well as being critical in considering how our online and offline practices are inextricably tied in ways we have only begun to comprehend. The implications of this research are far-reaching, and the findings can serve as a foundation for understanding the search for belonging and community-making in the modern world. My research encourages a dialogue about community, globalization, technology, language, and commodification.

My data-set is comprehensive and representative of the practices I analyze. It includes: interviews with 10 RT members; 22 Facebook posts and 379 comments; 11 Tweets and 467 comments; and 28 posts on the RT website. I have also completed more than 200 hours of field research by monitoring a variety of social media accounts and taking note of trends in postings, as well as attending in-person RT events such as content screenings, live events, community meetups, and the annual convention, RTX.

To capture communication in all its richness, I approach my research multimodally. To analyze my data, I draw on multimodal discourse analysis (MDA), examining how text,

language, images, videos, GIFs, and other semiotic resources are the means for the materialization of community. This approach allows me to examine how different social practices, social identities, times, and spaces converge, orienting people to take specific actions. I focus my analysis on how members draw on the cultural tools of narratives, rules, and regulations, and markers of membership to (re)create community.

This dissertation concludes with ideas for considering the significance of defining a community and the problematic ways in which people discuss the connections between online and offline interactions. I urge caution when adopting certain metaphors to define our realities. We should consider how communities are (re)constructed through our mundane, everyday communication, which involves both technical and situated affordances and constraints. This conversation becomes essential as we look toward a future filled with the continued proliferation of modern technologies for communication and, therefore, community-making. Further, I highlight how more and more companies are engaging in increasingly interpersonal "relationships" through social media with people buying their products, fostering communities around brands. I argue the need for ethical considerations and practices in light of this commodification of community.

INTRODUCTION

I wait for my latte at the counter in the open, airy Starbucks tucked into the corner of a Hilton hotel in Austin, Texas. A plucky indie tune melds with the whirr of coffee grinders and the sputter of milk frothing at high heat, but the coffee house cacophony is a tempest in a teapot compared to the excited voices of people in the hotel.

As I observe the crowds moving in and out of the lobby, a teenager who's just placed his order walks up to the counter next to me, glances at my shirt, and says, "I just saw Geoff."

"Oh, yeah?" I say.

"Yeah. He was just outside the hotel. I got a picture with him. I think Funhaus is around here somewhere. I think they stayed here."

"Yeah. I saw them at breakfast the other day."

"And I think Joel is outside the convention hall," he says quickly, excitedly.

"Nice."

"Yeah. He was just hanging out, taking pictures with people. It was really cool."

"Yeah. They've been good about taking the time they can with us," I say.

He nods in agreement.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

What is happening in this scene? At first glance, two people are having a conversation in a hotel Starbucks, passing the time as they wait for their overpriced beverages. But by engaging in close looking (Sacks, 1992), you will be able to pay attention to how mundane encounters

<p style="text-align:center">1</p>

such as this reference broader discourses that create our very worlds (Shotter, 1993). Through our casual queue conversation, this young man and I are enacting social practices that (re)construct a community where people tell small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2006) to each other in hotel lobbies. This is a community where people use what I will later examine in terms of markers of membership, physical items such as shirts and names like "Geoff," "Funhaus," and "Joel" to establish identities (Langellier, 1999) and mark allegiances. This is a community where respect and friendliness are both narratives and rules. This is a *community*—but what does that mean?

In this dissertation, I reconsider the idea of community. I start by examining community from a constitutive view of communication, which includes the role played by technologies in community-making. I will return to the story of Starbucks later, but first, there is much to consider.

Building Worlds Together

A world of "community" is constituted in and through communication between members who draw upon available social resources (from language to social media). Packer (2011) discussed the idea of constitution based on Aristotle's concept of people as inherently social beings:

> So the citizens of a community "constitute" it: they decide, formally and informally, how they will live together. Sometimes there is an explicit "constitution," but often the decision emerges tacitly. At the same time, a community doesn't just regulate its citizens' activity, it fosters their flourishing. Only by living together with others can humans actualize their capacities, both intellectual and moral. Communities "constitute" the

people who live in them. Constitution, then, is this relationship of mutual formation

between people and their forms of life. (p. 10)

He underscores the idea of how everyday actions create our communities and how our

communities also inform those everyday actions. This constitutive function represents a

dialectical relationship, as discourses are shaped by the world, which in turn shape the world

(Fairclough, 2010). Figure 0.1 depicts this dynamic in Shotter's (1993) diagram in which the

world—in the case of my research, the "world" of community—is rooted in discourse, which

also structures the community.
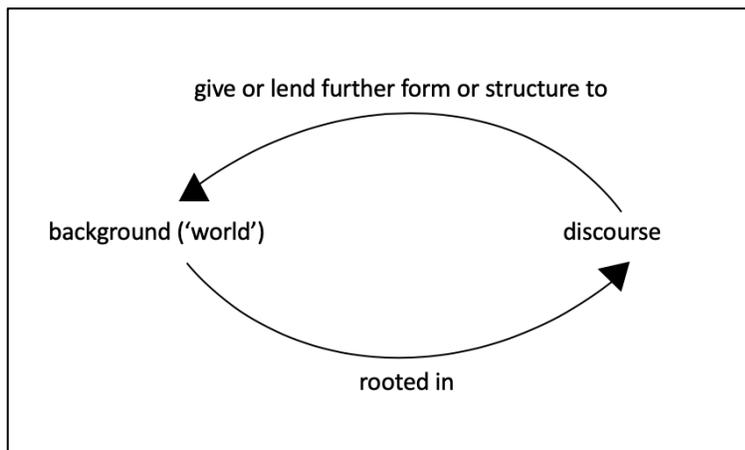
Figure 0.1. Shotter's two-way process. Model provided by Shotter, 1993, p. 36. Copyright permissions in Appendix J.

Furthermore, I understand this activity as part of Shotter's (1993) *joint action*, which accounts

for how knowledge becomes naturalized into our daily lives. When I casually say "the

community" when referring to any given community of which I am a part, it feels normal, as if

the existence of this community is something that just is and always has been. This is because

communities are constituted through communication, where members both shape and are shaped

by the world(s) in which they participate. The existence of communities becomes part of the

background of the mundane, everyday experiences of our lives.

The constitution of a community also pertains to the process of continual recreation (Fairclough, 2010). In other words, a community is something that is both produced and consumed; it is consumed to be re-produced, and in doing so, it is re-generated through everyday acts of communication. Latour (2011) discussed how groups rely on people *doing* things, which makes it a group. We can never quite pinpoint a group because "we are simultaneously above the story and under it – but never completely … and never at exactly the same time and at the same capacity" (Latour, 2011, p. 2). Latour's conception recognizes the tenuous nature of any group and how if we stop performing actions that keep it going, it will simply cease to function. For the purposes of my study, I understand the act of being a part of a community as always re-enacting being part of a community (Latour, 2011).

A community, therefore, can be understood as comprising the actions of its members constituting community and continuing to do so. By this, I mean that it is only in moments when we are *practicing* community (e.g., talking about it, wearing artifacts, attending events, posting on social media, etc.) that community actually exists. The objective of this dissertation is to examine these ideas in practice to examine how a community comes to and continues to exist. For the reasons previously described, I am using communication as the focal point of my investigation. With this premise, I can now turn to how a community is defined.

Can Community be Defined?

Yes, community can be and is defined. For a long time, yet without reaching consensus, scholars have attempted to provide a standard definition of community (Rapport, 2009). The notion of community resists definition, as it is itself a metadiscourse, indexical and reflexive. It is indexical because it is always pointing to its membership, the actions and values associated with it, and the discourses of which it is a part. It is reflexive because the word "community" is

always referring to its own existence, so the use of this word to describe a group of people (re)claims its very reality. Furthermore, community is ever-changing, unfolding, and in a state of becoming what it will be. There are many definitions of community people use every day in scholarship and daily life; however, I am not interested in claiming a singular definition as more or less accurate than others; I am more interested in how these definitions are used. As we work together to understand community, it is helpful to consider ways community has been talked about before. As a starting point in our journey of understanding community together, I share the following ways to describe a community.

Etymologically, community is a term that involves both people and unity, originating "from the Latin *communitas*, a unified body of individuals" (Mordini, 2003, para. 1). Following this idea, one way to define a community for simplicity's sake is "any large or small group of people sharing a common history, language, set of values or goals" (Mordini, 2003, para. 1). One important aspect of community is how it is inherently social (Delanty, 2018), and camaraderie and fraternity can be experienced by members of a community even if they never meet because "in the minds of each [member] lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). So, we can consider community as having to do with a binding commonality, where people seek out others with similar interests who can help fulfill a sense of belonging for members of a given community (Delanty, 2018). Turning back to Shotter (1993) and Fairclough (2010), we realize we also need people to discursively (re)construct community. Therefore, the first step to making a community is having a group of people call themselves a community. Then, to keep a community going, members then must continually communicate in ways that perpetuate the agreed-upon versions of that community and continue the cycle of production and consumption.

Instead of fully buying into any single given definition, even the seemingly basic one I provided from Mordini (2003), I invite you to ask with me (as I will throughout this dissertation): Whose definition of community is used at any one time and for what purposes? What does the definition afford and / or materialize? How do definitions enable certain actions? And how are the definitions themselves understood as technologies we can use to (re)create our communities? I used the word "technology" to describe a *definition* very purposefully. In this reconsideration of community, I would also like to reconsider technology.

Technology Reconsidered

The term "technology" conjures up many ideas. Here, I propose to reevaluate technology in two ways. First, I talk about what technology is. Then, I examine how the development of modern digital technologies has altered our discourse about communities.

Technologies of Talk

What is a technology exactly? We can think of technologies simply as *tools* we use in our lives to accomplish certain actions. When I say "technology," I do not just mean computers and other electronic resources. Tools include "telephones, computers, architectural structures, furniture, and other objects, as well as symbolic or 'semiotic' tools like languages, conversational routines and scripts, speech genres, social languages, social identities, and social practices" (Jones, 2016, p. 22). With this understanding, Jones (2016) proposes the idea of *technologies of talk*, or cultural tools we can use for communicative purposes. While I can use my smartphone to send an email to a friend (one type of technology), I also have to make decisions about the phrases I use to talk to a friend (use of slang, etc.), which would be the case if I were having a face-to-face conversation as well. We are always making decisions about what tools we can use as we perform social identities in different spaces we navigate throughout

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our daily lives. We have many cultural tools available to us to achieve a variety of communicative purposes.

Inasmuch as technologies are extensions of ourselves (McLuhan, 1964), we can begin to understand how all experience is mediated, and different technologies bring different meanings to our communication. Furthermore, how we use technologies is intimately tied to our identity creation. If I send you a text, call you on the phone, or meet with you for coffee, my message will come across differently. This is not because of any inherent value in any of these different communication modalities, but because of the convergence of social practices, social actors, and discourses that have become associated with different technologies, from Snapchat to the use of specific jargon in conversation. This mediation of experience is something I take up further in Chapter 1.

Modern Technologies, Modern Communities

So far, I have discussed what a community is and different conceptualizations of technology and mediation. Now, I will move toward situating my research and its significance in light of the social and cultural contexts in which this dissertation occurs. In recent years, digital and computer technologies have seen a rapid increase both in their evolution and proliferation in our lives. This is where we need to pause and think for a moment about the entangled nature of digital and physical spaces, as more often than not these spaces overlap. Entanglement is a way to describe how things are wrapped up in each other, yet are still distinguishable (Orlikowski, 2007). As Barad (2017) reminds us, entanglements are not always easy to notice for they " are not the mere intertwinings of, or linkages between … [they] are the ontological inseparability of intra-acting agencies" (p. 111). This means that things (time, space, matter) are never really separated, but instead we orient ourselves to time, space, and matter

differently in each interaction with other people and with objects and texts. I will engage this idea of entanglement throughout my dissertation, but I want to begin with a contemporary example.

Augmented Reality (AR) is one striking example of the visual blending of the digital and physical when using certain mobile applications, or apps. With AR, you can hold up a device such as a cell phone or tablet to view what is right in front of you physically with added digital enhancements. One example that made headlines back in 2016 is Pokémon Go, a video game app for cell phones where you can "catch" digital creatures (Pokémon) through the digital screen as they appear in public spaces such as parks; however, you must be physically present in the locations to see the Pokémon on the app, as displayed in Figure 0.2. Another example is Civilizations AR, an educational application that allows you to see artifacts from great cultures of the past and put them in your living room via your cell phone camera, as featured in Figure 0.3; think of this app as a mobile museum.

Figure 0.2. Augmented Reality via the Pokémon Go cellphone application. Image from Pixabay (see Appendix H for Pixabay license details).

Figure 0.3. Augmented Reality via the Civilizations AR cellphone application. Image taken by the researcher through the application (see Appendix I for Fair Use Assessment).

AR is an apparent visual blending of spaces. However, not every example is so straightforward in how digital and physical spaces are entangled, especially when we start thinking about identity, relationships, and the linkages and overlapping of spaces. Even a seemingly simple entanglement like AR also involves other spaces such as the digital storage it takes to load the app on the phone, the amount of room a person has to maneuver in a certain area where they are using the app, etc. It is worthwhile to think about how we are talking about physical and digital spaces, especially when it comes to social spaces within our communities.

Metaphors of Community

Consider for a moment the terms *on*line and *off*line and how they call forth the metaphor of a space (a type of enclosure) that a person (or their message) enters and exits (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For example, I may go "on" or "off" a ship or a plane, taking my physical body from one space to another. This idea of exiting and entering spaces does not make much sense with AR. Clearly, these spaces are interconnected or layered, rather than completely separated. They exist both separately *and* together. However, it is in their togetherness, their convergence, that something unique and interesting happens.

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The metaphor of a separate space also does not make sense when applied to social situations. Think about any time you have sent a text while talking to a friend who is physically in front of you. You do not exit and enter your phone space as you send a text. Instead, you may be typing the text while still talking to your friend. The question we should be asking in these situations is: *How are you spending your attention?* It probably shifts constantly between your friend and the text until the text is sent. In any given interaction, we can have a polyfocal orientation to time and space, and this includes physical and digital spaces.

Table 0.1. Headlines mentioning online and offline interactions

Headline	Publication	Publication Date
How addicts and their loved ones find 'strength' in online community	*ABC News*	February 8, 2018
Bitcoin Thieves Threaten Real Violence for Virtual Currencies	*New York Times*	February 18, 2018
How Gen Z is using social media to affect real-life social change	*Forbes*	February 21, 2018
Online platform aims to make lousy community meetings more inclusive and productive	*Mother Nature Network*	March 3, 2018
Foster, Adoptive Parents Find an Oasis in New Online Membership Community	*The Chronicle of Social Change*	July 19, 2018
Survey finds New Zealanders turning to online chat groups for a sense of community	*The New Zealand Herald*	November 17, 2018
A message to the mob: Behave on social media as you would in real life	*The Guardian*	January 7, 2019

If we look closely at how people talk about different spaces in daily discourses, the problem of wanting to separate spaces becomes readily apparent. For example, the headlines in

Table 0.1, pulled from a Google search of recent headlines using the search phrase "online community," are representative of how people talk about online and offline spaces. These verbal declarations create a bifurcation, separating out "online community" and "real life." So why is this a topic of concern? The implication of this split between the virtual and the real is that it becomes a guiding metaphor for how we understand and live our lives. The use of *real* to describe one space implies that other space is *not* real. What is *real* becomes only offline, separated entirely from digital spaces. However, when I talk to a friend on Facebook Messenger, I label that a *real* conversation happening in *real* life. To my point, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) claim "we define our reality in terms of metaphors and then proceed to act on the basis of the metaphors" (p. 158). Only from a metaphorical standpoint are Internet spaces separate and ones that we can travel in and out of; the same goes for the real world as a space we occupy that is separate from digital interactions.

The ways in which these spaces entangle is complex and multifold and is one major focus of this work. As digital communication practices are woven into our everyday experiences, we need to consider the guiding metaphors we use to describe how we experience our relationships with others. Krippendorff (1993) invites us to accept a notion of language that amplifies the power of metaphor by abandoning "the view of language as a medium for representing a reality outside of it in favour of one that sees language as a medium through which speakers organize their experiences and engage in interaction with each other" (p. 4). Metaphors are ways of engaging in a particular way of understanding the world, and when people act based on those understandings, they then create a reality (Krippendorff, 1993). When talking about community, we create what it is while engaging in activities of community. The container metaphor (Krippendorff, 1993) is represented in the headlines I shared earlier when we talk about being *in*

an online space or *in* real life, we are creating a space we can enter and exit. As I have already argued, a community only exists through the communication of its members. When we start to talk about community as *action*, we understand just how important our own actions are in shaping our communities. Thinking only about space as something closed and contained with known geological or "digital" borders offers only a limited view of how people engage with communities, as we act in many places at the same time (think of AR).

This combination of metaphors, technology, and definitions of community becomes increasingly important as communities continue to emerge and (re)create themselves every day. Therefore, it is important to examine why we are so ready to separate online and offline interactions, especially when it comes to talking about our communities, such as those displayed in the headlines in Table 0.1. Apprehension to using new forms of communicating (like new technologies from books to iPhones), especially when it comes to facilitating meaningful communication, is not new. One of the most prominent critics of technology and relationships is MIT's Sherry Turkle, who claims we are more connected to our devices than one another (Turkle 2011; Turkle; 2012). She and other critics argue that we are not making strong friendships through online interactions and can sometimes see our relationships formed online as disposable (Price, Jewitt, & Brown, 2013). I am not entirely arguing against this viewpoint. In fact, these critics and pro-technology advocates may actually be more in sync than they realize. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Turkle says she herself uses technology, but she remains cautious. She says, "I am not planning to give up my phone. I just need to know what it is good for" (Adams, 2015). She continues, "I am not anti-technology, I am pro-conversation" (Adams, 2015). Turkle's concerns stem from when technology orients us *away* from our relationships, but she also sees its value in relationships. During her TED Talk, she says a text from her

daughter can be like a "hug" (Turkle, 2012). She also claims technology moves us away from the messiness of human relationships by allowing us to clean up our messages and ways of presenting ourselves to each other (Turkle, 2012). She says some people would rather text than talk (Turkle, 2012). These concerns loop back to the idea of using different cultural tools in different ways. To change the use of the tool, we have to change our cultural practices; we have to change our discourse.

To do this, I side with the many scholars who are pushing against a focus on the dichotomy between online and offline communication (Barton & Lee, 2013; Katz, Rice, Acord, Dasgupta, & David, 2004; Tagg, 2015; Leander & McKim, 2003; Wellman, 2001). Creating a semantic divide between online and offline interactions is unhelpful, as it leaves out the significance of these spaces in relation to one another and how they are entangled. When we look at the idea that multiple spaces can be inhabited at the same time, it makes no sense to say we go in and out of a given space as though it has boundaries and barriers. By avoiding the trap of creating distinct worlds of *digital* and *physical* or *real* and *online,* and by understanding the Internet as just another space in our complex matrix of communication, we can better understand how to connect with others. Modern technologies allow us to extend our social reach. How we extend this reach is what matters.

Notions of community in this golden age of the Internet are in a state of evolution (Katz et al., 2004). Researchers have long talked about how digital spaces can be understood as complementing physical spaces (Wellman, 2001), and how online interactions extend rather than replace offline relationships (Leander & McKim, 2003) and practices (Jones, 2005). Barton and Lee (2013) find that for many people, online activities are intimately connected to offline interactions and interests. For example, textspeak has become widely understood and accepted

as a normal usage of language (Barton & Lee, 2013), and the ways we speak online make their way into offline interactions and vice versa (such as using "lol" in a sentence). Therefore, identifying a community with online elements as simply a *community* and not as an *online community* distinguishes how communities with online elements have blurry lines of demarcation, sometimes more or less being connected to non-online communication (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2006). Tagg (2015) suggests avoiding comparing online and offline communities and to examine the ways community is constructed through discourse as people seek out other like-minded individuals. This conception allows for a more fluid idea of community and does not discursively pigeonhole a community into only virtual or physical spaces, instead placing various forms of communication at the center of this notion of community.

If technologies are extensions of ourselves (McLuhan, 1964), then we need to better understand how we are using technologies in our lives. If, like Turkle, you believe there is an illusion of connection online without intimacy, and that technology is making false promises about relationships (Turkle, 2011), you should consider why that may be the case. I think these criticisms are important beginnings to a conversation on how we use all technologies (from language to iPhones) for different purposes. However, I strongly believe how we talk about and subsequently use technological tools for communication shapes their communicative value. My dissertation is not an argument for or against any specific technology (digital or otherwise); I am instead concerned with how all technologies of talk orient us to space, time, and people, as well as with what technology affords or constrains us to be able to do. I also argue we need to abandon the container metaphor of being *in* or *out* of physical or digital locations. Instead, my research teases out how the Internet compels us into conversations about how to *better*

understand communication and all of its complexities. Mostly, I am interested in how we have a polyfocal orientation to these different spaces as they are both entangled with and extend each other. I examine how intersections of space, time, social practices, people, texts, and objects make community more or less possible.

Overview of Chapters

Now that I have provided the backdrop for my research, I want to return to the narrative that began this introduction. The conversation in the Downtown Austin Hilton's Starbucks is a way for me to focus your attention on how members (re)construct a community though mundane interactions, specifically the community at the center of my research, Rooster Teeth (RT). The young man and I were attendees of RTX 2017, the annual convention for the RT community. Generally speaking, the several-million RT community members worldwide are fans of digital videos (from sci-fi parodies to podcasts to gaming) produced by Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC. In the following overview of the structure of my research, you will learn about my approach to examining the RT community and how this study reconsiders both community and technology.

In Chapter One, I provide an overview of the RT community, discussing different types of members, as well as details about the different spaces where they engage with one another. I also outline the main theoretical premises of my dissertation. First, all communication is mediated. Second, moments of mediation occur as sites of engagement (SoE) (Scollon, 2001; Jones, 2005). Third, community is produced and consumed. Fourth, metacommunication plays a significant role in how community is produced, consumed, and regulated. Then I will discuss my research question "What does a community need in order to exist?" and the three main aspects of community from my data that help in the construction of SoE where RT members

contribute to the existence of community through their mediated actions: community narratives, regulations, and markers of membership. Finally, I will discuss the dilemmas of community found throughout analysis, which are identified by members through accounts, accountable actions, identities, and narratives.

In Chapter Two, I review my methodological framework, the process of collecting data, my connection to RT, and ethical considerations in Internet research. My dissertation is a Multimodal Analysis, drawing from Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA). I selected this approach because community is constituted in and through communication. One way of looking at this closely is by studying discourse, which goes beyond language to understand communication as always inherently multimodal (from nonverbal communication to use of images, video, etc.). It is important to study community with this approach because I am able to view actions across online and offline spaces, which include images, bodies, artifacts, and other means of communication, with time and space being constructed in many ways concurrently through various SoE. I discuss how I have drawn most of my data from interviews with RT community members, social media posts from Facebook, Twitter, and the roosterteeth.com forums, as well as from my own experience of attending RTX and other member meet-up opportunities. I also discuss other artifacts I collected for analysis as well as my role as a participant-observer. I conclude by discussing ethical considerations in Internet research.

In Chapter Three, I examine the narratives of the RT community. I start by introducing the master narrative of the community of RT. This community narrative is supported by corollaries I call community narratives. I examine how personal narratives told by community members simultaneously shape the social identities of members while interdiscursively (re)constructing the community. I define and outline each of these different types of narratives

related to RT and their relationship to one other. I also review how the heuristic of SoE helps me examine storytelling as praxis. I investigate the intertextual relationship of multimodal stories told by RT community members through examples of narratives in interviews, digital videos, blogs, images, and social media posts. Finally, I discuss how the master narrative of community is a foundational premise for other mediated actions of members.

In Chapter Four, I study how rules uphold community narratives and values, control actions, and help move bodies to action. First, I discuss the role of rules and regulations in a community. Then, I talk about the role of humor in rule enforcement, including the role of humor in discourse. I then provide examples and analysis of how rules are written and enforced. Examples include formal written rules, both in social media spaces and physical spaces for interaction. I discuss also who enforces rules, which includes members with leadership roles, as well as how members police each other and themselves. Finally, I discuss the community dilemma of how regulations have to be justified as a method of controlling actions of members, and this justification usually takes place through metadiscourse.

In Chapter Five, I look at the role of how markers of membership help create community and help open up SoE for members to engage with one another. I define *markers of membership* as resources for displaying and performing membership, indexing one's cultural capital within a specific group. I describe different markers of membership, including markers that are digital (e.g., icons on websites, photographs), tangible (e.g., shirts, RTX badges), or even spatial (e.g., a geographical location, or special lines). Markers of membership I identify for the RT community are physical locations, artifacts, purchasable memberships and passes, and photographs. For example, the shirt I was wearing in the Starbucks was representative of a character from *RWBY*, the anime-style web series created by RT. The young man glanced at my shirt before engaging

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me in conversation. Therefore, my wearable community artifact in the form of a t-shirt was a signal to him (since he had the prerequisite knowledge of an otherwise strange symbol on my shirt) that I was a member of the community. Furthermore, wearing this shirt in a particular space, time, and place was meaningful because Starbucks became a hub for community members to meet near RTX. Therefore, I look at the role of markers of membership in creating community, supporting the narrative of community, and opening up SoE for members. I also examine the tensions and dilemmas regarding how community is modified and can be understood in terms of different types of capital. Finally, I discuss how markers of membership also create dilemmas for members to contend with, such as some experiences being exclusionary.

In Chapter Six, I conclude by revisiting my research question and emphasizing the results of my research and the implications it has for future research on communication and communities, as well as what it means for our everyday experiences. I consider how RT is a community both similar to and different from other communities. I review the value of multimodal literacy as proposed by Van Leeuwen (2017), using this research on community as a platform to consider the implications of language usage, how people experience contemporary community, and how companies are taking on more and more interpersonal roles in our lives through the processes of production and consumption. I consider the dilemmas of community brought up in each of my analytical chapters. I come back to the ideas of how community is defined by members and the role technologies play in (re)producing community. We recreate our worlds with the cultural tools available to us and communicatively constitute our communities. The multimodal production of community in entangled spaces is one way to (re)orient ourselves moving forward into the future. New digital technologies and ways of

communicating will continue to be invented, although we cannot forget our own role in how we use these technologies in our everyday use of language, cell phones, and more that we (re)configure what our world becomes. Therefore, I also issue a call to anyone reading this to reconsider their daily discourses and how they are contributing to the making and remaking of their own communities, especially in the context of having a more complex understanding of the spaces we use in SoE.

CHAPTER ONE:

OPENING WINDOWS: THEORETICAL PREMISES, DILEMMAS, AND QUESTIONS

I am one of 5,000 eager attendees waiting in rows of chairs filling the room. We talk, compete on portable gaming consoles, and take selfies. There are still three hours between us and the start of the show.

Suddenly, Lady Gaga's "Just Dance" plays through the speakers. A small conga line of a dozen people forms in the back of the room. The volume of the music increases and the line gets bigger.

Soon, nearly one hundred people are joining in the conga line, snaking in and out of the labyrinth of pathways formed between rows of black chairs. The audience begins to clap and cheer as the group maneuvers through the massive room.

The lights begin to flicker to the beat of the song. The audience goes wild—cheering, hooting, hollering—and then a chant starts that ultimately overpowers the music.

"RTX, RTX, RTX, RTX ..."

As though summoned, two RT celebrities emerge from backstage and engage in a battle with glowing plastic swords, replicas of lightsabers from the Star Wars universe.

The chant morphs into a wordless roar that peaks and valleys in reaction to movements of the combat on display.

* * *

This opening narrative features community members attending the 2017 annual

convention for Rooster Teeth (RT), RTX. From conga lines to mock *Star Wars* battles, this

multi-layered site of engagement (SoE)—a heuristic originating from Ron Scollon (2001)—is an

example of the convergence of identities, social practices, mediational means, spaces, and times.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the RT community as I review the four main theoretical

premises of my dissertation, which includes an analysis of mediation, SoE, production and

consumption, and metacommunication. I also discuss my research question, "What does a

community need in order to exist?" and the three main ways the RT community endures through

the actions of members. Finally, I consider the dilemmas of belonging that members' actions

bring to our attention.

"You ever wonder why we're here?": Introducing Rooster Teeth, (as) a Community

The RT community, which is several million strong worldwide, primarily revolves

around the following of members interested in video content published on the Internet by

Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC. While RT-specific ideas, shows, and stars may be niche, RT is

still part of broader discourses of the Internet, gaming, and entertainment. As an introduction, I

share a seminal digital video, which gave RT its initial popularity (depicted in Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1. Screenshot of *Red vs. Blue* Season 1, Episode 1. Screenshot taken from YouTube
(see Appendix I for Fair Use assessment).

"You ever wonder why we're here?" Simmons says to his fellow soldier, Grif, as they guard the Red Base in Blood Gulch Canyon. Grif answers the open-ended question by pondering life's great mysteries. When he finishes, Simmons clarifies his question, saying how he was asking *why* they were in the *canyon*. The comedy is in how open-ended this question is and how it could produce many different answers, like a Rorschach of questions. Grif takes it more seriously than Simmons intended, and this script opposition (surface-level question versus profound question) is the crux of the humor (Taylor & Raskin, 2012). This joke is the opening scene of the longest-running web series to date (Our Story), *Red vs. Blue* (*RvB*)*,* which premiered on April 1, 2003.

The RT show creators used recorded footage from the Sci-fi first-person shooter video game, *Halo,* and added voice-over recording to create their own original story. This genre of filmmaking called machinima is explained in *Spectra*, the Magazine of the National Communication Association, by Banks (2015): "some gamers create machinima (a portmanteau of "machine" and "cinema") by recording and editing in-game footage, often publishing the productions online and sometimes garnering micro-celebrity status" (p. 14). The micro-celebrity phenomena, as mentioned, certainly applies to RT employees who are featured in their video content. I simply refer to them as "celebrities" or "RT celebrities" in my dissertation. Examples of RT celebrities include the people mentioned in my coffee shop conversation (see the Introduction) such as Geoff Ramsey, a founder of RT who also voices Grif. Additionally, Simmons (Figure 1.1) is voiced by Gustavo "Gus" Sorola, another founder of RT and prominent RT celebrity.

RvB was one of the first reasons people came together in early community-making activities related to RT. *RvB* premiered in 2003, a time where there was no YouTube. People

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downloaded RvB webisodes from the RT website where the RT founders hosted their own videos. Imagine high schoolers and college students in computer labs, huddling around the glowing screens of computer monitors, sharing episodes with their friends. People also burned the web videos to DVDs to hand them off to friends at school who then handed them off to others. These are all early ways community-making began for RT. Fast-forward to 2019, and now my knowledge of *RvB* and these stories, including how I am using them right now, are ways for me to continue perpetuating the RT community right here in this very dissertation.

In the 16 years since *RvB*, RT has developed a cult following as they have expanded their entertainment brand to include podcasts, films, animated shows, live events, and more. I use "cult" in the sense that there are rituals we members participate in as social practices which (re)create our community. This metadiscursive action is what Silverstein (2003) calls *culturally eucharistic*, meaning that the very invocation of the word "community," in a particular context, is generative of the moral order that the term entails—that is, it performs it. In other words, the fact RT members describe themselves as part of a community does more than create a sense of unification, it actually constitutes a space for bodies to inhabit the practice in terms of time and space. Silverstein (2003) exemplifies this through oinoglossia, or wine connoisseurship:

> as we consume the wine and properly (ritually) denote that consumption, we **become**, in performative realtime, the well-bred, characterologically interesting (subtle, balanced, intriguing, winning, etc.) person iconically corresponding to the metaphorical ''fashion of speaking'' of the perceived register's figurations of the aesthetic object of connoisseurship, wine. (p. 226)

I am "drinking the wine" when I use a reference such as the *RvB* quote I shared at the start of this section. Quoting *RvB* is a type of slang used by RT community members, and, here, I am

entangling my identities as an academic and a RT community member. I am speaking the language of a community member when I use these references and jargon associated with RT (casual register) just as I use the language of an academic by quoting academic sources (formal register). As I perform an activity, such as making references to RT celebrities and shows, I identify myself as a well-versed member, who corresponds to the ways of speaking as a member of the RT community. Reflexively, in these moments, I am performing acts of membership (Fuoss, 1995; Conquergood, 2013).

As you read more about the RT community and its membership, I want to introduce terminology to serve as a reference point. A *RT member* or *RT community member* is a person who self-identifies as a member of the RT community. Additional terms I use to refer to RT members may include volunteer leadership roles such as:

- **Admin:** "Administrator" or leaders of local community groups.
- **Mod:** "Moderator" or person who moderates online communication in platforms such as Discord, Forums, or gaming channels.
- **Community leader:** Someone who is not an Admin or a Mod who takes on a leadership role such as organizing a single event or assisting Admins and Mods as needed.
- **Guardian:** A volunteer who helps run RTX conventions.

For the purposes of clarity in my research, I distinguish paid employees of RT from community members; though I recognize paid employees of RT may also self-identify as community members, and the production company and community are not distinct entities. However, I make this distinction because people who work for RT have experiences and will take actions that differ from people who do not work for RT because of their access, privilege, and job contracts. Different roles within the company certainly speak to different levels of

access, but a different identity is claimed when one is getting a paycheck from the community of which they are a part (for better or worse). For the purposes of my study, a *RT employee* is a person who is a paid employee of *Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC*. When applicable, I will provide a job title or relevant background information for employees of RT to identify them as such. There are many people who work for RT and not all of them are on camera. So, when I refer to a *RT celebrity*, I am referring to someone who appears on screen frequently in RT productions content and is well known to fans. I will use the abbreviation "RT" to mean Rooster Teeth, but will sometimes spell out Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC. to distinguish the company as needed for explication purposes.

Why RT?

I have selected the RT community for four reasons. First, this community has been around for 16 years and counting, which is a long time for a community born from an Internet-based company. The longevity of this community accompanied by its extended reach to members via the Internet offers a diversity of interactions across members, even internationally. RT also has a wide scope, with millions of members across the globe, making it an interesting site for researching ways of understanding this large of a community. Second, RT community members make frequent use of both digital (online) and physical (offline) locations for interacting. Interaction in this sense can be understood as "a craft, trade, or even art unto itself— a social task that is *also* technical" (Rennstam & Ashcraft, 2013, p. 11). This idea ties into the notion of technologies of talk we use to build our worlds of community across spaces and times. Further, interaction is a performance of membership as members are able to display their proficiency with different ways of communicating. Third, RT is representative of a modern version of a "brand community" (Kuhn, Ashcraft, & Cooren, 2017) and the affordances of the

Internet have allowed these types of communities, both large and small, to become more commonplace ways for people to seek out connections. I believe the study of this genre of community is significant as social media and other Internet spaces begin to further entangle with our identities, relationships, and social worlds. The fourth reason I study RT is my involvement in the community prior to my research and my identity as a member of the RT community. While it has been challenging at times to research a community of which I am a part, I feel it has been an exercise worth engaging in because of the ways it has changed the way I understand my own actions, identity, and participation. Essentially, I am personally invested in this research and am heavily invested in understanding more about a community of which I am a member. I will come back to this idea of my own participation and how it sells me on the idea of "community" throughout my dissertation. I will now continue this introduction of RT by examining the theoretical premises I have adopted in my research.

Theoretical Premises

In examining community, I use the following four main theoretical premises:

1) All communication is mediated.

2) Moments of mediation occur as sites of engagement.

3) Community is produced and consumed.

4) Metacommunication plays a significant role in how community is produced, consumed, and regulated.

I see these ideas as overlapping, intersecting, and building upon one another. This becomes apparent in the sections to follow. For the sake of my analysis, I will only bring forth aspects of the premises above that are relevant to the data at hand.

Premise One: All Communication is Mediated

As I have stated previously, community is constituted in and through communication. The focus of communication, as defined by the National Communication Association, is "on how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts" (National Communication Association, n.d.). This definition is helpful in my discussion of the nature of space, time, context, and meaning-making (e.g., sending a text while talking to a friend). Often, when we describe communication as being *mediated*, this is a reference to digital technology being a channel through which we send messages, such as computer-mediated. However, all communication is mediated through *something* with or without the aid of digital technologies. A conversation with a friend is also mediated. For example, Vygotsky (1978) outlines how speech mediates our experience of perception:

> by means of words children single out separate elements, thereby overcoming the natural structure of the sensory field and forming new (artificially introduced and dynamic) structural centers. The child begins to perceive the world not only through his eyes but also through his speech. As a result, the immediacy of 'natural' perception is supplanted by a complex mediated process; as such, speech becomes an essential part of the child's cognitive development. (p. 32)

Here, Vygotsky discusses how touch, sight, and language work together for the child to experience the world. Further, it is not just our physical, sensory, and linguistic experiences that mediate perception and communication.

Jones (2016) describes mediational means, or technologies of talk, as including not only computers and other electronic devices but also language, gestures, speech styles, genres, forms of talk such as telling stories, social practices, social identities, and social groups and institutions.

In this view of communication as mediated in all instances, we can begin to understand the broad array of communicative tools we are continually using and how each of them has an influence on the creation of community and relationships. McLuhan (1964) was onto something important when he made claims that the medium was an essential aspect of the message. The medium certainly matters—be it our voices, our languages, our nonverbal communication, social media, emojis, styles of speaking, and other tools for communication. These ways of communicating are all extensions of ourselves (McLuhan, 1964). How these different tools overlap with one another across spaces is an important aspect of creating meaningful messages.

Mediated discourse. Like Gee (2014), I define discourse beyond a focus on the linguistic, namely as,

> different ways in which we humans integrate language with nonlanguage "stuff," such as different ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, believing, and using symbols, tools, and objects in the right places and at the right times so as to enact and recognize different identities and activities, give the material world certain meanings, distribute social goods in a certain way, make certain sorts of meaningful connections in our experience, and privilege certain symbol systems and ways of knowing over others.
>
> (p. 13)

Gee's definition of discourse is especially helpful in understanding the mediation of communication in communities. Members strategically and meaningfully use semiotic resources to (re)create community. Scollon (2001) discusses how we use discourse to share meaning through social actions, and today, we have a gamut of options where we can talk, smile, send a text, "like" a post on social media, and more. Jones (2016) takes these ideas a step further and discusses contextualization and entextualization, understanding discourse *in* action, focusing on

the ways people converge with mediational means to make actions more or less possible. This is explained through the theory of affordances and constraints and is exemplified through the story I shared earlier from the 2017 annual convention of RT, RTX. Through the mediational means and performances of social actors, the convention space was formed and transformed.

     Affordances and constraints. The lighting, music, stage, and pathways between the seats at the panel at RTX can be understood as examples of *affordances* of the physical space. This idea comes from Gibson's (1979/2014) theory of affordances, which is helpful in understanding how mediational means—be it use of lighting, language, Facebook, email, or genre of speaking—make specific actions more or less possible. Affordances help us understand how mediational means contribute to orienting people to places, things, messages, ideas, and even other people. Different mediational means influence the way we experience the same information. For example, the affordances provided by my University of South Florida (USF) online library access, I can instantly access, download, and read many electronic books. While Gibson published his theory of affordances in 1979, there is no electronic version of this text in the USF online library. Instead, I have access to the electronic 2014 Classic Edition of this text. So, this affordance of the library website makes it more possible for me to quote the 2014 version instead of the 1979 version directly. My inability to download the 1979 version is a *constraint* of this tool, making it less possible for me to obtain the original version of the text.

     We can think of affordances and constraints as "objectively there," but they are also situated in experience: "affordances are properties taken with reference to the observer" (Gibson, 1979/2014, p. 135). This means that affordances and constraints are shaped by the actions of people, their situated knowledge, and the metaphors they have adopted that orient them to taking certain actions. Specifically, there are physical, technical, and situated affordances and

constraints that are important in understanding community (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2017).

Affordances and constraints apply to all interactions, online and offline through language, nonverbal communication, and technologies (Jones, 2019). Some spaces make it easier or more challenging to participate in the RT community, and the ease in which we can communicate specific messages will be dependent on physical, technical, and situated affordances. The venue at RTX I mentioned in my opening vignette to this chapter involved many affordances of the space and how they were interpreted and used by the people there. This type of engagement was made possible in a *physical* setting where attendees were in the same room together (where a conga line became possible because of music in the room and physical bodies being present). The *technical* ability for music to be played and lighting to be moved added to the atmosphere. The *situated* nature of the panel (an event tied to the community metaphor) afforded people to jump up from their seats and participate in the dancing and, in turn, encouraged the adjustment of the music and lighting to build on this action. Collectively, the RTX attendees, Guardians, and RT celebrities leveraged mediational means and social practices to transform the space from a "waiting area" to a space for entertainment and celebration. This was all because of physical, technical, and situated affordances and constraints converging to orient actions of the members present, all of which is entangled in this multilayered site of engagement (SoE).

Premise Two: Moments of Mediation Occur in Sites of Engagement (SoE)

SoE is defined as the convergence of individuals, social practices, mediational means, space, and time, making specific actions possible (Scollon, 2001; Norris, 2004; Jones 2005; Norris & Jones, 2005). When we understand that all communication is mediated (through voices, bodies, texts, digital technologies, etc.), we can begin to analyze how within each SoE, there are moments of mediation, which may involve a variety of affordances and constraints

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which will be negotiated by each individual differently. There is a narrow body of research

invoking the SoE heuristic. There have been studies of mediated action and how children are

socialized through discourse (Scollon, 2001), how identity is socially constructed (Scollon 2002),

how research creates SoE (de Saint-Georges, 2005), and how different populations have different

purposes for online and offline spaces (Jones, 2005). I see this project as extending current work

by laying the groundwork for how to examine self-described communities that make use of

online and offline resources to communicate and engage membership. I now turn to an

examination of different elements at play in SoE.

While Scollon (2001) introduced the concept of SoE, Norris (2002) extends the definition

as follows:

> A site of engagement is the real-time window opened through the intersection of social
>
> practice and mediational means that makes that lower (or higher) level action the focal
>
> point of attention of the relevant participants, and radiates from there encompassing the
>
> intersection of practices and mediational means that make those lower or higher-level
>
> actions the less focused or un-focused points of attention of the relevant participants. (p.
>
> 66-67)

In this extended definition, we can see how any given SoE is a window of opportunity for certain

types of mediated actions to take place, depending on how the particular SoE orients people to

points of focus. What happens in this window and how long the window remains "open" is

dependent on multiple, overlapping aspects. I will review the following elements of any given

SoE which drive where attention is focused: social practices, mediational means, attention,

participants, space, and time.

Social practice. A social practice is something people do, such as have a conversation or attend a conference. In any given SoE, what makes certain actions possible are the linkages between social practices. The experience at RTX presented at the start of this chapter showcased the connections between attending a panel at a convention, waiting for a show to start, dancing, and operating music and lighting systems that converged at the right time with the right people to prompt the actions of the attendees. The atmosphere, or SoE, was not created by one social practice alone—it is about these practices coming together in ways that orient us to take specific actions. Attention was drawn to the music once it began to play, just as the attention became focused on the dancing as more and more people began to participate.

Social practices require certain types of social knowledge. For actions to be intelligible by participants, people have to share what Polanyi (1966) calls tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is how we are familiar with people, places, and things we encounter in the world even if we do not have the words to describe them precisely. This knowledge is based on our experiences and is built over time. Garfinkel (1960) argues "the stability of social routine is a condition which enables persons in the course of their everyday affairs to recognize each other's actions, beliefs, aspirations, feelings, and the like as reasonable, normal, legitimate, understandable, and realistic" (p. 82). When we participate in socially-situated practices and routines, and we all share knowledge of these practices and routines, our actions are usually accepted by others without pause.

Interestingly, what happened in this SoE at RTX was not a part of an average social routine of "waiting" at a convention (or in other public spaces). The group started with the "usual" routine of chatting with friends or passing the time on electronic devices. However, the engagement moved from friend-friend to friend-stranger. The routine of waiting was

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transformed into room-wide entertainment through dancing, music, chanting, clapping, and lighting. So, how did this transformation occur? The socially accepted and widely-embraced departure from the usual "waiting" activities began when a group of people reacted to the song that came on. This signaled a shift for people in the room. Because of a shared community narrative of participation being inherently valuable (see Chapter 3), there was a positive response from the people in the room, including the person in charge of the lights. In other words, many aspects converged to construct a socially acceptable departure from the norm of a waiting area. Here, we can see how this SoE was dependent on the chained interplay between practice, rules, and resources (Iedema, 2003) that created new meaning for the space, participants, and acceptable social actions.

Mediational means. In any given interaction, we have a variety of mediational means. I have described all communication as mediated, and we can use our bodies, words, text messages, or even light switches to get messages across to one another. We can also make use of dancing, genres of speaking, and other mediational means. Each mediational means will have its own affordances and constraints, which I have also described as being physical, technical, and situated. Mediational means are also inherently connected to a variety of other objects, contexts, histories, and others.

Scollon (2001) describes how mediated action is always tied to material objects. Even posting on Facebook is a mediated action materialized through the convergence of physical counterparts as there is still a body that types the message, a physical device the message was created on, and all the physical structures that are involved in using the Internet. The Internet has many physical aspects, from the computer servers where information is stored to the way the "net" is connected through 750,000 miles of cable where code moves "around the world,

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traveling along wires as thin as a strand of hair strung across the ocean floor" (Satariano, 2019).

The process of creating this infrastructure is labor and time-intensive with the cables having to

be replaced about every 25 years (Satariano, 2019). Further, the Internet is dependent on radio

waves and devices which create those waves. Without the material infrastructure to move

countless bytes of data, the Internet would not exist. Furthermore, community is made material

through SoE as members engage with one another in spaces like the RTX panel, enacting

community practices, and therefore bringing it to life through communication.

Attention. Jones (2005) claims, "the real currency of the information age is not

information, but attention" (p. 152). Attention is an organizing dialectic, where attention is both

organized around actions and actions are organized around attention (Jones, 2005). We can see

this playing out in the RTX example. The background music became the center of attention for

the people who started the conga line, which then organized attention around this unfolding

performance. The Guardian, in turn, paid attention to this and responded by changing the music

accordingly. With enough people joining the conga line, it became increasingly difficult for

anyone to ignore the extensive line of people, especially combined with the music and lighting.

The interplay of attention and action drove a cycle of action.

Participants. Each person involved in a SoE will decide how actions are carried out.

They will also experience a SoE differently depending on their social knowledge and where their

attention is drawn. Additionally, not everyone present is part of a SoE or even experiences it as

such, physically or digitally. For example, I can choose to scroll past a posting on social media

and not engage where another user can choose to interact with the posting—I scrolled past the

window, and while I may have witnessed its existence, I played no part in its construction. At

RTX, not every one of the 5,000 attendees in the room paid attention to the dancing or lightsaber

battle. Some people still were on their phones, and they chose to keep their attention elsewhere and did not add to or participate in the SoE. This is similar to my own participation in this SoE. I was more of an observer than an active participant. I enjoyed seeing people have fun, but I did not get up and dance. Though, I was another body in the room, marking the significance of attendance at RTX and this panel in particular. I became not a focus of attention, but a part of the background of the dance party, a witness. However, in writing about this SoE, I have resemiotized it as not just an event at RTX that occurred, but as a collection of field notes which I am analyzing, and now discussing, which I will eventually discuss with my committee. Therefore, I have drawn this moment I witnessed in the social practice of research. I am re-making community through the affordances and constraints of academic research written in a Word document.

Space. Space, be it physical, digital, relational or otherwise, plays a significant role in any given SoE as there are a variety of ways we orient to space. *Digital* spaces are accessed through modern technology, usually by connecting to the Internet and using social media, websites, chat rooms, etc. *Physical* spaces include a variety of geographically-situated locations such as a Starbucks or convention hall. *Relational* spaces have to do with relational and social bonds between people. Jones (2005) explains how people using the Internet inhabit multiple spaces at any given time which can include: physical (home, office, geographic location), virtual (websites, chatrooms), relational (through discourses), screen (windows, tabs), and third (spaces referred to but not inhabited by participants). In other words, many spaces can be and usually are involved in a SoE at the same time. For example, while I am sitting at my computer, I am not detached from my body. I am using my fingers to type these words, and I am using my eyes to stare at my computer screen. My computer and keyboard are physical (offline) objects which

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help extend my presence from my office to the virtual page (or if I am creating a social media post, from my office to cyberspace). Any computer-mediated communication is always both an online and offline interaction, and it is more important to focus on ways in which people *use* a space rather than only on the space itself. At RTX, the *physical* location of the conference panel room, the *relational* space shared through belonging to a common community contributed to the unfolding of this particular window which facilitated many mediated actions However, how we take action in spaces is entangled with time.

Time. At RTX, each space of the convention center had different meanings depending on their timing—such as how different panels are offered in different rooms at different times, and attendees need to pick and choose where to be and at what time in order to engage with various aspects of the convention. Time is always a complex aspect of any interaction, as there are always multiple considerations of time happening at any given time. Blommaert (2005) discusses how various timescales, such as historical and personal, occur at the same time, what she calls *layered simultaneity*:

> We have differential developments of various aspects of social life, all of them simultaneously operating in the unfolding of single events, and often perceived as unified, equivalent features of the single event. We have a tendency to perceive only what manifests itself synchronically, but the synchronicity hides the fact that features operate on different levels and scales, have different origins, offer different opportunities, and generate different effects. Synchronicity, in other words, combines elements that are of a different order, but tends to observe these fundamental differences. (p. 128-129)

Blommaert (2005) is highlighting how, while we may take in things as happening as one event, there are multiple layers happening at the same time. For example, at RTX, any given attendee

is inhabiting the timing of the convention itself during the 4th of July weekend, this particular panel happened on the last day of the convention, the day of the week (which was Sunday), the time between when their own personal cycles of being awake and asleep (it was near the end of the day), just to name a few.

Finally, we have to consider the entanglements of time, not just regarding these cycles, but in how a discussion of time and space always involves the past, present, and future. As Barad (2017) describes, "each moment is thickly threaded through with all other moments, each a holographic condensation of specific diffraction patterns created by a plethora of virtual wanderings, alternative histories of what is/might yet be/have been" (p. 113). In other words, we can never disconnect what is happening now from previous, concurrent, and future happenings. Meaning is always connected to other spaces and times; it is dynamic and signifying the multiplicity of moments. We can recreate the past through a narrative, and we might yet anticipate what a dance party at a convention may turn into, all while we are still dancing. What dance we select to use at one moment is dependent on our prior knowledge of dances and how we may reimagine them for the present.

All of the elements of a SoE as described above, showcase how SoE are dynamic, changing, and can be experienced slightly differently by different people. Every time we interact, there are new possibilities for creating "meaning." In this exploration of SoE, I have looked at how SoE are the intersection of a variety of elements that open up windows for interaction between community members. Overall, SoE highlights how community is continuously created, recreated, and perpetuated and modified through time via the actions of members. Community is always becoming what it will be and can be understood as unfinalizable: "Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the

world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still

in the future and will always be in the future" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 166). This heuristic of SoE

allows us to understand how community members keep community existing through

communication in moments where identity, performance, artifacts, affordances, constraints, time,

and space converge to make community possible. With this in mind, we can consider how there

are always new opportunities for past meanings to be projected forth into future interactions.

Members of a community draw on, talk about, or (re)create social practices depending on the

particular coming together of elements in any given SoE.

   A visual of SoE. I have created a diagram to provide a visual view of the convergence

that comprises a SoE (Figure 1.2).
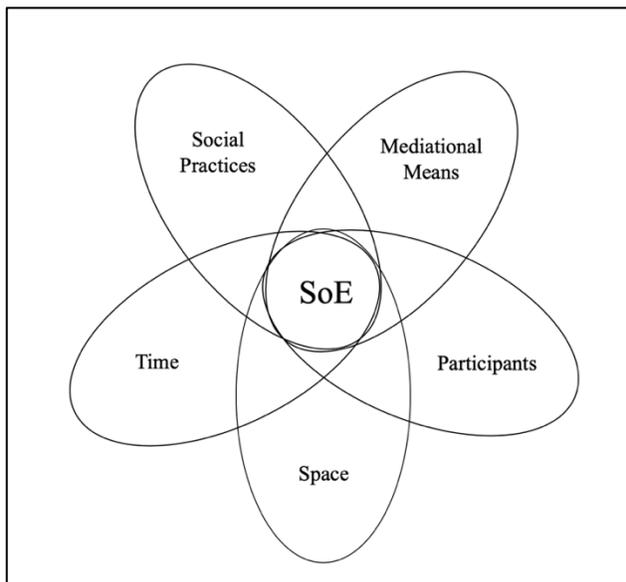
Figure 1.2. Sites of engagement (SoE) diagram. Created by author.

Interestingly, this diagram looks uncannily like an atom. This comparison can be helpful in

understanding how each SoE plays a piece in the larger whole and how the more of them there

are for RT, the larger the nexus of community. An atom comprises everything in the universe

and the build of each and every one of us. It is always in motion in ways that we cannot see

because of its quantum nature. Atoms are multiply entangled, as are SoE. During our daily lives, we walk around doing what we do—only occasionally do we contemplate these micro-level processes that structure our existence. SoE are a meeting of elements constantly in motion. Sometimes the moving parts collide; other times they do not. Barad (2017) reminds us that what we do with atoms can create catastrophes such as nuclear bombs, and how a historically past action like the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945 continues to reverberate throughout our daily experiences: "The splitting of an atom … destroys cities and remakes the geopolitical field on a global scale, how can anything like an ontological commitment to a line in the sand between "micro" and "macro " continue to hold sway on our political imaginaries?" (p. 108). This is a reminder that the significance of seemingly small actions can create wide-scale effects, and we can never predict how they will echo throughout the future. This is also a way of understanding the significance of fleeting convergences, such as a SoE.

Any diagram gives the false illusion that complex concepts can be simplified. Please allow me to complicate my own creation. Imagine that each oval feathering out to account for different dimensions, such as the overlapping of timescales and different spaces and the different dimensions of our identities. For the purposes of saving your eyes from straining to see strange 3-D drawings that have infinite possibilities, the constraints of my capabilities with electronic art, and the affordances of a two-dimensional paper on which you will likely be reading this, I will simply list the elements in the same oval when using this diagram in future chapters to analyze different examples.

Premise Three: Community is Always Being Produced and Consumed

Community is always being produced and consumed. Marx (1904) discusses the mutual relationship of production and consumption—without one, you cannot have the other: "a railroad

on which no one rides, which is, consequently not used up, not consumed, is but a potential

railroad, and not a real one" (p. 278). The same holds true for community. I see the RT

community being produced and consumed through communication and how members use

various products (be they event tickets, t-shirts, videos, etc.). Through communication, we

materialize concepts, like the very concept of community (Barad, 2007; Orlikowski, 2007;

Shotter, 2013; Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017). Through SoE, community is *produced* by members.

Any watchable or wearable product of community only has value through their use and how

members communicate about them and with them. Production and consumption for RT happens

with a complicated and entangled relationship between creators of RT content, RT community

members, and the production company itself.   I will now examine some of these intricacies.

Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC began in 2003 with *RvB*, but the entertainment studio

now produces a variety of shows distributed internationally primarily through the Internet. RT

has grown up significantly since its early days and Tech Crunch now recognizes RT as one of the

premier online entertainment content brands (Shivakumar, 2016). Interactions between RT

community members happen on the RT website, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, video

game consoles, and a variety of other online spaces. Additionally, there are in-person meetups

and events held by the RT company and by volunteer-led local community groups including

game nights through various platforms (Xbox, PlayStation, and PC), hosting local meetups of RT

celebrities, going to theme parks, and more. There are more than fifty local RT community

groups around the world in the United States, Canada, Asia, New Zealand, Australia, and Europe

(Atkinson, 2016). Additionally, there are other non-regional interest groups people can

participate in such as RT Radio or The Oxford Comma Café.

Table 1.1. Facts About Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC.

Rooster Teeth Facts	
Founded	2003
Ownership	In 2014, RT became a subsidiary of Fullscreen Media, a social entertainment company (Jarvey, 2018); Now, Rooster Teeth is a subsidiary of Otter Media, part of WarnerMedia Entertainment & a division of AT&T's WarnerMedia (About Rooster Teeth).
Location	Headquarters: Austin, TX; Other Studios: Los Angeles, CA.
Employees	350 employees work across nine divisions (Jarvey, 2018).
Website Subscribers	More than 3 million registered users on the RT website and 5 million unique monthly visitors (About Rooster Teeth).
YouTube Subscribers (across all channels on YouTube Network)	45 million subscribers (Jarvey, 2018).
Convention: RTX	The first RTX convention was held in 2011 with 535 attendees and was held outdoors (Francisco, 2019). More than 60,000 people attended RTX in 2017, 2018, & 2019 (Francisco, 2019; Sjoberg, 2019; Brouwer, 2017). RT also hosted international versions of RTX in Australia and London.
Types of Content Produced by Rooster Teeth	Web series, live-action shorts, feature films, documentaries, podcasts, animation, anime-style web series, shows about video games, gaming and entertainment news, and more.
Distribution of Content and Merchandise	Primarily online through www.roosterteeth.com and YouTube. There was a limited theatrical release for their films *Lazer Team* and *Lazer Team 2*. Select content via DVD and Blu-ray in addition to selling merchandise, all of which can be purchased on their website and at major retailers such as Hot Topic.
Crowdfunding: *Lazer Team* film	RT fans supported the film by donating more than $2.5 million collectively via Indigogo, a crowdfunding website (*Lazer Team* by Rooster Teeth). The original goal was $650,000 which was reached in 10 hours of the funding launch (*Lazer Team* by Rooster Teeth). The film was released in January 2016. This led to the second film, *Lazer Team 2* to be released in November 2017.
Crowdfunding: *Million Dollars But…* card game	A card game funded on Kickstarter and hit its goal within 2 minutes. In total $1.3 million was raised by the end of the campaign (Our Story). The card game can be purchased at RoosterTeeth.com and at major retailers, including Barnes and Noble.
Charity	RT's largest charity event is its annual 24-hour live stream where fans donate money for prizes. This event is called Extra Life, which is a program in partnership with Children's Miracle Network Hospitals and Twitch. Twitch is a live streaming video platform. It is associated with the gaming community and live streaming people playing video games. In 2018 RT raised more than $1.4 million for a local children's hospital (Whittaker, 2018). In 2017, they raised more than $1.2 million for a local children's hospital (McMahon, 2017). Collectively, over five years, the number for the total amount donated is more than $5 million.

I have created a summary chart to review facts and figures relating to the company and

the scope and involvement of the fan community by the numbers (see Table 1.1). Through this

table, you can see how the RT community can be understood in terms of production and

consumption. Table 1.1 demonstrates that to be a part of the RT community, one does not just consume online videos like *RvB*, there are also opportunities for interaction and contribution (which involve time and money). Employees of RT produce content shared with the fans and the fans consume this content. Fans also create non-official RT-related content through online platforms via the local community groups or individually (e.g., podcasts for RT Florida or live Twitch streams for gaming for the community). Kuhn, Ashcraft, and Cooren (2017) discuss how "brand communities" unify members around "their affinity for, and identification with, the brand" (p. 18). The level of investment a given person can give to the RT community ranges from watching a video to spending thousands of dollars to participate in events. Though, RT community members also produce and consume each other.

Members are not passively taking in the produced content, but rather, can be seen as co-creators through their engagement with RT in talking with other fans, going to meetups, and buying the merchandise. There is a high level of interactivity between fans and RT creators/celebrities through the RT website, where RT employees will often respond to fan comments or address community concerns via posts on their blogs on the website. Interactions also happen on Twitter where RT employees often respond to posts or give "shout outs" to community members via Tweets, often "liking" or retweeting fan-produced art and videos, as well as pictures of fans dressed as characters from RT shows (cosplay). Furthermore, Burnie Burns, co-founder of RT describes the community as "a big group of friends" (Recode, 2017). This idea of friendship is tied to the narratives of community which I examine in Chapter 3. The type of interaction relates to the idea of participatory culture where complex relationships exist between companies producing entertainment and products and their following (Jenkins, 1992/2012; Jenkins 2006).

While production and consumption can be taken up from a variety of angles in a study of RT, what I am interested in is this: the ways in which community members—RT members, including RT employees—help produce one another and the RT "community." While I make a synthetic distinction between a fan (pays money to participate) and an employee (gets paid to participate) through the ways they contribute to RT, it does not mean these membership categories are completely separated as both fans and employees alike contribute time to RT. Further, employees can still identify as fans of the content they create, or their fellow employees create. For example, RT employees create entertainment shows which are uploaded to YouTube and their website, which are consumed by members. Members may interact with the video through the comments section, contributing to RT "content" in the form of comments that will be read, and then other members can "consume" and then "produce" their own commentary in return.

Production and consumption are also driven through economic means, especially with RT being a "brand community" (Kuhn, Ashcraft, & Cooren, 2017) where a company is making money through the engagement of its following as members purchase merchandise and use social media as a form of word-of-mouth advertising. I take up the idea of the economic dynamics of RT through Chapter Five when I discuss markers of membership, which include purchasable ways to demarcate belonging and membership. I also see community as being produced and consumed through the performances of its diverse members, as I take up below.

Performance in production and consumption. Community is something that is *performed* by members (Fuoss, 1995; Conquergood, 2013) which then produces community. In other words, community is always being re(made) through SoE. Performances can include rituals, celebrations, stories, jokes, games, and other forms that are "reflexive events that focus,

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interpret, punctuate, and endow meaningfulness to experience" (Conquergood, 2013, p. 19). The RT community draws on these types of cultural performances, rich with its own rituals, stories, jokes, and other traditions, which are regularly enacted to indicate membership. Through performances of members, morality, relationships, and ideals are created and enforced, which, in turn, perpetuate community. How community performances move across and entangle with spaces is essential for a feeling of coherence in the nexus of community practices. The ways community is performed happens across and through many spaces and using many mediated actions—people speaking, video recordings, the websites where the final products are posted, wearable objects, and more.

Fandoms and communities. In this conversation of production and consumption, I want to consider how RT is situated within conversations about fandoms and geek culture. Fandom communities exist all across the globe, from Potterheads (fans of the *Harry Potter* series) to Whovians (fans of the science fiction television series *Dr. Who*). Trekkers or Trekkies, fans of the popular science fiction television series *Star Trek,* have particularly attracted the attention of scholars. This fandom has been around for more than fifty years, and the fandom following has been written about as a religious type of experience (Jindra, 1994). *Star Trek* fans have been engaging in cosplay, meet-ups, conventions, and online forums for a long time (Jindra, 1994), paving the way for the future of fandoms. However, along the way, members of fandoms were stereotyped and stigmatized by mainstream media as anti-social, childish adults, and unhealthily obsessed with their fandom (Jenkins, 1992/2012; Jindra, 1994). In recent years, the tide has somewhat turned for geek culture as now the geek is considered chic (Jenkins, 2012; McCain, Gentile, & Campbell, 2015; Tocci, 2009). Now, "nerd queens" like Felicia Day become award-winning actors, New York Times best-selling authors, and entrepreneurs with web-based

platforms and companies (Day, 2016; Day 2019). Games like *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Magic the Gathering*, *World of Warcraft* and other previously heavily stigmatized gaming fandoms are now becoming part of mainstream culture (Armstrong, 2019; Jahromi, 2017)—the fast-food giant Wendy's even generated a tabletop roleplaying game in 2019 to market to its base. Regardless of this cultural shift, the stigmas attached to early fandoms such as *Star Trek*, are still alive today (Todd, 2016; Xing, 2019). Many modern groups are moving away from this idea of a "fandom" and embrace ideas of "community," which connects to more positive connotations.

Jenkins (1992/2012) has extensively researched fan communities and also pioneered the acceptance of being a researcher-fan (such as myself). He discusses the dynamic nature of fandom communities and how it is a space of innovation, constantly adapting. This also means the ways we study fandom need to be reconsidered as fandoms develop and change. While older fandoms and newer groups (like RT) have many commonalities, there are some key differences. The RT community differs from the early days of Trekkers/Trekkies mainly because of the time of its inception. The historical shift regarding the popularity of nerd culture and the evolution of the Internet have had major influences on the development and types of engagements between RT creators and community members. For one, creators of online content (web series, podcasts, etc.) usually rely on fan support in the form of sponsorships. Additionally, not only are many of the creators of RT shows visible as on-camera talent, they are also the ones posting the shows online, interacting with fans, and responding to fan criticisms and feedback—this can happen in real-time through the affordances of social media. This type of relationship holds true for many smaller founder-led Internet-based communities (Panteli & Sivunen, 2019). Now that RT is expanding under the ownership of WarnerMedia, roles of employees of RT are changing, even as I have been writing this dissertation, different layoffs, acquisitions, and expansion of content

creation have occurred. I see RT is being representative of a contemporary version of community *and* a fandom as a community. Though, the (re)creation of the RT community fueled by different affordances and constraints intimately tied to the Internet's expansion, social media, the ever-present nature of digital technologies. This type of community that is produced and consumed in increasingly interpersonal ways creates new orientations to the dialectical tension regarding community and commodity (see Chapter 5).

The most significant way RT differs from fandoms such as *Star Trek* is in how RT community members pragmatically separate themselves through claiming the identity of "community" rather than "fandom" (these ideas are examined in Chapter 3). While RT can be classified as a fandom, I rarely refer to RT a fandom in my work because RT members actively avoid this word. My examination focuses on the adoption of the "community" metaphor rather than the "fandom" one by RT community membership, as well as how RT members use a specific definition of "community" as a technology, a strategy, for discursively constructing a particular version of community, one that encourages active engagement with other members. Following the constitutive nature of communication, I believe members have leveraged cultural tools and technologies of talk to create something that moves beyond *just* a fandom for much of its membership. I also recognize that not all of the millions of members in RT identify this way, but this dissertation focuses on the majority who do. I also recognize how the RT fandom that is presented as and lived as a community produces an inherent tension to be addressed, justified, and contended with by members. Even with great efforts by its membership to embrace a metaphor of community, it will always be entangled with discourses of "fandom."

I understand my research is situated in conversations about fandoms and geek culture and a very particular historical backdrop and cultural trends, which becomes very apparent in the

examples I use; though, I see my work as primarily examining how community is (re)created, and how members define themselves and perform different identities. I understand this work as a way to orient my audience to something else that is also going on, something that becomes very important as community and technology are resources that are being used for different, evolving purposes. In my study, I am not trying to compare fandoms or make broad generalizations. I am examining how a community is created and sustained by members. Again, I am posing questions about how the metaphors we adopt shift our attention to taking certain actions. Specifically, I examine what happens when groups like RT make efforts to shift from a metaphor of fandom to one of community, which is significant in what members ultimately produce and consume—which leads to the significance of metacommunication.

Premise Four: Metacommunication Plays a Role in Community Making

This final premise focuses on a specific type of mediated action known as metacommunication (i.e., communication about communication). Metacommunication plays a significant role in how community is produced, consumed, regulated, and otherwise performed by members. Metacommunication is a highly reflexive practice as it is a way to focus on the appropriateness of words and actions. To explain what I mean by this, I will discuss Silverstein's orders of indexicality and define metacommunication, metadiscourse, and metapragmatics and how these ideas overlap.

Meta-orders. Silverstein (2003) introduced the idea of indexical orders to describe how there are micro- and macro-social frames of analysis. Orders of indexicality help people understand what people, practices, ideas, things, etc. have value, what does not, and what should be ignored which are ways of including and excluding some people who do not buy into these

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values (Blommaert, 2010; Jones, 2009). We reflexively index many things through metacommunication, metadiscourse, and metapragmatics.

The broadest category of "meta" I am discussing is *metacommunication,* which is communication about our own or other's communication. Metacommunication functions to help people interpret the appropriateness of actions, as well as the relationships between participants (Littlejon & Foss, 2009). Metacommunication can include speech, writing, and nonverbal communication. Bateson (1956; 1972) is responsible for orienting many researchers to the value of metacommunication by describing the significance of contextualization cues in messages. Metacommunication considers how "there are complex layers of relationship that intertwine and interweave in ways that are often easy to perceive, but hard to explain" (Nachmanovitch, 2009, p. 7). For example, we need cues in order to understand if someone using dry humor such as a wry smile or a wink or even previous communication with this person to understand their sense of humor. Often, people have issues in digital spaces detecting humor because of the lack of nonverbal cues. This is where emojis, GIFs (moving pictures), and other digital affordances can help provide metacommunicative functions to help recontextualize messages. On a larger scale, we can consider metacommunication in the RTX panel example. The rising volume of the music was a reaction to the conga line, a metacommunicative action that indexed action that was favorable and accepted by event organizers.

One aspect of metacommunication is *metadiscourse,* which is discourse about discourse. Metadiscourse has a more linguistic focus and refers to how as we deliver messages through speaking or writing, we are paying attention to and making decisions about how we are sending those messages. Often, we look for responses from others and adjust language to better achieve understanding (Hyland, 2017). Metadiscursive utterances can help us understand if we have said

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the right thing at the right time and how community members tell each other if their actions are appropriate or inappropriate. Metadiscourse has become a large part of understanding language online (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011). For example, if you made a joke on a social media post that was not acceptable someone may write in response, "Well, that was awkward" or post a GIF depicting an uncomfortable moment to indicate your joke was not welcomed. With this emphasis on context, one important way of getting a sense of what is going on in any given online space is to focus on metadiscourse. Bridges (2017) studied the online phenomenon of the use of the portmanteau "mansplain" to discuss how speakers use language to share their beliefs and social identities through their expressions, which places them within a certain type of identity in their social world. Bridges (2017) found that people can use metadiscursive resources to "critique, evaluate, and/or normalize the appropriateness of other users' language" (p. 94). The same concept applies to how members talk about the RT community in specific ways to produce a particular version of community.

Metapragmatics "is concerned with speakers' judgments of appropriateness of communicative behaviour, both their own and that of others" (Hyland, 2017). In metapragmatics, the topic of discussion is not as important as "the communicative act itself" (Tanskanen, 2007, p. 88). Metapragmatics can also play "a monitoring role" by bringing attention to what is happening in a given situation (Caffi, 1994, p. 2464). The positioning of metapragmatic utterances matters (Tanskanen, 2007) and can serve as a way to maintain interest at different points in the text (Vásquez, 2015) and the appropriateness of actions (Caffi, 1994). For example, retrospective metadiscourse is used if a person feels self-conscious about a message they said by saying something like, "I'm sorry if my message is too long." This is an attempt to change how someone viewed the original long message as well as reframe their own

identity as a person who shares long messages. It can also command someone else to act by eliciting a response from the listener or telling them how to receive the message (e.g., "let me know if this is going too far …"). This can also happen in the middle of an utterance (e.g., "In my opinion, don't take it personally but…").

Metapragmatics are also intertextual, referring to other texts (e.g., "In your post…"), or intratextual, referring to the text message it is a part of (e.g., "I am angry. What I mean by that…") (Tanskanen, 2007). However, as Bartesaghi (2015) discusses, intertextuality is significantly more than making a mere reference to another text. Bartesaghi (2015) describes intertextuality as "not so much a matter of a text's interaction with prior texts as it is a process of legitimation in the discursive order of a culture" (p. 2). What texts and how they are used, referenced, when, how, and in relation to whom and what are all important for establishing cultural norms. Further, "at stake is how processes of social authorization lock the fit between text and context, thereby eliding seams and linkages, and how intertextual relationships are embedded in matrices of claims, warrants, entitlement—and indeed in the possibilities for articulation of a social order" (Bartesaghi, 2015, p. 2). Intertextuality is key to understanding how communities operate, and Vásquez (2014) emphasizes the importance of intertextuality in contributing to the construction of community. In the context of this study, intertextuality is a way to understand what matters to RT members, how claims can be made, and who can be made legitimate as a member. People can refer to a text (such as the *Star Wars* movie franchise with the lightsabers or a style of dancing such as a conga line), and it becomes a claim of what people should know and value in order to participate.

So far, I have established how community can be understood as constructed through communication, which is mediated through actions in SoE and involves both a cycle of

production and consumption. The RT community is also situated in trends related to the

popularization of geek and nerd culture and previous stigmas and practices associated with

fandoms. We can learn about how a community functions through orders of indexicality which

are conveyed through metacommunication. With these four premises in mind, I have come to

appreciate the complexities and difficulties of sustaining any community, especially with how

the RT community is constantly being (re)constructed by community members. In order to focus

my research, I have generated research questions that orient me to the actions of members and

the resources they use to (re)create community through communication in SoE.

The Materialization of Community

My primary research question is: "What does a community need in order to exist?" While

the question is simple, the answer is complicated. I cannot answer this question in totality

simply because there are limitless variables to consider. So, I have grounded myself by using the

SoE heuristic, which orients me to being curious about how windows open for community

making. By materialization of community, I am referring to how the social and material are not

seperate, they are intimately connected, or entangled (Orlikowski, 2007; Barad, 2007). In other

words, matter only becomes meaningful through communication. We use discourse to turn

something ordinary into something special (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017c). I have identified three

main ways RT community members materialize community: narratives, rules, and markers of

membership. The full exploration of these resources is found in my analytical chapters

(Chapters 3-5). For now, I will briefly introduce each of these ideas and discuss the questions

they raise, as well as the dilemmas examined in this examination.

Narratives

The first resource I want to discuss is narratives (examined in Chapter 3). Narratives are an important resource for RT community members to (re)make the community in their daily lives. Drawing from master narratives (Linde, 2000) of community (which both establish there is a community and also what that community stands for), people tell personal narratives (Ochs & Capps, 2001)to connect their own stories, and therefore their identities (Georgakopoulou, 2007) to discourses of community. The questions I raise are: How do narratives interdiscursively establish a community? How do community members use personal narratives as cultural tools? How is storytelling told through different ways of communicating (through the Internet, through documentaries, through conversations, through photographs, etc.)?

Rules

Rules are a formal way to establish community narratives, and they create a sense of order (examined in Chapter 4). Rules are both explicit (e.g., lists posted on social media sites) and implicit (e.g., interactional rules understood through metacommunication such as appropriateness of actions on a relational level). Communities that have an online component often include explicit guidelines, such as listed rules, to govern interaction (LeBreton, 2017; Ng, n.d.; Porges, 2014). For communities, online guidelines for interactions often still apply in relation to offline interactions (Porges, 2014). The questions I raise here are: How do members of the RT community use rules to create and sustain community? How do narratives of community set the foundation for rules and guide their enforcement?

Markers of Membership

I define markers of membership as resources for displaying and performing membership, indexing one's cultural capital within a specific group (examined in Chapter 5). These can be

physical items, purchasable memberships, digital photos, or even use of certain discourses. For instance, a fan can wear a shirt, have an image of herself at RTX, have a paid FIRST membership on the RT website, or even partake in discussions about RT celebrities. All of these are different ways to perform membership, including the type of member she is (such as how involved in the community she is) and her values. The questions I raise here are: How do RT community members use markers of membership to perform membership? How are markers of membership tied to economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986)?

Dilemmas

Finally, I will discuss the dilemmas of community found throughout my research. For a community to be produced and consumed, there is a give and take. While a community is about the collective action of a group and finding a sense of belonging, not every community interaction is pleasant for every individual. Dilemmas of community are considered in each of my analytical chapters. However, I will look at this issue broadly here.

To participate in a cycle of production and consumption, one likely both produces and consumes. Therefore, to be part of a community, one must be willing to give part of one's self to truly be a member. So, the question becomes: How do members resolve dilemmas of membership? I argue this happens in a variety of ways through accountability practices, identities, and narratives. *Accounts* are ways to justify the way things are (Buttny, 1993; Scott & Lyman, 1968), such as providing an explanation for why community members are willing to fly across the country or world to attend RTX. Accounts also have to do with *identity* (Scott & Lyman, 1968). For example, a RT community member may find themselves having to justify why they want to volunteer to be a Guardian at RTX, which involves demanding physical labor

for many days in a row. *Narratives* are spaces where all of these ideas can converge to give more convincing accounts for actions of community members.

Conclusion

I have so far reviewed how my research is based on the idea that all communication is mediated, and moments of mediation occur in SoE. The heuristic of SoE is useful when considering ideas of social practices, mediational means, attention, participants, space, and time all converging to help members construct community. Production and consumption of community involves participation and performances by members. I also discussed that the RT community relies on three resources: community narratives, rules, and markers of membership. Finally, the RT community has to contend with a variety of dilemmas through accounts, accountable actions, identities, and narratives. In the next chapter, I will discuss the multimodal approach I have taken in my research of the RT community.

CHAPTER TWO:

ANALYZING COMMUNITY: A MULTIMODAL APPROACH

Figure 2.1. "People like grapes" t-shirt from the RT Store. Screenshot from website store.roosterteeth.com (see Appendix I for Fair Use assessment).

The image in Figure 2.1 occurs at the convergence of several communicative modes. Notice how the caption contextualizes the image as originating from the RT Store, signifying this is a shirt for purchase. In fact, if you were to go to the RT website from which I extracted this screenshot, you would find a variety of other ways to engage with this image as it is surrounded by text, links, buttons, icons, reviews, and so many more invitations for interaction. The picture itself features both the man and the artifacts he wears and holds. There are oddly numerous iterations of grapes (bunch of grapes, singular grape, a purple-colored shirt, capital lettering of grapes, graphic of grapes) within the image. All of the "grapes" are thus texts, recursively connected to one another as they are recontextualized many times in the same image. Why so many grapes? To answer this question, I draw on a research framework that helps me engage the

complexity of how multiple communicative modes converge to create windows for action and signification. In this chapter, I discuss why I decided to pursue multimodal research, I review my process of data collection and examine the affordances and constraints of my research sites. I conclude by talking about my role as a researcher and the ethical considerations I held for this study.

Multimodal Research

As featured in the "People Like Grapes" example, modes—both digital and physical— converge to create meaning, opening up possibilities for action. All communicative modes, such as gestures, speech, images, and text, are *always* entangled and all communication is multimodal (Geenen, Norris, & Makboon, 2015). With this in mind, it is axiomatic that all SoE involve multimodal communication, and communities, in particular, rely on a variety of communicative cues. I understand multimodality through the following definition:

> Multimodality is, therefore, the study of how meanings can be made, and actually are made in specific contexts, with different means of expression or 'semiotic modes' whether these are articulated with the body (speech, facial expressions, gestures, and so on) or with the help of tools and materials (writing, drawing, making music, and so on). It is also the study of the ways in which multiple semiotic modes can be integrated into coherent multimodal texts. It is therefore not restricted to 'multimedia' in the sense of contemporary digital media but applies equally to face to face communication and other non-digital types of text. Multimodal literacy is, therefore, the ability to use and combine different semiotic modes in ways that are appropriate to the given context, both in the sense of the context-bound rules and conventions that may apply and in the sense of the unique demands made by each specific situation. Such a literacy must be based on a

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knowledge of what can be done with different semiotic modes and how, and of the ways

in which they can be integrated into multimodal texts but it also, and equally importantly,

requires an understanding of communicative contexts and an ability to creatively respond

to the unique demands of specific situations. (Van Leeuwen, 2017, p. 18)

I draw two key pieces from this definition. First, people communicate by combining different

communicative modes. Second, the communicative context is essential in creating shared

meaning. To be understood as a competent communicator in any given instance, you must have

knowledge of how to use and combine a variety of communicative modes in ways that will make

sense to others. Gee (2003) rightly says "words, symbols, images, and artifacts have meanings

that are specific to particular semiotic domains and particular situations (contexts). They do not

just have general meanings" (p. 25). In a community, the entanglement of communicative

modes involves how members recognize the intertextuality of their communication, which can

mark them as an insider or an outsider.

For example, most RT community members will recognize the person wearing the shirt

in Figure 2.1 as Gavin Free, a RT celebrity. Of those fans, many would likely know he was on

the RT Podcast and said the very statement now depicted on a bestselling shirt in the RT Store.

The "grapes" phrase became a meme because of how fans latched onto it, and it has a long

history with RT which includes derivative shirts and merchandise. Each iteration

recontextualizes the initial interaction. The static frame of the image in Figure 2.1 is enlivened

by knowledge of people such as Gavin Free and his friends who set him up for a joking

conversation about grapes, their relational histories, and other related texts (such as the podcast

where the phrase was first uttered and the memes that followed). As we can see, a single image

is never really a single image as it also indexes people, histories, and other contexts.

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By studying how multimodal elements converge in SoE, we can better understand how members leverage different resources in (re)creating community. Furthermore, the multimodal literacy mentioned by Van Leeuwen (2017) is important in understanding how to navigate the RT community as a member. One challenge of multimodal research as outlined by Kress (2003) is that "we need to understand how meanings are made as signs in distinct ways in specific modes, and we have to find ways of understanding and describing the integration of such meanings across modes, into coherent wholes, into texts" (p. 37). To continue with the example, this would be how RT community members are able to competently reference the "People Like Grapes" meme in a face-to-face conversation or on social media or knowing what to do when one encounters the t-shirt (online through images, videos, or text or offline if someone else is wearing the shirt). Additionally, all modes of communication are influenced by cultural, historical, and social uses, and people are responsible for making meaning through how they use and combine different modes (Price, Jewitt, & Brown, 2013). The image of the shirt is coherent to me, a community member, even as the meaning is layered and adapted with each new iteration of this meme which occurs across strictures of time and space. This is possible because of my engagement with and exposure to many of these versions of the "Grapes" references.

This brings me back to my question: why so many grapes? The image includes a multiplicity of grapes signaling, to those in the know, the inside joke. With this knowledge, the image of the shirt including the large number of grape representations can be understood as a strategically constructed text which traces back through multiple SoE; furthermore, the shirt also anticipates future actions of purchasing and wearing the shirt, which can lead to additional engagement between community members (e.g., taking photographs, posting photographs to social media, conversations, etc.). In other words, the image points to the multimodal production

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and consumption of the RT community, simultaneously drawing from the past and projecting forward into an anticipated future.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis

I draw from Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) to research the SoE constructed by RT community members. MDA "refers to a field of academic research interested in investigating the ways in which meaning-making practices and social interactions occur through multiple communicative modes" (Geenen, Norris, & Makboon, 2015, para. 1). MDA is based on the premise that all discourse is multimodal (Scollon & LeVine, 2004). MDA is an important way to study community because it helps me examine the notion of community as action across digital, physical, relational, and other spaces. Time and space are being constructed in many ways at the same time, and MDA takes this into account.

I want to take a moment to reiterate my perspective on discourse or the "D" in MDA. My research is based on a notion of discourse that examines language alongside other ways of communicating. Waring (2018) defines discourse as **"**the actual use of language along with other multimodal resources (e.g., facial expression, gazes, gesture, body movements, artifacts, and the material settings) to accomplish actions, negotiate identities, and construct ideologies" (p. 8). I understand discourse as relational and culturally-situated, and I will be using this premise as a way of teasing out the concept of relationality in my research. I am interested in the relationality of people, spaces, and things and how all of them come together to produce something socially meaningful. The term *relationality*, in this dissertation, refers to the possibilities afforded by the interacting and unfolding of relations in different situations (Cooren, 2018; Kuhn, Ashcraft, & Cooren, 2017; Shotter, 2013; Linstead & Pullen, 2006). Relationality

is a way of understanding how there are many possibilities in a given SoE which helps me analyze my data from a multimodal perspective.

I see multimodal analysis as a way to provide a broad understanding of how language (spoken and written), combined with pictures, videos, websites, nonverbal communication, and other resources constitute the RT community. I also will examine how relations converge and unfold between these different modes of communicating matters in how the RT community is experienced and created by members. I also examine how my very claims about community create a version of the RT community through this writing.

I see my research embracing the spirit of MDA discussed by Norris and Jones (2005) whereby each study requires a unique approach:

> MDA makes a point of eschewing dogmatism when it comes to methodology, making room for the analyst to introduce any data collection and analytical tools they deem useful within MDA's broad focus on social action … Since each nexus of practice is different, mediated discourse analysts must, to a large degree, be prepared to chart their own courses through those they are studying, applying whatever means seem appropriate given the knowledge that they have at any given point. (p. 201)

In the upcoming sections, I will detail my rationale for data collection. Broadly speaking, I have collected data from a variety of spaces, both digital and face-to-face. The guiding questions I asked myself in how I determined what data to collect were:

- How are people engaging with one another in the RT community?
- Where do people go to communicate in the RT community?
- Where do people say they are communicating in the RT community?

This approach allows me flexibility in which data I collected, allowing the RT community members I interacted with and observed help guide where I collected my data.

In my approach to MDA, I focus on what is happening in and across SoEs. To do so, I identify moments of mediation and discuss the role of affordances and constraints. I also focus on how SoE involve social practices, mediational means, participants, space, and time. I consider the role of production and consumption in community, as well as metacommunication and orders of indexicality (see Chapter 1). In each chapter, I draw in additional research tools to address the particular aspect of community I am discussing.

MDA is a perfect analytical tool in a study of SoE because multiple modes of communication are always converging through mediated actions. Furthermore, this type of analysis orients me to the linkages and the intertextuality within my data in order to understand what is really going on in any given window of action. I use MDA to gain perspective on how a community is constituted through communication, as well as how different modes and communicative contexts interdiscursively generate meaning.

Data and Collection

My research includes the following types of data: interviews, social media posts, and observations from field research. I collected data from August 2016 to February 2019. In the sections that follow, I will discuss my criteria and method of data collection for each type.

Interviews

My data collection began in 2016 as part of a class project for my qualitative methods course. I wanted to interview members of my local RT community, RT Florida, and ask them about their participation in the RT community. As part of my coursework, I obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for this study. In my application, I had to submit an

official flyer that I would use as a recruitment tool (Appendix B). I posted this flyer on the RT Florida Facebook page in order to recruit interview participants. I was able to initially enlist the participation of seven RT Florida members in the project. These interviews served as the beginning of my formulation of this dissertation project. The initial interview questions which I asked are provided in Appendix C. The questions focused on community, membership, and interaction with other RT community members. While these questions served as the foundation for my interviews, I also asked many follow up questions; thus, I classify these interviews as semi-structured because sometimes the conversations veered from the initial question as I engaged with each interview participant. In 2018, I posted a public flyer again in my local group to see if I could find additional participants. I also asked the leaders of RT Florida to pass along the flyer to anyone else they thought may be interested. Through this process, I found three new recruits for my study and I asked them a mixture of both the initial and follow up questions. I conducted follow-up interviews in 2018 with all seven of my original participants (follow-up questions are provided in Appendix D). In total, I had ten interview participants. Including the follow-up interviews, there were seventeen interviews that I transcribed.

I offered members who were within driving distance to me the option of face-to-face interviews, or interviews via Skype or another online video/audio chat program. All of the local members elected to speak with me via digital mediation (predominantly through Skype video chat, although one interview took place on Discord audio). In addition to the seven locals, I had interviews with three RT members in Ohio, Canada, and Germany. I recorded the Skype interviews using an application called Ecamm Movie Tools, which is a software that records the audio of the Skype calls. For the interview conducted on Discord, I used a computer audio recording software called OBS. Following IRB protocol, I stored the data, including the

recording and transcriptions, on a password-protected computer. I do not use a detailed

transcription method for my interviews and instead, focus on the relationship of each SoE within

the broader RT community. Additionally, I entered my transcripts into the AntConc

concordance software to orient part of my analysis to frequency of word use to identify any

patterns in speaking about community.

Table 2.1. RT Member Interviews Overview.*

Name	Interview Year	Video /No Video	Mentioned RT Affiliations	Leadership / Volunteer Mentioned
K	2016; 2018	2016 Video 2018 No Video	RT Florida	RT Florida Admin
Y	2016; 2018	2016 Video 2018 Video	RT Florida Ladies of RT	None
J	2016; 2018	2016 No Video 2018 No Video	RT Florida	Guardian at RTX Austin
H	2016; 2018	2016 Video 2018 Video	RT Florida	RT Florida community leader
C	2016; 2018	2016 Video 2018 No Video	RT Florida	RT Florida Admin
W	2016; 2018	2016 Video 2018 No Video	RT Florida RT World	RT Florida Head Admin
U	2016; 2018	2016 Video 2018 Video	RT Florida	RT Florida Admin
M	2018	No Video	RT St. Louis RT World	RT St. Louis Admin; Mod on RT website, RT World Discord, RT Cosplayers Discord
L	2018	No Video	RT Nova Scotia	RT Nova Scotia Admin; Guardian RTX London
G	2018	No Video	RT Germany RT World	RT Germany Admin

*The identifiers include only what was mentioned in the interviews and each RT community
member may have additional affiliations, leadership, or volunteer roles within the RT
community. These roles may have also changed over time.*

Interview process. During each interview, the participants and I shift between our

institutional frames (interviewer and interviewee) and social frames (RT community members)

(Sarangi, 2004). The very production of an interview is significant (Rapley, 2016) for the relational materialization of community. The fact that an interview is requested, accepted, and then performed makes it another space for community to materialize. The context of production begins before an interview even begins. Before each interview, I established my belief that the subject of the interview is valuable enough to put accounts of this community "on the record" through my research. Following IRB protocol, before each interview, I provided a list of rights for participants in my study and an overview of my research, which adds another layer of formality. So, before I started asking questions, the participant and I already agreed to an account in which community exists and it matters enough to be studied and spoken about and many layers of documentation and consent needed to be considered. Beyond greeting each other, my participants must orally agree to the process before the interview questions are asked. All of these rituals set up the interview within a formal, institutional framework (Sarangi, 2004, p. 70).

When I perform the role of the interviewer (for both the people I interview and for myself), I ask questions and I listen to responses, indexing my authority as an academic conducting an interview. McRae (2015) urges scholars to understand listening as performance. Performative listening involves listening with curiosity, listening to and with the body, listening for context and location, and listening with accountability (McRae, 2015). I can understand "the productive performance of listening to others as a way of learning, or conducting research, is never a neutral practice" (McRae, 2015, p. 44). Through the ways in which I listen, make noises of agreement (e.g., "mhm") or say something encouraging to the speaker (e.g., "awesome, yeah"), I cannot help but know I am part of "a performance that can shape and transform our understanding of experience" (McRae, 2015, p. 19). The ways in which I listen, the words I use

to keep the flow of the conversation going, my nonverbal communication, are all ways that I set up the interview as an institutional site. I am marking our conversation as institutionalized through using these protocols. Each question orients the person being interviewed to respond in a particular way, and both interviewer and interviewee, have uses and purposes for the interview (Smith, 1978).

Who is talking and who is listening are important factors in what data is generated in an interview (Riessman, 1993). I often spoke with participants for long periods of time before and after the "formal" IRB questions were asked, sharing stories about our experiences as RT community members and discussing my research. Through these conversations, we shifted between institutional and social frames (Sarangi, 2004). These conversations happened before, during, and after I was asking questions that I had provided on the consent form required of me to give them prior to our interview sessions. The RT members I interviewed often referred to our context of conducting an interview. For example, in my first interview with K, an RT Florida Admin, we had a conversation after my formal questions approved by the IRB were concluded and we were talking metadiscursively about our previous conversation. Because I had previously claimed my official questions were concluded, I switched the frame of our interview from institutional to social. We engage in some banter about the RT community and then K says:

Extract 2.1

694	K:	ARRRRRRGG. I wish I had thought of more of this stuff early on.
695	A:	It's okay. It's it's all a part
696	K:	Yeah, so
697	A:	I transcribe like everything.

696   K: Well don't don't transcribe me yelling randomly. (laughs)

697   A: I will

698   K: [he] said, "AHHHHHHH"

In line 694, K voices his frustration that what we were currently discussing was not shared earlier, which refers to the significance of the temporal qualities of interviews. K indexes the formality of an interview being dependent on the timing of an answer, such as if he had said things earlier (after my prepared question was asked), his words would have mattered more. His frustration stems from the timing of his comments after we shifted frames. He wanted to state his opinions during a "formal" part of the interview instead of in the post-interview conversation we were having. He jokingly mimicked what I would be transcribing him saying after I informed him that this part of the interview was also "on the record" (line 698). This exchange would not have occurred if we did not mark together the different frames or discuss my research process, which includes transcripts. This example represents the reflexive nature of interviews, as well as my role in the creation of data in the research process. K and I discuss what it would look like if I were to transcribe his yelling and how silly that would be if I were to do so, but the meta-conversation, since our talk is on the record, is how I have the power to take his words and use them as I see fit. I respect K and I used this example with the understanding he would find it amusing based on his sense of humor, therefore, I do not see it as the abuse of my power as the researcher. However, I would have reconsidered including this example had it been someone else who may have been sensitive to this context. The use of this conversation is also a great example of recontextualization, where I then took that segment of our interview as my very first representative example in this dissertation to talk about interviewing.

In my second interview with K, we also had a conversation about talking about the interview.

Extract 2.2

657   A: Yeah. I might just include our post-conversation and analyze that like

658   Rooster Teeth members talking to each other. Awesome.

659   K: Yeah, bunch of nerds talking to each other about nerd stuff.

Here is just one example of how K and I produce the RT community together in this SoE (the interview). Here, he provides an account of community where "nerds" will talk about things that are "nerdy" (line 659). Additionally, both my identity as a researcher and my identity as a RT community member are made present in our conversation. I am both the subject of my study and the person conducting the analysis. K is helping me produce both identities simultaneously. K and I are using humor (both in Extract 1 and 2), which is also a way of performing our membership as RT community members. In talking about the RT community, we are actually modeling community through our conversation and ratifying a candidate version of community. In chapter three, I will analyze how turn by turn, I work together with community members, co-creating community as we dip in and out of institutional and social frames.

In one final example, I want to examine how interviews are constructed as a platform for a variety of purposes by participants. Unlike my previous example with K, the following example with G, the Admin for RT Germany, is not in a humorous register. Instead, she is serious and focuses on what this interview represents for her, which has been a reinforcement of her belief the RT community is valuable and worth her commitment. This conversation occurred when I asked if she had anything to add after I wrapped up my formal questions, to which she answered:

Extract 2.3

535   G: No not really and just just realize how much ((laughs)) I love this

536   community once more while talking about it.

537   A: That's great

538   G: Yeah, I just I just I feel exceptionally lucky that I get to be part of the

539   Rooster Teeth community, especially right now, because, you know, it's

540   just after Extra Life and every time Extra-Life happens, I am blown away

541   and I cry a lot because I'm so happy.

In line 535, G quickly answers my open question with a quick response of "no not really" and then provides an unsolicited account of community. She discusses the value of the RT community and how she decided to qualify the time we spent together in the interview as a way to reinforce that value (lines 538-541). In talking about the community, she has been able to put on the record a version of RT she sees as a way to reaffirm her time and commitment to RT. Though ambiguous, my positive response in line 537 serves as an encouragement to G to expand her account as something that the interview is allowing her to do (notice yeah, in line 538, reprising and expanding what she was saying before my interjection).

As part of this expansion, G leverages temporality by way of deixis (right now, line 539) thus taking us to the shared present moment and what she also presumes to be the shared importance the event, Extra-Life, as a relevant example of the value of RT. Extra-Life is a live stream event RT community members participate in to raise money for a local children's hospital. By referencing this event (lines 540-541), she is able to provide a moral account of RT as contributing to a better world of people coming together to help others. Through talking about how important this is to her and the emotions it elicits for her (line 541), she emphasizes the

beliefs she just shared, implying that these are also my own beliefs. Here, through our interview, we have created a version of the RT community as a positive social space where people can enjoy being a part of a group of people who come together for the greater good, and we can feel good about being a part of this. Therefore, the interview became for G a way to reaffirm her own beliefs in community engagement and the value of the RT community. Temporality is entangled through the timing of this interview, the timing of Extra Life, and the time within the interview she wanted to share this with me.

More importantly, these representative examples showcase how interviews are a way of *making* data rather than *collecting* data (Roulston 2001; Smith 1978). Together, we co-labor to produce accounts of community. We also produce moral portrayals of different types of members, which include ourselves as community members (Roulston, 2001). Characters in accounts we produce can be imagined, suggested, or used as resources in descriptions of accounts (Roulston, 2001). Interviews are a site for making a version of what things are. Each participant and I are mutually agreeable as we collude and collaborate to produce and perform a version of the RT community *together*.

Social Media Posts

A large part of the interaction in the RT community happens through various social media. This is not surprising as social media have become woven into the fabric of the social world at large. There are roughly 3.5 billion active social media users globally, which account for 45% percent of the world's population (Digital, 2019). Facebook currently holds the title for the largest social media site (Clement, 2019a) and seven-in-ten U.S. adults (69%) use the site (Gramlich, 2019). The term social media refers "to all digital media which facilitate interaction" (Tagg, 2015, p. 249). One type of social media is social networking sites (SNS), defined by

boyd and Ellison (2008) "as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (p. 211). SNS are more focused on making connections with others or making others aware of your connections (e.g., Linkedin.com), where the broader idea of social media can be as simple as a comment underneath a newspaper article. In fact, "social network sites depend for their very existence on the relationships that people make, and the ways to facilitate relationship-building are a part of the site infrastructure" (Tagg, 2015, p. 166). One note about social media is how production and consumption are inherently part of their makeup as users can create, interact with, and view content (such as posts, videos, images, GIFs, emojis, and other digital resources).

In the sections to follow, I will review the number of posts and comments I collected for my research as well as discuss the affordances and constraints of each platform. For my study, I collected social media posts from three different websites:

1. Facebook (www.facebook.com)

2. Twitter (www.twitter.com)

3. Rooster Teeth website (www.roosterteeth.com).

Each of these social media sites have different audiences, aims, affordances, and constraints. For example, Facebook and Twitter, at large, seek a broad audience, and almost anyone can leverage these sites for various social and personal purposes. However, other sites are known to explicitly seek narrower audiences (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 218), which is the case with the RoosterTeeth.com SNS, where the site is aimed at RT fans and it would be very strange to come across someone who had no interest in RT on the website. Each of these sites are used by RT

community members to communicate with each other and sometimes with RT employees and celebrities. While there are many more spaces where members interact, I was drawn to selecting these sites because they were the most mentioned by the RT members I first interviewed in 2016 when asking them about where they engage the most online with other RT community members. I also wanted to select sites that offered publicly available spaces for interaction rather than private chat rooms or chat services such as Discord. Selecting publicly available spaces was important first for gaining access to these spaces, and second to further my understanding of how RT community members are engaging in public community spaces. Each of these sites offer a variety of affordances for the RT community and I will detail them below.

Facebook. Facebook is a SNS founded in 2004 with 2.38 billion monthly active users as of April 2019 (Clement, 2019a). There is no fee to create a Facebook account and the platform offers much in the way of interactive features, which continue to change and evolve over time. Some examples of the current technical affordances provided by Facebook include the ability for members to post text, images, GIFs, video, and more. Facebook users also can react to posts using what Varis and Blommaert (2014) refer to as "responsive uptake activities" (p. 35), which "trigger a phatic feeling" (Yus, 2019, p. 164) which helps promote a sense of connectedness. In Facebook, these responsive uptake activities include "reactions" to different items including "like," "love," "haha," "wow," "sad," and "angry" (see Figure 2.2).
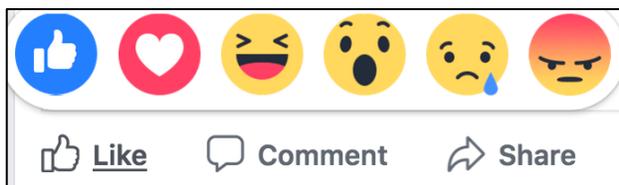
Figure 2.2. Facebook responsive uptake activities. The "like," "love," "haha," "wow," "sad," and "angry" are listed from left to right (see Appendix I for Fair Use Assessment).

Other affordances include ways to connect to others in a post on Facebook, such as using the

"@" symbol to tag a "friend" or use a hashtag (e.g., #offended) to indicate a connection to a

larger idea or theme (Tagg, 2015). Facebook also offers an instant messaging service where

users can partake in private conversations.
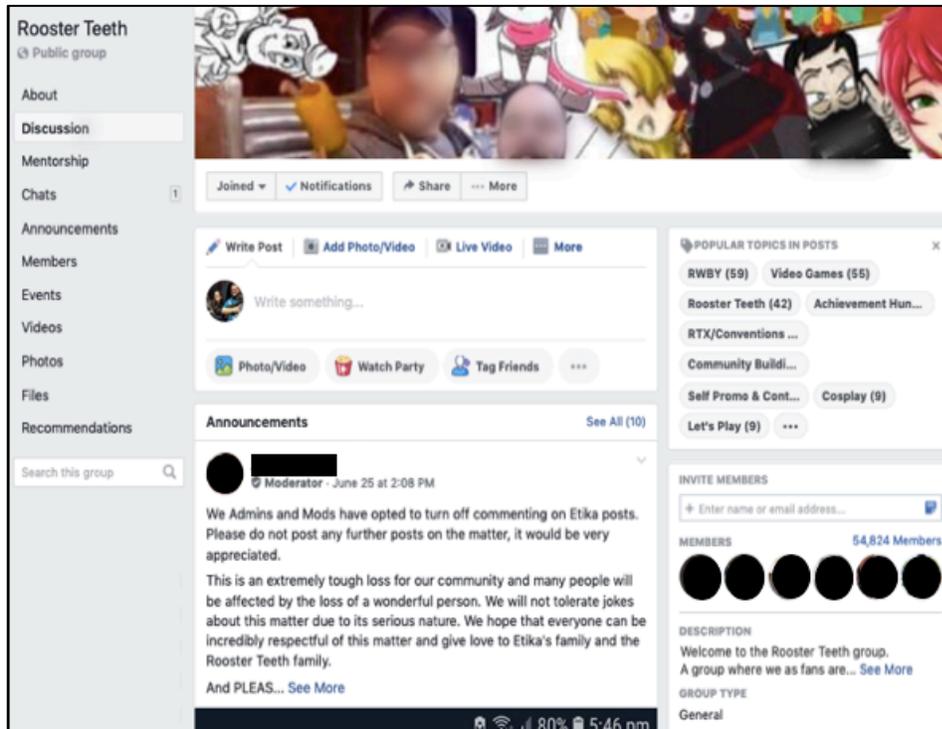
Figure 2.3. Rooster Teeth public Facebook group screenshot. See Appendix I for Fair Use
Assessment.

One affordance of particular interest to my study is how Facebook users can also create groups,

spaces that can filter membership. In Figure 2.3, you can see an example of how a Facebook

group page is set up. There are many ways for the group to distinguish and customize its

appearance. This includes a banner at the top, popular topics being highlighted, a list and

number of members displayed, as well as a group description. In the banner in the example

below, one of the group's Admins has selected a customized banner that is filled with cutouts of

screenshots, fan art, and RT art representing a variety of Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC's most

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popular content. Additionally, a group can have chats, announcements, events, polls and many

other interactive pieces.

 There are different types of privileges members can have in a Facebook group. Admins

(administrators) and mods (moderators) have additional rights and responsibilities that

distinguish them from other group members. Admins and mods have a special badge under their

names (see Figures 2.4 and 2.5). These symbols both have shields, which visually align them as

leaders. The star for Admins symbolically gives them "top" status and the check of the mod is a

way to symbolically verify their status (Twitter uses a check to verify the validity of accounts).

Figure 2.4. Admin symbol on Facebook.
See Appendix I for Fair Use Assessment.

Figure 2.5. Moderator symbol on Facebook.
See Appendix I for Fair Use Assessment.

 These roles in a Facebook group allow Admins and mods to approve or deny membership

requests, approve or deny posts in the group, remove posts and comments on posts, remove and

block people from the group, pin or unpin a post, view support inbox ("What is," n.d.).

However, only Admins can make another member an Admin or mod, remove an Admin or

moderator, manage group settings such as change the group name, photo, etc. ("What is," n.d.).

Some research has found the active presence of mods may help encourage participation among

members (Wise, Hamman, & Thorson, 2006). Roles attributed to mods by mods have included

to keep the discussion focused and free of harmful attacks (Berge & Collins, 2000). As such,

they control, direct, and manage group dynamics. Members of the group who are not Admins or

Moderators can post, comment, participate in responsive uptake activities, and other usual

Facebook activities. Anyone can usually create polls, posts, events, etc. specific to the group.

Settings can be adjusted by Admins and mods to make certain actions possible by members.

There are nearly 100 RT Facebook groups that focus on subjects ranging from general

RT content, to discussions about dating fellow community members, to local community groups,

to special interest groups for particular RT content. I selected two Facebook groups for the focus

of my field work: the Facebook group of my local RT community, RT Florida which currently

has 603 members, and the large public RT Facebook group with 54k+ members as of this

writing. Since August 2016, I have monitored posts in these groups as part of my ongoing field

research. Both groups are regularly active with daily posts. I collected data based on trends that

I noticed in each of the groups (the most common types of posts). Between these two sets of

Facebook data, I collected a total of 22 posts with 379 comments.

The posts in my local RT group, RT Florida, gave me a perspective of the types of

interactions that happen on a smaller scale with people who are likely to know each other (or

have more of a possibility of knowing each other or meeting face to face due to proximity). The

local groups serve as a self-organizing filter for two common factors: 1.) the people participating

in them like RT and 2.) the people participating in them live relatively near each other (thus,

ensuring some commonality in terms of local knowledge). The larger RT Facebook group gives

me the perspective of how a massive number of people interact in the same space who are less

likely to know each other outside of the group (due to the fact members are living across the

globe and the sheer size of the membership). The larger group only ensures that its participants

like RT, but not that they live near each other or that they have the same local knowledge.

I collected a sampling of posts from RT Florida's Facebook group based on the most

common types of posts that I observed, which are primarily about ways to engage with each

other. Posts collected included event invites to meet-ups (both physical and virtual), posts with

pictures of members hanging out, posts about coordinating meetings with one another, and posts

inviting others to engage on Facebook. Table 2.2 summarizes the 11 posts that I collected from

the RT Florida public Facebook group. For the public RT Facebook group, I collected posts

based on one of the most frequent topics of discussion during my observation period: rules.

Specifically, I culled examples focused upon reinforcing the rules, breaking the rules,

referencing the rules, or referencing actions of other members. In Table 2.3, I list the details of

the posts I collected.

Table 2.2. RT Florida Public Facebook Group Posts*

Post	# Of Comments	Source
Post 12	0	RT FL Public Group
Post 13	4	RT FL Public Group
Post 14	3	RT FL Public Group
Post 15	8	RT FL Public Group
Post 16	20	RT FL Public Group
Post 17	11	RT FL Public Group
Post 18	1	RT FL Public Group
Post 19	2	RT FL Public Group
Post 20	1	RT FL Public Group
Post 21	16	RT FL Public Group
Post 22	0	RT FL Public Group
Total Posts and Comments: 11 Posts; 66 Comments		

These posts were collected between November 2018 and January 2019.

Table 2.3. RT Public Facebook Group Posts*

Post	# Of Comments	Source
Post 1	41 (Nov 2017); 54 (Jan 2019)	RT Public Group
Post 2	66	RT Public Group
Post 3	44	RT Public Group
Post 4	101	RT Public Group
Post 5	49	RT Public Group
Post 6	9	RT Public Group
Post 7	0	RT Public Group
Post 8	0	RT Public Group
Post 9	0	RT Public Group
Post 10	0	RT Public Group
Post 11	3	RT Public Group
Total Posts and Comments: 11 Posts; 313 Comments		

The posts were originally collected between October and November 2017. I revisited them in January 2019 and some of the original comments were deleted, and new comments were added.

Twitter. Twitter is a microblogging SNS with 330 million active monthly users as of April 2019 (Clement, 2019b). Since its founding in 2006, Twitter has earned a reputation as a principal, real-time means companies and individual celebrities use to make connections with their respective audiences (Clement, 2019b). Users are able to follow one another's Twitter accounts to see each other's tweets appear in their Twitter feed, or live update of tweets. You can see a sample Twitter feed in Figure 2.6.
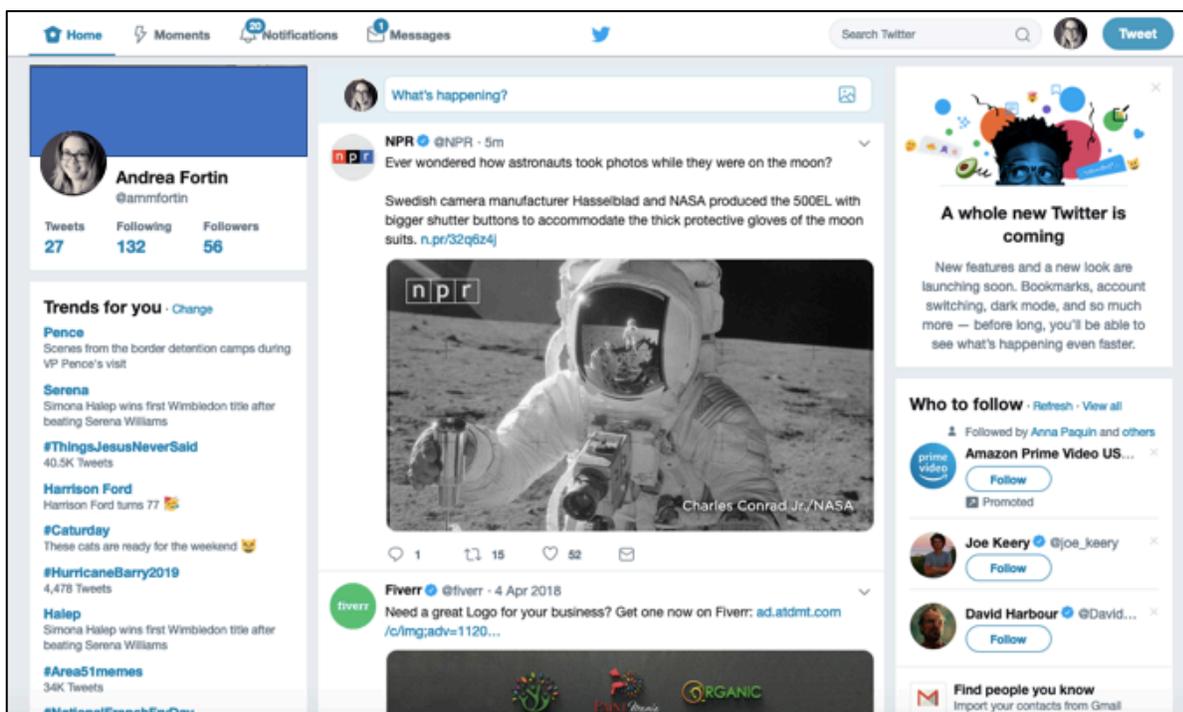
Figure 2.6. Sample Twitter feed.

There are a variety of ways Twitter users can engage with others. Foremost is tweeting out different updates (see example tweet in Figure 2.7). Twitter caps tweets at 280 characters, including emojis. A signature piece of Twitter is its use of clickable hashtags (#), which connect tweets to larger trends that become searchable. Twitter users can also tag other Twitter accounts using the "@" symbol (e.g., @bdunkelman). There is only one responsive uptake activity, the

"like" button as represented by a heart (see Figure 2.7). However, users can retweet, comment

on, and send a message to the account making the tweet. Figure 2.7 breaks down a sample tweet.
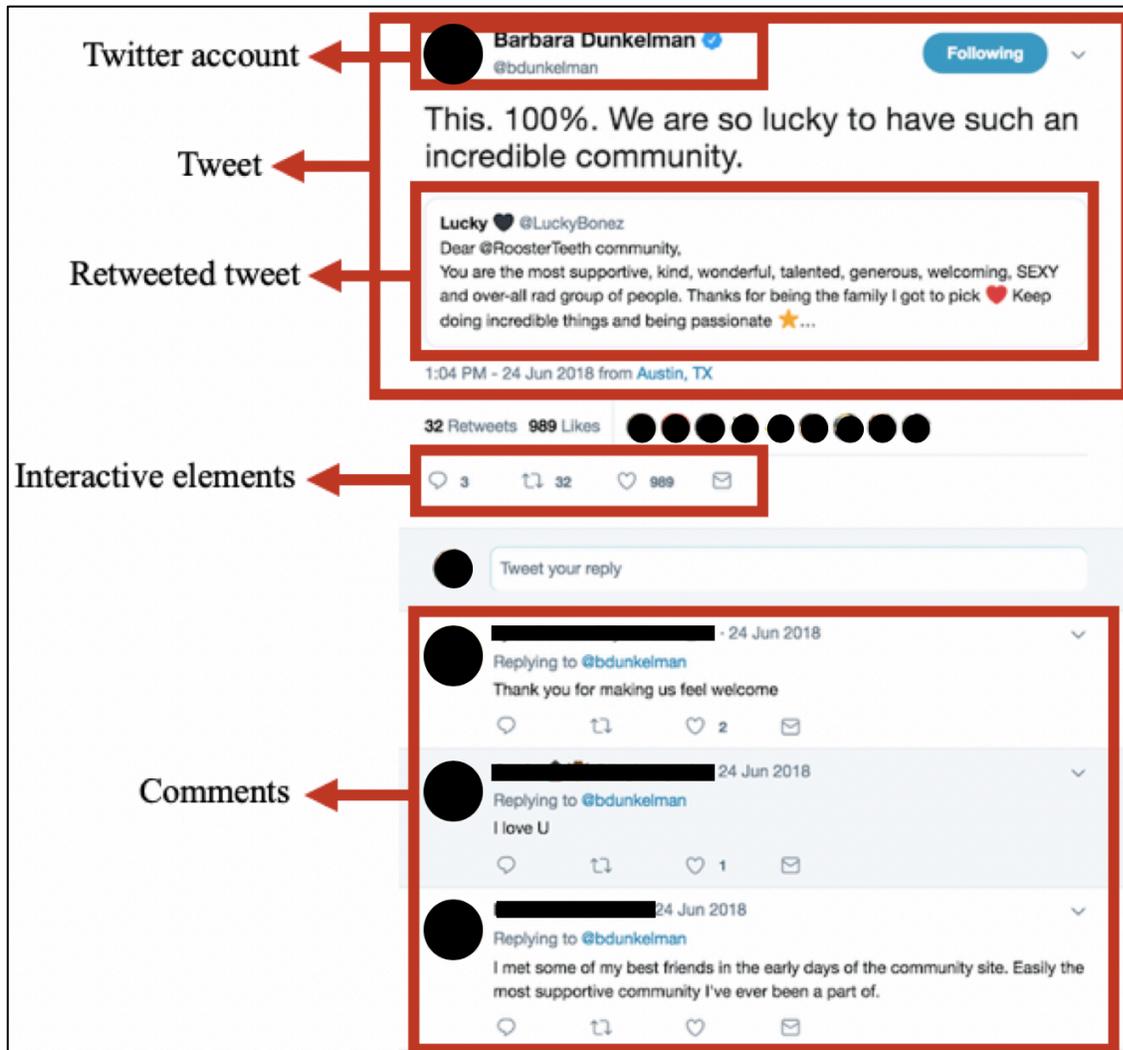
Figure 2.7. Tweet sample with a breakdown of different elements.

In Figure 2.7, we can see the Twitter account making the tweet is @bdunkelman with the

name Barbara Dunkelman. Account names with the @ symbol stay the same where the name

paired with them are changeable. In this instance, there is a blue circle with a checkmark in it

next to Dunkelman's name, which is a badge indicating she has a verified Twitter account,

meaning Twitter has verified her identity. This verification process is often used for brands or

celebrities to help users distinguish from impersonators, and Twitter does this for any account that may be of interest to the public. This tweet is actually a "retweet" paired with original commentary (see Figure 2.7). A retweet is a reposting (or quoting) of a Tweet that is yours or belongs to someone else. The interactive elements featured in Figure 2.7 from left to right are to comment, retweet, like, and message the account. Additionally, comments can be viewed when users click on tweets to expand the comments being made. Sample comments are displayed in Figure 2.7. Note that users can also comment on, retweet, like, and message for each individual comment, as well as for tweets. Further, this example also highlights the affordances of Twitter in relation to the production of the RT community. The tweet from Barbara (an RT celebrity) claims there is a community while also quoting another RT staff member who is also naming and celebrating the community (which backs up her claims). Through other affordances of Twitter, members are also liking this tweet (nearly 1000 times) and commenting to add to this narrative of community.

Twitter is a space where Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC. and its employees interact with its fan base frequently. Twitter served as a challenging space to study the RT community because of the sheer amount of Twitter accounts I could have chosen to study—from different groups within RT to individual RT celebrities with individual accounts. In selecting posts for my data, I elected to use the advanced Twitter search function to filter my results, not limit myself to only a select few Twitter accounts, and focus on posts that directly addressed the RT community. I searched for any posts with the hashtag or mention of "RTcommunity," "community," and "Rooster Teeth." Table 2.4 is an overview of the data I collected on Twitter. In selecting Tweets to collect for analysis, I chose to pick tweets with a range of interactions from high to low. I collected tweets with a range of 3 to 206 comments. My criterion for selecting tweets

was that the initial Tweet needed to be from a RT account or RT celebrity account and also

needed to relate to the RT community in some way (either mentioning the community directly or

by soliciting community members to engage with the Tweet).

Table 2.4. RT Tweets*

Post	# Of Comments	Source
Tweet 1	9	@MattHullum (CEO)
Tweet 2	206	@RoosterTeeth
Tweet 3	15	@chattykinson (Chelsea, Community Manager)
Tweet 4	23	@RoosterTeeth
Tweet 5	115	@ RoosterTeeth
Tweet 6	23	@LuckyBonez (member)
Tweet 7	3	@bdunkelman (Retweeting Tweet 6)
Tweet 8	37	@ RoosterTeeth
Tweet 9	25	@bdunkelman
Tweet 10	6	@ RoosterTeeth
Tweet 11	5	@chattykinson (Chelsea, Community Manager)
Total Tweets and Comments: 11 Tweets; 467 Comments		

RT Forums. Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC. runs its own social media site on its

website RoosterTeeth.com. They have 5 million unique visitors to the site and there are 3

million registered users (About, n.d.). These users include RT employees, many of whom

regularly post in the blogs and sometimes in the forums. On the RoosterTeeth.com website, you

can watch RT videos, read or write blog posts, participate in forums, join interest groups, and

much more. Interactive opportunities are focused primarily on the forums and blog posts. Users

can reply to blog and forum posts. Users can quote to borrow, re-use, and otherwise

intertextually link to other forum posts as part of their reply (think retweet) or share blog posts.

In Figure 2.8, you will see an example of a forum starter post and reply.

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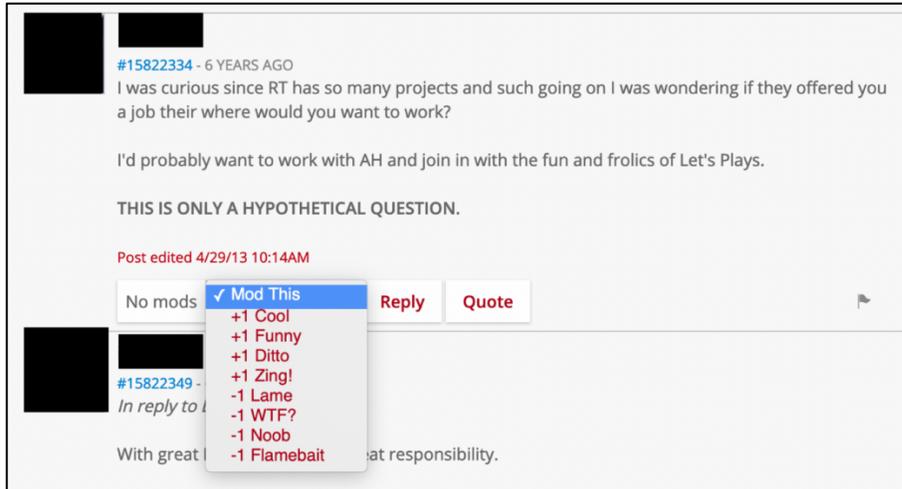
Figure 2.8. Interaction options on a forum post on RoosterTeeth.com.

Additionally, in Figure 2.8 you can see the "Mod This" Dropdown menu, which allows

for a variety of responsive uptake activities. Unlike Facebook's, these are attributed +1 or -1

points and do not have an emoji counterpart as they are purely textual responses. The +1

indicates a positive type of response, and a -1 indicates a negative type of response, with four of

each kind available. They are listed here: +1 Cool, +1 Funny, +1 Ditto, +1 Zing!, -1 Lame, -1

WTF?, -1 Noob, and -1 Flamebait. "Cool" indicates something generally positive, "Funny"

indicates something generally humorous, "Ditto" indicates agreement, "Zing!" indicates

someone is recognizing humor. "Lame" is generally negative, "WTF?" is a way to indicate

something is generally ridiculous, "Noob" indicates someone's newness and lack of knowledge,

and "Flamebait" indicates someone is completely off base or attempting to purposefully cause

discord or promote negativity. This same type of interactive model for forum posts applies to

blog posts where users can react and reply. See Figure 2.9 for an example of the responsive

uptakes in action where these affordances are used as a type of metadiscourse about an

interaction.
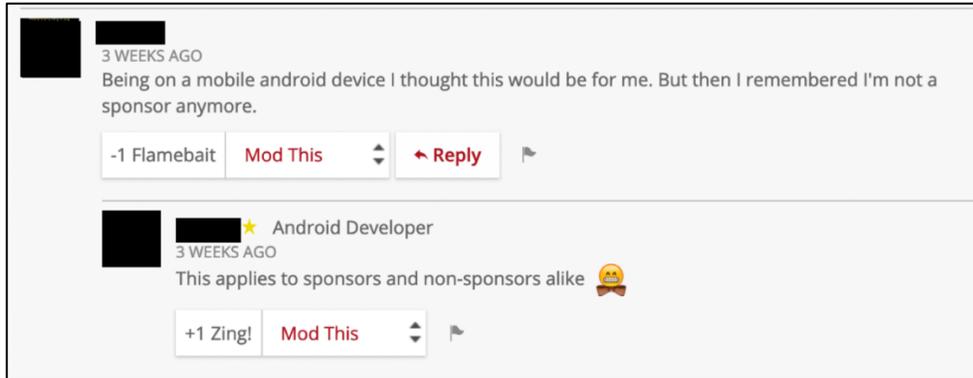
Figure 2.9. Interaction using positive and negative "Mods." This comes from a blog post on RoosterTeeth.com.

In addition to forums and blogs, the roosterteeth.com website has groups. In a community group, members can go to the group homepage for general information in addition to news, images, members, forum, and chat options (see Figure 2.10).
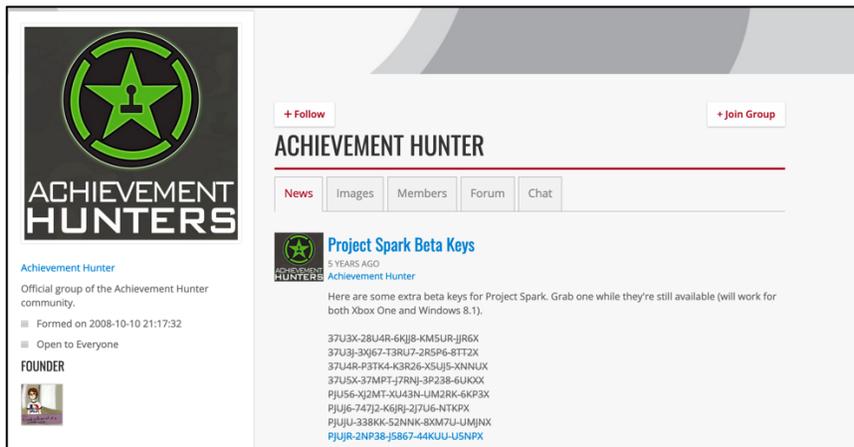
Figure 2.10. Achievement Hunter group on RoosterTeeth.com

In many of my interviews, RT members discussed how the RT site was not the primary place for interaction, often to their disappointment as it used to be *the* place for members to go. For example, I asked G, an Admin for the local RT Germany community, if she uses the RT website for her community. She lamented that her group's page and forums are largely inactive in that space at the moment because the RT site is "a bit of a clusterfuck" (lines 225-226). While

they did not use the word, "clusterfuck," as G does to plainly display her frustration with the RT website, to a fellow RT member (me) in a casual register. Other members and Admins often described a similar feeling to me regarding the site: it is difficult to navigate, engage, and participate in community activities on the RT site because the site itself can be clumsy to use. This is relevant to mention now because it was a challenge for me to find any recently active groups during my observation period. In full transparency, while I have been making final edits on my dissertation, a new—supposedly more organized and easier to navigate—RT community site has launched, and I have not had a chance to properly review the site for its inclusion in this dissertation.

Through a recommendation from another community Admin I interviewed, I found the Oxford Comma Café (OCC), which is the most active interest group I could find that uses forums on the RT website. The other active group that I observed was the general introductions forum for new members to the RT site. Because of the large inactivity on the site, I did not focus too much on interactions on here since most members are engaging through other social media and meetups for most of their engagement with other members of the RT community. However, because it is the official / original RT social media space, and the one which has been around the longest, I felt it merited inclusion in this study. It was also something the people I interviewed wanted to discuss, especially with new renovations to the website impending, which the members I talked to were very excited about. Table 2.5 lists the details of the posts I collected on Roosterteeth.com.

Table 2.5. RT Website Forum Posts

Post	# Of Posts Collected	Source
Introductions Forum	20	RT Website Forums
Oxford Comma Café Forum	8	RT Website Forums: OCC

Field Work

To start, I want to problematize the notion of "the field," which is a construct of research and also serves as a container metaphor where the researcher goes to a determined location and observes and participates for a set amount of time. Instead, I understand the field as a window of time and space, an interactional dynamic of continuous interaction where I can observe the unfolding of relationships. I holistically look at a field and understand it as a hermeneutic circle, as I cannot consider the parts without the whole or the whole without the parts. To study the community, I considered my field encompassing observing people at physical events as well as observing the digital fields of Facebook, Twitter, and the RT website. It is critical to not just jump onto a social media site, take screenshots and never return. Observing trends, watching engagement evolve over time, and seeing how people are using social media become an important part of this digital field work. I have studied various fields connected to the RT community for more than 200 hours between physical and digital fields, taking field notes on all of my experiences. The following are the spaces I engaged with for my research:

- I attended a theater screening for RT content in 2016 in Fort Myers, Florida
- I attended the 2017 RTX in Austin, TX, which included meetups with various groups
- I attended a live RT Event, Let's Play Live in 2017
- Weekly (mostly daily) observations of social media (Twitter, Facebook, and the RT website) on my phone through the use of applications and on my computer

Because of my membership, I understand myself as participant-observer in all of the spaces I engaged with for this research. Also, I came to this work with prerequisite literacy in the RT community. However, through my field work, I not only engage with RT as a

community member but also as a communication scholar. Through my research, I engage in what Sarangi (2005) calls "thick participation" which goes beyond the researcher becoming involved in a research setting and maintaining relationships with participants. Thick participation takes into account the need for a knowledge of the dynamics of the community, the different rules of the community, and the types of discourse that are and are not allowed. The work I have done in the field for this research follows the qualitative tradition which "features researchers themselves as observers and participants in the lives of people being studied" (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006, p. 3). I am now experiencing the RT community in new ways because it now matters to me differently since I have drawn my attention to theory and analysis in relation to community, my identity as a member, and how I engage with others through SoE that I help open up by doing this very research.

Prior to my research, I attended RTX in 2014. When I attended then I had no idea I would be writing my dissertation on RT, but in writing my dissertation I will be drawing on those experiences and memories as a reflective part of my research as I engage with my own identity as a RT community member. I see this as a point of "starting where I am" in that I am orienting to my research in ways relating to my own personal experiences and social experiences in the RT community, which also means what matters to me becomes more significant (Lofland, et al, 2006). Additionally, these memories are themselves data I am using to examine how community is created. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, memories relating to RT experiences are an important resource to draw on to create authentic accounts or narratives of membership.

Below is an example of the types of notes I took in my field work that showcase how I experienced a RT event. These notes are not simply information I gathered, and though they do include facts, they are data of how a RT community member (me) experiences an event:

RTX, Rooster Teeth annual convention in Austin, TX at the Austin Convention Center. Friday, July 7, 2017. *Observations from 11:30 AM – 12:30 PM.*

My husband and I were waiting in line for the "Super-Awesome-Doki-Doki-Waku-Waku Meg Turney Q&A Fun Time!" panel that began at 12:30 PM. Since we were VIP attendees, we were able to wait in a special line that would get to be seated first and we were able to avoid the 2-4 hour wait it normally took to attend a panel with a regular weekend or day pass. We got in line one hour ahead of the panel. This panel was much smaller (a few hundred seats in the room) than some of the much larger panels (with a capacity of 4000+). There were at least 25 other VIP members waiting in line with us when we first arrived. Most people were sitting on the floor (as were my husband and I), since the wait was long. The entire waiting area was filled with people and we were all separated into our respective areas reminiscent of a maze, with 3 ft. tall cloth dividers forming lines. There were three RTX Guardians (volunteers from the community who help run the event) to greet us, answer our questions, and make sure we stayed organized in our respective areas in line. Even though we were waiting, the room was alive with excited chatter and laughter could be heard frequently. Most of the time I looked around, almost everyone was smiling, talking, or playing on a portable gaming console, like a Nintendo Switch, which allowed for multiple players.

Doing ethnographic field work on the Internet has been a tradition for some time, which focuses on connection people make rather than location-based ethnographic research (Williams, 2013; Hine, 2000). Virtual ethnography is defined as "a research approach for exploring the social interactions that take place in virtual environments ... the virtual ethnographer becomes immersed in a virtual environment, observing and interacting using media appropriate to those

who use that site" (Virtual, 2008, para. 1). This type of field work pairs well with the purpose of

my research being multimodal as online ethnographers "tackle the burgeoning multimodal-

mediated communication occurring in Web 2.0 venues turning their analytical gaze to visual,

aural and other non-text modalities, immersing themselves in pop culture, and moving between

multiple field sites, including offline ones" (Georgalou, 2017, p. 25). For the purposes of this

research, I downloaded Twitter and Facebook on my phone and I regularly spent time reading

through posts on the RT Florida Facebook group, the RT Public Facebook Group, following

several RT members and accounts on Twitter, and reading through the RT website forums.

I took field notes on trends and patterns, such as frequency of types of posts (i.e., posts

about a new show coming out, or posts about gaming, or posts about metacommunication) in

order to know which data I would want to collect from each of these social media sites. Over the

past three years across Twitter, Facebook, and the RT website (www.roosterteeth.com), I have

engaged in approximately 150 hours of virtual field work. Here is a brief example of how I took

note of trends happening on social media through my field notes:

> **Twitter. Saturday, November 10, 2018.** *Extra Life RT Company live stream for 24*
>
> *hours taking place. Time: In medias res.*
>
> The Extra Life charity stream began at 8 AM CT / 9 AM ET and will run until Nov. 11
>
> at 8 AM CT / 9 AM ET. This event is to raise money for the Children's Miracle Network
>
> Hospitals. RT Twitter users are very active today, from fans to RT staff members. I am
>
> identifying and seeing these posts because Twitter users usually tag RT or other RT staff
>
> members that I also follow so it ends up in my news feed. I also am finding these tweets
>
> using the hashtag #forthekids, which is used in relation to the Extra Life event. I am
>
> seeing updates about the stream as it unfolds as RT and RT community members

comment on the progressively wackier attention-seeking tactics used by RT staff on the

stream. Tweets include updates on the money raised, video clips and screenshots of RT

staff on the stream.

Notes like this became helpful for me in identifying what types of tweets to collect for data

analysis. It also helps provide context in my analysis of those tweets so they are not seen as

taken in isolation but as a part of the context of a heavily communicated event such as Extra

Life.

Masspersonal Communication

As I examine social media, I consider how communication can vary from very personal

and private to widely public and impersonal. Of course, each person involved in communicating

through social media will experience communication differently. One way to conceptualize

communication through social media is put forth by O'Sullivan and Carr (2018) who identify

two dimensions that factor into determining if something is mass, masspersonal, or interpersonal

communication: perceived accessibility (how people interpret a message—public, private, or

somewhere in between) and personalization (how personal is the message regarding their identity

and relational network).

Interpersonal communication can be understood as personal and private (Facebook

message, conversation with a friend over coffee). Mass communication can be understood as

impersonal and public (YouTube video, Television, Listserv). Masspersonal is highly personal

and also highly public (Tweet, Facebook comment, radio call-in, Jumbotron proposal). Our

communication continually vacillates along this continuum, as we can easily take something

private and make it public (such as taking a screenshot of a private conversation or forwarding an

email) (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018). It is up to the communicators to decide what to do with their

communication, which can change from one moment to the next, and it is always dependent on

the affordances and constraints (technical, situated). Members of the RT community experience

communication falling on this continuum, especially with the many different opportunities

available for communicating. I examine how the concept of masspersonal communication plays

a role in shaping identities of members in the RT community, especially as communication may

be understood as mass, personal, or masspersonal by many people, even within in the same

interaction (e.g., one person directly talking to someone in a comment on Twitter and someone

else simply "liking" the Tweet). While the metaphor of community is used to foster

interpersonal relationships, a community tension persists as most communication between the

majority of members is highly impersonal, such as the use of "likes" on social media. Through

the diagram in Figure 2.11, you can see these concepts depicted.
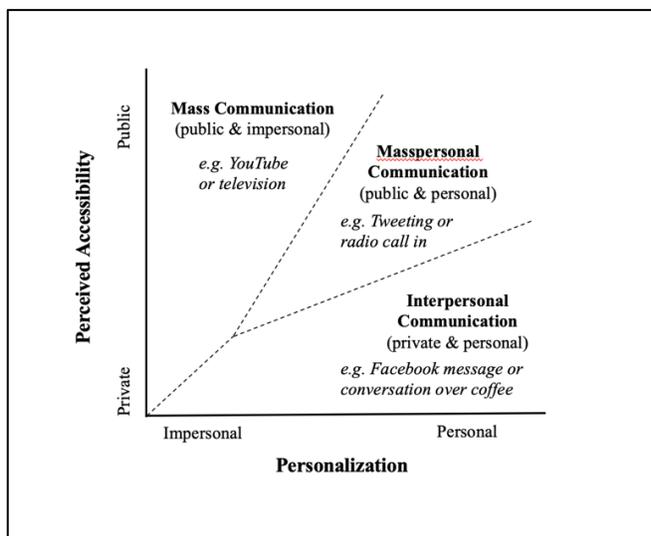
Figure 2.11. Masspersonal communication diagram. Modeled from O'Sullivan & Carr's (2018) conception and diagram of masspersonal communication. Copyright permissions in Appendix J.

Other Data

In addition to my interviews, social media post collection, and field work, I have engaged

with, taken notes on, and collected a variety of other data. This includes watching RT content

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(such as podcasts, animated shows, films, and video game playthroughs). I have also read blog posts on the RT site regarding the community. On the various social media sites, I have studied the different posted rule sets for community engagement, as well as group descriptions. I have read news articles written about RT, looked at the Extra Life and Indiegogo pages where money was raised by community members for both charity and RT productions. This data, similarly to my field notes, served as a way for me to better understand the intertextuality of the data I was collecting. I wanted to further my awareness of discourse about the RT community from a variety of sources.

RT and I

In qualitative research, it is important to evaluate the position of the researcher. Toward that end, I engage in reflexivity throughout my research, as described by Leeds-Hurwitz (1995): :

> Reflexivity implies accepting a multiplicity of meanings in events, and of participants' viewpoints, acknowledging that any study is but a partial accounting, heavily dependent on the particular researcher's training, questions, and assumptions. Reflexivity requires understanding research as a process involving the researcher as much as the 'subjects,' questioning the researcher's results no less than the subjects' responses. It accepts research as a complex process, with understanding emerging throughout rather than imposed once, securely, at the onset (p. 10).

In the context of my research project, being reflexive means to engage inongoing dynamic that is constantly shifting and evolving and is a part of this project from the moment it began. I see reflexivity as something that has already begun, that will continue to happen through the process, and will even keep happening long after the dissertation is complete. When collecting data, when writing about data, when interviewing, when talking about this research, I am constantly

shifting my position as a participant and researcher. The lines are blurred and indistinguishable. As I will discuss in my epilogue, this shifting of frames was a persistent challenge for me in doing this work. To make insightful academic claims about something I am actively a part of was only possible through continuous reflexive contemplation and conversations with my advisor who reminded me to take a step back and look at what I was taking for granted as a member. Research is relational. What I mean is that through my connections and interactions with my advisor, committee members, and RT community members, this work has been transformed. In an effort to both make apparent my own participation in the community and to reflexively address my participation, I have included many small stories of my own participation before, during, and after the research process as italicized vignettes throughout this dissertation. In analyzing the community, I also wanted to consider and incorporate my own engagement, especially since I am the one materializing community for anyone reading this dissertation.

I situate myself in this research as both a member and an analyst. I have been following RT for many years and I regularly watch RT shows, participate in RT Facebook groups, follow RT-related profiles on Twitter, and attend the annual convention (RTX) in Austin, TX. I see myself as engaging in participant observation which "is based on participating in different activities and observing how they are done" (Price, Jewitt, & Brown, 2013). In my role as participant-observer, I am constructing the RT community in the ways that I experience it, how community members speak about it, and through observations of interactions between members (including myself). I acknowledge and incorporate experiences from my own membership and participation as a part of this research study, which I see as data. While my interactions with the RT community long-proceeded this research, I am still engaging in an ever-unfolding relationship with the community, which will continue to be reflected upon as I continue to

grapple with concepts in this project at the same time as I enjoy participating in community activities.

My relationships with the people I talk to, my identity as a member as well as a researcher, and how I engage with all things RT are all continuously evolving. While I see myself as a member of the RT community, I am also acting as a researcher, making choices about what are the best representative examples of trends I am seeing or actions I believe are worth exploring in my research. How I describe the world will impact how it is understood by those reading this study and vice versa. I am adding to the body of knowledge about community, about a specific community, and I make things matter by writing about it for this dissertation at a public university. My representative examples, the selections I make, and how closely I examine my data all come from my perspective of what matters to me as part of the academic community and what I deem important to include. At the same time, I can only ever make claims based on my own experiences as someone engaging in writing about a community of which I am a part.

Conquergood (2013) discusses how the researcher is engaging in a performance and should be aware of the different ways she is performing. In my research, especially during the interviews, I am performing different roles, weaving in and out of performing RT member (e.g. when I share stories of my experience at RTX or commenting on various RT merchandise I can see through the webcams and complimenting those artifacts) and performing researcher (reviewing the IRB consent form, asking my interview questions).

Another important issue to consider when discussing sites of engagement is how "we as researchers contribute to the construction of such sites through our own actions, and how multiple trajectories of actions and practices of both the researcher and the researched converge in these sites of engagement" (Jones, 2005, p. 140). Through my interviews with RT

community members, we create a site of engagement where we make community together. I cannot deny my role in creating particular versions of community both in the interviews and in the ways I analyze the data I have collected.

Ethical Considerations

In gathering data from public places, there are bodies such as Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) and The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) to remind researchers of ethical considerations. In recognition of the potential for exploitation of individuals in a research study, I want to address the steps I have taken to attempt to forestall ethical concerns. In gathering the social media data, I took into consideration the ethical guidelines proposed by the AoIR such as privacy, context, potential harm, benefits, and risks (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). To protect the identities of social media users, I disguised names and avatar pictures (see Figures 2.3, 2.7. 2.8, 2.9 in this chapter for examples of how).

The Facebook groups I selected are semi-private spaces. To access the RT Facebook group page or the RT Florida Facebook group page, only a Facebook account is required. The groups are both public, so anyone can look at the posts in the group; one does not need to be accepted as a member of the group to view, but one must be a member to post. In the RT group's description, the administrators have stated, "Just remember to not post anything too personal, the group is public and anyone can see what is posted. Even if they're not in the group." So, even if people who are posting in this group are not aware of Facebook's policies or how the page operates, they are reminded through the group's rules. The public forums on the RT site do not require a username and password to view. So, this classifies these posts as fully public. In an extra effort to protect the privacy of users (and in accordance with the IRB), I chose to hide names and pictures from Facebook. I followed the same guidelines for Tweets

with the exception of posts by RT celebrities since they are public figures. All the Tweets I collected for this study were fully public and there was no login required to access the Tweets.

As for my interviews, while the RT community members each gave me oral consent to use their names, I am following the University of South Florida's Electronic Thesis and Dissertation database guidelines of omitting personally-identifying information. Instead, I have selected arbitrary letters to represent them on these pages. Though, their permission was interesting to me because it says something about the significance of these interviews of putting their accounts on record. In their oral consent agreement for the interviews, I explained to interviewees they can ask for any part of the interview to be excluded at any time. I sent the consent form ahead of the interviews, so the interviewees each have a digital copy. I reviewed the consent form before each of the interviews began, and then asked if the interviewees have any questions about the study or the contents of the consent form. None of them had concerns about the consent form, but many of them wanted to engage in conversations with me regarding my research before, during, and after my asking questions to them.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have established the analytical approach of my research as a multimodal analysis, drawing from the tradition of MDA. I have collected data from interviews, social media posts, field notes, as well as from websites. My engagement as a participant-observer becomes a focus of how I understand my own experiences as data and ways in which I contribute to community-making for RT. In the next chapter, I begin my analysis of the first resource RT members draw on to create community, which are community narratives.

CHAPTER THREE:

NARRATIVES OF COMMUNITY

At the end of the interview, I decided it would be OK to share a story of my own:

Extract 3.1

    360   A: I accidentally met Monty.

    361   J: Okay.

<div align="center">***</div>

"Once upon a time" is a "generic framing device" (Bauman, 2004, p. 4) that signals to someone a story is about to take place. In line 360 of Extract 3.1, I use a framing device which is context-specific, signaling to J during our interview that I am about to tell a unique story about meeting "Monty," or Monty Oum, creator of the world-famous anime-style web series *RWBY* by Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC. As a fellow RT community member, J displays interest in my statement by saying "okay" as in "explain further" (line 361). I will come back to this and other small stories, or brief narratives we use in mundane interactions (Georgakopoulou, 2008), later in my analysis. For the moment, I want you to consider how even when enacting the role of researcher during the interview extract above, I found myself sharing my own stories of membership.

In this chapter, I examine the different types of narratives which simultaneously shape social identities of members while interdiscursively (re)constructing the community. To begin, I define and outline types of narratives as they relate to RT as well as their relationship to one

another. I also review how the heuristic of SoE helps me examine storytelling as praxis. Finally, I investigate the intertextual relationship of multimodal stories told by RT community members through examples of narratives in interviews, digital videos, images, and social media posts.

Narratives of Rooster Teeth

Telling stories is a central to the human experience. People are inherently drawn to storytelling, and it is a way to make sense of experience and claim our own identities, connecting ourselves to larger discourses in society (Langellier & Peterson, 2004; MacIntyre, 1984). MacIntyre (1984) eschews the idea of original authorship of stories and instead says we should ask ourselves: "'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" (p. 216). In other words, we are each part of a flow of stories already in motion. Bakhtin's (1981) notion of dialogism takes into consideration the ways we communicate are always referring to other voices and conversations which speak to one another, responding to and anticipating future interactions. Therefore, narratives are highly intertextual. I begin my examination of narrative by discussing the master narrative of community and its corollaries and then investigate the personal narratives which (re)construct the RT community through the everyday engagement by members.

Master Narratives

A *master narrative* is a conceptual set of beliefs that orient people to take certain actions (Lyotard, 1984; Linde, 2000). Master narratives are more like inspirations for plotlines in stories rather than stories themselves (Linde, 2000). The master narrative for RT is that it is in fact a community. From this idea, all other narratives are derived. If RT were primarily called a "fandom" by members, it would shift the metaphor of what this group is, and therefore orienting members to different types of interaction because the term "community" comes with much more interpersonal connotations (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Inasmuch as metaphors are self-fulfilling

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prophecies, creating social realities which guide actions which, they, in turn, suit the metaphor as they are perpetuated through rituals (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Considering the history and stigmas attached to the idea of fandom (Jenkins, 2012; Jindra, 1994; Tocci, 2009), this strategy of using the "community" metaphor rather than the "fandom" metaphor serves many purposes. First, it semantically separates RT in many ways from the history of other fandoms and the associated negativity, and instead, draws attention to taking actions that are in accordance with ideals of community as established through the narratives of RT. There are many benefits to using the word "community" in building a world, as I will examine in this chapter.

Community Narratives

Now I will discuss what I call community narratives, which are corollary and generated from the master narrative of community. Community narratives are ideals and beliefs that orient RT community members to take certain actions, and they shape the stories told in interactions. I focus on two community narratives which reoccurred prominently across my data set, interviews, social media, field observations, and other sources such as RT videos, as well as news articles and blogs about RT:

1. The RT community is special

2. Participation in the RT community is inherently valuable

The RT community is special. In their study of individual uniqueness, Snyder and Fromkin (1980) found people have a need to stand out from others. This idea of yearning to be unique and special can also be applied to social groups because our participation in them is intimately entangled with our own identities. In the very naming of RT as a "community" and claiming a community exists, this is a special quality included in all subsequent narratives—in other words, RT is special because it *is* a community (e.g., *not* a fandom).

Participation in the RT community is inherently valuable. This is because values are personal, public discourses and are created and staged in narratives (Beck, 2019; Green & Sergeeva, 2019; Knackmuhs, Farmer, & Knapp, 2019). Our values constitute what we find worth doing and talking about. In RT, there is a community narrative that participation is not only inherently valuable, but is currency for a valuable membership. Participation always involves devotion of time, but sometimes participation also has to do with spending money or comes with other costs. I begin the conversation of value in this chapter and continue it in Chapter 5 where I discuss investment, identity, and different types of capital.

Personal Narratives

I use Ochs and Capps' (2001) definition of personal narrative as: "a way of using language or another symbolic system to imbue life events with a temporal and logical order, to demystify them and establish coherence across past, present, and as yet unrealized experience" (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 2). When a personal narrative is told, it can be understood as a sensemaking effort. Additionally, personal narratives can be understood as *interpersonal communication*, defined by Baxter and Braithwaite (2008) as the way people "negotiate meanings, identity, and relationships through person-to-person communication" (p. 4). Storytelling is relational because it encourages participation and collaboration in the form of listening, sharing, and empathizing (Riessman, 2002). Personal stories shape the identities of members because when we tell a story we create a self and how we want to be known by other members (Riessman, 1993). This being said, many of the narratives I will bring your attention to shortly (especially the ones distributed on the Internet) will vacillate on the spectrum of masspersonal communication (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018). This experience of mass communication, interpersonal communication, and the in-between will vary from person-to-

person depending on their level of engagement with the narrative and storyteller. As with all concepts I am engaging with for this research, fluidity is the only constant.

In addition to perpetuating community, personal narratives are important in the process of inducting new members. Linde (2000) describes this process of how members take on the narratives of their own as *narrative induction*: "the process has three parts: how a person comes to take on someone else's story relevant to their own; how a person comes to tell the story in a way shaped by the stories of others, and how a story may come to be told and heard by others within an institution as an instance of a normative process" (p. 608). Rituals of storytelling through personal narratives are a part of this process.

Big and small stories. As you may have noticed, I follow the practice of using the terms "story" and "narrative" interchangeably to avoid a too narrow definition of narrative (Langellier & Peterson, 2004; Herman & Vervaeck, 2005; Page, 2018). For the purposes of my analysis, I am not focusing on the structural model of narrative (Labov & Waletzky, 1967), where narratives are understood as "recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which actually occurred" (p. 20). This type of narrative simply does not fit my data as the stories I study relate to interactional accomplishments. Meaning is generated through SoE, where narratives are told, making them dynamic and also fleeting. Instead, I am focusing on *small stories* told by RT community members.

Small story is "an umbrella term that captures a gamut of underrepresented narrative activities such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, and shared (known) events, but it also captures allusions to (previous) telling, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell" (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p. 123). The everyday stories people tell perform social actions and functions during "mundane situations in order to create (and perpetuate) a sense of who they

are" (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 378). Small stories are not only usually brief in nature but are metaphorically small because of their connection to the mundane (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). Small stories, especially co-created stories, can also take the form of Facebook statues and comments (Georgakopoulou, 2017; West, 2013) and selfies (Georgakopoulou, 2016; Georgakopoulou, 2017). I want to emphasize how I do not make a claim on the value of big versus small stories. In fact, I believe they are not necessarily mutually exclusive or dismissive of one another (Georgakopoulou, 2007). West (2013) points out how small stories can involve narrative discourses through social media where audiences shape smaller stories and, therefore, the larger narratives of which they are a part.

Stories as multimodal performances. I also want to recognize storytelling as performative (Langellier & Peterson, 2004; Riessman, 2005). I use a performative perspective in my examination of narratives and understand narrative as praxis, or "a form of social action" (Riessman, 2005, p. 5). Storytelling is a performance "by a 'self' with a past – who involves, persuades, and (perhaps) moves an audience through language and gesture, 'doing' rather than telling alone" (Riessman, 2005, p. 5). In my analysis, I recognize the varied forms narratives may take and include images and even other digital affordances such as responsive uptake activities and emojis. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) propose images are a resource for narrative expression, specifically "in terms of 'doing' and 'happening'" (p. 73). Storytelling, especially on the Internet, challenges the privileging of orality, as different forms of storytelling can extend our bodies through digital reach to produce narratives (Langellier & Peterson, 2004). Often images and videos are found to be more popular than words for telling stories through social media (Georgakopoulou, 2017).

When we perform narratives, there are always affordances and constraints involved, and we have to consider the resources available to us such as language and other symbolic resources, histories, cultures, material or digital tools and conditions (Langellier & Peterson, 2004). We also have to remember the audience is a central part of our performative storytelling. This idea of narrative as performance, especially on the Internet, entails that we perform our own identities "in increasingly ritualistic and public ways by telling our stories and consuming the stories of others" (Langellier, 1999, p. 125). Furthermore, performance is a metacommunicative frame (Goffman, 1974; Bauman, 2004) that is used in various small stories—from interviews to selfies. I now turn to how I ground these varying ways of expressing personal narratives in theory.

Narrative dimensions. Ochs and Capps (2001) conceptualize narrative as both a genre and activity, which can be examined through five dimensions rather than having a prescribed list of inclusive features. They understand narrative as uniquely expressed by different people in distinct ways for a variety of purposes; therefore, it is understandable that narratives may take several forms and will always be subject to a range of possible versions (Ochs & Capps, 2001). Others have expanded this framework. For example, Vásquez (2014) described the nature of online reviews as falling on a continuum of narrativity, with some being strong narratives and some only having a few narrative elements. In turn, Page (2018) applied Ochs and Capps' framework to examine shared stories, a type of small story with many tellers, in social media. Ochs and Capps' (2001) five dimensions summarized in Table 3.1, are tellership (relating to the number of tellers), tellability (how interested audiences may be in a story), embeddedness (how relevant a story is in a given context), linearity (the ordering of events in space and time), and moral stance (teller(s) perspective(s) on morality relating to the narratives).

Table 3.1. Narrative Dimensions and Possibilities*

Dimensions			*Possibilities*
Tellership	One active teller	→	Multiple active co-tellers
Tellability	High	→	Low
Embeddedness	Detached	→	Embedded
Linearity	Closed temporal and causal order	→	Open temporal and causal order
Moral stance	Certain, constant	→	Uncertain, fluid

* Ochs and Capps, 2001, p. 20. LIVING NARRATIVE: CREATING LIVES IN EVERYDAY STORYTELLING by Elinor Ochs, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Copyright © 2001 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright permissions in Appendix J.

Again, I believe in the fluid nature of narrative and how these dimensions are a continuum. These dimensions relate to SoE because of how each plays a role in the (re)construction of the RT community. The overarching narrative of community relies on many co-tellers always engaging in this narrative by propagating personal narratives (which may have one or multiple co-tellers). The tellability of stories relies on a mutual agreement on the value of the story (usually a common understanding of RT being valuable). Through different SoE, stories will be more or less embedded but have the potential to be relevant because of the common thread of RT. Linearity has to do with placing ourselves in time (did we do something, are we doing something, will we do something that perpetuates community). Morality, for the RT community, is always being (re)established through narratives and how members portray themselves or others.

Interdiscursive Narratives

The master narrative of community, community narratives, and personal narratives are all intertextual. Furthermore, narratives are always interdiscursive as several discourses co-exist in a single story. When members share personal narratives, they draw on discourses related to the

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self, RT, and other social worlds. While narratives are connected to identities established in

interaction, they also promote group identities where narratives are used to perform and reaffirm

roles, as well as group ideals and values (Tracy & Robles, 2013). Telling a story is a way of

confirming one's social identity, which includes our character, personality, and attitudes (Tracy

& Robles, 2013). Furthermore, we take on different identity roles in different situations (e.g.,

researcher, community member, friend, etc.). In Figure 3.1, I have drawn a diagram of how

different types of narratives (master narrative, community narratives, and personal narratives)

intersect and are connected and entangled with one another.
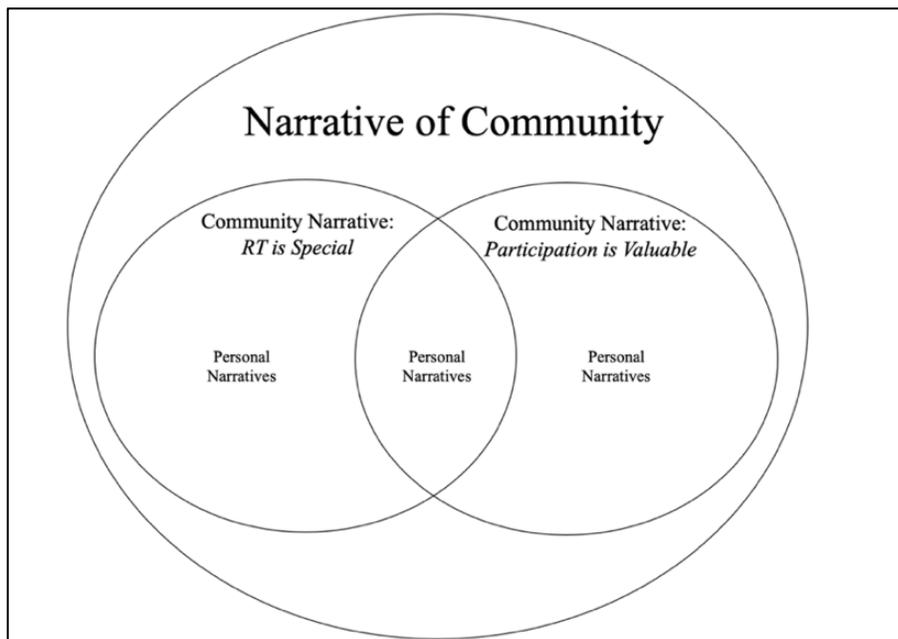
Figure 3.1. RT narrative relationship diagram. Created by author.

Any two-dimensional chart is only so helpful in imagining discursive connections.

However, within the constraints of these dimensions, we can think of this image not as static but

always flowing, like an interdiscursive network. I think of this diagram as dynamic, where the

circles move around, expand, and are entangled with other, undepicted discourses. This fluidity

is the nature of communication, as people are always changing, dancing through multiple

dialectical continua (e.g., individual and group). SoE are part of this chart as they are the

fleeting windows that open through personal narratives and are the mediated action which

happen at the convergence of space, time, social practices, social actors, and mediational means.

Sites of Engagement (SoE) for Telling Narratives

Windows for story-sharing open for RT community members in digital (e.g., social

media, websites, etc.) and physical spaces (e.g., events, face to face conversations) through many

social practices (e.g., interviews, writing, posting statuses online). In the following examples, I

examine a variety of SoE where stories are told by RT community members.

On Documentaries as SoE

In the first example, I orient you to a small story related to one of the many founding

stories (Linde, 2000) of RT. These types of founding stories are part of narrative induction and

serve to make this story relevant to RT community members and their own identities and stories

(Linde, 2000). This example comes from a RT produced documentary from the RT Docs series,

called *Why We're Here*: *15 Years of Rooster Teeth*. This documentary features footage of site

visits to old offices, interview clips with RT celebrities, RT events, and brief accounts from RT

community members.

The existence of a documentary in and of itself marks the community as something

special and worthy of documenting. The title of the documentary is metacommunicative on

many levels. First, it is interdiscursive as it refers to the first episode of *RvB* (as shared in

Chapter 1, Figure 1.1), where Simmons asks Grif, "You ever wonder why we are here?" The

joke in the original question from RvB was in how open-ended a question like this really is.

However, in the title of the documentary, this question is flipped into a statement "Why We're

Here," making it a declaration. Further, the use of the pronoun "we" is a strategic choice as it

creates solidarity with the audience and creates an intimate connection (Gardell & Sorlin, 2015) between the documentary, Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC., and RT community members. Not only does the title point to all people in the community, it also ties them to the very beginning of RT through the *RvB* reference. The inclusion of the number of years (15) also creates a sense of history, giving a justification for the creation of the documentary. The documentary draws on a variety of mediational means including interviews, footage of spaces and events, pictures, and other media. RT producing documentary about itself is a culturally eucharistic act (Silverstein, 2003) where a space is created to talk about its own significance.

The clip I extracted below features Michael "Burnie" Burns, one of the "founding fathers" of RT. Here, he provides an account for why the term "community" is used at timestamp 1:00:58:

> For me, it feels weird to use the word 'fans' or 'audience' – so we use community because it's like an ongoing collaboration between us and them. Using the word 'community' and recognizing that we're a part of it, is an acknowledgment that we know that media is now a two-way conversation. It's not just, 'Hey, we made this. Everybody watch it.' (Burns & Hullum, 2018)

Of particular interest in this clip is how Burnie relies on deixis, a specific kind of indexicality which frames his words as coming from a particular kind of perspective through using pronouns, demonstratives, and tense markers (Hughes & Tracy, 2015). Specifically, he uses them as metacommunicative strategies to talk about the use of the word "community" to describe RTs cult following. Burnie uses a metapragmatic statement "For me" to mark his own personal stance on how "fans," and "audience" are not appropriate terms to describe the RT collective. He uses "me" to mark his own opinion. By stating how those alternative terms make him feel

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weird, he is pointing to how out of place they are on a guttural level, rejecting them completely. He then shifts from this personal standpoint when he says "we use community" meaning Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC.—taking us from his personal stance to the stance of the company. By switching from a personal viewpoint to being representative of the company as a whole, he is able to reinforce his own views through backing them up with the views of the company using these deictics of "me" and "we" (Hughes & Tracy, 2015). Further, he shifts us in time by using a temporal adverb of "now" by saying "media is now a two-way conversation" (Hughes & Tracy, 2015). This is a claim that times have changed from how they used to be, serving as a justification for higher audience participation and a specialized marking of this audience as a community. This situates his account both in terms of historical time as well as within a particular type of relationship between the production company and community members.

At the end of the clip, Burns is actually double voicing imaginary talk from a character that represents all of RT productions ("we"), speaking to all of the community ("everybody"). This imaginary talk is used to describe what RT productions does not do, which is expect everyone to watch their productions without having an opportunity to reply. The strategies Burnie uses here are a way of anticipating possible criticism of the media company because they are a profit center while authoritatively displaying Burns' awareness that community is supposed to mean positivity (Baxter, 2011).

While the production company and community are in conversation with one another, there is still a divide between the RT celebrities and the community members. This presents an interesting dialectic between commodity and community, creating dilemmas and tensions in this relationship between the production company and its following (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008; Stewart, 1999). Many elements of the community involve purchasable memberships, artifacts,

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and experiences (see Chapter 5). While community produces relationships, it also generates

revenue for Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC. This can be understood through the relationship of

company-member, where while the members still have a voice in the conversation, ultimately the

company holds more power. Therefore, the RT community experiences the dialectical tension

between commodity and community (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). While the RT community

members may be called fellow collaborators, the community members will still mostly be in the

audience while the RT production company takes center stage. RT productions is still a media

company as Burnie classifies them in this clip. However interpersonal it may feel for community

members, the RT productions staff and celebrities will never truly be close personal friends with

all of the members of the community or even most of them. Through his language, Burnie is

acknowledging this tension; while community can be very inclusive, and members are essential

to it, there are still dividing lines. As with all relationships, there are paradoxes and conundrums,

and competing claims, which are constantly in a state of change (Stewart, 1999).

Figure 3.2. Michael "Burnie" Burns talking. Screen shot taken from the RT Doc, *Why We're Here*: *15 Years of Rooster Teeth.* See Appendix I for Fair Use Assessment.

Figure 3.2 depicts a screenshot of Burnie while he is talking. In addition to his words, the

video footage itself adds to this narrative visually (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Burnie is

actually only shown on the screen for a few seconds. He is sitting where the camera aperture

blurs out the background, but it is clear he is in one of their current production areas at the RT Studios, which shows him "at work." His physical location adds to his already-established authority through his history with the company. Burnie's identity is featured visually, verbally, and contextually implied (his location, his title, his history), work together to give him the authority to speak on behalf of the RT community. Therefore, we can further understand the metacommunicative aspects of this segment where Burns uses "me" and "we" as being underscored because they are spoken by this particular individual who holds a fair amount of authority on the subject, especially when we think of these choices in words spoken to this particular audience, the RT community (Gardelle & Sorlin, 2015).

Video footage of RT fans is also leveraged while Burnie speaks. This adds another element to the narrative expression of his words through how the fans are presented "doing" community through their actions (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). This is an example of presentification where the images of happy fans are being used as sources of authority to back up claims being made in the documentary (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009). Outside of these few seconds, we see Burnie talking, images of community members in audiences are flashed on screen, presumably at RTX or another RT event (see examples in Figure 3.3). This member b-roll takes up roughly two-thirds of the screen time Burnie does during this clip. The footage starts with the fans as Burnie begins to speak, cuts to Burnie, cuts back to the fans, and then back to Burnie over a span of 17 seconds. This clip from Burnie showcases many small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2007), layered together to make a point. Burnie's words and the images metacommunicatively address the community. This narrative is a complex multimodal combination of visuals and words of Burnie (a social actor of authority in the community) at work (a space of authority in the community), and the fans (social actors) at events (having taken

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place in the past while being used to make a point in the present). The screen time toggles between Burnie and the fans as the clip plays, further underscoring Burnie's idea of a "back and forth" conversation between Burnie and the community.

The footage of the community members features their smiles, laughter, and diversity, showcasing a happy, inclusive group of people as men, women, a variety of ages and skin tones and hair colors are represented. They become representative of all community members in many ways because they are the ones featured in this documentary. These community members are an audience depicted in a face-to-face context, which demonstrates how immediate feedback is given to anything happening in the room. These visual images are strategically used to show how people are enjoying their experiences with RT. Again, this visual storytelling indexes a special relationship that can be achieved through the RT community.

Figure 3.3. RT community members. Screenshot taken from the RT Doc *Why We're Here*: *15 Years of Rooster Teeth*. See Appendix I for Fair Use Assessment.

The entire documentary is a propaganda piece from RT about how special it is, speaking to the community narrative that RT is special. Further, the fact a documentary about RT exists at all is a claim of value (community narrative of value). This small clip I have been discussing

focuses on the community. However, the documentary provides an in-depth origin story and highlights the best moments of RT. This documentary is just one more cultural artifact that can be used to help point to larger community narratives. Ultimately, the documentary and this clip featuring Burns are resources adding to the master narrative that RT is a community.

This example also illustrates how Burnie's words become texts which can then be used by fans as ways to claim authority. This is interesting in terms of the dialectic of commodity and community because it gives even more power to Burnie's words not just in how the community is talked about, but in member's own construction of identities. Georgakopoulou discusses how "the actual 'work' that is being conducted by individuals in interactive engagement, so to speak, feeds into a sense of self—in the form of continuous process within which this sense comes to existences (*emerges*)" (Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 379-380). When members use Burnie's (and other RT celebrities' words), they are using them as a way to construct their own identities, which is what I will now examine.

On Interviews as SoE

The next story emerges from the interviews I conducted and addresses the idea of identity and quoting RT celebrities as part of the process of narrative induction. Before examining this personal narrative, I wanted to take a moment to talk about what is involved in the SoE for the interviews I conducted. Again, I reiterate how interviews are a way of *making* data rather than *collecting* data (Roulston, 2001; Smith, 1978). When engaging in interviews with research participants, I am working together with each of them to create candidate versions of community. However, I never question myself or my participants that there is, in fact, a community. Through my questions, I presume a community exists already and invite my interview participants to share with me in agreeing there is a community to speak about. I never ask: "Actually, is RT a

community?" By assuming community is a given point, we are then already engaging in that community.

Interviews produce candidate versions of accounts and constitute community in multiple frames. They evoke an institutional framework because "the institutional nature of the interview is manifest in the fact that such interviews are pre-arranged in terms of time and place, and that they are organized around a pre-set agenda, however tentative" (Sarangi, 2004, p. 70). Throughout each of the interviews, however, I weave in and out of my identity as a researcher and representative of an educational enterprise and my identity as a fellow RT community member. These frameworks and identities are critical in understanding the versions of community that are possible. I analyze both the "how" and the "what" of the interview to examine how through our interactions we are creating versions of community together (Sarangi, 2004). Smith (1978) discusses how "the form of the question tells the respondent what sort of work she is being asked to do" (Smith, 1978, p. 27). Therefore, I include my questions to include how I have influenced the answers. When I make claims about how the people I interviewed talk about community, I am also making claims about community that I have helped generate by asking for the interview to begin with, participating in the conversation, and by asking questions.

The narratives produced in interviews are entangled with the process of research: "meaning is ambiguous because it arises out of a process of interaction between people: self, teller, listener and recorder, analyst, and reader. Although the goal may be to tell the whole truth, our narratives about others' narratives are our worldly creations" (Riessman, 1993, p. 15). From the interview, to the transcription, to the analysis, and writing, I hold the bulk of power

regarding community construction in this dissertation. Additionally, through your reading and interpretation of it, you are adding yet another element to how these stories are being told.

In this next example, I focus on a story about the special relationship between RT and the community. In my second interview with W, a dedicated leader of RT Florida, we started talking about how the RT community has endured a lot of changes over the years:

Extract 3.2

271 A: Why does the community persist regardless of mode of interaction or

272   what's going on with the website or things like that? Why does it persist?

273 W: So this goes back to I think an old quote that Burnie it Burnie said, like

274   around the very beginning of Red vs. Blue. Like uh season one or two.

275   "As long as you guys keep watching, we will keep making." And the

276   community responded, "Well, as long as you keep making we'll keep

277   watching." And I think it's just been that constant cycle of give and take

278   between Rooster Teeth and the community. They help us, we help them,

279   we help them, they help us. And I think that's one of the biggest reasons is

280   that we've stuck around so long because it's not a fan base. It is an actual

281   community. I literally cannot think of another group where I can say they

282   function the same way as the Rooster Teeth community like it's something

283   entirely unique.

From the start, we can see my question demands an account from W. I am asking "why" questions that relate to the very existence and continued existence of the community (lines 271-272). Because of this, she draws on many resources to produce her account for "why," one of which is the use of reported speech (Fairclough, 2010). Reported speech can be direct or

indirect, based on events or fictional (Buttny, 2004). Direct reported speech is a demonstration, or recreation of the original speech (Vásquez & Urzúa, 2009). Indirect speech focuses on summarized content, but not a performance of the exact words (Buttny, 2004). Here, W creates Burnie and the community as two "characters" (Roulston, 2001) speaking to one another through her use of reported speech. In line 273, W uses presentification, or making a source of authority (Burnie) present in interaction (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009). Because Burnie is an established figure in the RT cannon, she uses him to reference a community narrative about the special relationship between the production company and the community. Further, this direct reported speech is a resource for her own identity construction (Vásquez & Urzúa, 2009). By citing the words of one of RT's founders, W is both drawing on Burnie's authority (and his words as a kind of sacred community text) while at the same time presenting herself as a competent community member with knowledge of both Burnie, his words, and the relationship the production company has with community members (both being part of the overall community). The fact she calls it an "old quote," places it farther back in the history of RT, adding more value because of the time in which it occurred—it is an older text, and therefore even more sacred, and time is understood as a resource, adding value.

In her second use of reported speech, she double-voices the community to represent how people should feel about what Burnie said. She uses both the initial and response reported speech as an example for this "cycle of give and take," (line 277) repeating it to emphasize the validity of the quotes. Direct reported speech helps highlight to the person listening how ideas should be understood, making morality part of this reporting (Roulston, 2001). Here, W is reporting to me that RT is a unique and special community worth investing and produces the reported speech as evidence to back up these claims (Holt, 1996).

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W is a RT community leader speaking to me on-the-record and therefore is representing the community. To answer my question, she makes sure to define what RT is not ("a fan base" line 280). W takes my question of why the community persists (lines 271-272), and W turns her answer into an opportunity to claim what community means for RT. The reason W gives for the persistence of the community is because RT *is* a community, an "actual community," (lines 280-281), one that will persist despite any technical issues. The RT community is more than a group of fans, it is a group of people determined to (re)produce community. Her answer both establishes the narrative of community and validates its existence.

W uses this definition of community as a technology to create a version of what the group of people in RT are. She uses "literally cannot think" and "entirely unique" (line 282), extreme case formulations (ECFs), or the strategy of using strong descriptive words to argue the validity of her statement (Pomerantz, 1986). W uses these ECFs to justify how RT is differentiated from other groups, saying how RT is special, which preserves a version of this community that is worth protecting from alternative versions (e.g., the negative connotations of fandoms). Not only is she describing the community, she is defending the use of "community," what it stands for, and is persuading me of what she is describing as an obvious answer to my question.

Furthermore, she anticipates that I will speak to you on her behalf because I am analyzing the interview data for this work. Therefore, her argument flows from her to me, to the transcript, to these pages, and now to you. The use of several linguistic resources to define community in this answer to my question reasserts her own identity as a dedicated community leader. She works hard to ensure people have many opportunities to connect with other members on a daily basis. She is active on the community websites, ready to welcome new members, and dedicates both time and money to (re)create community for RT Florida and the other community groups of

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which she is a part. Personally, she was supportive of my research and helped me get in touch with members and resources for my study. It stands to reason why she would want to personally emphasize a specific definition of community, especially when a non-RT audience will potentially be engaging with her answers. Through this example, we can understand how members not only define community, but use this definition as a defense, an argument, and a justification.

On Twitter and Facebook as SoE

In my next three examples, I look at small stories on Twitter and Facebook. Twitter and Facebook have many affordances which are used to link users together with many opportunities for co-tellership in storytelling (e.g., hashtags, comments, responsive uptake activities, and the ability to tag user accounts). Page (2018) discusses the shared story, a type of small story which can be amplified in the world of social media. People separated by space and time can all still participate in collective storytelling.

**Figure 3.4.** Tweet from @RoosterTeeth on Christmas Day 2017.

In Figure 3.4, you can see a Tweet from @RoosterTeeth, the official RT Twitter account. This Tweet was retweeted 261 times with 2,783 likes and 31 comments, which tells a shared story of its favorability with the community members on Twitter. This is fairly high

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interactivity, especially considering how this was done on a holiday when people spend time with relatives and loved ones. Liking is an interpersonal mediated action that creates a collective social identity for those engaging with the tweet (Page, 2018). Retweeting is also a way for users to make connections between participants (original poster, retweeter, and audiences liking and commenting) (Page, 2018).

The timing of the Tweet is also important. The Tweet was posted on Christmas Day, which is a statement of how community is something special enough to be acknowledged on the holiday, reinforcing the claims of "love" and "family" made in the Tweet. The use of "We are honored" is an ECF to emphasize and heighten the importance of how special the community is to RT, the production company. These elements build to the final line of "we love you" from RT to the community. The love being punctuated and emphasized by several emojis including a Christmas tree, rooster, and heart. Here, community is pictured as being about RT's love for the community and for the community to love RT (through the retweets, comments, and likes). The pronoun "we" is used to create a personal touch (Gardelle & Sorlin, 2015) which also as high subjectivity as "we" could mean Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC., but each member is left room to imagine their favorite RT celebrities as being the collective "we."

This leads me to an example from the RT Florida Facebook group. This post features a community group video call for the New Year in 2019 (see Figure 3.5). The post uses itself as evidence that the RT Florida group is a "family." The text making this claim is supported by a featured collage of happy faces of 16 video calls with 23 people, 21 of which are tagged in the post. RT Florida members live all across the state, some 8 or more hours away from one another. Through my interviews, I also learned that some RT Florida members moved out of state, but they continue to keep their friendships alive by visiting Florida when they can and

participating from afar in RT Florida community events. Some members even attend weddings of friends in the community, which is representative of the much more deeply interpersonal kind of relationships that can form. The video call in this Facebook post is an affordance of the computer technologies that allowed people in many different physical spaces to share the New Year celebration at the same time, live. Here the relational space became a driving force for this interaction.
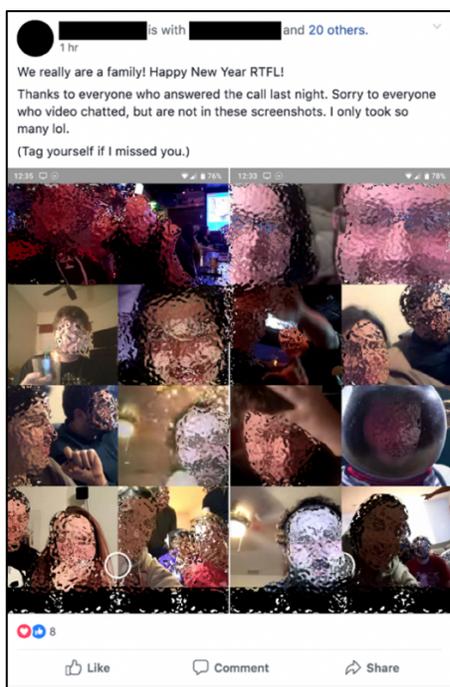
Figure 3.5. RT Florida Public Facebook group post for the 2019 New Year.

The sheer amount of people on the video call with the text indicating there were many more, underscores the poster's claim of "we are a family." This is another version of a story told more through pictures than with words, an increasing trend on social media (Georgakopoulou, 2017). This post's story adds to the narrative that the RT community is something unique and special because it is about having this closeness between friends in the community. What distinguishes this example from the one from the @RoosterTeeth Twitter account is who the

target audience is. In this example, a small, localized group is featured in the post. People are

likely to recognize and know one another, especially the pictured people. There are only a few

hundred people in the RT Florida Facebook group where this was posted. When posting on

Twitter, thousands to millions of people may come across this post and it is harder to tell who the

audience might be. The Twitter post and interactions lean more toward the "mass" end of

masspersonal, where the RT Florida post leans more toward the "personal." However, the

communication is going to vary from person-to-person. When friends post about friends on

either Facebook or Twitter, it will feel it is more personal for those individuals. When strangers

"lurk" online or come across the posts, then the posts may feel impersonal and even distancing if

someone does not have the same relationship.

Figure 3.6. Tweet by the @RoosterTeeth account for RT Community Day.

The third social media example showcases how narratives are sometimes solicited

directly. Figure 3.6 displays a Tweet by the @RoosterTeeth account, asking for people to share

their favorite RTX experiences. In this Tweet, @RoosterTeeth refers to the hashtag for

Community Day, which happens on the 15th of every month, where community members are

encouraged to wear their RT merchandise, have meetups, and generally participate in anything

community-related. This hashtag (re)constructs the narrative of community as it labels RT as a

community from the start, calls for active participation in a day-long, RT-dedicated celebration,

and it is a way to orient people to limit their comments to be RT-related. This tweet then becomes an aggregate of stories for others to witness in one space. The other hashtag used in this Tweet is for RTX Austin, which occurred in July 2018 that year, drawing the attention of like-minded audiences interested in the event. Tweets like this create a version of the RT community that is recongnized and celebrated by Rooster Teeth Productions LLC. and community members together in a public forum.

In this Tweet, there is a promise that some comments will be retweeted during Community Day. Retweets are an interesting social incentive as they are a way of reposting an original message of another Twitter user, which serves as a type of quotation that makes a connection between the original account, the account retweeting, and the audiences witnessing this interaction (Page, 2018). There is the potential for a small story, such as a Tweet by a RT celebrity, to be retweeted thousands of times (Page, 2018), giving high value to this promise of being retweeted if someone cares about the exposure. Retweeting is also a form of public acknowledgment and an example of interactions falling on the continuum of masspersonal communication. @RoosterTeeth will likely have many, many more followers than anyone commenting on this Tweet in addition to @RoosterTeeth being followed by many prominent RT celebrities. When we consider these contextual circumstances, a retweet in this particular instance will give members a special prominence in the community while RT also promotes its brand.

When @RoosterTeeth tweets "share your favorite RTX moments" it does not necessarily mean "show us your RTX photos"—for the statement can be interpreted in many ways. However, the comment in Figure 3.7 is representative of the vast majority of responses, which were images or collages of images usually paired with sparse text and / or emojis.

Figure 3.7. Comment on the Tweet by the @RoosterTeeth account for RT Community Day. (See Figure 3.6 for @RoosterTeeth Tweet.)

Most of the photos posted in the comments featured selfies with friends or RT celebrities or large group photos of meetups. Selfies are a picture taken by someone featured in the photo, which can be a singular person, someone with a partner or group. Selfies can be understood as small stories as they involve characters, visually arranged time and place, audiences who engage, and self-presentation (Georgakopoulou, 2016). Selfies are a high-stakes performance and often require extensive preparation involving taking multiple photos, editing, discussing which one to post) (Georgakopoulou, 2016). Therefore, selfies are carefully crafted ways of presenting identities metacommunicatively as they are self-referential—they are commenting on the image at the same time as presenting the image.

The comment in Figure 3.7 features a collage of several photos. The most prominent picture is filled with smiling faces which supports the idea of positivity and people having fun. The people are also wearing branded items. For example, in the largest picture on the right, I can see a white shirt form the Achievement Hunter brand of RT, next to her is a shirt I recognize as from the Lindsay collection of shirts from the RT Store, as indicated by a small cat on a white

shirt. Then, there is a Meg Turney (a former RT employee) "Heart you" shirt. On the top right, a blonde woman is being pinched on the cheeks by Arryn Zech, the voice actor for Blake on *RWBY*. These snapshots are repurposed on Twitter for Community Day to contribute to the collective story being told while telling a story in and of themselves. These photos also mark these members as present at one of the most important events in the RT community, RTX. Georgakopoulou (2016) discusses how there is *ritual appreciation* of posted selfies which usually include positive assessments of the person posting the selfie. Ritual appreciation is expressed through language and other affordances of digital media such as emojis or responsive uptake activities. In Figure 3.7 we can see there are 13 "likes" on this comment, making the audience engagement part of the performance of posting a selfie, which further increases the number of people contributing to this small story.

In addition to the collage of images, text is posted featuring the words "friends" and "family"—again referring to the special factor of RT as well as supporting the narrative of the value of her experience. The commenter punctuates her sentence with a heart emoji, which furthers the ideas of love and positivity. Through attendance at RTX, wearing the shirts, using this terminology, sharing these photos, these people are designating themselves as particular types of members (I will talk about the significance of these markers of membership in-depth in Chapter 5). In turn, in identifying these types of things, I am also marking myself.

First-Person Narratives

I now examine two examples of first-person narratives, one of my own and one regarding the sacrifices of membership. In Extract 3.1 at the beginning of this chapter, I invited J to listen to a story of how I met Monty Oum at RTX 2014. I proceed after she verbally acknowledges me to proceed by saying "Okay" (line 361):

Extract 3.3

362 A: So, I have back issues and, like, they were pretty bad back then, and the

363   Travel was kinda rough on me. And so, like, there's just this chair in the

364   middle of the main hall, and I just sat in this chair and I was like waiting

365   for my husband to see if there's like, a wheelchair or something or

366   anything, 'cause I just couldn't walk. You know, I was like, "oh, my

367   gosh!" And there really wasn't anything, so he ran off. I was sitting there

368   but was wearing like, the same color shirt that the Guardians were

369   wearing.

370 J: Oh

371 A: So, I think Monty thought I was a Guardian, and I just see him. He's

372   across the room, and he's got this troop of cosplayers behind them, they're

373   all gorgeous. And like he's just walking straight up to me, and I'm like,

374   why is he walking up to me? I'm just this random person and he just

375   comes up to me and says, "Hey, um where's the RWBY panel?" And I

376   actually knew because I had just studied the map of the convention hall

377   while I was sitting there, and I gave him exact directions. That was it. I

378   just gave him directions. And he said, "Thank you." And then he walked

379   up to his panel on RWBY.

380 J: Oh my god, that's awesome.

A first-person story about an experience is always related to identity work. Riessman (1993)

notes that "in telling about an experience, I am also creating a self—how I want to be known" (p.

11). This particular story sharing happened as part of the SoE J and I created together when we

shifted from the institutional frame to that of co-membership and we started swapping stories during the interview. Monty Oum is the creator of RT's very popular anime-style web series, *RWBY,* and my story takes place at the last RTX Oum would attend in 2014. Oum passed away unexpectedly due to an allergic reaction in early 2015 which was devastating for the community.

In telling this story to J and in sharing what I know about Oum now in this writing, I am referring to myself as a type of member who has a story to tell about meeting an important creator of RT and attending a particular RTX. I am doing a lot of identity management in this telling. Like W, I also use reported speech to create a moral universe (Roulston, 2001). Through both direct (what Monty said to me lines 375 & 378) and indirect (my reply to Monty lines 377-378) reporting of my simple interaction with Monty, I underscore my own morality of a kind person who gives directions instead of asking for a picture through indirect reported speech: "I gave him exact directions. That was it. I just gave him directions" (377-378). In other words, I am creating a moral version of membership through my narrative. While I am telling a story of my experience, I am also providing an account that is doing the work of impression management (Buttny, 1993) as I establish what kind of member I am: one who is respectful.

You can tell I find my story very valuable because of how much detail I add to a very simple situation, primarily through the liberal use of adjectives and adverbs to describe actions and circumstances. I start by framing the entire story with the adjective "accidentally" (Extract 3.1, line 360) to describe meeting this RT celebrity as a way to build up excitement for this chance encounter. I describe how my back issues were "pretty bad" (line 362) and how "I just couldn't walk" (line 366) and the journey to RTX was "kinda rough" (line 363)—I use these grammatical choices to impress the severity of my back issues to J. This serves as my justification for "why" I had to take the action of sitting in a chair. Furthermore, I say "just this

chair" (line 363) to portray the chair as a meaningful item, as if my sitting in the convention hall was fated to be. I proceed use "just" repeatedly as a way to continue this "unexpected, yet meant to be" way of telling the story, especially as I describe actions: "I just see him" (line 371); "he's just walking straight up to me" (line 373); "he just comes up to me" (lines 374-375); "I had just studied the map" (line 376; "I just gave him directions" (line 378). Most of the adverbs used are to describe actions, but I also qualify myself as "just this random person." This is an interesting strategy, in which I distancing myself as teller from the RT member Andrea, a person who is not normally special.

While telling the story, I was excited to (re)create this memory with J, who I knew would appreciate the telling. She co-tells with me through her reactions (such as "Oh" in line 370), confirming my belief during my telling. I could have told this story in many ways, but I decided to use the descriptors as ways to heighten the idea of how my accidental meeting was unique and important to me. The way I recreate the story in this interview with J highlights how the selected details and descriptors are telling of the relationship between the co-tellers. I was able to spend more of my story on building up its significance to me rather than explaining who Monty or Guardians were or what RTX was or why the color of a shirt might matter. Our tacit and situated knowledge as community members afforded this kind of telling.

My story is actually a compilation of several small stories, which work together to provide many narrative twists and happenstance that follow a causal order building up to the moment I meet Monty. First, my back hurt so I was sitting in a chair that placed me in the middle of the main hall (lines 362-365). I happened to be wearing the same color shirt as the Guardians that year (lines 367-368). I even double-voice my internal monologue at the time which is "why is he walking up to me?" (line 372) which justifies my disbelief that I should be

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the chosen one that day for him to talk to me, a random attendee. I talk about how I also happened to know the directions, again a strategy for describing how this moment seemed special for me. I added all of these little details to build up the importance of this situation, making my narrative more interesting and tellable (Ochs & Capps, 2001). Through all of this, I am marking this as a special, rare encounter—in other words, a valuable experience.
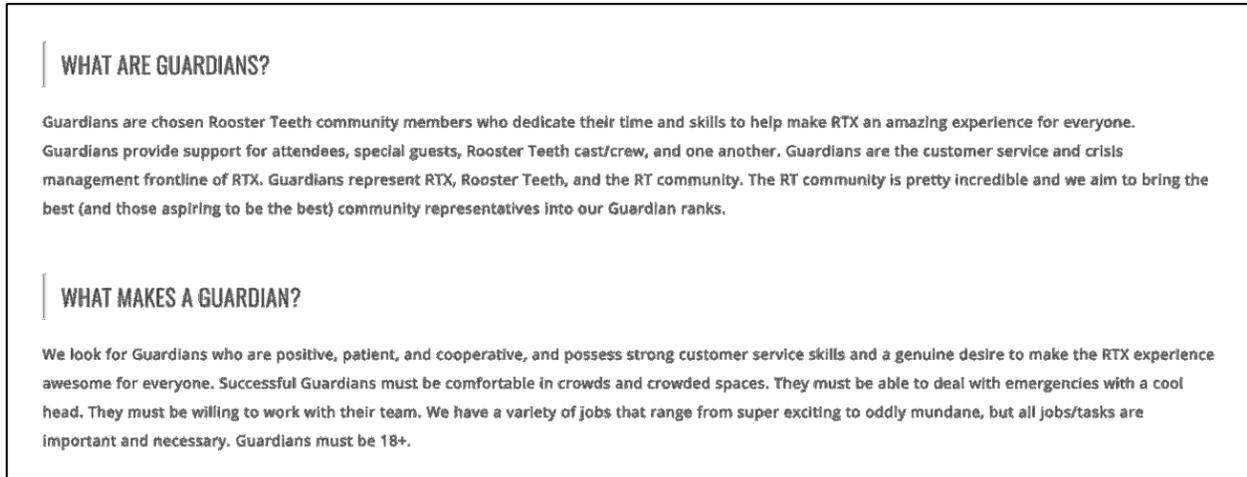
In this next, final example, I examine a narrative of selfless giving or personal sacrifice. Not all participation in the community is equal. Some members give more time, energy, and money than others. This is particularly true for RT members participating in the community through volunteer work. This includes unpaid positions that community members commit their time and energy to, often spending their own money to be part of. People can be community leaders, social media administrators or moderators, game moderators, event organizers, lead charity fundraising efforts, and more. There are thousands of volunteer RT community members around the world that help make community gathering and socializing possible through their daily hard work and labor. Most of the people I interviewed held multiple voluntary leadership positions, in some cases, upwards of six. One volunteer role in particular that is revered in the community are the Guardians, the volunteers that run RTX.

To become a Guardian, you have to fill out an application. An application is a text which plays a role in organizing members and creating categories of membership—people who are selected, people who are not selected, people who get to do the selecting. Additionally, applications have to do with actions that create categories or are assigned to members if chosen. Texts, like this application, allow people to act from afar, across time and space (Cooren, 2004). Here, members across the world are organized through the application process. Applications for Guardianship are reviewed by the Head Guardian(s), and then from thousands of applicants, only

a few hundred will be selected. This process of selection adds a special value to this type of participation, marking them as chosen and different from other types of members. Many people who become Guardians keep coming back every year and you are more likely to get selected as a Guardian if you have been one previously. When I was leaving RTX in 2017, I ran into a woman at the airport who told me she was proud to be a Guardian. She was about the age of my mother and she said she started out volunteering because her daughter wanted to be a Guardian and now, she has become part of the community herself through the camaraderie she experienced. Every person I talked to who was a Guardian spoke about it as though it is an experience they loved and would do again.

To be a Guardian, one must be prepared for hard work and labor. Guardians are not compensated and have to pay for their own travel, hotel, and meals while they volunteer at RTX. So, you might wonder, what makes someone want to volunteer to be a Guardian if it is exhausting, time-consuming, and even expensive? The narrative of value comes into play as there is a social capital that comes with being a Guardian that is just unattainable with any other membership role. The word "Guardian" evokes an important metaphor. While there is no official information listed anywhere that I could find (and no one could give me solid confirmation when I asked), "Guardian" may be a reference to the *Halo* video game (specifically, powerful security constructs, built to protect the greater good), which would be appropriate with the *RvB* origins of RT. Regardless, the word is symbolic of a protector, one who looks out for others, and a person to be respected for their selfless giving for the betterment of another person or persons. In other words, to be a Guardian is to put yourself second, and others first. This meataphor is important when it comes to what is asked of Guardians through their volunteer roles at RTX.

To examine this idea of value attached to volunteering as a Guardian, I want to review how Guardians are described by RT and then I will share an excerpt from an interview with a Guardian. In Figure 3.8, you can see how the RTX Guardians are officially described on the www.rtxaustin.com website. Furthermore, I broke down and organized the text in Figure 3.8 into a table of the Guardian descriptors, skills/attributes, and responsibilities in Table 3.2.

WHAT ARE GUARDIANS?

Guardians are chosen Rooster Teeth community members who dedicate their time and skills to help make RTX an amazing experience for everyone. Guardians provide support for attendees, special guests, Rooster Teeth cast/crew, and one another. Guardians are the customer service and crisis management frontline of RTX. Guardians represent RTX, Rooster Teeth, and the RT community. The RT community is pretty incredible and we aim to bring the best (and those aspiring to be the best) community representatives into our Guardian ranks.

WHAT MAKES A GUARDIAN?

We look for Guardians who are positive, patient, and cooperative, and possess strong customer service skills and a genuine desire to make the RTX experience awesome for everyone. Successful Guardians must be comfortable in crowds and crowded spaces. They must be able to deal with emergencies with a cool head. They must be willing to work with their team. We have a variety of jobs that range from super exciting to oddly mundane, but all jobs/tasks are important and necessary. Guardians must be 18+.

Figure 3.8. Description of Guardians on www.rtxaustin.com. See Appendix I for Fair Use Assessment.

Table 3.2. RTX Guardian Descriptors and Responsibilities

Descriptors	Skills/Attributes	Responsibilities
• Chosen • Rooster Teeth community members • The best • Community representatives • Part of Guardian ranks • Customer service and crisis management frontline	• Possess strong customer service skills • Positive • Cooperative • Genuine desire to make the RTX experience awesome for everyone • Comfortable in crowds and crowded spaces • Willing to work with their team	• Dedicate time and skills • Make RTX an amazing experience for everyone • Support attendees, special guests, Rooster Teeth cast/crew & one another • Deal with emergencies with a cool head • Represent RTX, Rooster Teeth, and the Community

In Figure 3.8 and Table 3.2, you can see the ways Guardians are characterized. They are community members who are "chosen," "the best," "representatives" (also a way to describe

customer service and crisis frontline) members "part of guardian ranks." All of these descriptors mark them as the selected few, making them as rarer than the average member. Second, they must have "strong customer service skills" and several attributes that culminate in a positive attitude putting themselves second and others first. For example, being positive, cooperative, desiring others to have an "awesome" experience, being comfortable in crowds, and working in a team are all about caring about others. This makes sense when looking at the list of responsibilities which are to apply all skills and time to benefit others, handle any difficult situations they may encounter during RTX, all the while being the face of the RT community. So, we can see that to be a Guardian, you must be willing to sacrifice your own comfort, happiness, and preferences in favor of the larger good of the community during RTX.

The ECFs "amazing" and "everyone" are used to describe the value Guardians add to RTX. Guardians are responsible for everyone's enjoyable experience, which is a very large responsibility as attendance by community members alone is more than 60,000 people, not to mention the behind the scenes crew they are working with (including fellow Guardians). Furthermore, this idea of an experience is important to note because RTX is not described only as an event, but an *experience*, which elevates the event and the responsibility further. The responsibilities of the Guardians include stressful jobs and difficult tasks for paid professionals, let alone volunteers. I have witnessed Guardians who help keep lines, help make sure people go in and out of rooms, run lighting, be personal assistants to RT celebrities; however, in this description, their responsibilities are heightened to be so much more than only the tasks they are assigned. Becoming the face or representative of something marks your participation as valuable, but also adds a layer of pressure. The existence of "Guardian ranks" connects to a moral universe of ranking and earning status in ranks. Guardians must be "positive, patient, and

cooperative" with vendors, convention hall employees, fellow community members, other

Guardians, and also any RT Staff or celebrities while managing crises and calmly dealing with

emergencies. These types of ideas present Guardians as up against a very difficult set of tasks

possibly involving angry crowds, mishaps, and stressful situations.

Any sane human presented with, "do you want to pay upwards of $1,000 to deal with

crowds, angry people, and be your best self while being the face of a company and community?"

would likely pass. However, in the case of the RTX Guardians, there are not enough spots to fill.

Why? I argue this has to do with the community narratives. Guardians are narrated as special

members, and they are revered and treated as such with attendees of RTX gathering signatures of

Guardians, clapping for them, and thanking them for their work. Additionally, Guardians make

friends and have unique experiences that other members will never have access to. Think of it

like the sorority or fraternity of the RT community. Guardianship opens many new SoE where

the average member can become extraordinary, special, and chosen. The discourse of

Guardianship is a discourse of sacrifice, where Guardians are described as being "the best" while

also being tasked with an intimidatingly large list of responsibilities. Fairclough's (2010) idea of

orders of discourse, or how the various potential discourses which orient us to different social

practices, roles, and hierarchies, is a helpful way to understand the role of Guardians within the

community (as important and special members). When Guardianship is revered, it becomes

easier to justify and account for the level of commitment required by members who volunteer.

In my interview with J, I ask her to talk about her experience as a Guardian:

Extract 3.4

166   J: Ohhhh. It is one of the most incredible experiences I've ever had, umm, it's

167   incredibly nerve-wracking when you apply, especially the first time 'cause you're

168   just like, what if they don't like me what if I'm not good enough what if I mess up

169   and they never let me back at RTX again?

170 A: (laughs)

171 J: 'cause those I mean I've done it two years in a row now and I still get those

172   thoughts when I applied when they opened up the applications last month, um,

173   but it's it's humbling. It's incredible. People say you know why would you spend

174   so much money, and they don't even pay you? Or you know um oh, don't you get

175   you know backstage access and you get to meet everybody. It's like no we don't,

176   we're not given anything we're given the ability to provide an incredible

177   experience to tens of thousands of fans every year, and it's hard to understand

178   unless you do it. You show up you work the hardest you'll prolly work all year

179   for a span of four or five days and you walk away knowing that we did this. We

180   made this happen. Um one of my favorite parts of RTX is actually my least

181   favorite. My favorite part is the end of RTX. On last day every year, it's the

182   saddest day is the day I try to hold back tears. We close the expo hall. We close

183   everything and we have like a round up meeting and that's where we get our

184   thank you's it's where we get our good byes. And that's where every year we get

185   told how awesome we are. Um and it's it's insane that like these people that we

186   look up, to rely on us to make this happen like they literally couldn't do it without

187   Guardians.

In lines 166-173, 178-180, and 181-185, J brings up several dilemmas of Guardianship—the dilemma of being chosen, the dilemma of sacrifice, the dilemma of endings, respectively. She resolves each of the dilemmas she mentions by means of involving community narratives.

The orders of discourse where Guardianship is a favored position helps us understand J's orientation to these dilemmas. It becomes natural for community members (myself included) to assume the specialness and respectability of Guardians, as they are ideologically seen this way as they are both rarer and held to higher standards than a regular member (Fairclough, 2010). The struggle here is that while Guardians are special during RTX, the value placement is temporary as all previous Guardians must still go through the selection process anew each year. It is also a reminder of the communicative constitution of specialness, as nothing is inherently special.

First, there is the *dilemma of being chosen*, which is how there is always a chance one will not be chosen. J starts off by questioning her own worthiness (lines 168-170), which signifies this heightened importance of being selected. As showcased in the description on the website and by the application process, there is a lot of pressure on Guardians to be "the best." They are an elite group of members who have to hold up to high standards of being representatives of the community. J discusses an extreme consequence of being barred from RTX if she does not do a good enough job, this underscores her fears of not being good enough (lines 168-169). Even after she has already served for two years, the worry lingers with her over time (lines 171-172).

Then, there is the *dilemma of sacrifice*. When J is saying how being a Guardian is an incredible experience (line 166), she is using an ECF to create a version of events where she justifies how much she sacrifices as a Guardian. Her experience is worth anything she has to pay. She anticipates the criticism that comes with this type of commitment (Baxter, 2011) and she double voices generic "people" who are the dissenting voice questioning why she would spend her money to be a Guardian (173-175). She uses indirect reported speech to acknowledge she has heard the dissent before and rejects them. J must account for her willingness to volunteer herself and her time when talking to people who are not part of the RT community's cultural

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context, where an RT member would not likely question why someone would want to be a Guardian (Scott & Lyman, 1968). To justify her claim, J rejects the negative conception that she should be paid for her work and that her access to RT celebrities is unfair with respect to her efforts (lines 174-175) and instead offers a counter version of what it means to be a Guardian in terms of what she can give to others (Scott & Lyman, 1968). She says she is "given the ability to provide an incredible experience" for the attendees (lines 176-177). Essentially, she is given the gift of giving or the gift of a unique type of participation.

J said at the end of each RTX the Guardians are given the ultimate recognition from RT celebrities where they are told they have value (lines 184-185) and how RTX would not happen without them (186-187). This is the experience that Guardians can have at RTX that regular members cannot. Attendees are thanked for being part of the community, but Guardians are held up as the heroes of the convention. This gives value to one's identity by having experiences they can claim and talk about that are rarified, that others who have not volunteered can never claim.

This dilemma of sacrifice seemed to be the most important to J as when J and I were chatting after the formal part of the interview questions, she brought up just how much she gives as a Guardian, including how she got blisters on her feet and wore holes in the bottom of her shoes (lines 459-460). This is a story of her dedication as a community member. It is also something that requires justification because the natural reaction is "why did you work so hard you wore out your shoes?" My version of that question during the interview is how I comment on her commitment:

Extract 3.5

464   A: Oh, my gosh. That's dedication, you know

465   J: It's it's I mean it's worth it. I I don't question it in the slightest. I have people like

466 my family or or friends say you know well why aren't you spending this money

467 on something like else? And I'm just like you just have to do it, you have to you

468 have to understand

She reacts to me by solidifying her belief in the value of Guardianship by saying she never questions her choice (465). She proceeds to speak for the dissent again in this later part of the interview so she can respond to it with her own reasoning, creating a sense of assertive authority (Baxter, 2011). This type of dedication to anything requires justification for her actions. Essentially, her response is that the experience itself is the value (lines 467-468). She shuts down any dissent by saying without the experience, one cannot comprehend the value (lines 467-468). Through this use of indirect reported speech and her responses to anyone questioning her dedication, she is able to support her moral stance that Guardianship is worth the sacrifice.

Guardianship is volunteer work. Though, it is volunteer work that requires justification for someone who does not understand. Rarely will you find someone questioning a person for volunteering time or money at a church, local soup kitchen, or for organizations such as *Habitat for Humanity*. Volunteering provides an opportunity for people to claim identities of being able to give back. This same kind of discourse is being applied to Guardianship by J. While the Guardians are not building houses, handing out food, or fundraising, they are still part of a process of giving to others through their work as they are dedicating themselves for the betterment of others. The tension is presented in how there is a for-profit center behind this volunteer work—I examine the commodification of community closely in Chapter five.

Finally, J discusses the *dilemma of endings* or the tension she faces at the end of RTX (lines 181-182). One of the rewards J mentions is how she and her fellow Guardians are praised by RT celebrities (lines 184 - 187), which is done at the very end of the event. It is a moment

when Guardians are told they are "the best," but at the same time they are thanked after the event is over, they are also about to enter back into the identity of regular membership. While Guardians have experiences they can talk about and gain a new line on their resumes, their Guardianship is temporally bound; the moment Guardians are given their ultimate payment of celebration of their sacrifices and dedication, they are also waving goodbye to that specialness until the next time.

Narratives can be understood as accounts when people use experiences to defend their actions (Buttny, 1993). How we account is dependent on the context, and if an account is acceptable depends on the norms and ideologies of the group and what is and is not acceptable (Buttny, 1993). J has been faced with opposition before on why she would volunteer her time and spend her own money to be a Guardian and anticipates she will encounter this again. She provides a response to past and future dissenters to counter these arguments and justify her version of Guardianship. Through all of these different accounts of Guardianship, J is negotiating her identity (Scott & Lyman, 1968). She is also performing her identity and membership as she talks with me to reconstruct the meaning of what it means to be a Guardian (Buttny, 1993). Further, narrative is a way to travel in time, to recover Guardianship. J is managing space and time in her discussion of beginnings (applying for a Guardian position) and endings (saying goodbye). Furthermore, she presently provides justifications to me while anticipating future justifications.

In all of these examples, we can look to Silverstein's (2003) notion of indexical orders as a way of understanding what kind of work is being done for they point "to certain kinds of people or practices or invoking certain ideologies, but also systems of *valuing* people, practices and ideologies that exist in different social contexts" (Jones, 2019, p. 61). In other words, orders

of indexicality help us understand what has value, what does not, and what should be ignored which are ways of including and excluding some people who do not buy into these values (Blommaert, 2010). Additionally, while ideas of love, family, friendship, and sacrifice may make some people want to get involved, it does exclude people who do not want those same things.

SoE Discussion: What does it all mean?

The master narrative of community, community narratives, and personal narratives are intimately interwoven, and all are resources and tools (technologies of talk) for members to use to keep the community alive in several ways. Narratives help open windows (SoE) for which *sharing stories* (the mediated action) about a way a person identifies and participates as a member (identity). Sharing stories about community is community making, the stories are part of this process of (re)production of the RT community world. Through stories, members situate themselves within community as certain types of members. In all of the examples analyzed in this chapter, versions of community, morality, and identities are all created and negotiated.

Telling stories is not limited to words or oral narratives that are lengthy and follow a particular structure. The examples in this chapter point to the many small and subtle ways we engage in storytelling in our daily lives. Stories are told through images and co-tellership can happen through responsive uptake activities such as "likes." Kress (2011) claims "multimodality includes questions around the potentials—the affordances—of the resources that are available in any one society for the making of meaning; and how, therefore, 'knowledge' appears differently in different modes" (p. 38). In exploring the different SoE where stories are shared, we can see how ideas of community are used, interpreted, and created in different circumstances. The

narratives told by RT community members also provide moral affordances and constraints, which also shape future actions (social practices) (Shotter 1993).

Space and time are also used as part of storytelling. People draw on stories of participation from the past to project themselves into a future of continuing to participate, such as posting images of having attended RT events. Different contexts for storytelling build different kinds of relational space. In the interviews, since we are having a conversation, stories supporting community narratives are dependent on how I ask a question, as well as how pressure is felt by the participants to represent the community in this more formal type of exchange. In a documentary, stories are presented as facts and video footage is used to support those facts. On social media, anticipation of participation is an important premise and images, as well as interactive features, are used as evidence to support the stories being told.

Stories are part of the process of narrative induction and how community narratives become part of member's own identities (Linde, 2000). Through the examples in this chapter, I examined the intertextual nature of stories in the RT community. Often, employees and non-employees of RT (re)produce one another by drawing on each other as resources. People are a resource (real or imagined, present or not) in storytelling. The production and consumption of narratives establishes a coherent sense of community and normalizes ways of talking about and portraying the RT community as special. Furthermore, through the telling of these stories of community, the dilemmas of community become apparent. Stories are a way to justify why sacrifices (shoes, blood, sweat, tears, money) have to be made for the "good" of the community and stories frame something that is otherwise undesirable to be actually desirable and valued because of "the community." Accounting for "why" people make sacrifices (accountable actions) is done through shared stories (social practice / mediated action) about who they are as

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members (identities). Storytelling is also a way to pragmatically separate RT from the negative

connotations of fandom. Narratives become a resource for justification such as a special

relationship and the value of participation is worth sacrificing for. Figure 3.9 summarizes the

examples of SoE elements that came together in the narratives in this chapter.
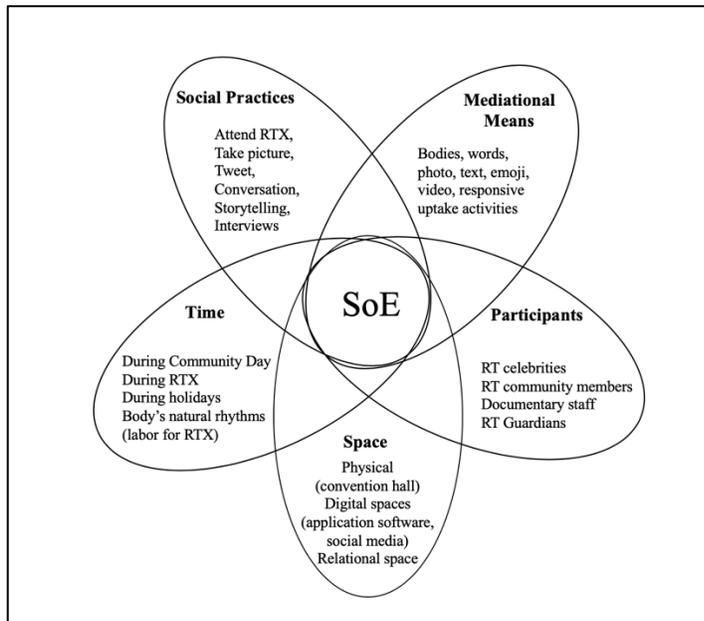
Figure 3.9. SoE diagram for narratives. Created by author.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the power of personal storytelling in supporting the master

narrative that there is a community in addition to the corollary community narratives of value

and specialness. Storytelling also is a way to make note of which actions are acceptable or not

acceptable, as well as shaping the identities of members. I have used this chapter to analyze the

stories RT members have told, including stories I have told myself. Through the process of this

research, it was very difficult for me to notice how much I took for granted with RT until I

realized the ongoing, dialectical relationship between the stories I told, my life history, and the

community narratives I found myself situated within.

In doing all of this, I have also created another type of narrative. To explain, I look to LeGuin (1980) when she discusses how stories are told, translated, retold, and passed on in many different ways. She says, "In the tale, in the telling, we are all one blood. Take the tale in your teeth, then, and bite till the blood runs, hoping it's not poison; and we will all come to the end together, and even to the beginning: living, as we do, in the middle" (p. 195). She paints a ritualistic view of a story, describing how partaking in this action can be understood as a unifying ceremony. She also alludes to the ouroboros, or the serpent eating its own tale. In the case of community, this way of understanding stories features how they feed into the cycle of production and consumption. Through this research, I have also created stories for people to tell by creating my own narrative of the RT community. I created this research project, which signals its significance by devoting an entire dissertation to its study. So, while I discuss stories, I realize I am, again, creating a new one that can be given to others to tell again in their own way, producing another cycle of the ouroboros of community.

Moving forward in the next chapter, I will be discussing the role of regulations in the construction of the RT community. The rules and regulations of RT are intimately tied to the master narrative and its corollaries as discussed in this chapter through how narratives are used by members to justify, police, and interpret the rules.

CHAPTER FOUR:

RULES & REGULATIONS

My friends and I lurk on the second floor of the convention hall at RTX, scoping out signs of a line. The RT Podcast panel starts in three hours, and we know it will fill up quickly.

Not five minutes after our lurking began, a Guardian hurriedly approaches and says, "Sorry, lines don't start yet."

"When do they start?" I ask.

"Not yet, but come back later."

We leave the area.

"They need to make a better system," I say to no one in particular as we approach the escalator.

***

In this chapter, I focus on how rules communicate and metacommunicate the RT community into being. In 2014, when I am unable to start a line at the RTX convention, there were no stated rules of where (space) and when (time) a line should or could be made at RTX. Members of the community (including myself) were frustrated and voiced concerns about this issue. Since then, rules on how to form lines, when, and where, are conveniently provided on the convention app (application) for smartphones. With the lack of rules regarding lines in 2014, my friends and I were subject to the authority of the Guardian. As you learned in the previous chapter, Guardians have a special kind of clout and reverence in the community. Because of this

community norm of respecting the Guardians, we left the area whereas we may have pressed someone else further if we were in a similar situation at a non-RT event. Rules and social procedures create SoE for actions to take place. Lines are a way to organize people spatially and form divides between experiences (those in line and those who are not). Rules are a way to reinforce who can be in a line and when (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017c). In other words, rules move bodies and situate us in space and time.

My argument in this chapter proceeds as follows. I will first analyze how rules are a part of the communicative constitution of the RT community. Then, I examine the formal written regulatory texts posted on the RT website: the Terms of Use and Code of Conduct. Finally, I analyze how rules are enforced in the community through the actions of members.

Rules, Regulations, and Narratives

Rules do not just "exist" out of nowhere, they are crafted for an intended purpose and audience(s), mainly to organize and orient actions of people. Rules only serve this purpose if they have built-in social value. In other words, people need a reason to follow the rules. As I outlined in Chapter 3, narratives are an essential part of constituting the RT community. Narratives are both recursive and doubly constitutive. What I mean is that in order to have a tellable narrative that is accepted by other members, one must engage in tellable experiences. Therefore, people will act in ways that are socially acceptable (tellable), which constitutes community, and then community is (re)constituted in the stories told about those actions. For the RT community to claim the community narrative of specialness, which includes positive experiences, for example, people will act in ways that are positive and therefore create the positiveness they tell. Now enter rules, which regulate and guide actions that produce those narratives. There is a need for sources of authority to regulate actions to make sure people are

engaging in friendly experiences that are accepted and promoted by the group. Rules play a special role in the constitution of community. In order for the community to be (re)produced in ways that are consistent with the values and ideals of the community, the rules must lay claim to those values and ideas. Therefore, entitlement to experience (c.f., Sacks, 1992)—or the rights and obligations with respect to the tellability of narratives—must be regulated.

In my examination of rules, I draw on linguists Fowler and Kress' (1979) classic critical analysis on rules and regulations. They define rules as "instructions for behaving in ways which will bring about an intended or desired state" (p. 26). Further, rules are about knowledge, power, and control where the creator of the rules is the holder of the knowledge and therefore holds the power and authority to control actions of others. Rules are also constitutive in how they mark a community's existence and "and entails commitment to a perspective on the way the group is organized" (p. 36). In other words, rules are a formal realization of community narratives and it is important the rules support these narratives. Fowler and Kress (1979) describe rules as falling on a continuum between "directive" and "constitutive":

> The space between 'directive' and 'constitutive' can be seen as a continuum. At the directive end are the instructions on self-service petrol pumps, launderette machines, and in cookbooks. Here there is no ambiguity about power-relationships. The petrol company has all the knowledge, the customer none, the customer must carry out the instructions to the letter or he will not get his petrol, or will lose his money, damage the equipment, set fire to himself and the petrol station, etc. At the constitutive extreme are rules which do not apply to the specifics of behaviour, but are designed to define a community by offering a distinctive analysis of, or ideology of, that community's behaviour. (p. 36)

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Regardless of where rules fall on this continuum, they play a role in the constitution of community as they guide the actions of members and promote values. Furthermore, ideology is metacommunicative as it is performed through the actions of members (e.g., being friendly, then telling a story of being friendly or others being friendly—this points to friendliness as acceptable and desirable). Again, this is a recursive process as the rules are both part of and a consequence of communication (Fowler & Kress, 1979). The rules of RT are multi-layered and reflect the extremes of the continuum as described by Fowler and Kress (1979). Rules can be found in many spaces—on www.roosterteeth.com, displayed at live events, and posted on social media. I have extracted examples from all of these spaces to examine how rules constitute the RT community and perpetuate community narratives.
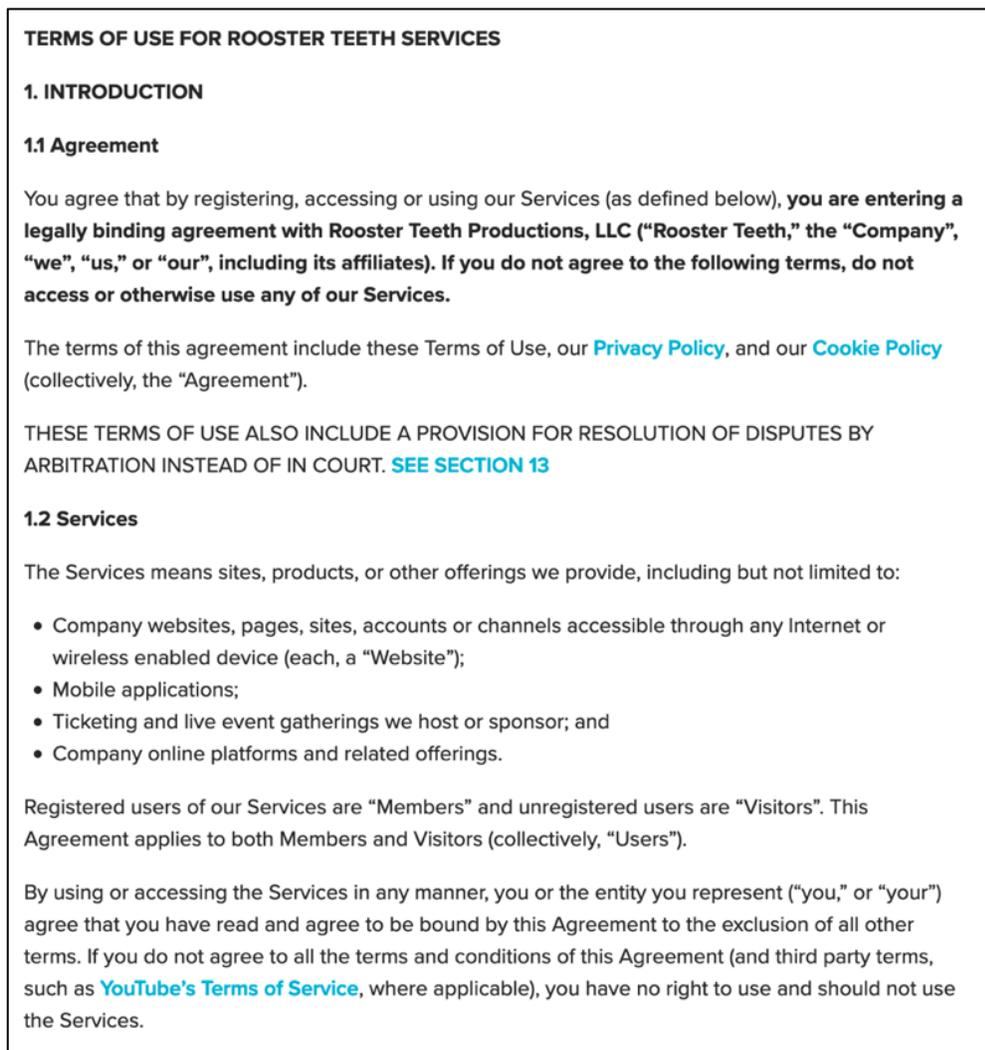
Terms and Codes Through Time and Space

I start my examination by focusing on the Terms of Use and Code of Conduct posted on the www.roosterteeth.com website.

Terms of Use

The posted Terms of Use consist of 7,239 words written in the dense and difficult to parse legal register. Figure 4.1 is an extract of a small portion of the Terms. While all of the different examples I provide in this chapter fit under the umbrella category of "rules," each of them are documented differently. Here, they are named "Terms of Use" which means they set the terms of engagement. Through a bulleted list under section 1.2, the Terms encompass many relational spaces including websites, accounts, mobile applications, live events, and any other place Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC. may operate or where community members may come into contact with one another. This means the relational engagement is set by these Terms. As stated in the Terms, if you do not wish to follow them, you are not to enter any of the

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aforementioned RT spaces. With the Terms being applicable to all members in all RT spaces,

they are a pervasive, ever-present regulating force, yet they are also invisible. Interestingly,

while the Terms are highly findable on the website through a quick Google search or scroll

through the main RT website, one would have to know about their existence in the first place in

order to seek them out and read them.

TERMS OF USE FOR ROOSTER TEETH SERVICES

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Agreement

You agree that by registering, accessing or using our Services (as defined below), **you are entering a legally binding agreement with Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC ("Rooster Teeth," the "Company", "we", "us," or "our", including its affiliates). If you do not agree to the following terms, do not access or otherwise use any of our Services.**

The terms of this agreement include these Terms of Use, our Privacy Policy, and our Cookie Policy (collectively, the "Agreement").

THESE TERMS OF USE ALSO INCLUDE A PROVISION FOR RESOLUTION OF DISPUTES BY ARBITRATION INSTEAD OF IN COURT. SEE SECTION 13

1.2 Services

The Services means sites, products, or other offerings we provide, including but not limited to:

- Company websites, pages, sites, accounts or channels accessible through any Internet or wireless enabled device (each, a "Website");
- Mobile applications;
- Ticketing and live event gatherings we host or sponsor; and
- Company online platforms and related offerings.

Registered users of our Services are "Members" and unregistered users are "Visitors". This Agreement applies to both Members and Visitors (collectively, "Users").

By using or accessing the Services in any manner, you or the entity you represent ("you," or "your") agree that you have read and agree to be bound by this Agreement to the exclusion of all other terms. If you do not agree to all the terms and conditions of this Agreement (and third party terms, such as YouTube's Terms of Service, where applicable), you have no right to use and should not use the Services.

Figure 4.1. A screenshot of a portion of the Terms of Use on www.roosterteeth.com. See Appendix I for Fair Use Assessment.

Furthermore, the way the Terms are written makes them highly inaccessible even if a

member were to know of their existence. The most prominent feature of the Terms is how it is

written in the style of an institutionalized genre where the language is "both unspeakable and

unreadable. Its unspeakability lies in its remoteness from any speech act which could be

performed by a real individual" (Fowler & Kress, 1979, p. 36). Because the Terms are written in

a legal register, not a conversational one, they do not invite feedback. They are presented as

legal facts that community members must abide by, and the Terms speak on behalf of Rooster

Teeth Productions, LLC.; furthermore, these Terms as presented are a faceless, unknowable

voice of authority.

Essentially, the Terms outline how "you" (a community member or anyone who decides

to associate or interact with RT in any way) will obey the Terms through the "legally binding

agreement," and if you do not "you have no right to use and should not use the Services."

Anyone associating with RT (member, website tourist, or otherwise) has to get on board with the

rules or they will have their rights removed. Notice how the pronominal work, the exclusive

"you," omits the writer from the collective of people implicated by the Terms. The writer is not

bound by the very Terms they have created. "You" points outward toward the RT community.

The language used also makes present the power distance between the unnamed, unknowable

writer and the readers (presumably all RT community members): "The greater the power

differential between the parties to a speech act of command, the more 'direct' the syntactic form

(e.g. imperative) which may be chosen. Someone who enjoys absolute power can afford to be

abrupt. The smaller the power distance the greater the amount of linguistic effort" (Fowler &

Kress, 1979, p. 29). Legal definitions, directives, and absolutes are all presented even in this

small section of the Terms. The writer of the Terms makes the definitions, tells the reader they

will agree to the terms, and there is no room for negotiation. In other words, all power lies with

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the writer of the Terms and none with the person reading them (who has to agree to them or else be excluded).

The Terms also operate intertextually as there are several hyperlinks (indicated by the blue text) which lead to other sets of rules outside of this webpage (Privacy Policy, Cookie Policy, and YouTube's Terms of Service) in addition to a hyperlink to a later section (Section 13 of the Terms of Use regarding legal disputes). The descriptive text and link to the legal disputes are also in all capital letters, distinguishing it as more important than other parts of the Terms of Use. This text is also bolded, visually foregrounding it from other text in the Terms and therefore underscoring its importance without actually changing the structure of the sentence.

Furthermore, these terms are part of the genre of Terms of Use at large, a version of which can be found on any website or application. Therefore, they become part of a common practice (folded into tacit knowledge) that is accepted by most users of technology who want to scroll past and "accept" so they can get to the application/site/participatory element. Because RT's Terms of Use are written like other types of writing in this genre, it helps remove it from the everyday discourses of RT community members, making space for RT to still sound warm and friendly because the Terms are accepted as a standard practice for websites and applications written by legal representatives of the company and not the RT celebrities. The language is out of place for the community narrative which espouses love and friendship that is accessible to everyone speaking the same language; the very work performed by the Terms of Use belies this narrative version of community.

5. WARRANTY DISCLAIMER

Company has no special relationship with or fiduciary duty to you.

Figure 4.2. An excerpt from section 5 of the www.roosterteeth.com Terms of Use. See Appendix I for Fair Use Assessment.

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One phrase of note in the Terms is in section 5 (Figure 4.2), where there is language that directly contradicts the community narrative of RT community members having a special relationship with the production company. While contradictory to the community narrative, of course, this again is written in a legal register, which can easily be categorized as lawyer-speak required for any company. It is interesting how "Company" is the noun selected for this segment of the Terms. In Figure 4.1, the ways in which Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC. is described in the Terms are listed: "Rooster Teeth, Company, We, Us, and Our." Of all of these, "Company" is selected, the most distancing and least interpersonal. There is even a lack of an article ("the Company"), making the Terms feel even more boilerplate. This sort of writing points to how the Terms are filled with standardized text where the writing is primarily for legal protections rather than being helpful ways for members to understand how to engage with others in the community. It is unlikely people are to read these Terms, and it seems as though the writer does not expect community members to engage in a close reading of these Terms (or even read them at all). Language such as "fiduciary duty" is a reminder of the community tension that no matter how close people may feel to RT and its celebrities, there will always be a divide. Regardless if people read the Terms or not, the codifications of expected actions and obligations (or lack thereof) are part of the identity of Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC. and exist on their webspace. Furthermore, the burden is on the members to navigate, translate, and be aware of these Terms and ensure their own actions are in accordance with them. While the Terms feel very anti-community narrative for RT, there is also a paradox present here, as, at the same time, the existence of the Terms of Use can be justified in how they protect the community from harm. This brings me to one final extract from the Terms of Use I wanted to direct your attention to the "DO's" and "DON'Ts" (Figure 4.3).

DON'Ts

You agree that you will _not_:

a. Create a false identity, misrepresent your identity, create a Member account for anyone other than yourself (a real person), or use or attempt to use another's account;

b. Post or distribute content that is intentionally false or intended to mislead or deceive others as to the source of the content;

c. Use the Service to promote, incite or engage in the harassment or bullying of others, in self-harm or other illegal activities. Making threats (direct or indirect) of violence, including threatening or promoting terrorism, is also prohibited. Users who harass, bully or threaten other users will have their content removed and accounts terminated, and also may be subject to serious criminal legal consequences in certain jurisdictions;

d. Post content or use the Service to promote hatred or violence towards, or directly attack or threaten any others, based on race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, disability, martial status, or veteran status;

e. Post or distribute content that contains nudity, sexual acts, or sexually explicit materials. Do not post links to pornographic sites or sites that contain pornography;

f. Promote or endorse regulated goods and services such as alcohol, gambling, tobacco, firearms/weapons, pharmaceuticals, or other goods and services regulated in the United States and other countries in which the Service is available;

g. Use the Service to distribute or promote any advertisement, solicitations or other commercial content, including non-Company products, services or any sweepstakes or contests;

h. Post, link to, or distribute content on or through the Service that is intended to damage or disrupt the Service, or another user's device or computer, or that is intended to compromise the privacy or account security of another user;

Figure 4.3. Section 14, a-h of the DON'Ts of www.roosterteeth.com's Terms of Use. See Appendix I for Fair Use Assessment.

This section most directly relates to other sets of rules such as the Code of Conduct and other regulations in local RT community groups. In Figure 4.3, I have focused on sections a-h of the "DON'Ts" category. With the conversational headings, it would appear as though the content might be more readable. However, we can see the listing is still written in the tone of the standard legal register. Additionally, it is a list of things _not_ to do ("not" is italicized in the Terms), which is anticipatory discourse aimed at shutting down specific actions (De Saint-Georges, 2012). With millions of people engaging across RT's sites (both members and visitors alike) and events at any given time, it can be anticipated that at least some of them may feel like doing something "wrong." "You" (anyone reading the Terms) are required to know and understand what you are _not_ supposed to do. Not only are you obligated to know this list of

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"DON'Ts" exists, you also are required to know what all of these things are and what qualifies

for each of the categories of "not" in order to avoid doing them. The list includes items that all

begin with verbs (create, post, use, promote, or endorse). Because of how they are framed as

"will *not*" these verbs are all written using the future tense. Therefore, the Terms are anticipating

the future potential actions in an attempt to prevent them. Again, the relationship of the writer to

the reader in this section continues to place the power of rulemaking solely with the writer. This

unnamed writer is hierarchically placed above the addressee with every right to manipulate the

actions of community members and issue commands to them (Fowler & Kress, 1979).

Let us now turn to section 14c of the Terms regarding harassment (see Figure 4.3). The

language in section 14c is comprehensive in describing how RT community members or anyone

associating with RT are not to harass others or even commit acts of self-harm. All types of

threats or actions that fall under these categories are to be avoided at all costs. This section of

the Terms exists to deny the existence of acts of harassment, as if one acts in this way, they will

be removed from the community. The Terms protect the narrative related to friendship and

positivity through effacing the threats to the experiences of community members. However, to

remove the threat, it must be named and associated with rules and consequences. This is another

paradox of the RT community. In order to be positive, we must recognize the negative *also*

exists and this recognition must be incorporated into community texts. The Terms lay the

groundwork for and are represented in the Code of Conduct, or the readable entry point and the

conduit for enforcement of the Terms.

Code of Conduct

The Code of Conduct found on www.roosterteeth.com is written using a much more

reader-friendly tone. It is 761 words in length, roughly one-tenth of the length of the Terms of

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Use. Because of its comparative brevity and colloquial tone, we can assume the writer thought people would actually read the Code of Conduct. I have included the entirety of the Code of Conduct in Figure 4.4. There are three elements that stand out visually in the Code of Conduct—hyperlinks, bolded letters, and capital letters. These visual strategies can be thought of as epistemic rights and obligations of the authors of the text as they decide which elements are more important than others. I identify and examine each of them below.

      Hyperlinks. I begin my analysis with hyperlinks because they are an affordance of the digital webpage that allows users to interact with them in ways that other forms of text do not. The two hyperlinked examples are "Terms of Use" and "conduct@roosterteeth.com" (listed three times). The hyperlink attached to the words "Terms of Use" directly connects to the Terms of Use webpage. This is an example of how the Code of Conduct is literally linked with and speaks to the Terms. The placement of this hyperlink gives authority to site administrators and moderators to enforce the Terms and Community Guidelines listed in the Code. This intertextual relationship is important because while the Code is more readable, the Terms are still represented and (re)enforced. Because not every single aspect of the Terms is fully represented in the Code, by mentioning the Terms and digitally linking them, it solidifies both of them equally as rules of RT, and the reader is responsible for knowing them and acting accordingly. With this digital affordance, members read the Code and click on and be brought to the Terms, entangling their existence. The two documents become inseparable.

      The other hyperlinks found are the three instances of the contact email "conduct@roosterteeth.com" which directly sends a message to the community managers, who are paid employees of RT. Interestingly, "conduct" (both a noun and a verb) is the username portion of the email address, which creates the existence of an email dedicated to reports of the

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actions of members. A username is an important way for others to infer aspects of identity

associated with the person behind this identifer (Vásquez, 2014). In this case, the email address

is not tied to one individual person, but rather the entire moral order of conduct reporting.

Through reporting breaches, members then become part of the cycle of rule-keeping.

CODE OF CONDUCT

Our rule is pretty simple: **be respectful**. Please respect others' safety and personal space, as well as any rules listed related to the event or forum. We personally believe Rooster Teeth fans and community members are the coolest ever—prove us right by helping ensure a safe, respectful, inclusive environment. We want everyone to have fun and enjoy their experience!

While at events, please remember - COSPLAY IS NOT CONSENT. Keep your hands to yourself. If you would like to take a picture with or of another fan, always ask first and respect that person's right to say no. While at events, please remember - COSPLAY IS NOT CONSENT. Keep your hands to yourself. If you would like to take a picture with or of another fan, always ask first and respect that person's right to say no.

Be respectful, be nice, be cool, and be kind to each other.

This Code of Conduct applies to the Rooster Teeth community as a whole—not only events, but also our website, social media channels, and in-person and online interactions. If you engage with anyone in a disrespectful or inappropriate manner or do not adhere to our Code of Conduct, we reserve the right to immediately remove you from the event or forum without refund and ban you from future Rooster Teeth activities or events.

Who follows our Code?

Everyone. Employees, guests, visitors, fans, and community members. If you attend a Rooster Teeth sponsored event, visit us online, or interact with us online, we expect all participants to be kind and respectful to one another by following our Code of Conduct. Any breaches in this Code will result in action, included, but not limited to: written or verbal warnings, temporary banning, permanent ban, removal without refund for tickets, or other methods as determined by Rooster Teeth in its sole discretion.

We have a ZERO TOLERANCE POLICY for harassment of any kind, including but not limited to:

Stalking, intimidation, offensive verbal or written comments, physical assault and/or battery, harassing or non-consensual photography or recording, sustained disruption of panels, signings, and other events, bathroom policing, inappropriate physical contact, unwelcome physical attention, or hate symbols.

In relation, but not limited to:

Race, color, national origin, gender, gender identity, gender presentation, sexual orientation, age, body size, disability, appearance, religion, citizenship, or pregnancy.

Hate symbols are not permitted, including as part of cosplay, nor are any costumes that contain hate symbols or appropriate the symbolism of hate groups, including, but not limited to, historical/comic-related/satirical costumes that are associated with Nazis. Whether a behavior or a costume violates this policy shall be determined by Rooster Teeth in its sole discretion.

Figure 4.4a. The first part of the Code of Conduct posted on the www.roosterteeth.com website. See Appendix I for Fair Use Assessment.

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Community Guidelines

1. Don't be a jerk.
2. Do not attack, harass, threaten, or bully anyone.
3. Hate speech will be removed.
4. Please respect the site admins and moderators when they enforce the **Terms of Use** and Community Guidelines.
5. If you break the rules, we reserve the right to temporarily/permanently ban or delete your account. We don't like doing that, so please help us create a healthy, fun, and safe community for all.
6. If you see someone breaking the rules, please report them to a site admin/moderator or email: **conduct@roosterteeth.com**.

What do I do if....

- **I feel like someone has broken the Code of Conduct?**

  Don't just let it happen. Tell us immediately. Our community managers are available via **conduct@roosterteeth.com**. To file a formal complaint, email us and provide detailed information about the situation along with your contact information so we can solve this in a reasonable time frame. Screenshots, transcripts, and more can only help your case so be detailed when letting us know what the problem is.

- **Rooster Teeth has contacted me and told me my behavior violates the Code of Conduct?**

  You would have been given the exact reason why and you should stop immediately. Further actions by your person can only mean increased actions taken by Rooster Teeth.

- **I experienced or saw harassment ONLINE on the RT app?**

  You should file a formal complaint by emailing **conduct@roosterteeth.com**, providing detailed information about the situation along with your contact information. If the harassment occurred on another forum (e.g. Twitter, Instagram, Facebook) please contact that forum to report concerns.

- **I experienced or saw harassment AT AN EVENT or other REAL LIFE EVENT?**

  If you feel unsafe in your immediate location, alert the nearest Staff member (wearing an RTX Staff Badge) or notify the registration desk and move to a safe location. If this is not possible, go to the Security Booth or call the police.

Figure 4.4b. The second part of the Code of Conduct posted on the www.roosterteeth.com website. See Appendix I for Fair Use Assessment.

Rule breaches should be reported to the authorities of RT unless they happen through Twitter, Instagram, Facebook or other non-RT social media sites where members must report to the appropriate authorities for those particular spaces. If physical harm is threatened or no authority is present, police are to be called by members. This mention of outside authorities showcases how while efforts to police the actions of their membership will be made, RT is not

always the ultimate authority. The onus is placed on members to determine when outside authorities are needed.

Members are asked to police themselves in section 5 of the "Community Guidelines" in the Code. Number 5 discusses how members will be completely removed from participating (through deletion of their account or banishment) if they break the rules. This first sentence is reminiscent of legalese, but then it is followed by a sentence that shifts the register to a very conversational one: "We don't like doing that, so please help us create a healthy, fun, and safe community for all." "We," meaning any person of authority (paid RT staff or volunteer community members) does not like having to ban members. This register shift is a way for RT to assert itself as welcoming and well-meaning while simultaneously laying down the law. They even implore members with a "please," meaning please self-police and make sure you follow the rules. The words, "healthy," "fun," and "safe" are used to describe the community which are appealing states of being that contribute to a friendly community narrative—this being another addition to the persuasive argument appealing to the pathos of members. Even with the use of the conversational register, the power dynamic remains. The Code of Conduct holds the power to say what is right and wrong, and while members are asked to take part—through submitting an email or calling authorities or to self-police—the actual power members have is the power to help enforce the code.

Additionally, the word "community" is used in the Code seven times. In contrast, the only mention of "community" in the Terms is at the end of the "DOs and DON'Ts" section: "Our community is diverse and reaches beyond geographical borders, so please keep in mind that something that you may find objectionable may not violate our Dos and Don'ts." This is one of the more readable sections of the Terms, connecting "community" to sections that speak

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directly to RT membership. The word community is showcased in the Code more prominently because it is written for the audience of the RT community, which also implies how the Code is much more representative of actual rules people will read and enforce in contrast to the legalese of the Terms.

Between the Terms and the Code, the Code is certainly foregrounded for rule enforcement rather than the Terms which are unapproachable for most people. Additionally, the interactivity afforded by the hyperlinks lays down responsibility for rule-keeping on the members in many ways since the access to information and reporting mechanisms are as easy as the click of a mouse or the touch of a smartphone. The Code emphasizes actions members can take specifically to protect the community and its rules (to self-police or report violators). The Code is not only a list of rules and actions members should take themselves, but it provides opportunities for them to be ambassadors of community narratives by protecting the community from rule violators. The Code is a call to action.

Bold letters. The Code of Conduct not only is entangled with the Terms of Service but also serves as a translation of some of the most important rules found in the Terms. Primarily, the anti-harassment language in 14c of the Terms (Figure 4.3). The Code of Conduct starts out by describing the single rule related to interactions which is "**be respectful**" which is only one of two instances of bolded text beyond the headers for each section. The second bolded phrase is "**Be respectful, be nice, be cool, and be kind to each other**" which stands alone without being paired with a paragraph, further visually underscoring its importance and making it stand apart. This second set of bolded text is an extension of the first, both repeating and expanding on the idea of respect. "Nice," "cool," and "kind" serve as markers of a conversational register, making this mandate wrapped in a friendly tone. This sentence also specifically directs the respect "to

each other" meaning member-to-member interaction. This is interesting as it does not necessarily imply respect is expected of RT employees or Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC., as the responsibility is directed outward at members.

With the bolded text emphasizing these words, it becomes obvious quickly to anyone reading that the theme of the Code is respect, with the term repeating throughout the Code (9 times including "respect" and "respectful" and "disrespectful"). This marks this language as the most important part of the Code of Conduct. Everything else in the Code supports this command and expectation for respectful actions. "Respectful" on its own is an ambiguous word because it is culturally situated. The remainder of the Code outlines what it means to be respectful in a variety of contexts and community spaces. In the Code, there are lists of respectful and disrespectful actions, what to do when members display disrespectful actions, and reasons to be respectful in the first place.

The Code of Conduct makes use of a conversational register in order to resolve the tension of laying down the rules within a putatively symmetric community narrative of love and friendship. In other words, the Code leverages both the formality of rules to tell people how to behave and conversational language ("fun," "community," "coolest") to persuasive ends. With conversational language sprinkled in the Code, it makes this section much more readable, meant to be read, and is a statement that is endorsed simultaneously by a lawyer and knowable people from RT (RT celebrities, volunteer community leaders, etc.). For example, "we personally believe Rooster Teeth fans and community members are the coolest ever—prove us right by helping ensure a safe, respectful, inclusive environment. We want everyone to have fun and enjoy their experience!" A lot of work is being done here to promote community narratives of how special the community is with the ECF describing them as "the coolest ever"—which

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heightens their significance. And there is additional persuasive rhetoric in the call to "prove us right"—in other words, do not let down your heroes.

In these examples, the Code draws on what Fairclough (2010) calls conversationalization where a synthetic personalization is used to make the directives into requests and expectations from a familiar speaker. This serves to address the inherent contradiction between the friendship, "symmetrical" narrative of community and the normative, asymmetrical imperatives that constitute rules (Fowler & Kress, 1979). As a discursive strategy, conversationalization renders the Code's terms of engagement more relational than anything found in the Terms of Use, which is in effect, asking for the performace of the same actions, if obfuscated by legalese inaccessible to the everyday reader. It is exactly because of its relational appeal and conversational register that the Code manages to be a more persuasive document. The narrative of community upheld by the Code requires the community experience to be positive, therefore, rules must be followed for its successful enactment. Also, if you want to be counted as "the coolest," you have to do what RT tells you is cool, which is to be respectful. The asymmetrical relationship that rules provide is accounted for within the Code through the use of this language, making a case for the existence of these rules as a way to protect the narratives of friendship and respect.

Capital letters. The other element of the Code of Conduct which stands out visually from the rest are the all capital lettered phrases. There are five instances of all capitalized letters. The first is "COSPLAY IS NOT CONSENT" which is repeated twice, which I am considering a typo on the RT webmaster's part as the same three sentences are repeated twice in the same paragraph. I believe it is a mistake because there is no connective language to make it a conversational repetition such as "I repeat…". However, its incidental repetition does

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unintentionally stress the importance of this form of disrespectful actions (harassment). Further

"COSPLAY IS NOT CONSENT" relates to the second all capitalized phrase which is a "ZERO

TOLERANCE POLICY" which is in relation to harassment, which is directly related to

cosplaying practices.

Figure 4.5. Cosplay example one. "NARUTO" by MiyaoChang (張喵鳴) is licensed under CC
BY NC-ND 2.0. No changes were made to the photo. Creative Commons license details in
Appendix G.

Figure 4.6. Cosplay example two. "20141220-(41---94)" by George 啾吉 is licensed under CC
BY-NC 2.0. No changes were made to the photo. Creative Commons license details in Appendix
G.

Cosplay is a portmanteau of "costume play" and is a common practice for fandoms of

movies, anime, cartoons, and other entertainment media. Fans purchase or create costumes of

their favorite characters, often making their own creative interpretations. Figure 4.5 displays a

cosplay of two characters (Sakura, left; Naruto, right) from the anime *Naruto*. Figure 4.6

features a cosplay of Ruby Rose from RT's anime-style web series *RWBY*.

"Cosplay is not consent" is a phrase not just spoken by RT, but by fandom communities

at large. Women especially have a history of being harassed when in cosplay, and most of it

goes unreported (Mulkerin, 2017). However, in recent years, many conventions have been

displaying signs throughout convention centers to remind attendees of this anti-harassment

policy, with New York Comic Con being the first to display this policy boldly on the convention

floor (Mulkerin, 2017).

Figure 4.7. Tweet from @RTX Lines during RTX 2018. Featuring reminder of Code of Conduct and three images of the posted rules at RTX. See screenshot Fair Use Assessment in Appendix I.

Figure 4.8. Cosplay rules image featured in Tweet from @RTX Lines during RTX 2018. See screenshot Fair Use Assessment in Appendix I.
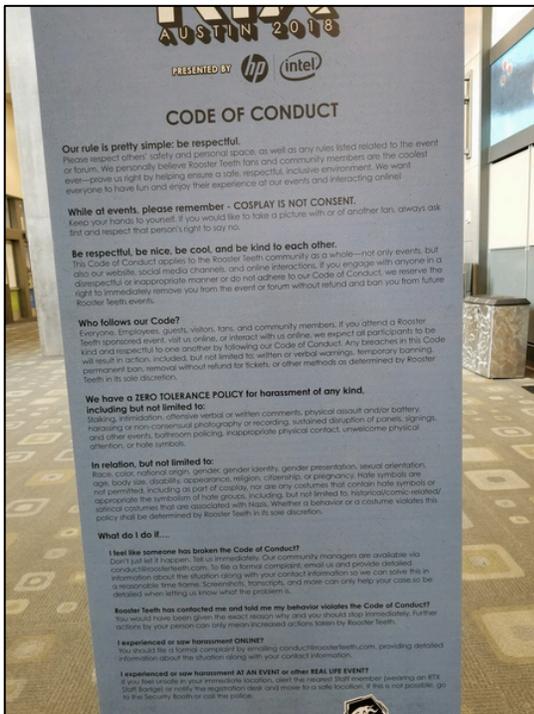
Figure 4.9. Code of Conduct image featured in Tweet from @RTX Lines during RTX 2018. See screenshot Fair Use Assessment in Appendix I.

The cosplay and consent element of the Code has been highlighted on a physical poster on the convention floor of RTX in recent years. Figures 4.7, 4.8, and 4.9 depict a tweet from the @RTXLines Twitter account (this account gives live updates regarding lines, when they are forming, and when they are filling up during RTX). The tweet features a reminder about the Code and three pictures of a sign that is in the Austin Convention Center for attendees of RTX Austin in 2018. There are many intertextual elements at play here happening through space and time. First, the text of the tweet uses capital letters and an exclamation mark to say "REMINDER!" before using asterisks to underscore the importance of "*Cosplay is NOT Consent*"—these textual affordances draw attention to the significance of the text to follow. The tweet goes on to explain how the Code of Conduct must be followed or you will be removed. There are three images attached to the tweet, one of the front of the sign and two of the back (one more zoomed in than the other). The Code then is represented in the text of the Tweet, the three images of the sign, the sign itself, and then, of course, in its original online form. In each of these instances, the Code is recreated with new affordances. This repetition also serves to emphasize the importance of adhering to the code.

This example is a way of understanding the "transformative dynamics of socially situated meaning-making processes" otherwise known as resemiotization (Iedema, 2003, p. 30). Essentially resemiotization is the transformation of semiotic forms across different modes of communicating dependent on the affordances and constraints of each mode and the related social contexts. There was a dynamic of cosplayers being harassed physically (action) and verbally (discourse) which turned into a conversation about cosplay and consent (discourse). This conversation turned into a movement and phrase adopted by conventions "cosplay is not consent" (discourse). This phrase was adopted by RT (and other institutions) as a formal rule

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(text/discourse) on their website (digital) and was printed and placed at RTX, their convention (text/discourse/physical). The image of this sign was then tweeted (text/digital). Through all of these iterations, the phrase and social actions become more durable and multiplied (Iedema, 2003). I now take a closer look at the resemiotization of this rule of anti-harassment related to cosplayers attending RTX.

The code is always posted on the website, a seemingly permanent location. The sign containing shortened and rewritten segments of the Code is physically placed at RTX but is temporally bound as it will be removed after the convention is over. However, even if for a fleeting weekend, the Code is built into the physical structure of the convention hall, placed in a prominent position adjacent to major entrances. The Tweet manifests the sign's existence on social media. The Code of Conduct is resemiotized from the website to the physical location to the picture of the physical poster of the Code. The choice of the twitter account to post an image of the Code printed on the banner placed in the convention hall is more powerful than just posting a link to the website to remind attendees of the Code. This is because the image of the poster places the Code in space and time. It features the physical connection of the Code to people at RTX. The tweet is a way to bring attention to this sign to attendees specifically and to increase the chances they are aware of it (at least on social media), even if they pass the sign by because of excitement or being in the thick of the crowds.

The Code is emphasized in many spaces and times, with each iteration bringing new meaning. Making a physical version of the code rather than a digital reminder online or on a phone application makes it present in a different way. The tweet reminds us of this physical manifestation, but it also reminds us of how our digital spaces inform our physical actions.

These many manifestations of the Code place accountability and responsibility on members to follow the Code as it is being presented in multiple spaces and timescales at once.

In a close examination of the front of the physical poster (Figure 4.8), we can notice how the language has been resemiotized yet again. As we know, the original harassment language in the Terms was translated into the Code, and now the code is translated again into this poster. In this iteration, the poster also makes use of all capital letters feature as used in the digital version of the Code. However, the sign features yellow-filled letters with a black outline, which makes them stand out visually, drawing the attention to this phrase above all other elements of the sign. Interestingly, this wording on one side of the sign is different than that of the listed rules in the Code of Conduct. Instead of "Cosplay is not consent" (also on the backside of the poster) the front of the poster says "cosplay does not equal consent." This semantic shift changes what something *is not* to what something *is not equal to*, which opens up the question: what does cosplay equal?

The poster gives instructions for specific actions attendees should avoid, including types of gaze ("please keep your eyes within your skull") and touch ("and your hands to yourself"). There are also directions for what attendees should do ("If you would like to take a picture with someone, ask them first. If they say no, that's fine! There is tons of other cool stuff to do. Go do that.") These conversationalized phrases serve to make the sign approachable, but it also opens up a margin for error as they are American idioms that may or may not be known to all people attending the event (especially when the RT community members haing from around the world). These listed actions are also not comprehensive. This side of the sign underscores specific actions, making them the most noticeable and, therefore, most important actions members should do or avoid doing.

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Other features of the sign are the event's logo, sponsors, and tagline, which are not only a marketing strategy but act as official endorsements of these ideas, as though the idea of consent is sponsored by many companies. There are also cartoon characters representing two famous RT celebrities, which places representations of them also as endorsers of these ideas. As mentioned, the placement of the sign in the middle of the walkway is also spatially significant, drawing attention to the sign in ways differently if it were buried in a program or hung on a wall.

This brings me to the final all capital lettered items in the Code which also signify the importance of space in the RT community. The final three examples of all capitalized letters are "ONLINE," "AT AN EVENT" and "REAL LIFE EVENT." "Event" and "real life event" both signal face-to-face interactions, but the distinctions may be between RT events and non-RT events. These phrases are also in bold since they are distinguished as questions in the question and answer portion of the Code. Being in all capital letters, it emphasizes the different spaces where community members may interact. These final examples of all capital lettered phrases essentially emphasize how the rules, no matter where they are posted, always apply. Actions are actions no matter where they take place (even though RT does use the contradictory "real life" distinction). Also, members are always accountable for their own actions and the responsibility is put on members to know, acknowledge, and interpret rules, as well as report rule breaches.

I have, so far, examined how rules are presented to RT community members. I will continue to examine the importance of resemiotization in the following examples of rules in action as I now turn to how rules are talked about and enforced by community members.

Humor in Rule Enforcement and Negotiation

I found humor injected everywhere in the RT community through the data I collected. Humor is as a way to claim power in the community as people using humor perform an identity

that is personable, entertaining, and self-aware. In this section I connect humor to power and rules. I then provide examples of how humor is a resource in enforcing, negotiating, and even resemiotizing community rules.

About Humor

Humor is a hallmark of being human. In digital culture, the viral spread of sarcasm, jokes, memes, and other forms of humor presents many ways of coping with, enjoying, and pushing back against our modern condition. Humor is also a big aspect of being a RT community member, as RT was founded on comedy productions. While RT has expanded to include a variety of offerings, this comedic theme persists through the podcasts and different productions, and of course, is (re)produced by community members. For the purposes of this section, I discuss the humor as metacommunication and two different types of humor relevant to my analysis: memes and joint fictionalizations.

Humor as metacommunication. Humor can be defined by use of framing devices (e.g., emojis, punctuation, GIFs, and memes), the reactions of others (e.g., responsive uptake activities and building on the initial humorous utterance), as well as social and cultural influences (e.g., community norms), the goals (e.g., being positive, bringing people together), and the genre (e.g., a post from an Admin on Facebook) (Chovanec & Tsakona, 2018; Vásquez, 2019).

Silverstein's (2003) notion of orders of indexicality becomes important in a discussion of rules and humor. Rules are directives for members that guide participation, but they are also metadiscursive because they are already a discussion of how people are supposed to communicate with one another. Further, humor is metacommunicative in nature. Think of the classic "Why did the chicken cross the road?"—this joke is centered on the action of the chicken. In the age of the Internet, the use of metadiscourse online is often tied to humor. To successfully

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engage with others online requires high metadiscursive awareness touching on a wide body of intertextual knowledge (Caffi, 1994). Ruiz-Gurillo (2016) discusses the complexity of humor involving the "participants, channel, register, grammatical structures, meaning, memory, intention, ideology, etc." (p. 86). In other words, humor is a process that takes place intersubjectively between the writer and the audience, involving choices and dynamics that need to align between participants in order to "work." Ruiz-Gurillo (2016) and other humor theorists (Mulkay, 1988; Purdie, 1993; Taylor & Raskin, 2012) see humor as being a productive process for the person making the joke and an interpretive process for the person experiencing the joke. Opportunistic and conversational humor as described by Priego-Valverde (2016) happens frequently in the RT community. Teasing can indicate closeness (in established relationships) or bonding (in newly forming relationships) and produce cohesiveness at the same time that it disrupts conversation (Priego-Valverde, 2016).

Humor can serve as a connective mechanism but can also be a way of seeing who is part of the in-group. Yus (2018) sees humor as "an ideal test to check who has access to the necessary background knowledge and assumptions of mutuality needed to get the full extent of humorous effects and which, again, generates positive effects of group membership and identification." (Yus, 2018, p. 297). Humor is produced and consumed as a dynamic co-construction (Chovanec & Tsakona, 2018) which is also a cultural performance (Conquergood, 2013). When using humor, people can break the rules in a way that is socially acceptable (Purdie, 1993). Therefore, humor is a way to present multiple versions of reality (Holmes, 2000). Through humor, we can exert power (Holmes, 2000) and defy social norms (Tayebi, 2016). Ultimately, I examine how humor is a resource to both enforce and break rules.

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Memes. One quintessential genre of humor on the Internet is the use of memes. While the word "meme" may conjure up the idea of an image paired with witty text, otherwise known as the multimodal *image macros* (Dynel, 2016), this is just one version of modern-day memes. Memes have been around long before the Internet. Richard Dawkins coined the term "meme" in 1976 and described them as "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation" (Dawkins, 1976/2016, p. 249). An example of a pre-Internet meme would be a catchphrase or a popular song lyric. Memes that are purely textual are still very commonplace on the Internet, even if they have multimodal counterparts (Vásquez, 2019). The affordances provided by the Internet allow for dynamic co-construction of humor with a variety of multimodal memes, text-only memes, wordplay, and more, all in the same conversation. RT community members often leverage memes in conversations for a variety of purposes, mostly humorous.

Joint fictionalizations. Joint fictionalizations are another, more complex version of humor on the Internet where people will begin and build on a fictional scenario for humorous purposes (Tsakona, 2018). Tsakona (2018) discusses online joint fictionalizations involving intertextual connections such as this example as a way for "participants not only to display and share their knowledge on such topics, but also to position themselves towards them, that is, to display their positive or negative stance towards the person, event, register, etc. alluded to" (p. 231). These types of humorous exchanges help create solidarity among RT community members, especially since they may never meet face-to-face, while also opening up communication among participants where people may feel more comfortable engaging in humor than a serious conversation about rules (Tsakona 2018). Memes are actually an important part of online joint fictionalizations where memes are positioned within and "function as integral parts of wider genres and communicative activities. Hence, the interpretation of their meaning(s)

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emerges via their interaction with other meanings proposed by comments, poems, etc. which are part of the same text/genre" (p. 250). This further reinforces the idea of the significance of the reactions of others, contextualization, and the genre of humor.

This discussion of humor is a prelude to how humor is used within the genre of rule-keeping in the RT community. I will now investigate examples of how rules are discussed by community members. The first example is from a local community group, RT Florida, and the second is the RT Public Facebook group.

The Resemiotization of H

RT Florida, my local RT community group, is very active and growing with five Admins and roughly 600 members. When I began my research in 2016, there were only three Admins and only 300 members. RT Florida has spaces for interaction through meetups, events, game sessions, and through a variety of social media—Twitter, YouTube, Facebook. They also have a Twitch Channel (Twitch is a way to stream games being played along with a video of the person playing the game), and a Discord (a communication service built for gamers with the ability to share text, images, video, and audio). They also have a website and a store where they sell their own shirts.

While this is a relaxed group, we do have a few rules that we would appreciate you follow.

1. Be respectful to everyone within and outside the group unless it's **H**
2. In regards to above, it's all fun and games so please actually do be respectful.
3. Socialize. While not technically a rule, we do encourage it. How else are you supposed to make new friends if you only lurk.
4. Feel free to create your own event in the group. Link, tweet, or post it, and we'll help advertise it whether it's a game night, mini-meet up, etc.!
5. Have fun! What's the point of being in a community group like ours if you aren't having fun?

Figure 4.10. The rules from the RT Florida group page on www.roosterteeth.com. See Appendix I for Fair Use Assessment.

Each local group or interest group can have its own set of rules in addition to the Terms of Use and Code of Conduct. RT Florida posts its rules on RoosterTeeth.com and links to them from other social media sites. These rules are featured in Figure 4.10. One interesting description is found in rule number 5, which refers to RT Florida as a "community group." Community becomes an adjective to describe a group, which points to particular ways of "doing" group according to the very rules of the group. In this analysis, I will briefly focus on the rules as a whole, but I will zoom in on rules 1 and 2 in particular because of how they work together to both be an exception and a reinforcement of the rules found in the Terms and Code posted by Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC.

As you can see, the words "respect" and "respectful" appear in the RT Florida group's rules, creating an intertextual link with the rules of RT posted in the Terms and Code. Most of these rules are written in a casual register and offer more suggestions for engagement than commands (socializing, creating events, having fun). The "we" represents the voice of the Admins and mods and the "you" represents the members they are overseeing. The rules begin with the declaration that the group is "relaxed," yet there must be rules (again, pointing to the inherent contradiction of formal rules within an environment of friendship). Rule 1 has two parts, the rule ("be respectful to everyone") and the exception ("except for H"). "H" is an RT Florida member specifically named in the rules. Rule 2 discredits the exception ("in regards to above, it's all fun and games") and reinforces part 1 of Rule 1 ("so please actually do be respectful"). The contradictions in Rule 1 and Rule 2 imply there is some wiggle room for humor, but "respect" is still reinforced.

Humor has a regulatory function (Purdie, 1993), and this example of H highlights the complexity of interactions as they relate to rules. Here, knowing the difference between a joke

and a social breach is important, and that is where metadiscourse becomes helpful, especially in this set of rules. The rules are broken within the rules, this breach is marked to highlight the rule that exists, bringing higher awareness to interactional expectations (Purdie, 1993). Here, the knowledge needed to understand the inside joke is to know who H is and why it may be OK to disrespect H, but only in a sense that is fun in nature and not making a true insult to H. This set of rules offers a different dynamic for engaging with RT community members as they involve much more of an insider status, as one would need to know more about H, localizing the humor and rules. Having the background knowledge will help members navigate contexts in which H is mentioned.

H actually is one of the members I interviewed. Through speaking with him and his friend (a fellow RT Florida member), I was able to hear the origin story of this joke which has to do with playing a video game, *Rocket League*, and how H was harassing his friend in-game, which is technically a rule breach. However, when looked at in context, it really is not. While H's friend was frustrated in-game it was considered playful and actually transformed into an inside joke that has continued to this day. While they accounted for the origin of their joke in the interviews, it is actually an origin story of the resemiotization of H.

In the initial version, which is, of course, one version as told to me in the context of the interviews, H was yelled at by his friend for specific actions. However, this mentioning shifted to blaming H for anything when hanging out as friends in the RT Florida group. These H jokes have only continued to evolve over time, two years after I first spoke with H for his interview in this project. There is even a H t-shirt (see Figure 4.11). This shirt works by way of metacommunication that has been resemiotized from the game experience (action) to his friend's reaction (discourse) to inside jokes (discourse) to a shirt (physical item). With each

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transformation, the affordances are also transformed. This shirt becomes a SoE with an embedded history. The shirt materializes community by someone wearing it, and the wearer becomes a site for production and consumption. The shirt is a physical manifestation of community, a local community group, rules, and identities. Furthermore, making fun of H is also now a way to mark insider status of RT Florida community members who are "in the know" of this running joke or that it is OK for members to make fun of H.
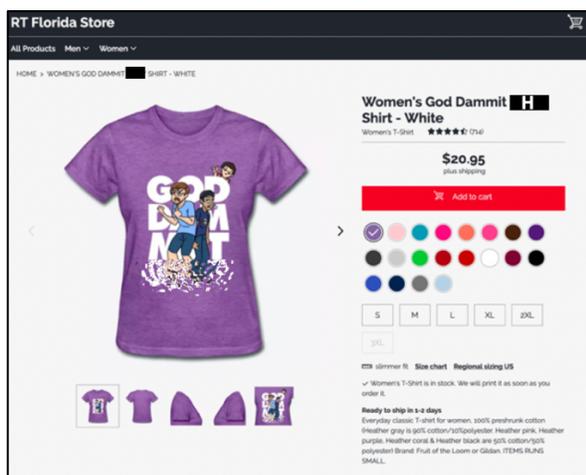
Figure 4.11. The inside-joke shirt sold in the RT Florida store for $20.95 plus shipping. Fair Use assessment in Appendix I.

Each iteration of "H" produces different enactments of rules with new affordances and constraints. In the initial verbal joke, it was a joke between the friends playing the video game. When it was brought up and used in other contexts for RT Florida, it became an inside joke for RT Florida members. The way it is recontextualized into the rules and onto a t-shirt both bring new meaning to this joke. In the rules, it is a way to mark insider status, but also highlight how there are multiple realities which can exist at once (Holmes, 2000)–ones where we make fun of people, ones where we do not. Regardless, we need to have a deep awareness of social norms and group dynamics in order to know which one is acceptable. The t-shirt is a way that RT Florida mimics Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC (think the "People Like Grapes" shirt from

Chapter 2) who also makes t-shirts based on jokes between friends. In this example, humor transforms across contexts to be used for different purposes – to both mark rules and insider status within the community.

In this example of how actions produce rules and rules produce actions, we can understand the deeply relational nature of rules, especially in smaller community groups. In the next examples from the RT Public Facebook group, I examine an ongoing discussion of what should and should not be allowed in terms of posts and actions of members in their online space. This is an example of how power dynamics play out between members. Another example follows.

"Delete if not allowed": Rules and Orders of Indexicality

The Rooster Teeth Public Facebook group, run by volunteer Admins and mods in the community, has more than 54,000 members which means there are more opportunities for people to both follow and break the rules. In observing this group, while there were many different types of posts made by members, one common genre of posts had to do with ensuring members were following the rules. Three ways by which this is carried out are: updating existing rules, reminding members of rules, and blatant violations of rules. I discuss each of these separately first and then offer a summation of how they work together as ways of authorizing and surveilling actions of community members.

Updating the rules. To update the rules means to call attention to the roles of group leaders (in this case, Admins and Mods), power relations, expectations of members, and the fact there were violators of the rules. I present an example that demonstrates how the tensions of rule enforcement are presented by different members with different roles in the group.
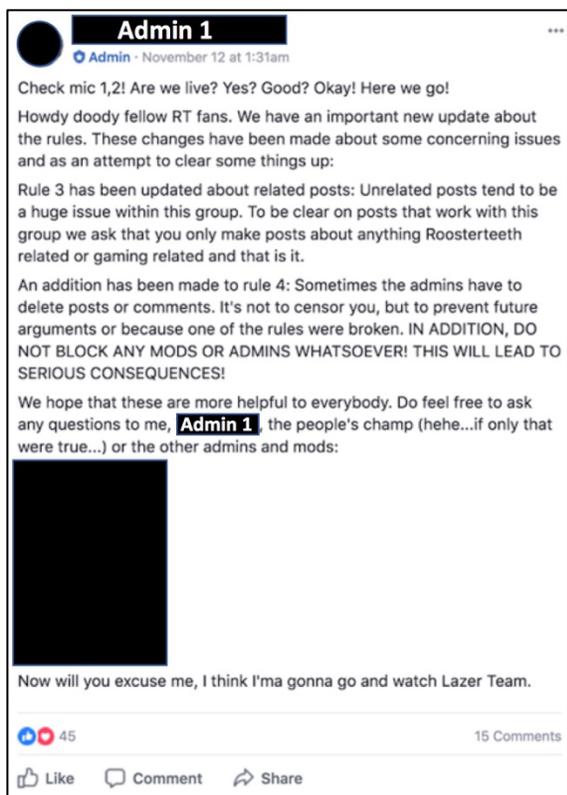
Figure 4.12. A post by Admin 1 in the RT Public Facebook group.

In Figure 4.12, we can see Admin 1's announcement of the recently revised rules. When I first observed the group and encountered this post, it was pinned, which means it was set to be the first post people will see upon entering the page. This action indicates the significance of the post through this special designation. The use of a conversational register in Figure 4.12 to begin the post is an attempt to establish solidarity between Admin 1 and the readers (Fairclough, 2010). The Admin aligns himself with his audience by calling them "fellow RT fans" preceded by a "howdy doody" as a friendly greeting. Through these actions, Admin 1 is recruiting an audience by referencing the imagined presence of others. For example, beginning the post with "Check mic 1,2! Are we live? Yes? Good? Okay! Here we go!" demonstrates a way of announcing a statement that harkens to spoken discourse, such as how someone may get the attention of a large crowd that may be distracted (referring to a traditionally face-to-face context). This serves as an

invitation to the readers to pay attention, give a response, or care about the message to follow. These types of addressivity have been found in other studies to create a sense of interactivity between reader and audience, as though the "writer is having a conversation with the reader" (Vásquez, 2015, p. 32). Here, it is an effort to generate engagement with readers, especially to get them to comply with the new rules. These metapragmatic strategies are used to get attention and an attempt to immediately connect with readers who may or may not have a relationship with or previous interactions with Admin 1. The conversational nature of this post is an attempt by the Admin to align with the RT community narrative relating to friendliness and the Terms and Code by Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC. regarding being respectful to other members.

As for the rule enforcement strategies, throughout this post are various examples of presentification, or conversation strategies to make the group's rules and the Admin "present as sources of authority" (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009, p. 7). Admin 1 presents a reason for a rule update and enacts authority as the one to give the rule update, which is that there have been "concerning issues" in the group. In addition to bringing attention to the rules, there is a further step indicating the "why" for rule 4. Admin 1 explains the role of Admins and mods in deleting posts and comments "to prevent future arguments or because the rules were broken." This justification comments on both previous action and future action. The other part of rule 4 includes a metacommunicative element because it is in all capital letters, which simultaneously indicates seriousness (or emphasis) in addition to being hyperbole (or humor through exaggeration), warning against blocking Admins or mods to avoid "SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES!" Blocking an Admin or mod is an action on Facebook that would prevent these users from seeing posts (therefore being unable to filter or delete the posts in accordance with the group's policies). The consequences are not stated here explicitly. Possible

consequences within the grasp of an Amin or mod would be to block the user from being in the group or to even flag the account for suspension by Facebook. Ultimately, the consequence would likely result in removal from this social group and being unable to participate in the conversation, which would essentially silence a member completely.

We can see Admin 1 including a humorous remark at the end of the post by saying they are "the people's champ," humor being denoted by a following "hehe…if only it were true" and then discussing his plans to watch *Lazer Team*, the first feature film created by Rooster Teeth. These comments are tactics to help the message be received by readers in a more positive way, especially after the discussion of the new and updated rules. Admin 1 indexes their own membership as a fellow RT member by referring to a RT film. By self-deprecating, Admin 1 is demonstrating the ability to self-reflect and highlight possible imperfections, which is a way to connect with other members as a form of social bonding, which is one of the purposes of humor.

This multivoiced utterance in which the Admin is speaking both as member and as someone authorized to warrant members' speech displays a delicate balance between being an authority figure and being "one of us" in the RT group. This is further evidenced through the interactions of group members on this post. Admin 1's post has 45 positive responsive uptake activities, which tell a story of how members who have seen this post either agree with the ideas posted or they have abstained from an opinion (for those that did not provide a FB reaction or comment). This is a digital form of phatic communication Varis and Blommaert (2014) call conviviality. Using the "like" button can mark a person present without having to write a response. However, no negative responsive uptake activities or comments were present in this post. While this may indicate no one had a negative reaction, it is also constrained by the Facebook platform as there is no "dislike" button. While there is an "angry" reaction option, it

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was not used by any members as a reaction to this post. A series of comments that follow this post criticizes the idea of rules in the RT community, showcasing the contested nature of overtly stated rules.

   Responding to authority through joint fictionalization. Everything Admin 1 wrote set the tone for interactions regarding the post. The very first comment is from Mod 1 and simply says, "#offended" (Figure 4.13).

Figure 4.13. Comments responding to the post in Figure 4.12. From RT Facebook group.

The use of a hashtag is a type of referential communication because the word with the "#" in front of it becomes a link to posts also using that hashtag. Hashtags can indicate a trending topic and links the word to similar posts. This use of a hashtag is humorous because it stands alone without other text, is made by a mod (another authority figure in the group) and is a mockery of the affordance of a hashtag as though the Admin's post was related to an issue or trend of being offended. Because Mod 1 is one of the most active moderators on the site and his job is to enforce the rules, and he would not likely be offended by them, this is an example of irony. Instead, the response double-voices a possible reaction by a member (being offended) by the rules. This comment highlights the complexity of situated humor. There are many orders of indexicality here, as this commentary is metacommunication (commenting on what other people might hypothetically say) about metacommunication (talking about the rules) about metacommunication (the rules).

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The first comment underneath the "#offended" comment (Figure 4.13) begins a thread of comments that become a joint fictionalization (Tsakona, 2018) of extreme reactions to offended members. This comment adds yet another meta-level to the conversation, "Arrest this rebel scum and have the firing squad ready!" This comment is made by Admin 1 and is a reference to *Star Wars* (the comment refers to an iconic line from the movies) and is indicating an obviously exaggerated reaction to the use of the "#offended" hashtag. This exchange demonstrates Mod 1 and Admin 1 are hyper-aware of their roles to enforce the rules and how people may react to having restrictions. Further, they are exerting power through humor (Holmes, 2000) by using humor as a way to make fun of people who easily get upset by rule enforcement. This is a tension the "keepers of the rules" (Admins and mods on Facebook) must contend with, one they address through jokes. Of course, the intertextual reference to Star Wars assumes knowledge of this reference for people to understand and engage with this comment, which makes this exchange accessible to people who have knowledge of the *Star Wars* storyline.

Purdie (1993) discusses how jokes simultaneously breach rules and reinforce them. Humor can be used to mark a transgression because here, humor points to how the rule exists, bringing greater awareness to norms. The audience also must know it is a rule that exists for the breach to have humorous value to them. The audience (imagined or real) plays an important role in the success of the humor. The enjoyment in partaking in jokes is that there is a "'forbidden / permitted' expression of hostility (as a recognized Symbolic breach)" (Purdie, 1993, p. 43). Here, the Admins and mods are both contesting and reinforcing the rules by mocking people who would contest them. This is also an example of the Admin and mods "laughing 'with'" themselves (Purdie, 1993, p. 14). They are making jokes within the framework of their own authority.

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This introduction of the *Star Wars* reference becomes an additional invitation to participate in this conversation and it does not end with the single comment in Figure 4.13. However, this invitation for participation is only really extended to members who can follow the message. Humor is only understood in context, and while in-group members may find something hilarious, the meaning may be out of reach for people outside of the group, thus creating boundaries for who belongs and who does not (Hay, 2000; Holmes, 2000). This is heightened when rarefied references are used (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017c). Communication between RT members often includes rarefied references and humor. One such example can be found in the GIF below in Figure 4.14. As the intention is for this document you are reading to be printed or posted in the PDF file format in a university repository for dissertations, I am, sadly, not embedding any GIFs (moving images) into my dissertation. So, you, dear reader, will have to bear with me as you piece together a recreation of the GIF through the image in Figure 35 and the description I provide. The representation of this GIF has become multimodal and resemiotized for the purposes of this dissertation.

Figure 4.14. Comments responding to the post in Figure 4.12. From RT Facebook group.

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The GIF I am referring to is from a key scene from *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*, posted by Member 1 with the text: "Execute Order 66!" (Figure 4.14).   This is a reference when Clone Troopers, allies of the Jedi (the heroes of the story), turn against the Jedi at the hand of Emperor Palpatine (the villain) who secretly programmed the Clone Troopers (a very large army originally given to the Jedi) since their genetic laboratory creation. Of course, only someone who is familiar with the *Star Wars* movies would understand how this is a reference to a devastating moment as the Clone Troopers commit genocide against the Jedi.

Now, if you were not familiar with this franchise fairly intimately, you may not be able to glean all of that from the GIF which is simply a brief clip from the film showing people in white and black armor shoot an alien-like figure with a glowing stick (for those in the know, it is Clone Troopers shooting at a Jedi with a lightsaber, which is highly contextual as outlined above). Engagement in the Facebook exchange is contingent upon prior knowledge of *Star Wars* lore and the ability to identify the reference and making it relevant to the current situation about rules and authority in the RT Facebook group. All of this is an example of resemiotization, where members change the meaning of this popular culture moment (a scene in a film) as a way to talk about authority, membership, and community.

We can see the continuation of community bonding and the bolstering of community narratives of participation and friendliness through how when Admin 1 posts "I AM THE SENATE!" in response to the GIF (Figure 4.14). He is playing along with the online joint fictionalization (Tsakona, 2018) where members are building a story of an extreme fiction of the power of an Admin over other members. Further, the use of the *Star Wars* reference is important because this response by Admin 1 only makes sense only if one were to know this is a piece of dialogue from the Emperor in the *Star Wars* film where the villain legally declares total control

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of the galaxy through political manipulation. With this knowledge, we can see that humor is

being used as a tool whereby someone can appear to be friendly while enacting power, and it can

be used by others to challenge this same power in a way that is socially acceptable (Holmes,

2000). Additionally, it targets this message to members who are also *Star Wars* fans. When

sharing in jokes that contain privileged information, dynamics can shift, reinforcing

commonality between the jokers and also "marking a social boundary between them and the

other participants" (Hay, 2000, p. 210).

Using this reference, members, moderators, and the Admin are indexing their roles in the

group and discussing the very power structure in the RT Public Facebook group. Admin 1 is

making a commentary about his figure as an authority, displaying awareness of this and of how

others may view his actions. This exchange is recontextualizing the idea of power and control in

this Facebook group. By declaring the rules and consequences, Admin 1 is making a judgment

call that will impact all users (such as the Emperor makes a call that impacts everyone in the

galaxy). However, Admin 1 is not fighting this comparison, rather colluding with RT members

to further "play it out" as he simultaneously makes light of this power while executing it with

firm rules. The initial post about rule updates has turned into a community-building humorous

exchange between Admins, mods, and members.

Figure 4.15. Comment responding to the post in Figure 4.12. From RT Facebook group.

In addition to the Star Wars references, members also had other reactions to the

"#offended" comment. Member 2 posts, "Being offended is not RT-related. Demoted. Banned"

(Figure 4.15). Since this user was neither an Admin or mod, this is an example of mimicry or double-voicing of what an Admin or mod may say to someone breaking the rules, which is even more ironic since it was a mod that made the "#offended" post. This post is commenting on the "#offended" post, which was also a double-voicing of a "member" offended by the rules. Here, the double-voicing examples are an extension of this fictionalization that people are offended by the moderator's posting, helping generate fellowship by building on each other's ideas. With this, regular members and the members with authority (mods/Admins) have double-voiced each other. This is a form of textual play and humor where roles are inverted and it becomes a resource for social connections and camaraderie (Taylor & Raskin, 2012, p. 136). The discussion of rules becomes a way to enact community, which includes friendship.

Genuine questions and rules. In response to the rule update, some asked sincere questions, such as the exchange found in Figure 4.16. The question being asked implies a moral judgment where "support" is seen as an important tacit rule of community, which is tied to the community narratives. Member 3 asks about a cultural practice that could supersede the explicit rules. This member is asking about the explicit rules and clarification to reinforce her understanding of the idea of "community" or "family" (in this case, being supportive of one another) which is also a part of the description in the rules of the RT group. Mod 2 responds with a post that indicates "it all depends" on the situation, which directly confirms the community norm (as indicated in the group description) of closeness, community, and family that may have the power to override the explicitly stated rules. Also, it indicates that all participation is negotiable for what is acceptable. The more knowledge a member has (which can be accrued over time through more participation) and the more frequently one participates, the more a member can know if a post is an acceptable breach of the rules.

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Figure 4.16. Comments responding to the post in Figure 4.12. From RT Facebook group.

Both of the comments in this interaction in Figure 4.16 received a few "likes" by other

members, which indicate positive agreement and acknowledgment (there were no "angry"

reactions present). This exchange points to the importance of community narratives more than

explicitly stated rules. Essentially if you are being supportive and kind to another member, you

can likely post something non-RT related without facing punitive measures. Community and

protecting the idea of community seem to override any particular rule, which also reminds us that

rules change all the time. The reason this question was even asked was regarding a recent rule

update. Rules are fluid and will have to change as members, community spaces, and norms

adapt over time. Rules are a resource to protect community, not stall it from growing.

Rule reminders (or meta-metacommunication). In this next section, I focus on how

members sometimes remind other members to not violate the rules. One rule, in particular, is

concerned about preventing negative actions. This is Rule 8 in Figure 4.17 and is the specific

rule regarding "spoilers" (ruining plotlines before others have had a chance to watch the original

content themselves). This rule is written in all capital letters, emphasizing the severity of this

breach. Only two rules are in all caps, so this too indicates this is one of the top two rules, even

though it is not listed at the top.

Figure 4.17. Rule #8 posted in the RT Facebook group's description. See Appendix I for Fair
Use Assessment.

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Additionally, there are multiple levels of "no" listed in this rule: first "no spoilers," second "by any means," and third "for any." Through this, we can surmise this rule, in particular, emphasizes how much members should avoid this action. Also, we can see different levels of "meta" happening as members are being reminded to follow (metacommunication) the rules (metacommunication).

As mentioned before, a popular show produced by RT is the anime-style web series, *RWBY*. Just before the premiere of the fifth season, there were many posts by members asking for "no spoilers" (see example in Figure 4.18). One user makes use of the specialty backgrounds afforded by the Facebook platform used as a semiotic resource to indicate a large red, painted "X" on a black background, visually signaling and supporting a message of, "do not do this." The post is directed at "First members," RT subscribers who have early access to content, to not spoil the premiere of the show for people who are fans, but who do not pay for membership. Most of RT's content is free, with early access given to First members. This language by Member 4 highlights discourses of access and privilege of different levels of RT membership paid and nonpaid (I take up these ideas in Chapter 5).

Figure 4.18. A post about RWBY spoilers in the RT Public Facebook group.

The user who posted this message is not listed as an Admin or moderator for the group. Therefore, this person is advocating for the community as a member, and attempting to police actions of others, which is a response to the call for action in the Code posted by RT. The response to this message had high positive engagement through responsive uptake activities (Varis & Blommaert, 2014) reacting to this post (129 "like," 18 "love," and 3 "laugh"), the 58 comments, and one share. This large volume of interaction signals that several members are supportive of this post.

The message specifically addresses the First members, and the post creates a division between first and non-first members. However, to play down this idea of separate "classes" or hierarchy of membership, the poster uses "non firsties" as a nickname. This tactic of using a diminutive to refer to the "other" group indicates subtle condescension. Member 4 did not use "firsties" to denote First members, but Member 4 did use "non firsties" to indicate non-First members. In terms of the rules being addressed, "don't spoil" is the call to action here, and metadiscursive element at play—what is and is not allowed to be said.

Figure 4.19. Screenshots of a GIF comment in response to the post from Figure 4.16. See Appendix I for Fair Use Assessment.

None of the comments below the parent post spoil the plot of the season premiere of *RWBY*. One reaction tactic from members was about comments that actually are spoilers for plot lines for other popular shows, but not *RWBY*. One example is a GIF created from a RT vine (short video) featuring RT personalities. The GIF begins with an image of RT celebrity, Barbara, talking to fellow RT personalities, Burnie and Gavin, and asking them to look at the new spoiler she got for the back of her car (see Figure 4.19). The spoiler on a car is designed to help with the aerodynamic performance, 'spoiling' unfavorable air movement across a vehicle. Instead, there are letters on the back of her car stating "SNAPE KILLS DUMBLEDORE" which is a spoiler for the *Harry Potter* book and movie series. The concept of multimodal "punning" is at play here where a double meaning is generated from the polysemy of the word "spoiler" (Priego-Valverde, 2016). Barbara's signature personality quirk is her love of puns. This was a very strategic GIF to select for many reasons. This particular GIF indexes a fairly dedicated RT membership for being able to think of and grab this GIF as a response to this posting which addresses the RT community directly because it includes RT celebrities. It is a way of responding to the serious post with a RT GIF, which both makes a joke and indexes membership. This makes this GIF much more strategic than any other random GIF about spoilers – if it was not Barb, Burnie, and Gavin, but other non-RT people, the GIF would not have the same effect.

Blatant violation of rules. This final example is about blatant violations of the rules or rule violations in action. In Figure 4.20, where a member uses the phrase "take down if not allowed" to begin the post.

Figure 4.20. Post breaking rules and comments from RT Public Facebook group.

Iterations of this metadiscursive prefacing such as "delete if not allowed," places the

responsibility on others as they are calling in prior knowledge others may have, are used many

times by members in this Facebook group and in others. Usually, the post to follow is an

obvious violation of the group rules. These statements are presumably addressed to the group's

Admins. In the following example, Member 9 places the responsibility of knowledge of the

rules and enforcement of the rules on group Admins. This post was never taken down during the

observation period.

Figure 4.21. Rule #12 posted in RT Public Facebook group description. See Appendix I for
Fair Use Assessment.

The request that follows the statement in Figure 4.2 addressed presumably to the Admins

is in direct violation of rule 12 in the group's description (Figure 4.21). The rule states not to ask

for free items, and Xbox Gold subscriptions are included in the rule specifically. There is only one "like" on this post, and three follow up comments. All of the comments are dismissive of this post or are sarcastic. The first commenter, Member 10, says a directive, "save money," denoting annoyance and sarcasm. Member 10 provides the obvious solution for this person to obtain Xbox Gold cards: the cards cost money, so get money (currently $60 for 12 months or you can purchase them for 1, 3, or 6-month periods). Member 11 is also sarcastic by starting off with a "yea" to indicate the obviousness of the following idea: "people are going to use Xbox gold cards." Xbox is a popular gaming system to play with friends, and in order to play with friends (unless you are on the same console, which is very rare for games to be designed to be played on the same console anymore), you have to have an Xbox Gold subscription. Therefore, it is most likely people would not have any spare redemption codes because of the practicality of the membership for consistent gamers, as well as the expense in maintaining a membership. The other comment mentions how two-week trial cards can be obtained (sometimes stashed in new games or offered as a promotion).

There is a lack of interaction with this post compared to most of the posts on the group page as a whole. The three comments on this post seem to dismiss the initial poster and / or be unhelpful in nature. This blatant violation of the rules by the original poster did not seem to yield Member 9 any additional social capital, and instead Member 9 is mocked through sarcasm. In other cases of blatant rule violation such as self-promotion, there were no comments or responsive uptake activities, and these posts had no interaction with members. The relative silence on these types of posts, with average posts in the group usually receiving 15 or more comments, seems to indicate that this type of post is not what users want to interact with, making it obvious that this is an inappropriate post, although, no one explicitly cites the rules in this case.

The post is just a solicitation for free things and did not generate any playful punning, GIFs, memes, joint fictionalizations or otherwise. This post is the opposite of a window for community-making, which makes it generally unappealing to engage with.

A Brief Discussion of Surveillance and Policing

The data I selected thus far from the RT Florida Facebook group and the Rooster Teeth Public Facebook group have exemplified how rules become a premise for authorizing (and negotiating the authority) of the propriety of members' conduct. Rules can even help foster opportunities (SoE) to perpetuate narratives of friendship and community. The common thread running through all of the previous examples is how members are in a constant state of surveillance and self-policing. This is apparent through the constant metacommunicative (multi-layered) way people are talking about their own actions and the actions of others through community group rule sets and social media posts. All of this intertextually relates back to the Code of Conduct and Terms of Use where members are encouraged to police themselves and others. This means members are constantly under surveillance, not just by people in positions of official authority, but by one another.

Surveillance is a practice of maintaining power through information (Lyon, 1994). With the enhancement of technologies providing more and more opportunities for more data collection surveillance has become "a central feature of modernity" (Lyon, 1994, p. 37). Since Lyon's writings technology has expanded to the point where surveillance has taken on an entirely new proliferation in our lives and the extent to which is very difficult to measure (Andrejevic, 2008). While I believe the popular conversation on data and privacy is an important and concerning topic, the focus of my discussion on surveillance will be specific to how it plays a role in rule-keeping in the RT community.

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Surveillance applies to online and physical spaces in the RT community. This surveillance does not stop with Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC staff and / or any monitoring technologies they may or may not employ. Andrejevic (2008) discusses how digital spaces are especially conducive to facilitating both commercial and peer-to-peer surveillance. This has been exemplified in Terms of Use and Code of Conduct and the call to action for members to report any wrongdoings. Also, in the Rooster Teeth public Facebook group, members can remark on each other's posts to surveil their actions as acceptable or not.

Further, through the examples provided in this chapter, we have seen how members participate and uphold self-surveillance or self-policing, which is how people keep themselves in check. The rules are a way of guiding how to self-police by being told which actions are acceptable or not. However, rules only have power if there are consequences that matter to individuals. In the case of RT, the consequences are of not being able to participate. Therefore, the best way for the RT community to keep itself in check is to upkeep the value of participation and the idea it is special. This is where community narratives bring greater value to the rules.

Thus, contrary to a top-down understanding of rules as authority or structure, enforcement is distributed among the community, which transcends traditional notions of structure. Policing of the rules can happen by members to other members, by members to themselves, by member Admins and moderators to other members, by RT staff, by social media outlets outside of RT, and by actual police or security. However, the fact that rules are distributed does not mean that their distribution is symmetrical. Through the disguise of conversationalized language (Fairclough, 2010), ideologies of the community narrative related to friendliness are protected at the same time that rules are enforced. This helps solve the dilemma of "keeping people in line" and "keeping people happy." The Terms and Code are resources for

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local or interest group Admins and moderators to use in rule enforcement. Protecting the rules becomes a way of protecting the community.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined how rules have to be justified so people will want to follow them. They are a way to orient members to particular types of participation in community. Rules are the premise for mediated action and can ban people, be the premise for jokes, make people account for actions, and more. Rules can be written in legalese, translated to the common language, include inside jokes (think H), and they can change over time. Additionally, rules become evidence of existing tensions because even a big group of friends can get out of control and precautions (rules) and handling negative actions (addressing and / or taking action against rule-breakers) are inevitable elements of community. Most of all, rules are the formal recognition that there are community narratives, and therefore, values of the community. The tension lies in how the rules simultaneously recognize community narratives *and* the need to regulate behaviors of members that have been negative in the past, that are currently negative, and predictably will be negative in the future. In other words, while RT narratives are about friendship, positivity, and community, members do not always act in ways that support these narratives, as I have witnessed in my fieldwork and heard about through my interviews.

The Terms of Use, Code of Conduct, and individual group rules are in place to protect the moral order of the community and are created and used as tools to guide interactions, and therefore protect community narratives. Community narratives are tools used to help people want to follow the rules. Rules and community narratives produce and reproduce one another. Everyone in the RT community is held accountable for keeping the rules. Members can be self-appointed voices of authority if they are protecting the rules of the community. There are many

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strategies for regulating and negotiating member actions. Above all, the rules are the undercurrent for each SoE RT community members will engage with, as they can always be held accountable by themselves, by others, and by outside authority figures for their actions. Rules open up windows for interaction, as well. They are the reason to talk to someone (e.g., RT Florida's rules are mostly about engaging with members), important aspects of humorous discussions (e.g., RT Facebook joint fictionalization), and also offer opportunities for social bonding and community making, which perpetuates community.

Humor is one strategy for enforcing and negotiating rules, especially when members take on volunteer authority roles. Silverstein's (2003) orders of indexicality help us understand just how "meta" members go regarding a discussion of rules and actions. Rule enforcement is not purely authoritative, as members will police other members and police themselves. We are always in a state of surveillance if we participate in a community because the community involves people other than ourselves. We can be watched at live events, and photos and videos can be taken of us. Alternatively, our posts can live forever in a variety of social media posts. Figure 4.22 displays some of the elements that converge to create SoE regarding the rules of RT.
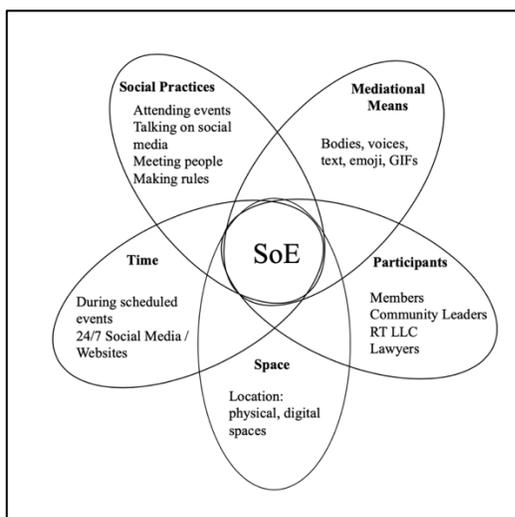
Figure 4.22. SoE Example regarding RT community rules. Created by author.

In Figure 4.23, I depict how the rules take place within the narrative of community. I also added an oval which intersects with the Narrative of Community circle but also is outside of it. This I have label as "Popular Culture," which can include many things, but one of the examples I prominently focused on in this chapter was Star Wars popular culture.
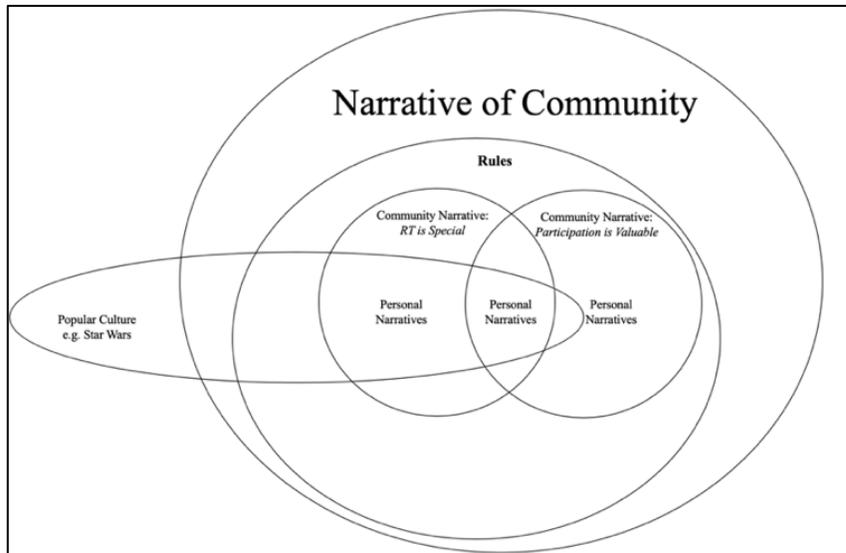
Figure 4.23. Relation of rules to narrative of community. Created by author.

In the final analytical chapter, I shift my focus to the different markers of membership used by RT community members. While rules are the formal realization of community narratives, demarcation of membership performs narratives of membership while leveraging different types of displays of capital (economic, cultural, and social). Markers of membership are a way of examining the ways community is commodified.

CHAPTER FIVE:

MARKERS OF MEMBERSHIP

My husband, Joshua, and I are eating artisanal tacos at a little restaurant attached to the Hilton in Downtown Austin. Joshua nods his head toward an adjacent table and says, "That's Michael and Lindsay. We should catch them on the way out."

I see the two RT celebrities sitting across from us, and say, "Yeah. That's so cool."

Other patrons of the restaurant with RTX lanyards draped around their necks notice the presence of the two RT stars, and five photoshoots, one after the next, occur within inches of our dining table.

After finishing their meal, we ask the Joneses for a picture, and they graciously oblige.

"Sorry we kept interrupting your lunch," Michael says.

"No worries," Joshua says.

"It's great to meet you. Thank you for all the great content," I say.

"No, thank you for watching, I wouldn't have a job without you," Lindsay says.

We take pictures with them and then part ways.

Figure 5.1. RTX 2017 personal photos. Me (left) and Joshua (right) with Lindsay and Michael Jones of Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC. Photo Release Appendix F.

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In the pictures (Figure 5.1), you can see the tight space the restaurant afforded for standing between tables. Visible in the photo are the lanyards everyone but Michael was wearing, marking our attendance at RTX. The badges Joshua and I wore designated us as "VIPs" and Lindsay's distinguished her as one of the event's talent and staff. In the picture, Joshua, Michael, and I are wearing RT shirts representing different allegiances to brands within RT (Heroes and Halfwits, Achievement Hunter, and the Barbara Dunkelman Collection, respectively). Through this story, I have showcased many ways of displaying membership, furthering community, and producing and consuming RT. Additionally, this example represents all four categories of what I will call *markers of membership,* or resources for displaying and performing membership. The exchange we had with Michael and Lindsay also points to the complexities of community and the dilemmas members must navigate regarding the commodification of community.

In this chapter, I look at the role of markers of membership play in (re)creating the RT community. Additionally, I examine the tensions and dilemmas regarding commodity-cum-community. First, I will discuss my theoretical approach for this chapter. Then, I define and describe the different markers of membership and provide an analysis of their role in

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community-making. I conclude with a discussion on the production and consumption of markers of membership.

Theories of Capital, Theories of Elitism, Theories of Community

Bourdieu (1986) outlined three types of capital: economic, cultural, and social. Economic capital has to do with monetary value. Cultural capital has to do with knowledges, skills, personal style, etc. which help identify you as "belonging" to a group or groups. Social capital has to do with connections and relationships. Both cultural and social capital have the potential to convert into economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), and this happens frequently in the RT community. In the examples that follow, I examine these different types of capital as they apply to markers of membership.

In my analysis, I draw on the work of Thurlow and Jaworski (2017a; 2017b; 2017c; 2011) who examine super-elite travel culture, as I found close parallels with their work and my own. By examining the ways members mark themselves within the community as "preferred" or higher status members, I extend Thurlow and Jaworski's (2017a; 2017b; 2017c) ideas about how we mark ourselves as exclusives, that is, to the exclusion of other members. What distinguishes my work from theirs is how I see narratives and the commodification of community also producing friendships and supportive relationships. By way of markers of membership, I analyze the dilemmatic relationship between community and commodity, the cycle of production and consumption, and how it at once stands at odds and engenders (narratives of) community and friendship.

Examining Markers of Membership

I draw the phrase *markers of membership* from Thurlow and Jaworski's (2017c) mention of privilege and status markers that demonstrate "how to desire, consume, and perform to attain a

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privileged status or elite persona" (p. 186). For my study, I define *markers of membership* as resources for displaying and performing membership to index one's cultural capital within a specific group. For RT, markers of membership are used to display and perform membership to one's self, other members, and outsiders. Markers of membership can be digital (e.g., icons on websites, photographs), tangible (e.g., shirts, RTX badges), or spatial (e.g., a geographical location, or special lines).

Markers of membership have to do with what Lash and Lury (2007) call the "culturification of industry" (p. 9) whereby "goods become informational, work becomes affective, property becomes intellectual and the economy more generally becomes cultural. Culture, once in the base, itself takes on a certain materiality. Media become things. Images and other cultural forms from the superstructure collapse into the materiality of the infrastructure where media and things come together" (p. 7). In the case of RT, community becomes a commodity (and vice versa), pictures become narratives of community, and shirts become aspects of our identities. In the following sections, I will review examples of the following categories of markers of membership important to the RT community: physical locations, artifacts, purchasable memberships and passes, and photographs.

Physical Locations

Physical locations serve as symbolic markers of membership, enabling us to transform everyday spaces into spaces of distinction (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017b). I will provide an example of the importance of physical locations for local community groups and then discuss the importance of the RT convention, RTX, as it relates to physical locations.

Localizing community. Most of the 50+ community groups within the RT community are tied to a geographic location such as a state, city, region, or country (e.g., RT Florida). The

geographically-defined groups afford opportunities for face-to-face interaction among members via in-person meetups. These sub-affiliations based on geolocation create opportunities for RT community members to have markers of membership regarding their allegiances to their local community group. Like sports teams, local community groups sometimes have rivalries, although for RT these competitions take the form of video game matches or charity fundraisers. Although competition is present, so too is cooperation among the local entities. Established groups, leaders, and members who have a lot of cultural capital regarding local community groups will support newer groups and their leaders who are just getting started

To make oneself physically present at a local group event is a marker of a type of membership and identity. Furthermore, this investment of time builds social capital by increasing one's own social network. The spaces members use can become temporary markers of membership. There is nothing necessarily inherently valuable in spaces, as "the meanings of spaces are established by the way they are represented and by the nature of social interactions that take place within them" (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2011, p. 363).

While my present focus is on physical locations, as I have stated before, digital and physical locations overlap or are entangled with one another in ways we just cannot separate. For example, in-person meetups are usually organized digitally through invitations either through messaging services, Facebook events, email, or other digital resources. In the following example, I will focus on how digital and physical spaces work together in creating a SoE for community members. In this example, during her first interview with me, Y talks about her first meetup with the RT Florida community. In her account, she features both the digital and physical spaces that brought her to that moment of engagement:

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Extract 5.1

121 Y: So, um so like I went by myself and I was so nervous. And then K like, he,

122   like, opened the door. He's like, "Oh, you RT Florida?" And I was like "Yeees."

123   And he's like "I recognized you because the green hair" and I'm like, "Hiii."

124 A: (laughs)

125 Y: And like, I don't know, everybody was chill and it was cool and we like played

126   laser tag and like did the Whirly Dome stuff and and no it was just like it was just

127   like I didn't feel like I belonged. But, like just like someone opened door and was

128   just like, hey, like it's okay to feel like you have a place to just, like, kind of be

129   with people you don't even know that you could just get to know because you

130   have something in common.

Notice how Y uses indirect reported speech (Buttny, 2004) to presentify the speakers who

welcomed into the space (lines 127-130). She repeats the words "just" and "like" which are used

to produce a conversational register (as she is speaking to a fellow member). These words also

interrupt her performance of indirect reported speech which serves as a way to emphasize her

(re)telling. Y also came back to this small story later in the interview:

Extract 5.2

330 Y: I'm really attached to K like because he was a person who opened the door

331   and, like, I don't think he even realizes how much like that made a difference in

332   my life. Like, I was about to leave like I was so scared that I was I was just like,

333   I'm just going to go home like this is this is too scary. And then he just opened the

334   door and was like, "Welcome!" And I'm just like, ahhh this is it for me. I now

335   have to go in.

While there is much to unpack in Y's account of her first meetup with RT Florida, I want to

focus on how she describes why she decided to walk into the building. Notice how she shifts

from a question to a proclamation in her double-voicing of K from one phrase "Oh, you, RT

Florida?" (line 122) to "Welcome!" (line 334) in the second iteration of the story. She is now

double-voicing a version of K that underscores his positivity and welcoming actions, which tie to

the community narrative of friendship. What is important in these extracts from Y is what she

chooses to focus on, which is a repetition of this idea of a door opening, both a physical door and

a symbolic door.
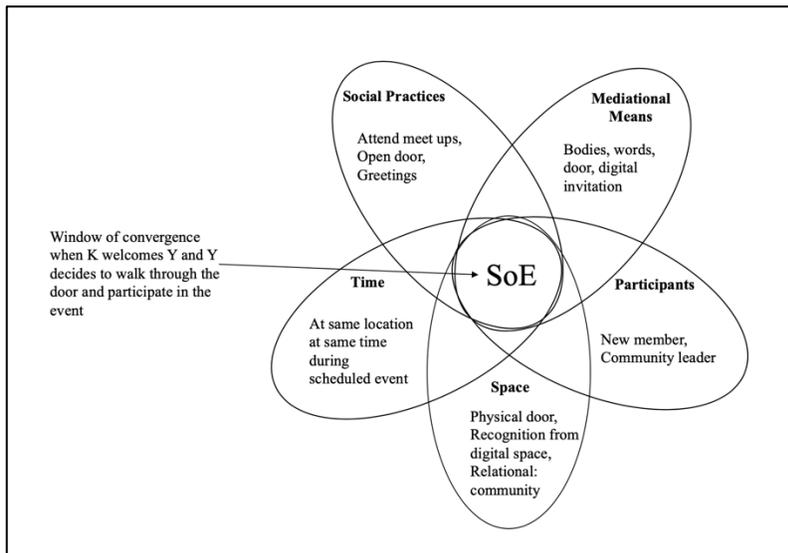
Figure 5.2. SoE diagram of Y and K at RT Florida community meetup. Created by author.

In Figure 5.2, I share a diagram of the SoE as described by Y in her interview. In Y's

account of participation in her first meetup with the RT Florida community, she describes

physical location and action as important elements of why she decided to engage. The *social*

practices involved are attending meetups, opening doors, and greeting people when they arrive.

Mediational means are their bodies, words, the building/door, and the digital invitation to the

event that let her know the event was happening, and also the vehicle that allowed her to travel to

the location of the event. The *actions* Y attends to in her description of events are the friendliness of K through his welcoming of her to the location and his physical opening of the door. The *participants* are Y, a new member to a meetup and K, the ambassador, or community leader. Both identify as RT community members. Many *spaces* overlap for this SoE: the relational RT community space, the physical space of the building and the door, and the digital space which allowed K to recognize Y by her hair color. *Time* is relevant because the meet up was set to happen at a specific time, but also how K was the one to greet Y, where if he was otherwise occupied with ordering food or using the restroom, he may not have been there to greet her and the event may have unfolded differently. Also, the story is a way to re-experience a past event for the performative purpose of the interview, and this time, I am a part of it, too. Within our interview SoE, she brings me with her back to the same point in time to relive this experience

Though I understand Y's account as a candidate version of events (Roulston, 2001), the details she chooses are a way to recruit me in securing a version of RT where the community is welcoming. Having a positive attachment to a local community group becomes part of one's overall RT community member identity. Through her experience at a physical location (meetup), and attachment to RT Florida (a group attached to a geographical location), Y now has new social and cultural capital to draw from in her interactions with RT community members. This includes how she tapped into those resources in constructing her account for me in this interview. In the next section, I take a step back and look at how a larger community gathering affords different markers of membership.

RTX. I now turn to another aspect of physical location which affords many resources for displaying and performing membership. While RT's roots are on the Internet, they are also

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bound geographically as *RvB*, the first RT production, was created by a group of friends in Austin, Texas. This geographic location has become symbolically associated with the RT community and the production company. There have been several office locations for RT in Austin and many fans will tour through Austin to see them. When I first went to RTX in Austin, my husband and I went with a group of friends from Florida. We were unable to get to Austin early, but our friends did and took the extra time to locate and find the old offices, taking pictures at each location. This is a common ritual among community members. Austin remains the primary physical location associated with RT even with their associated offices in Los Angeles. Therefore, visiting this location and knowing its value become cultural capital for members and resources for performing membership by talking about Austin.

The most important annual event for the RT community is their convention, RTX, which always occurs in Austin, the first taking place in 2011. There has been an RTX in Austin every year since and has grown from 500 attendees to 62,000 (Francisco, 2019). This yearly gathering is tied to this geographic location. In Figure 5.3, you can see a banner in Downtown Austin, which I took a photograph of in 2017 when I was visiting for RTX. This banner marks the physical territory for RTX, RT, and the community and serves as a marker RT puts out for members to identify with.

Figure 5.3. Banner in Downtown Austin during the week of RTX 2017. Author's personal photo.

RTX takes place at the Austin Convention Center as well as surrounding hotels, and the event offers opportunities to attend panels discussing RT content, shows, or ideas about gaming, animation, and media production. There are also a variety of vendors present: artists, gaming companies, and technology manufacturers. Among the biggest perks for community members is having the opportunity to meet the RT celebrities, as well as other community members you may have only ever interacted with through digital spaces. Even if a member cannot attend RTX, it still serves as an ideological physical space for members.

The idea of RTX and being able to attend is a common conversation among RT members. Before we could afford to go to RTX, my husband and I would muse about our goal of making it there "one day." Talking about RTX in this way is a way of recreating the RT community, making SoE for others to share their stories or ideas of attendance or longing to attend. This becomes woven into our identities as members, understanding attending RTX as being one of the ultimate forms of performing membership. Even if one cannot go, one should *desire* to go.

For example, how RTX is spoken about by members is one of the ultimate ways to index the narrative of community, uplifting its importance in the eyes of other members. For example, RT World (2018b) writes a blog post, "Every year since 2011, thousands of us have made the journey to the proverbial mecca known as RTX. We gather in shock and awe and celebrate the sense of belonging and acceptance, telling ourselves that these are our PEOPLE!!" Here a reference to Mecca, Islam's holiest city, is made. Mecca is also a location associated with a traditional pilgrimage and it is expected for each person to complete at least once in their lifetime if they are of the Islamic faith, it is one of the most important acts in this faith (Pilgrimage to Mecca, 2018). RTX as compared to a most holy religious place and the respective journey is a bold statement, but may be experienced by members this way. This way of speaking about the

RT community underscores the parallels belonging to the RT community as a quasi-religious experience. Interestingly, this type of religious reference to "Mecca" has been used by members of other fandom communities which is tied to a specific location and event, specifically *Star Trek* fans (Jindra, 1994). The metaphor of Mecca makes the journey to RTX more than just an annual gathering of members, but a significant experience of one's membership (faith) in the RT community (religion).

Talking about RTX and physically being there are two very different experiences. When my husband and I finally went in 2014, we were not just watching from afar as everyone shared stories of RTX, we were a *part* of the experience. Going to RTX has much to do with some of the other markers of membership I will discuss shortly. For now, I want to emphasize how having a physical location to point to, talk about, visit, or desire to visit that is associated with the narrative of community, serves as an important symbolic resource for making community and for members to perform their membership and identities.

Artifacts

I define artifacts as tangible objects that are symbolic of RT. This could be anything from merchandise (e.g., t-shirts, hoodies, blankets, cups, plushies, lanyards, posters, etc.) to objects I could make myself, such as fan art, jewelry, clothing, etc. There is something to be said about the physical nature of artifacts and what happens when we interact with them, wear them, or display them. Price, Jewitt, and Brown (2013) claim "the materiality of modes also connects with the body and its senses, that in turn place the physical and sensory at the heart of meaning" (para. 17). Physically touching an item is different than watching it on a virtual screen. However, these items only have value in a cultural sense. These artifacts acquire symbolic value "that transformed in the social lives of persons they metonym" (Agha, 2011, p. 46). When a

member wears a RT shirt, it is not *just* a shirt, but a way to index belonging, friendship, and community. The shirt has indexical meanings regarding alliances (such as a local community group or a brand within RT), values (community narratives), and therefore morality and beliefs.

The images featured in Figure 5.1 at the opening of this chapter showcases different shirts that my husband, Michael, and I are wearing. Not only are these markers of membership to RT, but also each shirt indexes our identities as members. Michael works in the Achievement Hunter branch of RT, and he is wearing an Achievement Hunter shirt, which makes sense, especially since his shirt features a phrase he was part of the creation of. Joshua is wearing a Heroes and Halfwits shirt, which is representative of a Dungeons and Dragons show hosted by RT. I am wearing a geometric owl shirt, which was designed by Barbara Dunkleman. Each of these shirts identifies different allegiances, preferences, and identities we are claiming. In essence, wearing these shirts is a performance of belonging and very specific types of belonging.

When members wear or have on their person artifacts, it can serve as a signal to other members that they like RT and can open up SoE. When attending a local RT screening event in Fort Myers in 2016 at a local theater, another RT member flagged down my husband and I to say hello because he noticed our RT shirts we were wearing. Our bodies can become walking billboards for our membership and identities. The shirt opened up a SoE where this stranger felt comfortable introducing himself and we felt like engaging with him further. If one is aware of the narrative that to be in the community is to be friendly, and the artifacts (shirts) were a symbol that we would likely be friendly, and therefore approachable. Members who wear artifacts or display artifacts are also performing our level of dedication to the community as we have spent money and have decided to incorporate RT into our own identities. Artifacts are a significant nonverbal way of communicating about one's personal preferences and allegiances.

Purchasable Memberships & Passes

Another category of markers of membership involves purchasable memberships and event passes. I first examine RTX Tickets before analyzing the online RT subscription.

RTX Tickets. As with most live events, there are different purchasable passes that allow attendees to have various perks, such as early access, opportunities to meet celebrities, and exclusive swag. Figure 5.4 displays the RTX 2019 tickets for sale and their respective perks.
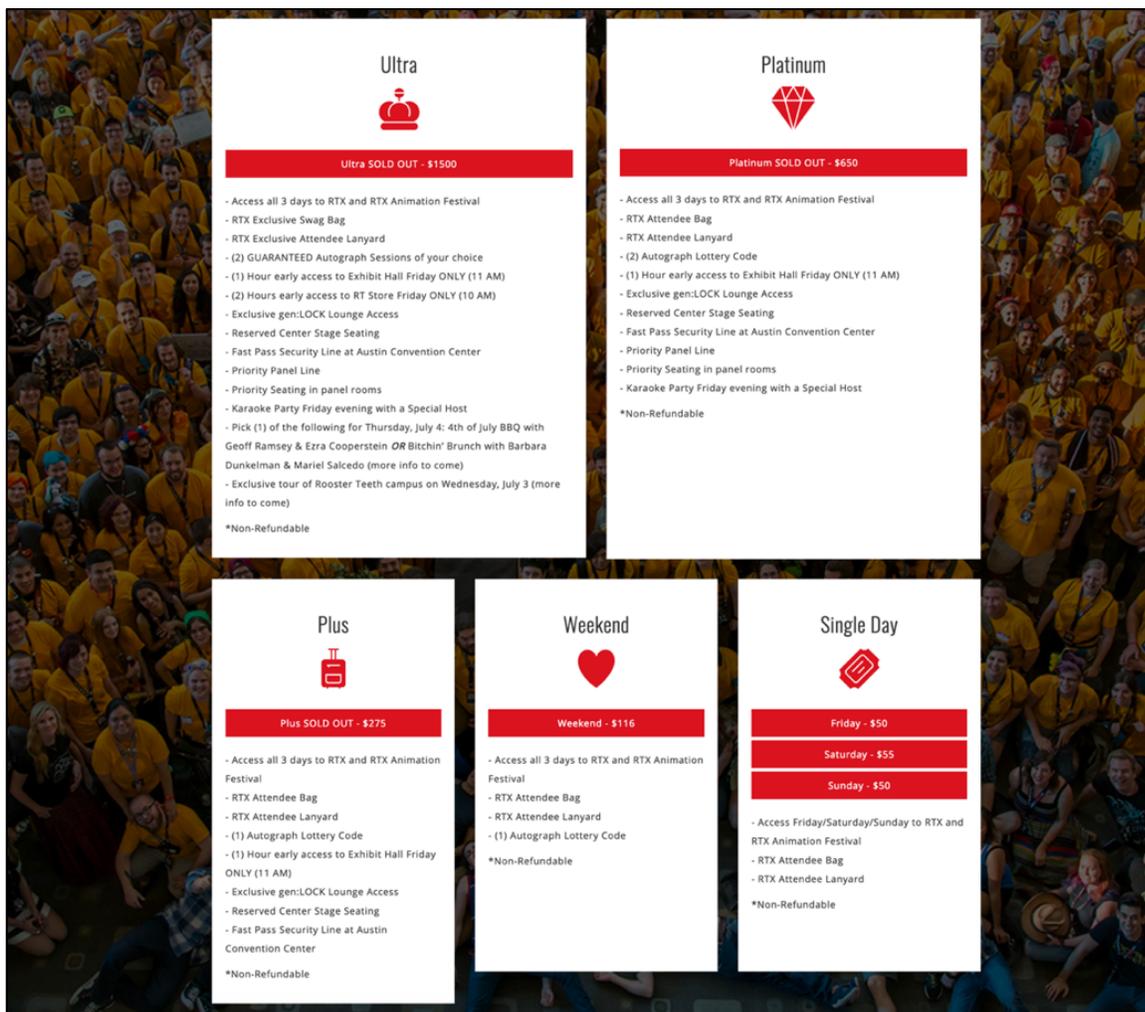
Figure 5.4. Screenshot of RTX tickets 2019. See Appendix I for Fair Use Assessment.

Before I examine the differences in the listed perks, I will analyze the visual elements of this webpage displaying the tickets as displayed in Figure 5.4. There are two categories of

visuals broadly speaking: the visuals that tie the tickets together and the visuals that differentiate them.

Tie together. The background photo on the page features a crowd of people. This is actually a group photo of the Guardians from RTX Austin 2016, which I identified through a Reddit post from a Guardian who shares the group photos every year (Blackpenguin, 2016). Using the Guardians as the background for the different ticket prices is a strategic choice because they are the volunteers who devote their time, sweat, and labor to running much of the behind the scenes work for everyone purchasing the tickets listed. They are also representative of some of the most devoted community members. This photo is cropped, giving the illusion of an endless sea of people, which serves as a strategy to allude to the magnitude of the community. This image is what binds all of the ticket listings together, as in the community is what binds them together. The other visual which connects the tickets is the red coloring used for both the icons and the background fill for each of the ticket pricing, categorizing them as like-things. With all the competing elements on the page, red is a bold color choice, making it stand out and drawing the eye more than any other element.

Wrapping the community image around these tickets and giving them all the same color serves as a way of giving the illusion of unity. However, the red is also associated with status symbols, which include the cost of each ticket and the icons that represent the different levels of access and experience at RTX. The prices and icons also serve as the first visual differentiators.

Differentiate. The tickets are differentiated by price, names, the icons, and their list of perks. Therefore, there are different versions of RTX for sale. One of the most glaring differences between the ticket types is their price points. One can attend RTX for one day for $50 at the cheapest price point or one can purchase a ticket for $1,500 (30x more) at the highest.

Financial access to these different tickets creates a divide among members who have different socioeconomic backgrounds. Only members who have access to or are willing to go into debt over the "Ultra" tickets will be able to have this elite version of RTX.

The names of each ticket in order of most expensive to least are "Ultra," "Platinum," "Plus," "Weekend," and "Single Day." The two cheapest ticket types are identified by the amount of time one will spend at RTX—for the entire weekend or just a single day. "Plus" is a way of saying there is just a little more added (like economy plus means just a bit more legroom for an airline). The second-most-expensive level, "Platinum," is reminiscent of a name given to elite travel members to make them seem like the upper echelon (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017c). It indexes it value by drawing on Goffman's (1951) ideas of natural scarcity where "the natural scarcity of certain objects provides one kind of guarantee that the number of persons who acquire these objects will not be so large as to render the objects useless as symbols for the expression of invidious distinction. Natural scarcity, therefore, is one factor that may operate in certain symbols of status" (Goffman, 1951, p. 298). Platinum, much rarer than gold or silver, is scarce in nature, and therefore more valuable. There are fewer and fewer tickets available at these higher price points, which is another parallel. The most expensive ticket, "Ultra," is associated with the most extreme version of something, and relies on symbolic value of an "Ultra experience" defined by the actual scarcity of the limited number of tickets available and symbolic scarcity through the list of perks and the number of unique and rare experiences available to members at this tier.

Each of the tickets is differentiated by icons. The most expensive tier, "Ultra," is represented by a crown, a symbol associated with status, power, wealth, and elitism. The next tier, "Platinum," is paired with a diamond, which represents wealth, status, and rarity. This

platinum-diamond combination involves an additional qualifier, which inflates the value, drawing upon not one, but two naturally scarce resources, much like the "silver diamond" levels of elite travelers, except this one, is multimodal (image and word) instead of purely lexical (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017c, p. 190). The third tier, "Plus," is represented by a suitcase, which feels out of place except when you tie it to elite travel culture where you feel like you are getting something more, thus making them feel like their experience could be differentiated from others. This broadens the audience for specialty tickets "simultaneously lowering the bar while making people feel like they are on the podium nonetheless" (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017c, p. 195).

The fourth tier, "Weekend," is represented by a heart that, in the context of RT ties back to the community narratives associated with love, friendship, and participation rather than status—love can be considered as having a "priceless" value. The weekend pass comes in at just under $100 if purchased at the Early Bird rate, which makes it still pricey, but mostly doable with enough financial planning. Therefore, this tier of experience represents what the vast majority of people who visit RTX will likely purchase. The heart is symbolically tied to this ticket, indexing it as tied most to the community. The fifth tier, Single Day, is represented by a traditional paper ticket icon, which would be the cheapest possible representation of a pass for entry, usually associated with raffles, carnivals, and other low-cost events or experiences. Therefore, the icon devalues the ticket in comparison to the others.

Again, all of these icons are the same red color, a way to bind them together visually, even though they have vast differences in symbolism. The different lists of "perks" represent how not all members will experience RTX the same way. Thurlow & Jaworski (2017a) understand "elite" as an action rather than a state of being or something to acquire. However, to engage in elite actions at RTX, one must be able to acquire certain tickets that provide specific

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kinds of access. Eliteness "points us to the semiotic and communicative resources by which

people differentiate themselves and by which they access symbolic-material resources for

shoring up status, privilege and power" (p. 244). Status at RTX is acquired by tickets that lead to

specific experiences including many privileges.

Table 5.1. RTX 2019 Ticket Prices Breakdown.

Perk	Ultra **Early Bird:** $1,500 **Regular:** $1,765	Platinum **Early Bird:** $650 **Regular:** $765	Plus **Early Bird:** $275 **Regular:** $324	Weekend **Early Bird:** $99 **Regular:** $116	Single Day Fri. & Sun. **Early Bird:** $42.50 **Regular:** $47	Single Day: Saturday **Early Bird:** $50 **Regular:** $55
1	3-day access	3-day access	3-day access	3-day access	1-day access	1-day access
2	**Excusive** bag	Bag	Bag	Bag	Bag	Bag
3	**Exclusive** lanyard	Lanyard	Lanyard	Lanyard	Lanyard	Lanyard
4	2 **guaranteed** autograph sessions	2 lottery autograph sessions	1 lottery autograph session	1 lottery autograph session		
5	1-hour early access to Exhibit Hall Friday	1-hour early access to Exhibit Hall Friday	1-hour early access to Exhibit Hall Friday			
6	2 hours early access to RT Store Friday					
7	Gen:LOCK Lounge Access	Gen:LOCK Lounge Access	Gen:LOCK Lounge Access			
8	Reserved Center Stage Seating	Reserved Center Stage Seating	Reserved Center Stage Seating			
9	Fast Pass security	Fast Pass security	Fast Pass security			
10	Priority Panel Line	Priority Panel Line				
11	Priority Seating in panels	Priority Seating in panels				
12	Karaoke party	Karaoke party				
13	Special Event with celebrities					
14	Tour of RT					

Listed underneath each of the tickets are lists of "perks" attendees will receive at each

price point. I have organized the tiers of tickets in Table 5.1. The six areas shaded in gray are

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only offered at the "Ultra" badge level. There are a range of 3-14 possible perks for RTX

attendees, and the access to these perks scale according to the price from lowest to highest.

Markers serve many purposes for members of the RT community as markers demand

attention from those who are not normally elite to "use them as points of access, sources of

cultural capital and opportunities for social mobility" (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017b, p. 536). The

tickets are a form of inscribing elitism across time: prospectively (anticipating a particular

version of attendance), in the moment (access to spaces and making certain actions possible), and

retrospectively (a record to be produced after RTX). As with luxury travel, these different tiers

of tickets represent inequality in social practices (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017c). This idea of

different tiers can also be found at many conventions, concerts, and other events where

participants can pay more money for more "experiences." These lists of perks "establish the

framework of loyalty through the entextualization of semiosis-shaping spaces, interactions, and

bodies, shifting between linguistic, spatial and embodied 'experiences'" (Thurlow & Jaworski,

2017c, p. 192). The perks vary and include artifacts (lanyards and bags), as well as where you

will be allowed (better seats at panels, early access, exclusive parties), and "procedural

incentives" (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017c, p. 191) (special shorter lines, access to convention

center). Here, we can understand how through the purchasing of the ticket, members will have

access to different markers of membership, including artifacts and spaces. Of course, the space

of the convention center is communicatively constituted through the community narratives and

the ways in which RTX is representative of an important pilgrimage for members (Thurlow &

Jaworski, 2011).

Special lines segregate people spatially and form divides between experiences (Thurlow

& Jaworski, 2017c; Thurlow & Jaworski, 2011). In addition to these types of incentives, the

word "exclusive" is used to index an idea of specialness beyond the other tiers when looking at the "Ultra" perks, which are "subjective, open-ended notions" (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017c, p. 191). The "Ultra" badge being more than double the cost of the next tier down has to be justified. Therefore, the perks and language used to describe them, as well as the icon associated with it, need to do a lot of work to add value.   All of these perks are worthless to someone who does not invest in the narrative of community with RT or how special it is. If one is not a dedicated member, they are very unlikely to want to spend $1,500 on a ticket to tour a production studio, go to a "Bitchin' Brunch," and have exclusive trinkets. The value is in the narrative, the community, and the narrative of experience being valuable.

As you can see from figure 5.4, by the time I took the screenshot of these ticket prices, the top three tiers were already sold out. According to the @RTXevent official Twitter account, the Ultra badges sold out on January 16, 2019 (the very first tier to sell out, two days after they became available to top-their RT website sponsors) and the Plus badges sold out on January 18, 2019. They did not post when platinum badges sold out, but I took this screenshot in early February. These top three tiers, as expensive as they were, sold out well ahead of the event, demonstrating how these are actually perks people are willing to pay top-dollar for.

Unlisted privileges. When I went to RTX in 2014, our weekend passes cost $86.65 with tax. In 2017, the badge types available were single day, weekend, and what was called VIP. In 2017, I decided to splurge on VIP, which, at the time, was the top tier (costing $575 each). There were many reasons I decided to VIP—for one, I wanted to experience it for my research, another was because of the shorter lines, and there were other perks such as an exclusive concert & party, a lounge, and better seating. I discovered through my VIP experience that there are

sometimes additional, unlisted experiences that top-tiered ticket holders can have access to, as well.

For example, as a VIP ticket holder, I was invited to be an extra in an RT production happening the day prior to RTX. Only 100 of the VIP members were allowed to participate and we were solicited to participate through an email from a RT staff member. I did get to participate in this experience (exclusivity within exclusivity), which I found to be really exciting and fun. An experience I was excited about quickly turned into many added costs, as it required I purchase a "costume" (jeans, plain t-shirt, plain shoes—all of which could get ruined through makeup and distressing), and I had to arrive a day early and dedicate a 7 AM to 5 PM time period for the shoot. It was an unusual, memorable, and exhausting experience that afforded me the opportunity to meet other dedicated RT members, and bond through our shared suffering in the sweltering Texas heat. This story illustrates the complexities of RT community membership. On one hand, I paid a lot of money to be offered the opportunity to pay more money and do exhausting work without compensation. On the other hand, I got to be part of something exciting, different, and affiliative with like-minded individuals. The cultural and social capital I gained from those experiences were worth it to me at the time for this exchange of economic capital.

Subscription Fees. In the course of collecting data and writing this dissertation, I have witnessed many changes within RT, including the introduction of subscription fees to access content on the www.roosterteeth.com website, and the addition of new subscriber-only perks such as store discounts and early access to RTX tickets. RT has been bought out by several different media companies and is currently owned by WarnerMedia Entertainment. Subscription prices have gone up, and the ways members are distinguished on their social media site have also

changed. People who pay a subscription fee for early access to content on the RT website as

well as other perks went from being called "Sponsors" to "FIRST" members. In August 2019,

RT raised its prices on FIRST memberships ($35.99 to $59.99/year) and added a new tier,

FIRST+ ($119.99/year).

On the blog post announcing these changes by Matt Hullum, the CEO of Rooster Teeth

Productions, LLC. (at the time of this post), on www.roosterteeth.com, (Figure 5.5) community

members commented about these price increases and the new subscription model. In the blog

post, Matt organizes the "perks" into bullet points and makes use of capitalization and bolded

words to underscore the importance of these perks. The all capitalized and bolded words are

"FREE" and "FOUNDER'S PACK" to showcase the extra value of these items. 50% off is also

stressed but only applies to international shipping.
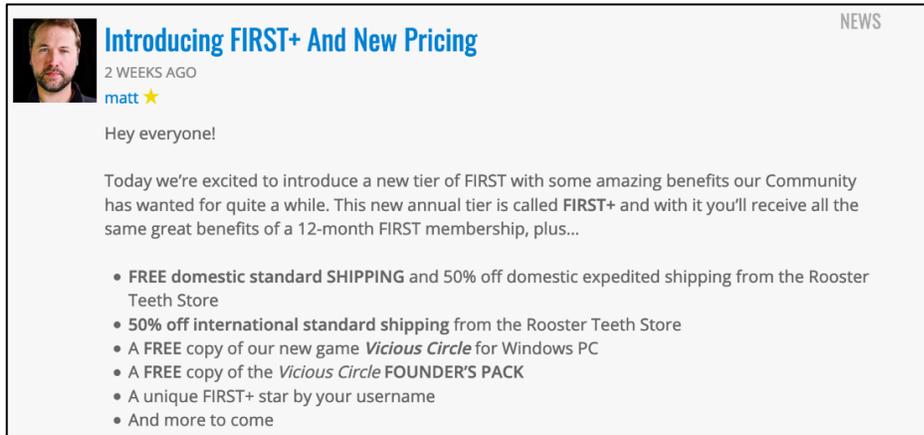
Figure 5.5. Screenshot of price increase blog post. From Matt Hullum's "Introducing FIRST+
And New Pricing" blog post on www.roosterteeth.com. See Appendix I for Fair Use
Assessment.

Figure 5.6. Screenshot reactions. A summary of reactions to Matt Hullum's "Introducing
FIRST+ And New Pricing" blog post on www.roosterteeth.com. See Appendix I for Fair Use
Assessment.

Figure 5.7. FIRST+ icon on www.roosterteeth.com. See Appendix I for Fair Use Assessment.

Many people stated that they would be canceling their FIRST memberships. Additionally, there were 806 "lame" responsive uptakes (Figure 5.6), indicating that this post garnered an overwhelmingly negative reaction from the community. The 665 comments included many complaints and only a handful of supportive notes. Matt used a conversational register in his announcement about charging members more money and offering a new list of perks for the new price point. The first two perks are to save money on shipping when making purchases at the RT Store, which requires spending more money to use this perk. The next two perks have to do with a new video game they are releasing (a value of $24.99 for PC). The next perk is simply a symbolic icon next to a username on the site (see Figure 5.7). The final perk is a promise of more, undetermined perks.

Collectively, these perks were not weighted by community members as impressive enough to justify paying double the previous price, particularly since they require additional spending, the ability and desire to play a game, the belief in the value of a symbolic digital differentiator and a promise. Matt frames the changes as "amazing benefits our Community has wanted for a while," implying that the changes were requested by the community. He also capitalizes the word "Community," making it *the* community. I have not seen other postings from either members or staff that use this formatting for the word, so this may be a subtle way of reflecting RT's corporate decision to emphasize the capitalistic aspects of their enterprise

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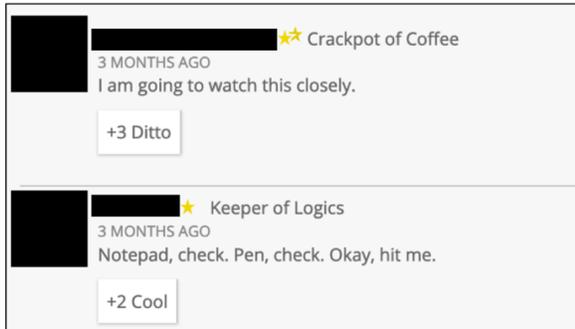
Figure 5.8. Two comments of RT website users. Featured are one with double gold and one with gold membership to the RT website. See Appendix I for Fair Use Assessment.

Before this subscription model was introduced, there was a form of membership called "Double Gold," which was framed as a sponsorship and entitled the member to a special icon by their name. Examples of these digital markers are the golden stars next to a name on the www.roosterteeth.com featured in Figure 5.8. The single starred member is just a regular sponsor, not a Double Gold Sponsor. These icons draw on the idea of a "gold star" as in being a good student, an idea already drawing on the natural scarcity of gold (Goffman, 1951). These digital markers instantly identify members as special, but only when interacting on the RT website. The new FIRST+ membership icon is featured in Figure 5.7, but I could not find any users with this icon as yet (the new model was only recently introduced at the time of this writing).

To summarize, the purchasable tiers are markers of membership as they symbolically index a performance of membership dedication, which is to invest economically in RT, bringing a member cultural capital. Further, these passes and subscriptions offer access to many other markers of membership. These include tangible items (e.g., lanyards, shirts), space (e.g., access to spaces both digital on the website and physical at RTX), locations (e.g., Austin or local areas for meetups), symbolic (e.g., gold stars next to usernames on the website), and experiences (e.g., exclusive parties or invitations).

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Photographs

I place photographs in a special category of markers of membership because of their versatility. I have already established how images are also narratives (see Chapter 3). Before I analyze examples of photographs as markers of membership, I want to orient you to some uses and purposes of photography and then review how photographs are used as markers of membership in the RT community.

Photography and capital. Almost anyone can take a photograph if they have access to a device with a camera, making the practice of photography accessible to billions of smartphone users across the world, in addition to people who purchase dedicated cameras. While it is easy to think the Internet and smartphone cameras have sparked a new obsession with photos, Sontag (1977) says photography's impact on humanity has been part of philosophical conversations for some time now, and people have been devoted to photography since long before the introduction of the Internet selfie.

Sontag (1977) identifies photography as a visual code that alters what people think is valuable to look at and observe. Photos provide evidence of something someone has and "offer indisputable evidence that the trip was made, that the program was carried out, that fun was had" (Sontag, 1977, p. 6). Sontag (1977) describes photography on vacations as a way to alleviate the anxiety of something new such as travel and to give a ritual to the experience of travel "stop, take a photograph, and move on" (p. 7). Now, social media offer an extension of the ritual. In the case of RTX, the routine is travel to RTX, take selfies and groupies with other members and stars, and post those photos on social media to initiate a new social experience. Hence, photographs can be used as cultural and social capital when posting to @RoosterTeeth's tweet where memories are requested to be produced (see Chapter 3). Photography allows us to

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perform our participation by sharing of photographs. In some ways, experience and photographs

are entangled, as Sontag (1977) says, "ultimately, having an experience becomes identical with

taking a photograph of it, and participating in a public event comes more and more to be

equivalent to looking at it in photographed form" (p. 19).

In a recent study, Hunter (2018) discusses performative spectatorship when it comes to

taking selfies in museums: "spectatorship is also necessarily performative, with or without a

smartphone. Visitors view objects on display in view of other visitors, observing their viewing

practices even as they are aware of being viewed in return" (p. 58). I would extend this idea to

both attendance at live RT events (when we watch others take pictures, hang out with friends,

wait in lines, etc.) and on social media (when we observe the types of pictures, comments, ideas

that people are performing). How does one learn how to share a GIF or meme? Through

watching others perform sharing GIFs and memes. How does one learn how and when to share a

photograph? Through watching others perform sharing photographs.

I have already shared several of my own photographs in this dissertation, including the

photos with Lindsay and Michael (Figure 5.1). The semiotic translation of photographs into

sharable narratives/evidence/data performs something new and establishes relationships between

people, ideas, and things each time they are used in new contexts for new purposes. When I look

at the photograph with the friends I took it with, it opens up a space for remembering (piecing

together the stories) our experiences together. However, when I take that same photograph and

post it in a thread of photographs on Twitter as part of a Community Day event for RT, it is now

recontextualized, and can be understood as a performance of cultural capital—evidence that one

belongs as a member in the community (that I was "there"). From there, I may gain social

capital through people who may notice my picture or notoriety if I am retweeted by a famous

account like the official @RoosterTeeth Twitter account (akin to Oprah retweeting your recipe). Further, all the personal photos I share in my dissertation have been resemiotized as text and as data for the purposes of this dissertation.

As photographs of participation are narratives (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Langellier & Peterson, 2004), they also make visible social identities and relationships (Georgakopoulou, 2007). The photographs I share point to my own identity as a RT community member. I am marking my membership by having these experiences to share through photographs. Taking selfies and pictures and posting them to social media is not uncommon (Georgakopoulou, 2017). RT community members are using photographs to resemiotize experiences into many different things. To illustrate this cycle, I share in Figure 5.9, a photograph of my first experience at RTX 2014.

Figure 5.9. A photo from my first RTX in 2014. Jacob, Joshua, and I are sitting on the set of the RT Podcast. Author's personal photo. Photography release in Appendix F.

This photo features my husband Joshua, our friend Jacob, and I on the RT Podcast set (Figure 5.9). One of the RTX Guardians took this image of us. Jacob is on the far left and is

imitating one of the more frequent RT Podcast guests (at least in 2014), Gavin Free, who is constantly adjusting his pants. Joshua is pretending to have a conversation with me as though he is also a guest on the show. I break the theme of pretending to be on the podcast by holding up the pillow to show it off to the camera. We are each performing in this image in different ways. Jacob and Joshua are embodying RT celebrities, mimicking their previous actions, fully embracing being on the set as people on a podcast. Whereas I am performing the excited tourist, holding onto the artifact attached to the show and displaying it for the camera. We are using our bodies in these performances of tourism of the RT set to create a sense of self and place with the space of RTX, the recreation of the Podcast set, and our interactions with the objects, each other, and the act of taking a photo (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2011). These are all ways to perform experience at RTX and many other similar tourist attractions. We now have this photograph to both mark our presence, and I have now resemiotized it as data, which then becomes part of an analysis, a defense, and so on.

Discussion

All of the ways of marking membership I listed above (physical locations, artifacts, purchasable memberships and passes, and photographs) showcase how production and consumption of the RT community is culturally eucharistic **(**Silverstein, 2003). The more we use markers of membership in the RT community, the more we produce and consume the RT community. We recreate the RT community every time we go to RTX or a community meetup, wear shirts, purchase subscriptions to RT, and perform other membership rituals. Narratives supporting participation and specialness are kept alive through continued actions of members at events and then reporting how participation and specialness are positive for us.

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Markers of membership are conversation starters, ways of gaining access to spaces, and ultimately a resource for opening up SoE between members. Furthermore, markers of membership open up ways of thinking about what Morley (2001) calls *spaces of belonging* and identity. These are not merely physical places, but are also virtual and rhetorical spaces, as long as people feel connected to others, sharing in experiences. The markers of membership I discussed here allow people to inhabit multiple spaces of belonging at once (such as being part of the community, attend RTX, posting about it on social media, etc.).

Social and cultural capital are the most significant gains of using markers of membership. However, the economic capital required to access some markers of membership cannot be ignored. Disparities exist between members in terms of the ability to participate in exclusive events, especially for those who cannot afford the several thousand dollars it takes to have exclusive experiences at RTX. Though, this could be experienced on a smaller economic level as even a $35 shirt can be unaffordable and unattainable. The rising costs of subscription membership also serves an exclusionary function for people who are challenged financially.

Elitism in RT can be claimed through a blend of social, cultural, and economic capital. Markers of membership can designate members as "elite" or not. Howard and Kenway (2015) outline variables that are involved in elitism: field, degree, time, space, power, and visibility. From the examples I have provided in this chapter and previous ones, we can examine how these aspects apply to RT & RTX:

- **Field:** temporary elite (regarding purchasable RTX passes), knowledge of RT elite, volunteer members elite (Guardians), RT celebrity elite, RT staff elite

- **Degree:** level of participation, level of pay into attendance cost or membership, amount of time devoted to volunteer roles (at RTX or otherwise), paid employee of RT or not

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- **Time:** new and old members, new and old volunteer leaders, time working for RT

- **Space:** being able to attend events or not, social media presence

- **Power:** ruling elite (leadership roles; RT celebrities; RT staff)

- **Visibility:** badges, shirts, leadership titles, "lurkers" vs. "posters" online

Overall, in reviewing different types of capital, we can see how markers of membership have to do with transformations. Thurlow and Jaworski (2017c) discuss how "transmodal practices – akin to the alchemic power to transmute base metals into gold, turning something banal into something spectacular, something worthless into something precious" (p. 189). Through the community narratives, markers of membership are given the first ingredients for transformation. These narratives lend social value to objects, locations, and symbols. Through semiotic and discursive strategies, a shirt becomes a marker of insider status, a tour of an office becomes a rarefied and coveted experience worth $1,500+, and a photograph becomes a moment worth remembering, sharing, and performing for in the first place. This also brings into account the idea of mediational means in SoE. The markers of membership only have value through being integrated into the social practices of members and these markers "arise as codification or materialization of social practices" (Jones & Norris, 2005, p. 50).

Dilemmas of Community

Markers of membership demarcate how there are devides between community members. Because securing membership requires a lot of commitment, time, and money, markers can be exclusionary for people who cannot participate in or afford to purchase these different markers. Commodities play a role in mediating social relationships in everyday life and "it is necessary to consider, instead, relationships between sociohistorically specific commodity formulations and their uptake in activities of those acquainted with them … It is the relationship of commodity

formulations to their outcomes that matters in all such cases" (Agha, 2011, p. 49). In other words, social situatedness plays a large role in if commodities are desired by people (i.e., how is a $1,500 convention ticket or even a $35 t-shirt desirable?). The rhetoric of commodity is built into the discourses of RT. From having to drive to a local community event (requiring a vehicle, gas money, and then money to participate in the event such as purchasing food or passes), to attending RTX which can be experienced at various price points. It also can mean purchasing a shirt to display one's loyalty and identity. To perform community, one will be drawn to engage in activities that cost money. The dilemma, therefore, is how some people will never have access to certain types of participation because they simply cannot afford to do so. Economies of production and consumption, therefore, shape different versions of community where access is granted to some and not others. All versions are entangled with the narrative of community, but divides are generated, driven by different types of capital (e.g., time, money, connections). This community cannot deny its economic drive, and members must accept this in order to belong.

Another dilemma beyond the mixing of commodity and community is how all of this money will never buy someone a job at RT. Because of the masspersonal relationship between RT productions and the community, it is easy for members to feel closer to RT celebrities than RT celebrities do to them. This is because of the sheer amount of millions of community members who exist and it would be impossible to form that many close interpersonal relationships. I have yet to come across an RT celebrity story from another member through this research or my own experience that was less than kind and friendly toward the community. I have learned that some RT community members want to feel like they are part of RT productions. Indeed, a common dream for many members is to work for RT productions. This illustrates a tension of community in that most members will never have the opportunity to work

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at RT. There are stories of fans who became employees, but it really is only a handful, and a very small percentage compared to the millions of individuals who comprise the community.

Container Metaphor Revisited

In the opening narrative, I say to Lindsay, "Thank you for all the great content." Content is a term used by a lot of people on the Internet to refer to videos. YouTubers create content all the time. While RT is not primarily based on YouTube, they still heavily stream online video. This particular term is interesting because content brings forth the container metaphor (Krippendorff, 1993). All of the examples of makers of membership I have mentioned in this chapter are examples of how people are contained, if we understand containers as a set of contraints and affordances—from lines to photographs to allegiances (via t-shirt). There is something powerful about the many ways in which people can be contained both ideologically and physically through communication and the discourses we adopt.

The Narrative of Community and SoE
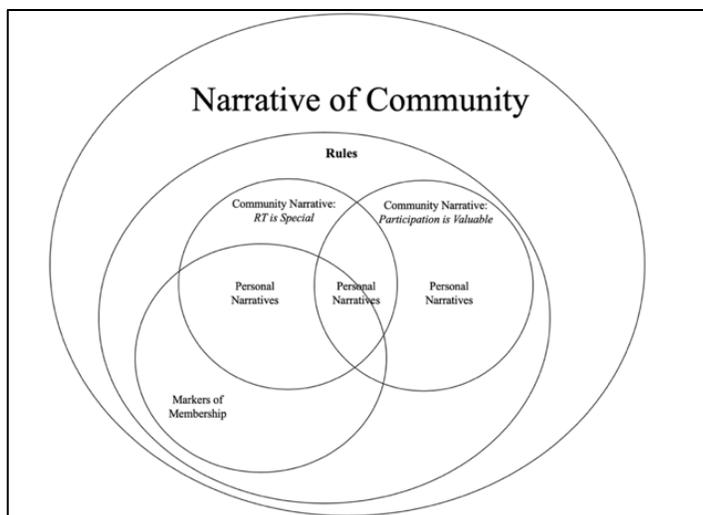
Figure 5.10. Narrative of community diagram with the addition of markers of membership. Created by author.
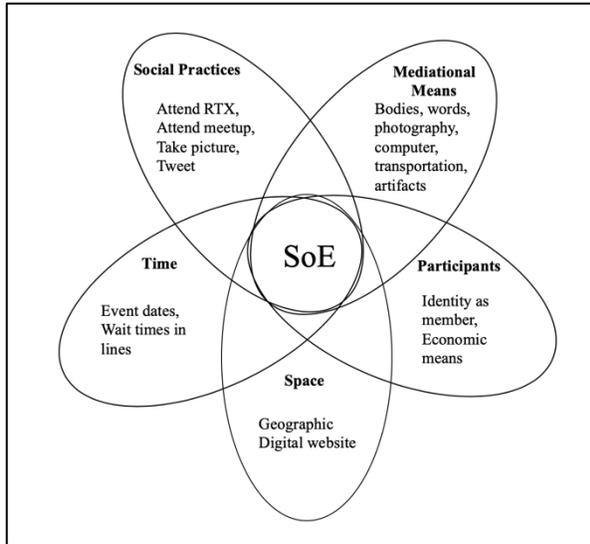
Figure 5.11. SoE example diagram for markers of membership. Created by author.

I want to return to the diagram I created for the master narrative of community, and add

another circle for the markers of membership (Figure 5.10). Markers of membership are yet

another way to perform community membership and identity and therefore belong in the circle of

the narrative of community. They also intersect with the other elements of this narrative

including community narratives, personal narratives, and rules. Further, at the intersections of

these elements of the narrative of community, we find openings for SoE. Figure 5.11 illustrates

how the markers of membership can converge to create a SoE.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I defined markers of membership as resources for displaying and

performing membership indexing one's cultural capital within a specific group. I provided

examples of four different categories: physical locations, artifacts, purchasable memberships and

passes, and photographs. Through these examples, I was able to define how it is problematic

with how expensive it can be to engage with each of these markers as it can be costly to travel,

purchase tickets, participate in local events, or buy merchandise. I also examined the

commodification of community. The line between friendship and "buy my stuff" is blurred,

entangled, and confusing. For community to exist, members must spend money to partake in community rituals (like RTX, buying shirts, having photos to share with community friends). Participation protects community values, saying it is worth time and money. All of these markers of membership have cultural and social value and are only meaningful because they are transformed through the discourses and narratives of the RT community.

In the following chapter, I will review the collective findings of my research and look ahead to the future of how to conceptualize "community" through SoE, production and consumption, and the dilemmas and tensions of community.

CHAPTER SIX:

THE END OF THE BEGINNING: CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

"What's this?" I ask as he sets his laptop in front of me. A YouTube video is pulled up on the screen, and I see two Halo characters, frozen in time, poised for action.

"Just watch," he says to me, cryptically, with a smile.

"Fine," I say, not knowing by clicking the play button, I would begin my participation in something that I would experience as a community. I could not even imagine that nearly a decade later, I would write a dissertation and study the ways the RT community is (re)produced by members multimodally through space and time.

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We never know what will matter when we begin something, as it is only in retrospect that we craft the tale (Freeman, 2010), materializing its representative moments. While a conclusion is an ending of sorts, often, it is also a signal for another beginning. Krippendorff (1993) emphasizes that understanding is an endless reflexive journey: "Understanding is never finished. Even in the absence of physical stimulation, people can reconsider, reconstruct, or invent new worlds, including themselves" (p. 16). This dissertation serves as a reconsideration and reconstruction of RT's narrative of community; however, I only see this as a start to my own conversation about this matter, which has now been informed by, merged with, and moves forward in the flow of conversations metacommunicatively addressing experience. In this final reflection at the end of my beginning, I would like to revisit my primary research question and

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the broader implications of my research for understanding how communities are communicatively constituted.

Revisiting the Existence of Community

I posed a question at the beginning of this examination of utterances, images, tables, graphics, and multivoiced texts: what does it take in order for a community to exist? The answer takes an entire dissertation to explicate, but the first step can be summarized in a sentence: a community needs a group of people to communicate it to life by claiming a community indeed *does* exist. This discursive materialization is echoed in the voices, words, images, and other mediated actions of members, a process of communication that engenders community narratives, rules, and markers of membership. All of these aspects of community perpetuate the cycle of production and consumption that materializes community and then rematerializes it through continual communication. We (re)make worlds together through discourse because the social and the material are entangled with one another, and matter comes to matter through communication (Barad, 2007; Orlikowski, 2007).
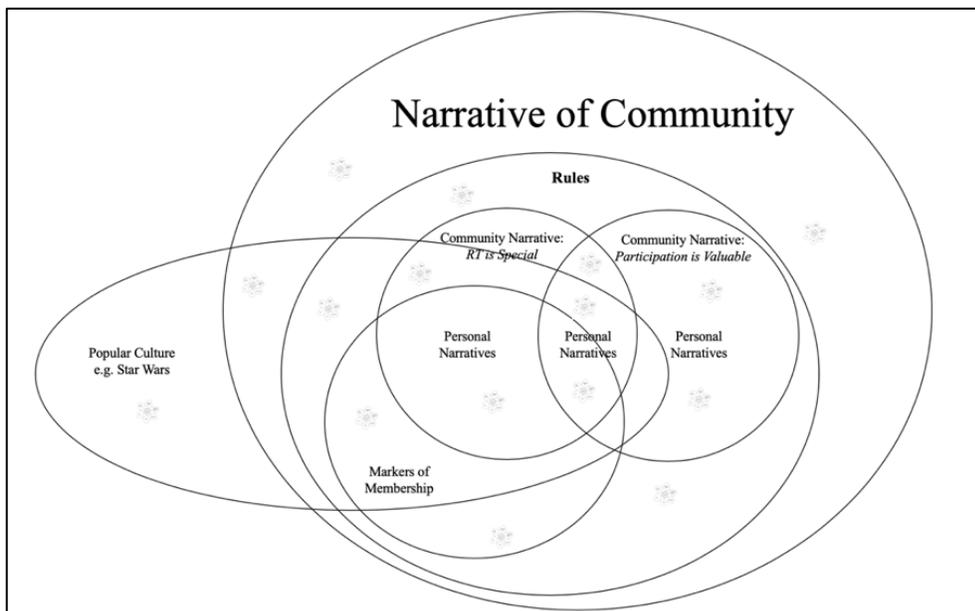
Figure 6.1. Narrative of community diagram expanded. Created by author.

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Especially important for this materialization of the RT community is the narrative of community, acting as the lifeblood flowing through SoE as pictured in Figure 6.1. I have designed versions of this diagram and included them in my analytical chapters to showcase how attention can be drawn to each aspect (narratives, rules, and markers of membership) one at a time for the purpose of analysis. Yet is through their entanglements that we can begin to graspwhat gives life to community. The narrative of community intersects with, calls in, and performs many other discourses. In this version of the diagram in Figure 6.1, I have sprinkled in SoE to note how they are realized through these discourses of community. Here, they look more like snowflakes than atoms due to their size. When zoomed in, we can see all the details and what makes each SoE unique. When zoomed out, we can understand in the grand scheme of a narrative of community, they are small, fleeting moments that disappear after they pass through.

However, like a snowflake, they are not entirely gone as their formation dissolves away. They melt, evaporate, and come back again in different forms—these SoE are part of the cycle of production and consumption. SoE are ephemeral and unrepeatable in exactly the same way, but they are essential to keeping the narrative of community alive as they are the convergence of elements that encourage mediated actions of community-making. As Barad points out, "particles are born out of the void, go through transformations, die, return to the void, and are reborn, all the while being inseparable from the wild material imaginings of the void" (2017, p. 112). Communication is also a cycle of re-production—through interaction, we materialize our worlds. We are always recreating through every interaction, drawing from previous interactions and other discourses, yet also creating something anew each time.

Implications of Research

Sites of Engagement

So far, I have argued that concepts that orient us to how SoE reproduct of community are narratives, rules, and markers of membership. *Narratives* relate to both the guiding master narratives which establish community values and the personal narratives we tell which re-establish the master narratives. Storytelling has to do with both asserting individual identities and group identities. *Rules* are a formal realization of community narratives and are leveraged by community leaders and everyday members to police accountable actions that protect the values embedded in community narratives. *Markers of membership* are ways of displaying and performing membership, indexing one's cultural capital within a specific group. Markers also serve as ways of supporting community narratives where they materialize through communication in physical, digital, and cultural spaces—or *spaces of belonging* (Morley, 2001).

I have discussed SoE throughout this work, and I want to emphasize the value of this heuristic notion in understanding community and communication. What are the arrangements that make actions possible? How do people do the things they do? Using the SoE heuristic helps us focus on how members (re)create identities as they intersect with social practices, mediational means, actions, space, and time—this is a complex and ephemeral convergence which guides certain actions such as storytelling, hugging, or handing something to another person. The SoE heuristic considers how different affordances and constraints focus our attention toward overlapping and entangled spaces. SoE are embedded in many discourses and are intimately tied to cultural and social norms. I believe that SoE is an as yet underdeveloped research framework, and focusing on the literal and metaphorical "places" where we encounter with others has the potential to open up important conversations about the complexities of human interaction.

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After the individual examination of SoE throughout this work, we can consider how they are connected to the larger practice of community. SoE can be placed in a broader context, which Scollon (2001) refers to as a *Nexus of Practice* (NoP), or "a social structure which comes into existence over time as the intersections or linkages of specific practices in the sites of engagement of mediated actions" (Scollon, 2001, p. 167). A nexus of practice is a useful construct for understanding the interconnected nature of the myriad SoEs which comprise a community. A NoP is fluid, changing with each practice, social actors, and through each SoE (Scollon, 2001). This understanding takes into account the living, breathing community constituted through the actions of members.

Community Qualities

The RT community is like all communities in that in order to create a sense of belonging, we inhabit and create community, making it matter. To do this, people must first lay claim to a discourse of community, a narrative of community, community identities, rules of community, and markers of community. To varying extents, all communities rely on the resources I have outlined in this dissertation. Each community, through its respective discourses and membership rules, approaches the narrative of community differently, shaping the SoEs that perpetuate its existence. What makes RT different from many communities? Not the artifacts, the convention, the narratives, or even the people who are in the community. What makes this community different to its membership is how much encouragement there is for interaction, which helps create windows for SoE. RT is different because it says it is (well, the members say this). Therefore, all actions that come after this claim are influenced by this discourse of being unique. A directive of "engage" is found throughout the different discourses of the RT community. This

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compulsion to interact with others consistently, frequently, and in ways the community considers to be positive, is what helps the community to continue to grow.

Furthermore, built into the DNA of the RT community is the claim of community rather than the claim of fandom. The negative stigmas associated with fandoms are not necessarily excluded from all RT interactions. There are certainly negative experiences members have faced in the past and will face in the future. However, these stigmas are actively sought to be eradicated in all aspects of the RT community, particularly through narratives and rules. While RT can never fully guarantee each member a friendly experience every time they engage in the community, the narratives and rules transform the community, building positivity into social practices. When considering SoE, these social practices will draw attention to particular ways of acting as members engage in mediated actions with other community members.

16 years have gone by since the inception of Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC., and the RT community now includes millions of members worldwide. Every year, Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC. grows bigger with its number of productions and so does the RT community membership. The most important way to keep a community alive is that people are doing things to make it so, which members of the RT community seem to understand. It is through SoE, consistently encouraged and constructed, that we communicate and therefore create community, shaping it into what it is. We breathe life into a community through our actions which continue its legacy and reshape it for future actions by members. Every time members engage in mediated actions through SoE, the community is recreated, but just a little bit differently than it was before. As Garfinkel (1996) notes, every recreation of a practice demands that we engage in its iteration anew, for "another next first time" (p. 10).

Community Dilemmas and Opportunities

The commodification of community creates dilemmas and tensions regarding access, insider status, and economic disparities, all of which can prevent members from engaging in certain types of participation. Cultural and social capital are sometimes only earned if members devote time and / or pay money (also known as having access to a large amount of economic capital). However, these types of capital can also be earned through having specialized knowledge of RT and related popular culture (e.g., *Star Wars*), as well as connecting with RT celebrities through social media. Building these types of capital becomes more achievable for the average person in the age of the Internet.

Communities like RT are opportunities for people to be inducted in a heightened microcosm for social interaction. Before they are competent in the ways of being members of the community, there are "girders" up for people such as rules, Admins, mods, and a variety of entry points into engaging with other members. Often more experienced members will take new members "under their wing." A community like RT is open to anyone who enjoys a variety of entertainment such as RT content, video games, or geeky pop culture, which allows people to be "affiliated by their commitment to a common endeavor [community], not primarily by their race, class, ethnicity, or gender" (Gee, 2003, p. 218). Indeed, having a sense of belonging is one reason to join any community. On this matter, Purdie (1993) writes:

> If all our speaking in and of the world is founded on this most basic need to be
> 'recognised by the other', it is not surprising that our sense of personal worth, and also of
> what is culturally valuable, are intricately knotted up with others' recognitions of what
> we say and think as being 'possible, right, rational, real'. Nor is it difficult to see how
> ideologies, in constructing powerful groups as sites of the validating other, can

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manipulate our responses, so that it is difficult to feel personally valuable unless we are

recognized as such from these sites. (p. 169)

Through identification with different groups, we cultivate our own identities. To be part of a

group is a way to claim something about your individuality (through personal narratives, wearing

artifacts, posting pictures) at the same time we establish group identities (belonging to the RT

community).

To belong is to gain the power of membership, and as a member, you gain the ability to

make certain claims. However, at the same time, to belong is to relinquish power as you must

buy into narratives and rules to participate and remain part of the group. This ebb and flow of

power is also contingent on who is speaking, acting, and authoring different community

narratives through different spaces and times. Not only is power temporally and spatially bound,

it is also dependent on the role a member is performing in the moment. Members must reorient

their engagement when using social media, attending RTX, in cosplay (or wanting to take a

picture with someone in cosplay), volunteering (Admin, mod, or Guardian), working for RT,

engaging with members as a RT celebrity—each act and associated identity role will bring

attention to different acceptable or unacceptable ways of being a member.

To be a member of the RT community also means you gain access to many sub-groups

(the local community or interest groups). In a group such as RT Florida, there are more daily

opportunities for engagement that is highly interpersonal with other RT community members

such as game nights, meetups, and local fundraising opportunities. This participation increases

our chances of being acknowledged by other members. One basic human drive is for

recognition—we all want to matter. Personal identity is "constructed by social process" (Linde,

2000, p. 629). The RT community narrative helps create social spaces for people to feel like

they belong. If one can pick up on the community narratives, follow the rules, and embrace markers of membership, one can find a sense of belonging. It is also a transformative process to belong, which means we must hand over our own stories and to be able to tell other people's stories as our own.

I imagine some readers will argue that this dissertation is a positive account of RT, to which I say I believe I have showcased the complications and dilemmas all members are faced with, which are not inherently positive aspects of community-making. A fairer argument is that this is a limited account of RT. There are so many ways I could have analyzed this community and so much yet to examine. For this dissertation, I decided to focus on how a specific definition of "community" is leveraged as a tool by community members in an effort to reproduce particular versions of community. There are certainly additional negative aspects of the RT community to consider such as accounts of harassment between members, differences in opinion between members, as well as problematic treatment of people regarding gender and race (especially when examining the gaming side of the community), etc. These issues and others are intimately entangled with other discourses about gaming, fandoms, and the Internet, and I can take them up in future studies as they are worthy of a closer examination than I had room to do here.

Masspersonal Communication

With the proliferation of social media, the concept of masspersonal communication has become increasingly important to consider. As my work brings to the forefront, Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC. and its celebrities play a large role in the lives of the community members and how they perform their identities, especially through social media with affordances such as retweeting. While I intuitively knew there was a connection before starting this research, hearing

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each member talk about RT, studying social media posts, and then reflecting on my own experiences as a community member, I started to notice that there are some serious ethical considerations when a company like RT holds so much sway over a group of people. Any time people view a for-profit company as a "friend" (more interpersonal, than mass), it raises ethical questions. Members have an awareness of this, and as Thurlow and Jaworski (2017c) acknowledge, we are often complicit in fantasies of specialness. For the RT production company to keep producing entertainment and hosting large events such as RTX, it needs people to keep spending money for its own economic interests (which is evident in the new price raising for RTX tickets and sponsorships). Essentially, there is a commodifaction of friendship and belonging present in the RT community. To belong, there is a price to be paid (monetarily, through time, or giving up a piece of yourself for the "greater good"). While genuine interpersonal relationships are reproduced through the community, so are superficial ones. The always fluctuating masspersonal relationship between community members and the RT brand's social media accounts (with interactions frequently channeled through its celebrity representatives) is complex. Members must be willing to accept they may give more to the community (e.g., time, attention, money, relational work) than they will receive in return.

This tension is not just related to RT—many companies are taking this masspersonal approach and encouraging the formation of communities around products. With companies engaging with their consumers on social media, there are implications in the fields of communication, linguistics, advertising, and marketing, but most importantly, ethics. I believe future research on this would be valuable as commodification of community and culture expands in our tech-savvy world, especially when companies are always with us on our phones which connect us to our worlds.

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Storytelling as Commodity

I have demonstrated how common beliefs come to be held by community members through the personal narratives that are told by members which are linked to the narrative of community. Ochs and Capps (2001) discuss the significance of everyday narrative in constituting the moral order(s) we inhabit is wide-reaching. Lyotard's (1984) investigation of how knowledge comes to be, focuses on the role of stories and how they "allow the society in which they are told, on the one hand, to define its criteria of competence and, on the other, to evaluate according to those criteria what is performed or can be performed within it" (p. 20). Stories become self-fulfilling prophecies in many ways; they assign epistemic primacy to some with respect to others, assign speaking rights, and teach us how to listen (Lyotard, 1984). Through all of this, stories can also create an ideal image of what something should be. Wegner (2002) points out how narrative utopias both describe *and* make history. I extend this idea to how a community is imagined as a utopia in many ways for RT community members. Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC., the idea of community, and the community members are caught up in a complex entanglement, a cycle of production and consumption (each piece producing and consuming the other).

Storytelling is also a strategy in commodification. Books such as *Storytelling: Branding in Practice,* have been written to teach business people to leverage storytelling in branding and marketing to tap into customers' emotions and portray company values (Fog, 2010). For example, this business text makes claims such as how "as a concept, *storytelling* has won a decisive foothold in the debate on how brands of the future will be shaped" (Fog, 2010, p. 17). Furthermore, "a story communicates values in a way we can all understand" (Fog, 2010, p. 24). This has only become more and more apparent as brands use storytelling on social media and

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draw on personal pronouns (e.g., we, you) to create a sense of connection and solidarity with people purchasing what they are selling (Gardelle & Sorlin, 2015). Stories are a cultural tool for marketers, companies, and fandom communities alike, and these discourse communities are not separate but entangled with one another. Again, the idea of masspersonal communication through storytelling becomes a concern moving forward in the lifecycle of humanity.

RT is one of many types of communities that are inspired by a brand. While this commodification cannot be ignored, it does not mean that it is mutually exclusive when it comes to community. Friendship and relationships formed while participating in community activities often go far beyond the purchasing of products or supporting the brand of Rooster Teeth Productions, LLC. The purchasable aspects of the brand may be brought to attention at times, but the friendships can also take center-stage. This will vacillate for each member from experience-to-experience and be different through each SoE of which members are a part. That is the dialectal relationship—it is both always tied to a brand and tied to something deeply interpersonal. This deep entanglement makes the lines impossible to clearly distinguish.

Online and/also Offline

In doing this dissertation, I have finally been able to examine a question that has been plaguing me since my undergraduate years: why do people so often dismiss the value of or vilify online interactions? This question was my original inspiration for pursuing a dissertation topic that involved the Internet. I chose RT as my research site because I thought it was a great example of how community happens both online and offline. I still stand by this idea; however, it is so much more than that. Community is materialized through our communication with one another, occurring in the context of myriad SoEs. Community is not a space or place, but, rather,

the multimodal production and consumption of spaces, places, identities, and discourses that are entangled with one another. Further, community is a metadiscursive resource in and of itself.

Going back to my question, how are metaphors of the Internet-oriented toward including aspects such as "bad people," "cyberbullies," "not as genuine as face-to-face," or "not real interactions"? Well, these ideas are tied to larger discourses about the Internet and its value and purpose. This idea of the Internet as a contained space of "negativity" is a discursive construction. The more we engage in these discourses and use them, the more those spaces become entangled with those notions. Just as RT materializes a narrative of community, the narrative of the Internet is also kept alive by discourses of what the Internet is. There are certainly dilemmas of the Internet as there are dilemmas of community, though vilification of the Internet is a discourse we have created. If we use this discourse, we feed its existence and the excuses it provides for certain interactions, which pave the way for negative SoE where people have yelling contests or presidents Tweet at their rivals in unprofessional ways. So, if you do not like "the Internet" it is time to start changing the narrative of the Internet, which will shape our actions and open up SoE we want to be part of instead. You need to ask yourself what metaphor you want to bring forth, live in and perpetuate.

To understand how to make productive communities, dialogues, and ways of creating identities, we should be looking at how to create better conditions for people to make choices that are better aware of others' perspectives. The heuristic of SoE helps us understand how many considerations there are in the convergences we encounter every day with other people. We have to equip ourselves with knowledge and engage in practices that encourage a nexus to come together in such a way where we can produce and consume, together, the communities and discourses associated with a better version of the world than it is today. For example, Berry

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(2016) discusses how bullying is a prevalent and powerful communicative phenomenon, and he outlines the connections between communication, identity, and bullying. Bullying involves certain types of performances of ourselves, as well as pushing people into certain types of performances. Bullying occupies multiple spaces and times (digital, physical, and relational) in our lives, usually polyfocally. Bullying is just one example of how easily conditions can be perpetuated that allow for shame, hatred, violence, and negativity toward ourselves and others. To enter a discourse of bullying, we have to consider the complicated entanglements of spaces, times, affordances and constraints, and social practices, as well as how they converge more often than not in our daily lives.

It is easy to condemn the Internet as a way to become isolated and cut off from the world. The RT community members are demonstrating that it is *actually doing the opposite*. It is a way to find connections, make meaningful relationships, and encourage face to face interaction. However, this is only in some instances. It can also be used as a way to cut ourselves off from others. The social norms we adopt and the relationships we have with others are more of an influence on how technology is used rather than just the fact the technology merely exists. Only through interaction does technology (discourses, genres, computers) gain meaning.

We need to encourage multimodal literacy as Van Leeuwen (2017) urges us to do for young children in the relation of learning contexts. This idea is also very important for social contexts. In addition to addressing how to speak, in what way, and through what ensemble of modes, we should also understand how these different spaces interact and affect each other. When we consider the entanglement of spaces (digital, physical, cultural, relational), we can start to (re)imagine our world in fuller, more complex ways, opening up opportunities for connection and a sense of belonging.

The Flow of Community

The late John Shotter (2018) reminds me that even as I am in the process of researching and writing, the RT community has already changed, as it is always in a state of action. This brings up Barad's (2007) ideas of intra-action:

All "things" exist as "doings," as agential enactments, as focal things attended to *from within* a larger, ceaselessly unfolding, unbounded, fluid, and, probably in itself, organized in a still unthinkable and also unimaginable reality. Thus, as beings within (and of) a world that is always in the process of becoming other than what it was before, we must learn to think "while in motion," so to speak, and to treat our "thinkings" as temporary results within a still continuing process of becoming." (p. 3)

This rings true for me as I have watched RT and the community constantly change at every step of my research. Even when checking my data online to get a better screenshot, I noticed comments that were deleted and comments that were added since my initial data collection. Additionally, RT has been bought by different companies and became a subsidiary instead of a privately-owned company. RT also went from making use of its own self-created microcelebrities to hiring big-name celebrities to act in their shows (such as Michael B. Jordan, Maisie Williams, and David Tennant). Most recently, for the first time since RT began, the company no longer has an RT founder at the helm; instead, a non-RT media executive stepped up to take the lead of General Manager while the founders of RT took on other roles in the company. In follow up interviews with community members, many had changed their level of participation (some increased, some decreased), moved to a different state, or had comments to say about how RT has changed. At every turn in my research process, I found change.

Therefore, I see my "temporary results" serving as a point of reference for other researchers, members of communities, or people engaging across SoE. Even though SoE are fleeting, they are still an important way of understanding how worlds live and die. I know in the process of doing this research, I have made a version of the RT community speak through me (as I am spoken through the community) and materialize onto these pages. Therefore, this production, this performance of research, points to the parts that make up the whole that is always becoming what it will be. As Krippendorf (1993) said, "To not merely describe or explain communication as a social phenomenon, but moreover to realize the study of communication as a social phenomenon means becoming communicatively involved, accounting for the second-order understanding of this involvement, and reentering these accounts (theories) into the very process of communication to be understood" (p. 19). This research becomes a way of creating community and discourses of community.

I hope my examination of the RT community through narratives, rules, and markers of membership can be seen as a model of how to engage in productive questions regarding the materialization of community. My wish is this work opens up future conversations that help create conditions for inclusivity and also a reconsideration of spaces where people can find a place to belong, even as members of various communities struggle with inequalities and dilemmas.

Finally, I hope the reflexive practices I have engaged with through this project will speak to other academics. As Riessman (1993) said, "the construction of any work always bears the mark of the person who created it" (p. v). Incorporating my own narratives and investigating how I present my own identity has been a way to situate myself in this research and make transparent the person behind the keyboard and pages of text. I have recreated myself over and

over again as I have reflexively engaged my contributions to community and research. The narratives I shared (written and photographic) of my own engagement with the community over the years have made me think about all of the communities I find myself a part. I thought I was a person who questioned everything. However, I realize, I fall short of this expectation of myself every day as there is so much about my own communicative worlds I take for granted. The way discourse builds worlds allows those same worlds to fade into the background. This dissertation has been a reminder for me that we must all be vigilant in reflexively going through our lives, as it is so easy to forget our own contributions to "the way things are." But I am also hopeful, because, as this research reminds me, it is through our mundane, everyday conversations and actions that we (re)make worlds together. This means each of us has more power than we know in shifting perspectives, engaging in productive conversations, embracing performances, claiming identities, and materializing communities.

Epilogue: Personal Journey

A conclusion "simultaneously announces the possibility of another story even as it draws performing narrative to a close; it opens the floor to others' stories, to conversation, and to critique" (Langellier & Peterson, 2004, p. 243). This dissertation is a way to discover my own identity as not only a researcher but as a RT community member. I began this research eager to talk with community members, watch RT content, and attend RT community events. These were enjoyable and eye-opening experiences for me. Through writing about the community, I had to grapple with the dilemmas and tensions of the community while examining the dilemmas and tensions of writing about it.

One aspect of Thurlow and Jaworski's (2017c) work which resonated with me in my process of researching the RT community was how in super-elite travel and in the privileging of

the RT community we often play "complicit and often quite explicit role in it all … [and are] seduced into thinking of ourselves as 'elite.'" (p. 185), or in the case of RT, "special." Their reflexive writing includes their own experiences of feeling excited about and confused by their own reactions to the ways elite travel companies would help mark them as elite. This type of scholarship, stemming from experience-cum-data, can be a valuable way to understand our own humanity, connecting us to our work and leading us into difficult, but worthwhile analyses. It is something that I feel made this work stronger (albeit more difficult to do). The way we incorporate ourselves into our work makes us better scholars as we have to critically reflect on our own role in our research. It also encourages transparency and opens our minds to the complexities of doing this kind of work, which is the work of understanding the role of communication in our lives. Ultimately, it is up to each of us individually to question what is going on in our worlds and finding out if there are constructive conversations yet to be had— which there always will be.

The way we think about the world is built into our discourses, our narratives, and embodied identities. It becomes a nexus of practice which is hard to pull back from and examine when we are just living our lives. Before this research, I would not have said that community itself was a narrative. In fact, I did not say this. I took the idea of a community for granted, as a given. However, through my reflections, writing, and pouring over data and texts, and speaking with my major professor, I now realize the true power, complexity, dilemmas, and tensions that come with making any claim that any community is, in fact, a community.

I understand, in hindsight, that this project is not at all what I thought it would be when I began. I tried to let go of all expectations from the start, as I learned during the very first semester of my doctoral coursework that you start where you are, and you do not go in knowing

the answers. For what is the point of doing this work if you will not encounter dilemmas worth grappling with? What is the point of doing this work if you do not push beyond what you and others who came before you have already examined? What is the point of this work if you cannot transform yourself along the way?

<div align="center">***</div>

"So, as the person who introduced me to RT, what do you think?" I ask Joshua.

"I mean, after this, the rose-colored glasses are off now. Did this ruin RT for you?"

"It did and it didn't. I certainly don't see RT the same way, but I learned how to appreciate things I didn't before. I think what changed the most for me is thinking about how communication has this incredible cosmic entanglement."

"Well, I mean the real question is, did you ever figure out why we're here?"

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APPENDIX A:

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA
USF RESEARCH & INNOVATION

RESEARCH INTEGRITY & COMPLIANCE
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd, MDC35, Tampa, FL 33612-4799
(813) 974-5638   FAX (813) 974-7091

October 23, 2019

Andrea Fortin
Communication

████████████████

RE: **Expedited Approval for Continuing Review**
IRB#:   CR3_Pro00028505
Title: Connection and Identity in the Rooster Teeth Community

Study Approval Period: 11/21/2019 to 11/21/2020

Dear Mrs. Fortin:

On 10/23/2019, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents contained within including those outlined below.

Approved Item(s):
Protocol Document(s):
  IRB Protocal Version 2 9.20.2018 No Markup.docx

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:
  Skype Interview Consent form, Version #1.docx

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab on the main study's workspace. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are valid until they are amended and approved.

The IRB determined that your study qualified for expedited review based on federal expedited category number(s):

(5) Research involving materials (data, documents, records, or specimens) that have been

collected, or will be collected solely for nonresearch purposes (such as medical treatment or diagnosis).

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with USF HRPP policies and procedures and as approved by the USF IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB via an Amendment for review and approval. Additionally, all unanticipated problems must be reported to the USF IRB within five (5) business days.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subjects research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

Melissa Sloan, PhD, Vice Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board

VOLUNTARY RESEARCH STUDY PARTICIPANTS WANTED

If you identify as a member of the RT Community, I could use your help to complete a research study for graduate school. See the information below and ask me any questions you might have.

- **Name of Study:** Connection and Identity in the Rooster Teeth Community
- **Purpose of Study:** To better understand how online communities with in-person meetups work, what their potential benefits are, and how community members understand their role within the community.
- **Why you?** Because you know the Rooster Teeth community the best.
- **What is involved:** Talking about your experiences as a Rooster Teeth community member for about 30 minutes to one hour, depending on where our conversation goes.

Contact Information:
Andrea Fortin, afortin@mail.usf.edu
PhD Student at USF in Communication
Study Number: Pro00028505

USF UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA ®

APPENDIX C:

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did you find Rooster Teeth?

2. Did you share Rooster Teeth content with friends?

3. What is the type of content you like the most?

4. What is the type of interaction you like the best with community members?

5. Did you ever join the Rooster Teeth main community site?

    a. Did you participate frequently?

    b. What did you think of your interactions?

    c. Did you make any lasting friendships?

6. Did you ever join a local Rooster Teeth community?

    a. How was your experience with that community?

    b. Do you regularly participate?

    c. How do you contact members—social media, website, YouTube?

7. How do you define the Rooster Teeth community?

8. Do you interact with fellow fans mostly online or in-person?

9. Do you feel the community is welcoming to new members?

10. As the community grows, are you seeing a change in the type of person attracted to this community?

11. Any final thoughts you have for me after our conversation?

APPENDIX D:

FOLLOW UP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Have you thought about anything you wanted to add since our first interview about your membership in the Rooster Teeth Community?

2. What do you think of researchers who claim online interaction is not as authentic or "real" as face-to-face interaction?

3. Do you primarily interact with Rooster Teeth fans online or offline? Which do you enjoy more?

4. Any final thoughts you have for me after our conversation?

Script for Obtaining Verbal Informed Consent

Researchers at the University of South Florida (USF) study many topics. To do this, we need the help of people who agree to take part in a research study. We are asking you to take part in a research study that is called: **Connection and Identity in the Rooster Teeth Community.**

The person who is in charge of this research study is Andrea Fortin. This person is called the Principal Investigator.

We are asking you to take part in this research study because as a Rooster Teeth community member, you know the community best and can speak from your own experiences. The purpose of this study is to find out how communities use online spaces as well as in-person meetups to help sustain their membership and community. The research will involve one-on-one interviews with members, as well as observing how people interact online and in person.

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to:
Interview one-on-one through Skype or a location that works best for you. The interview should last between 30 minutes and one hour. The interview will be recorded (audio and visual or just audio—you can indicate your preference at the time of the interview), but only the Principal Investigator will have access to the recording on a password-protected computer on a password-protected hard drive. The transcript of the interview will use anonymous identifiers. The files will be deleted by 5 years after the final report is submitted to the IRB.

Similar questions will be asked of participants, but since this is a conversation and you are leading the charge on what you think is most important, follow up questions are inevitable and we may not get through all of the following questions:
    12. How did you find Rooster Teeth?
    13. Did you share Rooster Teeth content with friends?
    14. What is the type of content you like the most?

15. What is the type of interaction you like the best with community members?
16. Did you ever join the Rooster Teeth main community site?
     a. Did you participate frequently?
     b. What did you think of your interactions?
     c. Did you make any lasting friendships?
17. Did you ever join a local Rooster Teeth community?
     a. How was your experience with that community?
     b. Do you regularly participate?
     c. How do you contact members—social media, website, YouTube?
18. How do you define the Rooster Teeth community?
19. Do you interact with fellow fans mostly online or in-person?
20. Do you feel the community is welcoming to new members?
21. As the community grows, are you seeing a change in the type of person attracted to this community?
22. Any final thoughts you have for me after our conversation?

You have the alternative to choose not to participate in this research study.

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer and should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study.

This research is considered to be minimal risk.

We will not pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

We must keep your study records as confidential as possible. We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not let anyone know your name. We will not publish anything else that would let people know who you are. However, certain people may need to see your study records. By law, anyone who looks at your records must keep them completely confidential. The only people who will be allowed to see these records are:

• The research team, including the Principal Investigator and the Advising Professor.

• Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your records. This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety.) These include:

- The University of South Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the staff that work for the IRB. Other individuals who work for USF that provide other kinds of oversight may also need to look at your records.
- The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

If you have any questions about this study, you can contact the investigator Andrea Fortin at afortin@mail.usf.edu. If you have question about your rights as a research participant please

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contact the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact by email at RSCH-IRB@usf.edu.

Would you like to participate in this study?

APPENDIX F:

PHOTO RELEASE FORM

PARTICIPANT CONSENT
I am 18 years of age or older and hereby grant the researcher designated below from the University of South Florida permission to photograph my likeness and to use my likeness in photograph(s) for publication for the dissertation study, *(re)Making Worlds Together: Rooster Teeth, Community, and Sites of Engagement*. I will make no monetary or other claim against USF for the use of the photograph(s).

Printed Name: Date:
Signature:

If Participant is under 18 years old, consent must be provided by the parent or legal guardian:
Printed Name: Date:
Signature:

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APPENDIX I:

FAIR USE ASSESSMENTS

The following is the explanatory page of the Fair Use Worksheet supplied by the University of South Florida was used to determine fair use of screenshots included in this dissertation:

University of South Florida

USF Fair Use Worksheet

The fair use exception was added to the Copyright Act of 1976 as section 107 and was based on a history of judicial decisions that recognized that unauthorized use of copyrighted materials were "fair uses." The distinction between fair use and infringement may be unclear and not easily defined. There is no specific number of words, lines, or notes that may safely be taken without permission. This worksheet is offered as a tool to help you determine if your use of copyrighted content is likely to be considered to be a "fair use."

Before you begin your fair use determination, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Is the work no longer protected by copyright?
    a. Is it in the public domain?
    b. Did I retain my copyright ownership over a work I created when signing my publication contract?
2. Is there a specific exception in copyright law that covers my use?
    a. Does my use fit within Section 108 of copyright law: 'Reproduction by libraries and archives?'
    b. Does my use fit within Section 110 (1) of copyright law: 'performance or display of works in face to face classrooms?'
    c. Does my use fit within Section 110 (2) of copyright law: 'performance or display of works in online classrooms (also known as the TEACH Act)?' *see TEACH Act checklist*
3. Is there a license that covers my use?
    a. Is the work issued under a Creative Commons license and can I comply with the license terms?
    b. Do I have access to the material through library licensed content? *Ask your librarian*

If your answer to the above questions was no, then you should proceed with your fair use evaluation. Section 107 also sets out four factors to be considered in determining whether or not a particular use is fair:

1. The purpose and character of the use, including whether such use is of commercial nature or is for nonprofit educational purposes
2. The nature of the copyrighted work
3. The amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole
4. The effect of the use upon the potential market for, or value of, the copyrighted work

None of these factors are independently determinative of whether or not a use is likely to be considered fair use. In evaluating your use, you should evaluate the totality of the circumstances and consider all of the factors together. The Fair Use Worksheet will help you balance these factors to determine if your use of copyrighted material weighs in favor of 'fair use.' While valuable for your own documentation the Worksheet is not intended as legal advice, which can be provided only by USF General Counsel.

LeEtta Schmidt, lmschmidt@usf.edu and Drew Smith dsmith@usf.edu
Reviewed by USF General Counsel 08/11/2015

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Screenshot Fair Use Assessment (noncreative)

The following completed worksheet assessment applies to the following figures which are screen shots from websites and are not creative works:

- Figure 2.1: "People like grapes" t-shirt from the RT Store at www.roosterteeth.com.
- Figure 2.2: Facebook responsive uptake activities.
- Figure 2.3: Rooster Teeth public Facebook group screenshot.
- Figure 2.4: Admin symbol on Facebook.
- Figure 2.5: Moderator symbol on Facebook.
- Figure 2.6: Sample Twitter feed.
- Figure 2.7: Tweet sample with breakdown of different elements.
- Figure 2.8: Interaction options on a forum post on RoosterTeeth.com.
- Figure 2.9: Interaction using positive and negative "Mods."
- Figure 2.10: Achievement Hunter group on RoosterTeeth.com.
- Figure 3.8: Description of Guardians on www.rtxaustin.com.
- Figure 4.1: A screenshot of a portion of the Terms of Use on www.roosterteeth.com.
- Figure 4.2: An excerpt of section 5 of the www.roosterteeth.com Terms of Use.
- Figure 4.3: Section 14, a-h of the DON'Ts of www.roosterteeth.com's Terms of Use.
- Figure 4.4: The Code of Conduct posted on the www.roosterteeth.com website.
- Figure 4.7. Tweet from @RTX Lines during RTX 2018.
- Figure 4.8. Cosplay rules image featured in Tweet from @RTX Lines during RTX 2018.
- Figure 4.9. Code of Conduct image featured in Tweet from @RTX Lines during RTX 2018.
- Figure 4.10: The rules from the RT Florida group page on www.roosterteeth.com.
- Figure 4.11: The inside-joke shirt sold in the RT Florida store for $20.95 plus shipping.
- Figure 4.17: Rule #8 posted in the RT Facebook group's description.
- Figure 4.19: Screenshots of a GIF comment in response to the post from Figure 4.16.
- Figure 4.21: Rule #12 posted in RT Public Facebook group description.
- Figure 5.4: Screenshot of RTX tickets 2019.
- Figure 5.5: Screenshot of price increase blog post.
- Figure 5.6: Screenshot reactions.
- Figure 5.7: FIRST+ icon on www.roosterteeth.com.
- Figure 5.8: Two comments of RT website users.

INSTRUCTIONS

Check all boxes that apply, and keep a copy of this form for your records. If you have questions, please contact the USF General Counsel or your USF Tampa Library Copyright Librarian.

Name: Andrea Fortin

Date: November 15, 2019

Class or Project: (re)Making Worlds Together: Rooster Teeth, Community, and Sites of Er

Title of Copyrighted Work: Screenshots in Dissertation (not creative)work

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■ Lower quality from original (ex. Lower resolution or bitrate photos, video, and audio)	☐ Similar or exact quality of original work

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This worksheet has been adapted from:

Cornell University's Checklist for Conducting A Fair use Analysis Before Using Copyrighted Materials:
 https://copyright.cornell.edu/policies/docs/Fair_Use_Checklist.pdf
Crews, Kenneth D. (2008) Fair use Checklist. Columbia University Libraries Copyright Advisory Office.
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LeEtta Schmidt, lmschmidt@usf.edu and Drew Smith dsmith@usf.edu
Reviewed by USF General Counsel 08/11/2015

Screenshot Fair Use Assessment (creative)

The following completed worksheet assessment applies to the following figures which are screen shots from   creative works (YouTube video, mobile applications, documentary):
- Figure 0.3: Augmented Reality via the Civilizations AR cellphone application.
- Figure 1.1: Screenshot of Red vs Blue Season 1, Episode 1.
- Figure 3.2: Michael "Burnie" Burns talking.
- Figure 3.3: RT community members.

University of South Florida

INSTRUCTIONS

Check all boxes that apply, and keep a copy of this form for your records. If you have questions, please contact the USF General Counsel or your USF Tampa Library Copyright Librarian.

Name: Andrea Fortin

Date: November 15, 2019

Class or Project: (re)Making Worlds Together: Rooster Teeth, Community, and Sites of Er

Title of Copyrighted Work: Screenshots in Dissertation (not creative)work

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☐ Teaching (including multiple copies for classroom use)	☐ Entertainment
■ Research or Scholarship	☐ Bad-faith behavior
■ Criticism, Parody, News Reporting or Comment	☐ Denying credit to original author
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☐ Restricted Access (to students or other appropriate group)	■ Made accessible on Web or to public
☐ Nonprofit	☐ Profit-generating use

Overall, the purpose and character of your use ■supports fair use or ☐does not support fair use.

NATURE OF THE COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

Likely Supports Fair Use	Likely Does Not Support Fair Use
☐ Factual or nonfiction	■ Creative or fiction
☐ Important to favored educational objectives	☐ Consumable (workbooks, tests)
■ Published work	☐ Unpublished

Overall, the nature of the copyrighted material ■supports fair use or ☐does not support fair use.

AMOUNT AND SUBSTANTIALITY OF MATERIAL USED IN RELATION TO WHOLE

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■ Amount is important to favored socially beneficial objective (i.e. educational objectives)	☐ Portion used is qualitatively substantial (i.e. it is the 'heart of the work')
■ Lower quality from original (ex. Lower resolution or bitrate photos, video, and audio)	☐ Similar or exact quality of original work

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☐ The copyright holder is unidentifiable	■ Made accessible on Web or to public
☐ Lack of licensing mechanism for the material	☐ Affordable and reasonably available permissions or licensing

Overall, the effect on the market for the original ■supports fair use or ☐does not support fair use.

CONCLUSION

The combined purpose and character of the use, nature of the copyrighted material, amount and substantiality of material used in relation to the whole and the effect on the market for the original
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Note: Should your use of copyrighted material not support fair use, you may still be able to locate and request permissions from the copyright holder. For help on this, please feel free to contact your Copyright Librarian.

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Smith, Kevin; Macklin, Lisa A.; Gilliland, Anne. A Framework for Analyzing any Copyright Problem. Retrieved from:
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APPENDIX J:

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Figure 2.11: Masspersonal communication diagram

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Figure 0.1: Shotter's two-way process

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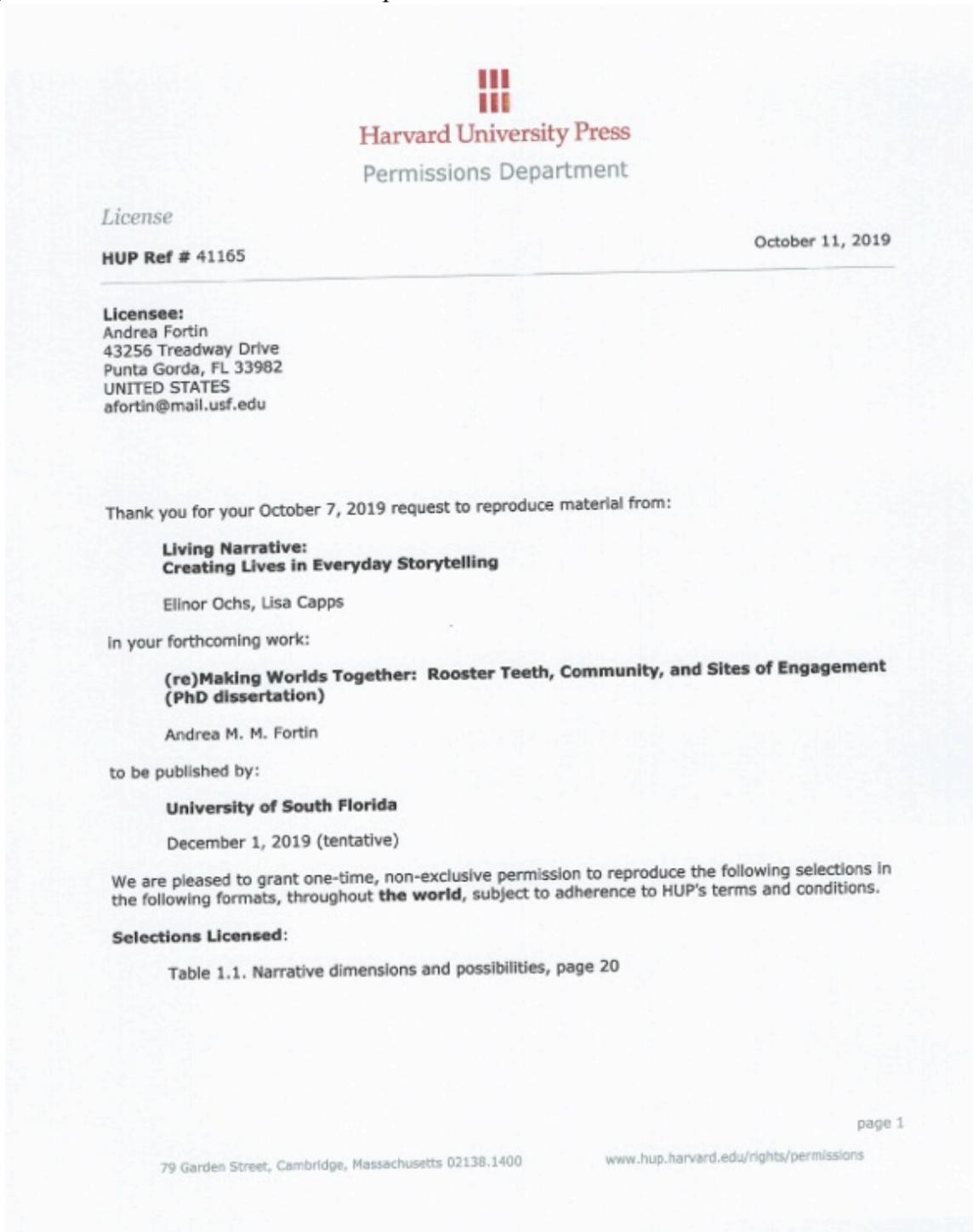
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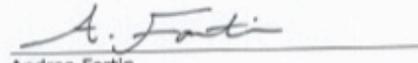In accepting this license, you agree that:

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