The Performance and Maintenance of Standpoint Within an Online Community

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In the following essay, we explore the possibility for the expansion of the Audience Performance Paradigm to include the concept of “Standpoint Performance.” Specifically, we looked at an alternative cityscape constructed through diffused intertextual production as the site for such a performance. Using interviews and qualitative content analysis, we were able to demonstrate how some members of the DetroitYES! web community were able to construct a collective experience that allowed them to gain a voice within the oppressive environment of the contested cityscape of Detroit. In addition, our research also illustrated how there is a hierarchical community maintenance that was necessary for such performances to arise within the community.


Past audience research has demonstrated two forms of audience coperformance with mediated texts: Spectacle Performance (SP) and Resistance Performance (RP). SP was illustrated in Abercrombie and Longhurst’s (1998) book Audiences, in which they explicated the different forms of audience that had emerged in media and audience research throughout the latter half of the 20th century. SP emerged from research concerning spectacle and performance developed by scholars like Debord (1967), Hebdige (1979), and Schechner (1993). Under SP, audiences coperform with spectacular consumption-oriented images that they find in the media, which transforms their experience of “everyday life.” RP was developed by Atkinson and Dougherty (2006), and later refined by Atkinson (2010) in his book Alternative Media and Politics of Resistance; this line of research utilized the same notions about performance in order to build on alternative media research of journalism and media scholars such as Atton (2002), Downing (2003), and Meikle (2002). RP developed from interviews with activists and qualitative content analysis of alternative media, and demonstrated how critical worldviews, interactions with alternative media, and communicative resistance shaped the performances enacted by activists who sought to address problems that stem from dominant power structures (i.e., corporations,
government). Both forms of audience coproduction fit well within the literature concerning mass media audiences (e.g., Couldry, 2004), as well as alternative media and activism (e.g., Warnick, 2007).

Interestingly, Atkinson (2010) noted that SP and RP were not mutually exclusive, but were in fact part of the same paradigmatic view concerning audiences; it was suggested that Standpoint Performance could possibly be a part of this Audience Performance Paradigm. One place to explore the possibility of Standpoint Performance is the alternative cityscape of Detroit constructed from the diffused intertextual production associated with the DetroitYES! web community. Diffused intertextual production is a reference to the development and extension of an intertextual framework from the interactive coproduction between producers and audiences. Past research by Atkinson and Rosati (2012) demonstrated how the simultaneous presence of intertextuality (see Ott & Walter, 2000; Warnick, 1998, 2007) and interactivity (see Warnick, 2007) allowed for community members to construct a fluid “knowledge” about the physical site of Detroit that was considerably different from representations of the city in news and popular media. This alternative cityscape—as well as the performances of community members within that virtual site—stands as an excellent opportunity to observe and explore the possibilities for Standpoint Performance. In the following essay, we illustrate concepts related to Audience Performance, as well as explicate the concept of diffused intertextual production within the contested cityscape of Detroit. This is followed by a description of our research procedures and findings. In our current research, we engaged in qualitative content analysis (see Altheide, 1996; Mayring, 2000) of discussion threads on the DetroitYES! forums, as well as active interviews (see Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) with 18 members of the DetroitYES! web community in order to explore their use of the websites, their interactions with one another, and their performances in the city of Detroit. This provides much more insight into the web community and alternative cityscape than in the past research, as Atkinson and Rosati relied on textual analysis to explore both. Ultimately, we demonstrate (a) the different performances engaged in by members of the DetroitYES! community, (b) the emergence of standpoint within some of those performances, and (c) how that emergent standpoint is maintained. Our findings hold important implications for media and communication scholars’ understanding of Audience Performance, as well as diffused intertextual production.

**Audience Performance**

The idea for an Audience Performance Paradigm first emerged from the writing of Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), in which they conducted a meta-analysis of past audience research. They found that audience research had moved through three paradigmatic shifts: Behavioral Paradigm, Incorporation/Resistance Paradigm, and Spectacle/Performance Paradigm. The Spectacle/Performance Paradigm is based on the foundational concept of the diffused audience, which refers to an audience that blurs the line between their own position and the mediated performances in
society that they witness. Essentially, the diffused audience exists at the intersection of “everyday life” and the multitude of media messages around them. At this intersection, fragmented spectacle and images meld into a mediascape in which the audience engages in performance.

So deeply infused into everyday life is performance that we are unaware of it in ourselves or in others. Life is a constant performance; we are audience and performer at the same time; everybody is an audience all the time. Performance is not a discrete event. (p. 73)

The diffused audience pieces together a mediascape from all of the different fragments of spectacle and imagery swirling about, and come to perform as one of the *Friends* or a member of the *Entourage*; they perform as a member of an NFL team by buying the jersey of their favorite quarterback. That is not say that these individuals see themselves as Jennifer Aniston or Tom Brady, but they learn to perform as if part of those respective worlds. Such performance is narcissistic, in that the blurring of the line between audience and performance contributes to the inability of the audience to differentiate between themselves and the outside world; the diffused audience view the world as an extension of themselves, or vice versa (see Porter & Catt, 1993).

Although Abercrombie and Longhurst’s Spectacle/Performance Paradigm provided valuable insight into the performances of affluent audiences of mass media within the context of a thriving capitalist system, critiques have been leveled about its value for the examination of groups who resist dominant power structures. Specifically, Atkinson (2010) argued that this vision of the audience largely ignores power and resistance to institutions that manufacture/circulate spectacle-laden images. According to Atkinson, such “audiences seem to become part of the dominant structure without question; the more involved they are in spectacle, the more narcissistic they become” (p. 32). To counter this problem of power and resistance, Atkinson and Dougherty (2006) initially addressed the possibility for a “Resistance Performance Paradigm” that was based on the performances of audiences who used alternative media grounded in critical theory (e.g., *Adbusters* magazine, Indymedia.org). This position was later refined in Atkinson’s work on the subject of politics of resistance. Essentially, this line of research explored performances of alternative media audiences—typically political activists—that expressed their cultural and individual identity as they attempted to draw the gaze of others (e.g., Schechner, 1993). The research illustrated how the performance of resistance emerges from five categories: (a) critical worldviews, (b) interactions with alternative media content, (c) communicative resistance, (d) intercreative capacity, and (e) narrative capacity.

The first three categories focus on the audiences and their actions. Audiences of alternative media often demonstrate critical worldviews in the way they talk about dominant power structures in society; those worldviews range from radical to reformist. Such audiences also engage in interactions with alternative media texts; such interactions range from lay (or passive) to participatory (engagement with texts through coproduction or feedback to producers). Finally, communicative
resistance are strategies the audiences deem to be necessary to counter the dominant power structures in society; these strategies range from adjustive (i.e., legal) to militant. Ultimately, these first three categories emerge against a backdrop of fragmented alternative media content about power structures, power, and resistance; such fragmented narratives are passed about and shared within activist networks in local level communities. As activists learn these narratives they begin to form critical worldviews, and engage with additional texts to learn more. The more participatory their engagement—or interaction—with those texts, the more they solidify critical worldviews (see Huesca, 2001; Meikle, 2002). Those audiences who are more “participatory” in their use of alternative media are more confident of their worldviews, and more likely to engage in public performances of communicative resistance. The latter two categories deal with activist organizations, networks, and their connections to the world around them. Intercreative capacity focuses on the interactivity between producers and audiences at the local level, and between the local level with the global level. Narrative capacity, finally, entails the ability of activist networks in a local community to come together and form protests and public resistance. Overall, the Resistance Performance concept illustrates the integral role of alternative media in the development and enactment of public performances of protest and dissent.

At this point, we would like to note that spectacle is still a part of this Resistance Performance view; spectacle is, however, bifurcated as activists separate good spectacle (e.g., content in Adbusters) from bad spectacle (gap advertisements). In this way, the “good” spectacle found in alternative media content solidifies the audiences’ critical worldviews, and mobilizes them against “bad” spectacle. In fact, Atkinson and Dougherty claimed that the Resistance Performance Paradigm they speculated about was not so much a different paradigm, as much as it was an extension of the paradigm described by Abercrombie and Longhurst. Later, Atkinson (2010) suggested that the term Spectacle/Performance Paradigm be modified to Audience Performance Paradigm, in which audiences engage in performances based in spectacle (SP) or resistance (RP). That is the position that we take in this essay. We also look to Atkinson’s suggestion that there is also the potential for the establishment and performance of standpoint by audiences in the right situations. Therefore, we look to add to the literature concerning Audience Performance by addressing the performance of standpoint by audiences who are members of web communities that allow for diffused intertextual production.

**Diffused intertextual production and the contested cityscape**

Recent research by Atkinson and Rosati (2012) demonstrated the concept of diffused intertextual production, which provides an opportunity to explore the possibility for Standpoint Performance. Their research focused on a web community called DetroitYES! that featured two key components: the intertextuality in the virtual tour, and the interactivity in the discussion forum. While, it is understood that
intertextuality is a crucial way of conceptualizing the mediation of social life through codes, interdependent and mutually constitutive discursive fields (see Kristeva, 1980), we use “intertext,” “intertextual,” and “intertextuality” in a more bracketed way for the needs of our specific study as well as describing forms of interactive Audience Performance. Intertextuality refers to a *rhetorical* strategy that allows producers of websites and other media to procure materials and contexts from multiple texts and immerse them into their own work; this is done in order to create frames through which audiences can view issues and concepts in new ways (e.g., Ott & Walter, 2000; Warnick, 1998, 2007). Together, Ott and Walter (2000) and Warnick (2007) identify five intertextual strategies: parodic allusion, creative appropriation, self-reflexive reference, cross-reference, and explicit play with social texts.

Within the context of DetroitYES!, the intertextual component was the Fabulous Ruins of Detroit Virtual Tour, which was created in 1997 by Lowell Boileau, a Detroit area artist. The virtual tour begins with a discussion about the importance of the project, and explains that Detroit now stands as America’s first great ruins similar to Athens or Rome. The tour features numerous photographs of crumbling buildings throughout the city, along with Boileau’s own commentary about those sites; such commentary serves as an intertextual strategy of explicit play with social texts (see Warnick, 2007) that helps to frame the cityscape as the ruins of an ancient city/empire. While Detroit is often mediated through the dominant codes of postindustrial collapse or riots, the use of “ruins” as a code hails Detroit within the discursive fields of ancient great civilizations, worthy of admiration. The intertext of Detroit *Ruins* is a strategy to reshape what audiences bring with them to mediate the “text” of the physical city itself. Connected to the virtual tour is the interactive discussion forum created by Boileau to allow people to discuss the tour and the city of Detroit. The interactivity associated with the forum entails the cocreation of content by audiences alongside producers (see Meikle, 2002; Warnick, 2007). Members of the community use the forum to expand on Boileau’s intertextual frame by posting memories and stories about their beleaguered city, as well as uploading photographs and scanned documents (e.g., maps from the 1940s) into discussion threads. Through these components, the community members constructed an alternative cityscape anchored to the nostalgic intertextual comparisons to Detroit to Athens and Rome; this new site challenges dominant perceptions about the city. In this way, then, the city becomes a lost and ancient ruins worthy of exploration. This new way of viewing the city allows for users to interact with one another, and with the city, in different ways, which aids in the construction of a more participatory identity (Atkinson & Rosati, 2012).

The diffused intertextual production described by Atkinson and Rosati gives rise to alternate paths through—and interactions with—the physical site of Detroit. In many ways, this emergent knowledge and identity is similar to the establishment of standpoint that is described in communication literature, but divergent on one important aspect. According to feminist standpoint scholars, a standpoint is a shared location that emerges from recognition of material circumstances; this location
aids people in the process of interpretation (e.g., Harding, 1993; Hartsock, 1998). According to Hartsock (1998), “A standpoint is not simply an interested position (interpreted as a bias) but is interested in the sense of being engaged” (p. 107); that is, standpoint is not a preconceived worldview that people take up, but is an engagement with others in order to build community and understand the world. Standpoint is achieved through the recognition of different material conditions within varying cultural locations, as well as the power and subsequent oppression associated with relations between and within those locations (e.g., Dougherty, 2011; Harding, 1993; Hartsock, 1998). It should be noted that the notion of standpoint has also fallen under critique for its assumption of the essential connection between subjectivity and a particular identity position (see Butler, 1990). Such essentialism has been demonstrated as incomplete (see Hall, 1996). But, so has—within this same critique of essentialism—the opposing notion that all individuals have unfettered agency in their choice of identity positions. Our use of standpoint acknowledges the nonessential nature of identity, as well as the mediated construction of community through multiple discourses within which subjectivities are produced. That is, the construction of standpoint is, itself, also constructed out of the limits and pressures (Williams, 1977) that at once constrain and fracture so as to make identities multiple (see Deleuze & Guattari, 1977). However, even where our emphasis intersects with the physical material of the city, we conceptualize this intersection as one that opens up and closes down potential subjectivities and performativity, rather than constituting some special position of knowledge or subjectivity outside of forms of discursive mediation.

Through discourse and narratives, people share their different perspectives on those locations and power relations until they reach a collective experience about their own material condition and oppression (e.g., Allen, 2000; Sloan & Krone, 2000). For example, men and women, Whites and African Americans, rich and poor all constitute different cultural locations that hail subjectivities into identifications and forms of performativity and, as such, entail differing resources and social capital that constitute power. Power relations between these different locations often lead to oppression by one location, although that oppression is oftentimes hidden through discursive closures (e.g., Clair, 1998). As Hall (1996) notes, all such locations entail a process of being “hailed” into specific identity positions, which are neither completely external nor simply internal to an individual. That is, both oppression and domination are discursive projects, which construct the subjectivities of all such positions. This, obviously, is not necessarily mutually exclusive with a nuanced view of feminist standpoint. For instance, as Mitchell, Marson, and Katz (2004), and other cultural geographers (e.g., Mitchell, 2000; Olwig, 2002) have emphasized, the morphology and use of the built landscape do not exist outside of dominant systems of meaning and relations of power. Materiality, so central to feminist standpoint, can never exist outside of discursive production, nor can discourse ever not be material. The material environment is a political project within which dominant, residual, and emergent social formations interact. An oppressed group can build
a standpoint to construct an alternative cultural location through the sharing of narratives; such sharing allows for the construction of a collective experience that can enable people to see through the discursive closures established by the dominant group. The sharing of narratives and construction of a collective experience applies to the diffused intertextual production, alternative cityscape, and participatory identity discussed in Atkinson and Rosati’s research. However, one important point made by feminist standpoint scholars is that the collective experience that emerges through discourse also provides a voice for those who are oppressed, through which they can address the dominant power structures responsible for their oppression and find some form of liberation (Dougherty, 2011). It is important to note that just because a standpoint is developed does not mean that is done evenly or democratically. And, certainly, voice is not equivalent to unhindered agency among those participating. What voice can be, however, is an alternative rhetorical strategy against dominant narratives and the discursive production of oppressive social locations. Such voice is not addressed in the past DetroitYES! research, and is the primary deviation from standpoint literature. Establishment of Standpoint Performance—as part of the Audience Performance Paradigm—rests in the illustration and exploration of any “voice” that emerges from the knowledge and identity associated with the alternative cityscape of Detroit.

Examining performance in the alternative cityscape

Atkinson and Rosati’s past research concerning DetroitYES! and diffused intertextual production illustrated the ways in which the intertextual strategy of explicit play with social texts utilized by Boileau and the interactivity of users framed the physical architecture in the city and shaped the web community. However, the research was based on qualitative content analysis of the latent meanings found within the “exhibits” featured in the Fabulous Ruins Tour and discussion threads on the forums, which provides little insight into the everyday lives of the members of the community or their performances within the alternative cityscape. In order to build on that research and demonstrate Standpoint Performance, we engaged in active interviews (see Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) with 18 members of the DetroitYES! web community. In these interviews, we met with the participants in sites of their choosing, and asked them to describe their use the DetroitYES! sites (the virtual tour and forums), role in the web community (online and off), and interactions with people inside the city. The interviews were recorded using digital audio recorders, and transcribed for grounded theory analysis. Using grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we looked through the transcripts for examples of 1) collective experience and 2) using voice to speak out against power structures and/or oppressive practices.

In addition to the interviews, we also engaged in qualitative content analysis of 156 discussion threads found on the DetroitYES! forums, similar to the analysis conducted in Atkinson and Rosati’s research. Qualitative content analysis is the process used
to uncover themes in order to illustrate any latent meanings held within the text (see Altheide, 1996; Mayring, 2000). Essentially, the researcher constructs thematic categories through a series of steps that function within the framework of the project and the texts (Mayring, 2000). In our analysis we focused on community members portrayals of their own performances within the alternative cityscape constructed through DetroitYES! In this way, we searched for examples of collective experience and speaking out against oppressive practices.

**Performance**

The interviews with the DetroitYES! community members, as well as the qualitative content analysis of the forums, revealed three categorical performances: performance outside of the intertext, performance against the intertext, and performance within the intertext. The first of these categories, performance outside of the intertext, involved discourse and actions that did not reflect or embrace the vision of Detroit as an ancient ruins portrayed in the Fabulous Ruins Virtual Tour. That is not to say that such performances rejected or challenged the frame established in the tour, like those below, but rather ignored this intertextual strategy. In postings on the forums and in one-on-one interviews, some community members talked about sports and politics outside of the frame that had been established by Boileau. In these instances, the community members reflected the “mainstream” notions of the contested cityscape. That is to say, they discussed Detroit within contexts established through mainstream media outlets (e.g., high crime rate and unemployment, government interventions in the auto industry). The second performance that emerged from our research, performance against the intertext, involved discourse and actions that challenged the original intertextual strategy employed by Boileau; such performance typically took place online in the discussion threads. Essentially, members of the community would question Boileau’s notion that Detroit was the “fabulous ruins” of a once mighty empire toppled by some unknown cataclysm; such individuals often posted their own theories and opinions concerning the problems plaguing the city. For instance, one community member, a Black activist called Crasher, claimed that Detroit was a city battered and ravaged by White racism. As Black people in the city demanded accountability of the police and city government in the 1960s and 1970s, White flight to the suburbs increased. This flight from the city reduced the number of jobs, as well as tax revenue that was necessary for integral services. In fact, Crasher claimed that the DetroitYES! community was nothing more than a “white” project aimed at reclaiming the city from Blacks for those White communities that fled decades ago; he often noted that most of the community members were White people who lived in the suburbs: “I think whites dominate here, the whole chat . . . they’re comfortable, they think they’re progressive, they think they’ve done great things for Detroit.” Another community member called Lawrence told us about how he had made claims on the forum that Detroit was ruined by Black people who have created a “black holocaust of abortion.”

I may have referred specifically to the published stats that show African-Americans currently abort fifty-eight percent of all their pregnancies,
with that number soaring to ninety percent in some inner-city areas. Since
Detroit is over eighty percent African American and is publicly pleading for more
residents, it made sense to suggest starting at home in the quest for more people.

According to Lawrence, this “holocaust” leaves Black families broken and more
dependent. Needless to say, such challenges to the intertextual frame did not go
unnoticed. In both cases, Crasher and Lawrence explained that Boileau banned them
from the forums and completely erased their comments from all of the threads; both
individuals essentially ceased to exist. In our interviews with him, Boileau admitted to
banning Crasher from the community, and had some memory of banning Lawrence.
The banning and erasure of comments from threads plays an important role in the
maintenance of standpoint, described below.

The final performance illustrated from the interviews and qualitative content
analysis was the performance within the intertext. Of the three performances, only
the performance within the frame entailed the expression of collective experience and
speaking out against oppressive practices associated with the theory of standpoint we
have outlined above. Online, many of the community members posted commentary
about their actions in and around the city of Detroit. Such posting is not in and
of itself resistive in a traditional sense, in which oppression and resistance entail
confrontation within public view (see Aptheker, 1989; Clair, 1998). In such postings,
the community members often talk to one another about their vigilant observations
watching over important landmarks and nodes within the city; in some cases these
individuals even acted as an eyewitness reporter. For instance, in a thread entitled
“Tiger Stadium Elevator Tower to Fall,” several members of the community kept
watch over the slow demolition of the old baseball stadium near downtown. One of
the last parts of the stadium to be demolished was the elevator used to take reporters
up to the press booth once upon a time. In one post, a member called detroitstreets
noted that the demolition of the elevator had not yet occurred:

Was at the ballpark yesterday, and one of the guys said they had just put in
permits to close Michigan Avenue so they could raze the rest the elevator tower,
on the corner of Michigan and Cochrane. Said they’d be working at night. I’m
stuck at work during nights. Has anyone driven by in the last few hours? I’ll drive
by around 12:30 myself. Sure would be nice to get video and/or photos of that
tower falling.

Later, another member, Screech Brick, reported the following about the elevator
tower: “I was at the Tiger Stadium site at 8:30 a.m. today (Friday) and found no
demolition workers on site. Could it be that they are getting their rest now so they can
work tonight?” Similarly, a community member called BenR noticed a Bangladeshi
festival taking place a few blocks from his house. He started a thread on the discussion
forum about this event, and then, taking on the guise of an “intrepid reporter” went
out to the festival to observe. The notion of intrepid reporter was evident in the way
that BenR signed off in his posts (e.g., “this is your reporter, reporting from the eye
of the storm”; “Your daring reporter, risking it all for you”). Throughout the day,
he posted a series of “on the scene reports” in the thread about the activities, people, sights, and smells that he discovered:

12:20pm: Booths still empty. No people. But music is emanating from the band shell at the end of the street. Life stirs . . . .1pm: The vendor booths are still empty. Lite jazz starts to play.

These “reports” serve as a kind of online “community watch” that is concerned with keeping track and narrating changes in the alternative cityscape; such narration is similar to “coping and survival.” In past research, Aptheker (1989) and Clair (1998) examined forms of resistance that were alternative to the “traditional” notions of resistance that emphasized ideology, liberation, and power shifts. Aptheker examined the resistance of Jewish women in the Nazi controlled ghettos, and noted that retelling traditional stories and enacting rituals brought hope to a community that know only despair. Utilizing such a view, Atkinson (2009) deemed some oral histories told and retold in Zapatista autonomous communities in southern Mexico to be resistance through coping and survival: “Such resistance did not so much challenge the balance of power in the region, so much as it was an activity that could function as a source of hope and dignity for a community that existed under siege” (p. 21).

In the same way, then, the narratives and rituals of some community members celebrate the city’s historical buildings against—even if simultaneously within—the dominant discourse of those buildings being “ugly,” “wasteful,” and “unproductive.” Essentially, this narration envisions those sites in a manner that is alternative to the dominant narratives about the city as devoid of upkeep and abandoned. These instances stand as a new knowledge and engaged voice and thus, constitutive of a standpoint against the dominant oppressive view of the city as destroyed and without physical value.

In addition, many of the community members whom we interviewed described events and actions in the physical cityscape that grew out of discussions on the forums. For instance, one community member called Hamtramck Bob explained that he often joined with a group of DetroitYES! community members to play softball at Riverside Park in Detroit. The softball games were a ruse for the community members to get in the way of construction workers who were planning the construction of a new toll bridge that would destroy the park; the community members felt that the bridge was only being constructed to increase the incomes of wealthy elites in the city.

There were a bunch of us, we went down there in full view as [construction workers] showed up . . . we [organized] this on Detroit Yes . . . So this initial thing ended up leading to other demonstrations here in the park where people just went in and decided to go in and use the park. You can’t kick me out.

Another community member called Guy read about the concept of community gardens in the DetroitYES! forums and decided to start a major cooperative garden in his neighborhood.
Everyday I was putting stuff on the forum about what I was doing. Soon, [members of DetroitYES!] came out and helped me till and map out the plots of where we’re going to plant. [One person] brought out his tiller . . . That was our first official work day game from DetroitYes people.

Guy noted that the garden not only provided fresh fruits and vegetables to people who had little access to such things, but also created a sense of community pride. Another community member, Dana, explained that she worked with other community members to provide historic tours of downtown Detroit. The tours were designed to educate the community about the rich history of the buildings and businesses downtown, as well as the region. Much of the information that Dana and the other tour guides passed on to people came directly from the discussions on the forums. In another instance, a community member called Raven became part of an urban gardening project in which people grew food in vacant lots. She used the project not only to grow food, but also as an opportunity to explore the city. As she worked with her boyfriend in the gardens, she unearthed interesting items—like a brick with an emblem that she did not recognize—which she later took to the forums for discussion. Finally, one community member called Florence explained that she had worked in an office in the city until 1981, but refused to cross Eight Mile Road again after she retired. She claimed that she was often frightened of the people and problems in Detroit; she avoided the city as much as she could. However, after she found the Fabulous Ruins of Detroit and involved herself in discussions on the forums, she took a different view of the city. Through the forums, she became involved in an urban gardening project, as well as a nonprofit group that works to restore and preserve parts of the city.

Ultimately, we contend that the performance within the intertext constitutes performance of standpoint. This is due to the expression of a collective experience in the postings in the forums and the commentary provided by many of the community members in the interviews. In addition, this also stands as Standpoint Performance because of the newfound “voice” to oppose oppressive practices around them, which was demonstrated in many of the interviews. First of all, the postings of many community members exhibit a collective experience concerning the city. This collective experience involves the nostalgic-laden history that comes from the intertextual frame, which Atkinson and Rosati aptly described in their past research:

[The architecture in Detroit is framed] within the intertext of ruins in Athens and Rome, which are presented in “popular” historical accounts and literature about travel. Such places entail legends of Emperors, senators, and wars that constitute a nostalgic history that draws the tourists’ gaze. Like Athens and Rome, Boileau suggests that Detroit similarly holds an ancient past that was vibrant and exciting, and that the past, as well as the present, is worthy of such nostalgia. In addition, [his commentary in the tour] describes a vague cataclysm that occurred long ago to drive away the ancients. (p. 12)
As the city is enriched with history and nostalgia, rather than crime and danger, many within the DetroitYES! community consider it to be worthy of rediscovery and exploration. In many instances, like in the case of Florence, there was the notion of a “sea change” in the perception of the city. Before they were involved in DetroitYES! they were apprehensive of the city; after they became involved they sought to engage with the city.

After I stopped working in the city in 1981, I became one of those suburbanites who would never cross Eight Mile Road and go to the city. It seemed the older I got the more afraid I became. Then when I got involved with the non-profit, I found myself going into the City all the time . . . . I am more interested in the City itself now . . . for years I didn’t care at all.

Other community members also described a significant transformation of their perceptions about the city and the surrounding region. The activities of community members like JonnyC and BenR chronicled on the forum, as well as the commentary in interviews, reflect both a collective experience about the ancient ruins and coping and survival as a form of resistance (see Aptheker, 1989; Atkinson, 2009; Clair, 1998). As many community members developed a new knowledge about their community, they took part in activities that would demonstrate to people that Detroit is not the crime-infested burned out industrial shell often represented in popular media. Dana’s tours of the city, Raven’s work in the urban garden, and Florence’s work with the nonprofit group constituted such resistance. In their own ways, their actions stood in stark contrast of the dominant cityscape of Detroit built from popular media and mainstream news. These actions also helped to bring a kind of dignity and hope to the vacant lots and crumbling parts of the city. It should be noted, however, that such actions can also constitute hegemonic resistance, as described by Mumby (1997). Such resistance can be deeply hegemonic in that the actions reinforce the dominant ideologies and power structures; in the cases above, the actions of the community members draw attention to problems that are often the focus of mainstream media, and even trivialize them in some cases.

Not only did the interviews demonstrate the performance of standpoint described above, but also the process for the maintenance of that standpoint. The interviews revealed one interesting fact: that Boileau, the site creator and administrator, regularly banned people who crossed him from the forum and erased all of their past comments. On the surface, this sounds particularly authoritarian and contrary to the notion of standpoint establishment described in past research (e.g., Dougherty, 2011; Harding, 1993; Hartsock, 1998). This seemed particularly problematic as the first person we discovered Boileau had banned was the Black activist Crasher. In his interview, Crasher claimed that he would often enter the forums and begin illustrating the racist nature of comments on the discussion threads, and especially point to the racist nature of Boileau’s virtual tour and administration of the forums. These comments, he claimed, led to his removal, after which he would then create a new account and
return to the forums. Interviews with other people banned from the community, as well as with Boileau himself, provided more insight into this practice. Crasher, Lawrence, Bravo, and Pearl were all individuals who had engaged in performances against the intertext, and were banned by Boileau. These were individuals who engaged in performances against the intertext. Crasher made challenges through his vivacious postings. Lawrence challenged the intertext through his racially charged explanation for the collapse of Detroit. Bravo challenged Boileau’s authority by telling him to “blow it out his ass” in the middle of a debate about proper etiquette on the forums. Pearl also made a challenge by sticking her tongue out at Boileau using an emoticon (:P) during a similar debate. Boileau admitted to the practice of banning people and their IP address from the forums to us in a second interview. However, Boileau defended these actions by noting that the people who were typically banned from the forums and DetroitYES! community were “trolls” looking to create problems for people. Trolls could either create obvious problems (e.g., calling people vulgar names), or derail discussion threads through their “one trick pony” antics:

Somebody who really gets into a one trick pony. That means, they got something they were on to. This one guy was on to mass transit and he would come into threads that had nothing to do with mass transit and he would say the same thing basically over and over. It was completely about that . . . . Lots of people get annoyed by that.

For Boileau, such banning was absolutely necessary in order to maintain the integrity of the discussions, and he cited other forums (in Detroit and elsewhere) in order to demonstrate his point. He explained that the “nastiness” of “trolls” often “infuriates other people and derails the discussion.” A forum that is dedicated to knowledge and understanding can quickly fall apart if an administrator does not act often and decisively. This idea of derailment was mirrored in comments made by Raven, who explained that the DetroitYES! community had once gone through some “tough times,” when “thread rippers” regularly “trolled” the forums insulting people and making racist/disrespectful comments about Detroit. In those days, Raven was not particularly active in discussion or activities in the physical cityscape.

Ultimately, the interviews and commentary of community members demonstrate how standpoint established through online settings needs to be hierarchical and a little authoritarian. Commentary provided by members like Raven demonstrate how the stability of the community was threatened before Boileau utilized his strategy of banning and erasure. In addition, many of the community members told stories about other forums concerning Detroit that did not establish a shared or collective vision of the city; one community member described such forums as “mob rule.” Within such a chaotic context it would difficult to establish any kind of collective experience, or the coping as resistance described above.
Discussion

Ultimately, the findings of our research demonstrate a fuller picture of the Audience Performance Paradigm by demonstrating a third manner of Audience Performance: Standpoint Performance. The foundations of this part of the larger paradigm consist of intertextuality and interactivity, which are the very components of diffused intertextual production described by Atkinson and Rosati. Essentially, the intertextual frame is necessary for the emergence of a collective experience for audiences/users of a particular medium, similar to the shared experiences described in past standpoint research (e.g., Allen, 2000; Sloan & Krone, 2000). Those individuals who “accept” the intertextual frame and perform within that context are more likely to share such a collective experience. Those audiences/users who do not accept it do not share any such experience, and in many cases challenge the frame. It should be noted, however, that the intertextual frame is only one part as interactivity, such as documenting activities or posting stories, also plays an important role. These actions help to solidify the collective experience associated with the intertextual frame and give rise to the participatory identity described by Atkinson and Rosati, and demonstrated in the past research of Huesca (2001) and Meikle (2002). In their research, Huesca and Meikle demonstrated how open publishing and other forms of online interactivity help users to build political identities within the context of new social movements. In this way, then, those community members who accepted the intertextual frame and engaged in interactive use of the forums were able to establish a new understanding of their city, as well as a “voice” that corresponds with past standpoint research (Dougherty, 2011). This allowed those community members to utilize coping and survival as forms of resistance against the oppressive nature of the dominant, contested cityscape.

It should also be noted that the Standpoint Performance observed in the case of DetroitYES! required centralized, hierarchical maintenance. This is significant as past standpoint research alludes to the construction of standpoint as an egalitarian event with little or no hierarchy or guidance (e.g., Allen, 2000; Dougherty, 2011). Such lack of hierarchy or guidance stems from the fact that such research focused on the construction of standpoint in face-to-face organizational settings. In those settings marginalized individuals can identify allies and threats, which allows for them to shift the sites for communication from one point to another when need be. For example, if a group of women in a corporate setting were meeting in the break room to discuss sexual harassment within the organization, they could relocate their discussion if a group of men entered the room. In the case of DetroitYES! and other online environments, anonymity and the possibility for multiple user identities makes such identification of allies and enemies difficult—almost impossible. In addition, the discussion forums and threads are public space that is available to all audiences, including those who are not actually members of the community. For these reasons, then, it becomes necessary for a centralized figure or group to engage in maintenance of the intertextual frame that drew people to the site.
and community. Boileau’s banishment and censorship of performances against the intertext maintained the integrity of the Fabulous Ruins from the attacks of “trolls” such as Lawrence or Crasher, and allowed others like BenR and Florence to construct and perform standpoint. Although Pearl disdained Boileau’s tactics, she revealed an important rationale for such actions through her comparison of DetroitYES! with a similar forum called Hot Fudge Detroit (HFD). In this comparison, Pearl noted that HFD was “self-governing” so that banishment and censorship were unnecessary because “wounds heal themselves.” However, she recounted a story about a young woman who, like Pearl herself, frequently posted comments on both sites; many members of the HFD disliked this young woman because of her views about the city.

It’s a funny story. Well, it’s not a funny story because it’s mean. But I laughed anyway . . . Maybe you know her. She goes by FordDriver on DetroitYES! The guys over in Hot Fudge hate her guts. Somebody over there got her picture and pasted it up on HFD. And it’s like, oh! I wouldn’t like that! I would be very uncomfortable, and I wouldn’t want people to know [who I am].

Members of the other forum diminished the anonymity of someone with whom they disagreed. Pearl herself noted that she would hate to be targeted in such a fashion, and that such tactics had a chilling effect. Within the DetroitYES! forum, such tactics would be punished and corrected immediately by the administrator.

We would like to emphasize that this does not mean that spectacle and narcissism associated with SP, or critical worldviews and communicative resistance associated with RP, held no place within the DetroitYES! community. On the contrary, all of the concepts associated with those forms of Audience Performance arose in our observations of the forums and interviews with community members. There is a narcissistic quality to the postings provided by community members like BenR, and the actions of community members like Hamtramck Bob constitute adjustive forms of communicative resistance. However, diffused intertextual production holds the potential for a different kind of Audience Performance from the frameworks of SP or RP. In the case of both, the mediascape in which audiences perform is created for them by powerful economic and cultural elites (e.g., network executives, social movement leader, organic intellectuals). In the case that we examined for this research, the audience constructed that mediascape through their own interactivity framed within an intertextual component; the performance, then, took place within a mediascape truly negotiated with the audience. This was different from the communicative resistance under RP, as cultural elites create a bifurcated mediascape of good versus evil under RP; such resistance (militant or adjustive) adheres to the more traditional forms of resistance described by Aptheker (1989) and Clair (1998) (e.g., public confrontation). Within the DetroitYES! community, audiences worked together to build alternative knowledge that gave rise to a new voice through which stories were told and rituals engaged. We should also note that the performance audiences in this community was fluid, so that individuals were not locked into
a singular form of performance; people engaged in multiple forms of Audience Performance within the context of our research. Depending on the situation or topics of conversation, community members’ mediascapes shifted, followed by the nature of their performance.

Notes

1 Our argument is that discourse and materiality are mutually constitutive, which is something that has been developed by Williams (1977), and expanded through the research of cultural geographers such as Mitchell et al. (2004), Mitchell (2000), Olwig (2002), and Cosgrove (1988). As an anonymous reviewer so helpfully reminds us, our negotiation with Stuart Hall here significantly departs not only from essentialist notions of identity. But, further it departs from related notions common in communication and media studies. Hall and others (e.g., neo-Marxists, feminist standpoint theorists, interpretivists) can be seen moving us away from a representational model that assumes a split between signifier and signified, which tends to operate with faith in a material-symbol dialectic. Rather, our understanding of Williams and the work of particular geographers insists on materiality of language and discourse articulation.

2 The names of participants, with the exception of Lowell Boileau, have been changed in order to protect the anonymity of community members. In the case of Lowell, it is impossible to protect his anonymity as he is the only web administrator for the website. However, we have consulted with Boileau, and he has consented with our use of his name within this article.

References


