

**WE THE UNDERSIGNED:
ANONYMOUS DISSENT AND
THE STRUGGLE FOR PERSONAL IDENTITY
IN ONLINE PETITIONS**

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IN ONLINE PETITIONS**

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To my grandfathers:
Conrad Lacunious Allgood, Jr.,
Cecil Guy McLendon, and
William Fowler Riley

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
SUMMARY	ix
<u>CHAPTER</u>	
1 Introduction	1
The Problem of Anonymity in Online Petitions	1
The Solution of Online Petitions as Pseudonymous Social Networks of Personal Testimony	3
2 The Definition of the Petition	5
Concrete Prototypes	5
Ballot Initiatives, Referenda, and Recalls	5
Letters to the Editor	19
Political Bumper Stickers, Buttons, and T-Shirts	26
Legal Appeals	29
Protest Videos	34
Emails to Legislators	37
Common Denominators	47
Target	47
Complaint	49
Demand	50
Constituency	51
Signatures	51
Artifact	55

General Definition	56
Definition of Online Petition	59
3 The Political Traditions of Petitions	60
Petitions as Personal Pleas	60
Petitions as Vents for Dissent	63
Petitions as Signature Spam	73
Petitions as Membership Lists	75
Petitions as Gauges of Public Opinion	76
4 The Anonymization of the Online Petition	89
Personal, Pseudonymous, and Anonymous Signatures	89
Individual and Collective Identities	94
Anonymity or Personality	99
Identity Survey of Online Petition Websites	100
gopetition.com	100
tearitdown.org	109
thepetitionsite.com	110
prochoiceamerica.org	116
pledgebank.org	118
Privacy and Publicity Concerns of Online Petitions	122
The Pseudonymous Compromise	133
5 Reformatting Online Petitions as Pseudonymous Social Networks of Personal Testimony	137
Social Networks, Social Signatures, and Social Frames	138
Co-authored Complaints and Demands	141
Multimedia Voice	144
Revisable Support	145

Still Undersigned	148
REFERENCES	150

SUMMARY

Historically, the petition has served as a primary means by which people have communicated their individual and collective grievances to political authorities. To persuade political reform, afflicted people have reified and branded their dissent with personally signed prescriptive documents, petitions. They have relied on petitions to both publish and protect their status as numerically distinct and socially relevant persons.

With the advent of the Internet, petitions as rhetorical documents became easier to reproduce, save, and disseminate. Consequently, online petitions have raised privacy concerns about their management of personal information. To address these concerns, many online petitions now enable people to anonymously or pseudonymously sign them.

In this thesis, I examine the rhetorical trade-offs between anonymous and personal dissent in online petitions, reframing these trade-offs as a struggle between the rhetorics of personality and anonymity. I argue that anonymous petition signing poses a serious threat to the legitimacy of the petition as an authentic expression of political dissent because it cannot adequately represent or organize the personal identities of the petitioners. In particular, anonymous signatures cannot establish the status of petitioners as numerically distinct and socially relevant persons to political authorities. To mitigate this threat and strike a balance between anonymous and personal representation, I propose a social network approach to petition signing, one that personally represents and organizes the individual and collective identities of petitioners pseudonymously. In particular, I propose that we reformat online petitions' largely anonymous lists of signatures into pseudonymous social networks of personal testimony.

In the first chapter, I introduce the problem of anonymity in online petitions and sketch its solution. I argue that anonymous signatures in online petitions address perceived privacy concerns online, but ultimately undermine the efficacy of the online petition as a mode of personal political persuasion by not making clear whether its petitioners are numerically distinct and socially relevant persons. To maximize personality and preserve privacy, I propose recasting online petitions as pseudonymous social networks of personal testimony. I argue that online petitions, like petitions in general, ideally represent and organize social networks of socially relevant petitioners through their personal testimonies. In our attempt to protect the online privacy of petitioners, I contend that we must not abandon the rhetorical power of petitions, which historically hinges on their ability to emphasize the individual and collective identities of the petitioners in a personal manner.

In particular, I contend that online petitions cannot solely rely on political cryptography or “norms of secrecy” to establish and protect the identities of petitioners as authentic and socially relevant persons, but they must also rely on political ethnography and norms of publicity. I suggest that the ability to encrypt and trace back to the legal names of petitioners is insufficient, and perhaps unnecessary, to secure one’s political signature and engender reform from politicians, but that an informed personal testimony between reputable pseudonymous users is necessary, and perhaps sufficient for this purpose.

In the second chapter, I unpack the definition of the petition from a diverse array of prototypical petitions, including ballot initiatives, letters to the editor, political bumper stickers, legal appeals, protest videos, and emails to legislators. From these petition-like

objects, I abstract several common features of petitions and conjoin them to form a general definition. In formulating the general definition of the petition, I compare and contrast the petition to several other predominant forms of political communication between the public and political authorities, including the poll, the vote, and the protest. Finally, I define one kind of petition, the online petition.

In the third chapter, I track the political traditions of petitions from the perspectives of petitioners and the political authorities they target. I focus on how petitions function as a tool for personal political persuasion and democratic practice. I argue that petitions are not only political artifacts that reflect social networks, but are also the catalytic formalizations of a petitioning process, a social media practice that has historically used media to network people for and against political reform. By examining the political traditions of the petition and the ways in which they have historically relied on political ethnography to persuade political authorities, I develop precedent for reformatting the online petition as a social network of personal testimony.

In the fourth chapter, I examine the anonymization of online petitions and argue that anonymity seriously undermines the rhetorical power of the petition. First, I introduce the concepts of identity, anonymity, pseudonymity, and personality as they are expressed through signatures. With this conceptual framework, I survey several online petition websites. Next I evaluate the privacy concerns and publicity goals of online petitions, and explore the rhetorical trade-offs between anonymity and personality with respect to persuading political authorities. Finally, I advance a pseudonymous compromise between anonymity and personality that balances many of the privacy and publicity concerns of petitions and represents the individual and collective identities of

the petitioners. In particular, I propose that we reformat online petitions as pseudonymous social networks of personal testimony. I argue that such socially networked personal testimony, unlike anonymous signatures, can establish petitioners as socially relevant persons to political authorities.

In the fifth chapter, I suggest several basic ways to balance the rhetorics of online petitions through pseudonymous social networks of personal testimony. To personalize online petitions in a manner that respects both publicity and privacy concerns, I propose that the signatures of online petitions incorporate social frames, co-authored complaints and demands, multimedia voice, and revisable support.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The petition has historically served as the primary means by which afflicted people have communicated their personal and collective grievances to political authorities. From the master-less samurai of feudal Japan to the female abolitionists of Philadelphia, petitioners of all persuasions have pressured politicians and other power brokers to receive and respond to their policy concerns (Roberts 432; Zaeske 36). To persuade political reform, petitioners have personally signed and shared prescriptive documents, formalizing and disseminating their complaints as media artifacts, and branding their dissent with the rhetorics of personality and anonymity. Petitioners have struggled to strike a balance between these rhetorics, to simultaneously convey their status as persons with all of the political protections that attend personhood, and to protect themselves as petitioners from political retaliation and exploitation by obfuscating their individual and collective identities.

The Problem of Anonymity in Online Petitions

With the advent of the Internet, petitioners now face new challenges to protect their privacy and new opportunities to influence political authorities. Although digitally networked media technologies make it much easier for petitioners to reproduce, save, organize, and share their grievances with political authorities than previous communication technologies, such as printing presses and postal mail, it also makes it much easier for political authorities and their ideological allies to record, monitor, manipulate and retaliate against petitioners.

To address these online privacy concerns, online petition formats have largely adopted and facilitated the use of anonymous signatures. While the capability for

anonymous signatures may encourage participation from people who are seriously concerned about controlling their digital identity, it may also undermine the efficacy of the petition as a mode of personal political persuasion.

From the perspective of political authorities and potential petitioners, it is not always clear whether the digitally represented signees are numerically distinct and socially relevant persons. It may be the case that a single person wrote every signature with different names, or that many of the signees do not live within the jurisdiction of the targeted authority, or that the signee accidentally signed the petition. It may be the case that viral software agents were programmed to sign the petition and spam contempt for the targeted political authority, or that the leadership of a special interest group persuaded its large membership to individually sign onto reforms they neither authored nor understood, all of which calls into question the integrity of the online petition. Hence, it is not always clear to petitioners or political authorities whether the grievances encoded in online petitions are sufficiently authentic to warrant a response or support.

The digital signatures of online petitions often fail to establish the petitioners as socially relevant persons because they fail to leverage the persuasive force of their signees' personal testimony, a rhetoric central to the petition format. As Christopher Kush complains, "Unfortunately, online petitions and pre-written email messages, while relatively easy to send, reek of being impersonal, and personal stories have always been, and remain, the foundation of grassroots influence" (Kush, p. xxiv). If we extend Kush's perspective, we can see that digital signatures often fail to reflect the personal stories of the people they represent, and for this reason in large part, politicians who are supposed to represent the people do not respond to or support their online petitions. So we need to know how we can augment and reorganize the digital signatures of online petitions to leverage the rhetoric of personality, while resolving the privacy concerns suggested by the rhetoric of anonymity.

The Solution of Online Petitions as Pseudonymous Social Networks of Personal Testimony

While the use of anonymous signatures poses a serious threat to the perceived authenticity and efficacy of the online petition, the threat can be mitigated by reformatting the online petition as a pseudonymous social network of personal testimony, one which fundamentally respects the rhetorical principles of the petition, especially its essential emphasis on representing the individual and collective identities of the petitioners. To redesign the online petition *qua* petition, I advance the view that online petitions must strike a balance between the rhetorics of anonymity and personality, between political cryptography and political ethnography, between norms of privacy and norms of publicity, and that to do so, we can reformat the petition's list of signatures into a pseudonymous social network of personal testimony.

In particular, we will discover that the personal testimony of pseudonymous users is necessary, and perhaps sufficient, to persuade political authorities and other petitioners that the signees are socially relevant persons, while traditional identity management techniques can suffice to establish that the petitioners are numerically distinct persons. Moreover, we will find that the socially networked personal testimony of a petitioner functions as her social signature.

In this thesis, we will examine the online petition and how it negotiates the rhetorics of anonymity and personality. We will consider the major rhetorical trade-offs between anonymous and personal signatures. As we pursue our inquiry, I aim to convince you that anonymous signatures, in their attempt to protect personal privacy, can largely undermine the legitimacy of the online petition as a mode of personal political persuasion, and that more personal information is needed to authenticate petitioners as socially relevant persons. Moreover, I hope to persuade you that we can strike a balance between the rhetorics of personality and anonymity by reformatting the largely

anonymous lists of signatures found in many online petitions into pseudonymous social networks of personal testimony.

Finally, as we consider the conventions of online petitions and other social media, I propose several basic ways in which we can reformat the signatures of online petitions into pseudonymous social networks of personal testimony. In particular, I propose that the signatures of online petitions should incorporate social frames, co-authored complaints and demands, multimedia voice, and revisable support.

CHAPTER 2

THE DEFINITION OF THE PETITION

Before we can understand the rhetorical tensions between anonymity and personality in online petitions, we must first comprehend the general subject of our study: the petition.

Concrete Prototypes

Petitions, like chairs and other material objects, take a variety of mediated forms, but generally accord with several concrete prototypes. In this chapter, we will explore the constellation of concrete objects that are petition-like in order to tease out the abstract meaning of “petition”, and ultimately, the meaning of its online variety. As we consider each petition-like class of object, we will look for common conceptual threads that run through them in order to formulate a grounded definition of the petition.

At the outset, we will follow common parlance and assume that a petition is “a formally drawn request, often bearing the names of a number of those making the request, that is addressed to a person or group of persons in authority or power, soliciting some favor, right, mercy, or other benefit” (Dictionary.com). From this provisional definition, we will examine several kinds of petition-like objects, including ballot initiatives, letters to the editor, political bumper stickers, legal appeals, video protests, and emails to legislators. By examining these concrete prototypes in detail, we will look for common denominators that challenge our provisional definition of petition and reformulate a more comprehensive and sensitive definition.

Ballot Initiatives, Referenda, and Recalls

In 2003, California Governor Gray Davis was removed from office by a direct recall, one of three legal measures, along with the initiative and the referendum, by which

the people of California can petition their local and state lawmakers for political and legislative reform (Baldassare, 163). Unlike passive requests or pleas for reform, “the initiative, the referendum, and the recall created the mechanism for the masses to use petitions to create new legislation, repeal actions passed by the legislature and recall judges and other state-and local-elected officials” (Baldassare, 165). All three petitioning instruments not only demand reform, but also legally enact it, and they do so directly through popular vote without relying on the consent of proxy political representatives, such as local or state legislators. To legally enact political reform, ballot initiatives, referenda, and recalls must follow a formal procedure of petition production, a procedure that is highly choreographed by the state, requiring juridical translation, geographically biased signatures, and labor-intensive channels of secret communication.

Ballot initiatives, referenda, and recalls have slightly different procedures for legal enactment, but all three rely on a sequence of staged public performances. To enact a ballot initiative, referendum, or recall, the people of California must sequentially write, summarize, circulate, sign, validate, argue, and vote on legal documents that propose reform (Bowen). To focus our analysis, let us consider statewide ballot initiatives, petitions that seek to put new legislation on statewide ballots for a direct vote by the people of California.

To begin the ballot initiative process, a group of California citizens must “write the text of the proposed law” (Bowen). Citizens can write the law themselves, hire private lawyers to write the text for them, or receive writing assistance from public lawyers, such as those at the Office of the Legislative Counsel, who advise the state legislature and governor. To receive writing assistance from the Office of Legislative Counsel, proponents of the ballot initiative must first gather 25 or more signatures of support from other citizens, and the Office of Legislative Counsel must determine that “there is a reasonable probability the initiative measure will eventually be submitted to the voters” (Bowen). It is not clear how the Office of Legislative Counsel determine this

probability. If the Office of Legislative Counsel refuses to assist citizens, citizens can write the text of the ballot initiatives themselves.

Although any citizen of California can write ballot initiatives, in practice, private lawyers write the ballot initiatives for the public. According to Chris Dawson, a lawyer at the Office of the Legislative Counsel, private lawyers write more ballot initiatives than lawyers at the Office of Legislative Counsel, and they write more ballot initiatives than citizens who are not lawyers. According to Dawson, no ballot initiative that was drafted by the Office of Legislative Counsel for citizens reached the statewide ballot.

The public of California putatively formulates and enacts laws through ballot initiatives, referenda, and recalls, but the official production process of these petitions has transformed the public voice of personal grievances into the impersonal voice of legal procedures. Consequently, the audience of these petitions has shifted from potential supporters who can sign them - most of whom are not lawyers and who cannot understand legal jargon - to members of a professional juridical class, lawyers and administrators who interpret and enforce these petitions as law. When we evaluate the authorship of petitions such as California ballot initiatives, we must consider not only who sends and receives these texts, but also who frames and comprehends them.

The second stage of the ballot initiative process is summarization. After writing a ballot initiative, proponents must submit it to the Attorney General of California for an official title and summary. The Attorney General reads the purpose and amendments of the proposed legislation and then writes a state-sanctioned title and summary for it. While the title is not called a summary, it does summarize the legislation. If the Attorney General deems that the legislation might impact state or local budgets, he will send it to the Department of Finance and the Joint Legislative Budget Committee for a fiscal impact estimate, which is also incorporated into his official summary.

The summarization process of California ballot initiatives is largely removed from citizen control. The citizens who propose a ballot initiative cannot legally author the

official, state-sanctioned summarization. Only the Attorney General, an elected state official can legally author the title and summary, which appears prominently on the ballot and on the signature sheets publicly circulated.

For example, Doug Mosebar, Jon Coupal, and Jim Nielson submitted legislation they entitled, the “California Property Owners and Farmland Protection Act”, but California Attorney General Edmund G. Brown Jr., relabeled it with the anonymous titles, “Proposition 98”, and, “1248. Government Acquisition, Regulation of Private Property. Constitutional Amendment.” While the proponents of this ballot initiative are presidents and chairmen of special interest organizations, each with private lawyers to help them craft the title and text of their proposition, they are also citizens who attempted to present their legislation to the public in their own words, words which were reframed by governmental officials.

Unlike the proponents’ title, the Attorney General’s anonymous titles do not advertise a purpose or intent of the legislation, such as the intention to prevent the government from taking real estate away from private landowners and then using it for private development. Instead the Attorney General’s title abstracts the legislation into procedural topics, such as acquisition and regulation, an overt and strained attempt to prescribe truth and impartiality. According to California law, “in providing the ballot title, the Attorney General shall give a true and impartial statement of the purpose of the measure in such language that the ballot title shall neither be an argument, nor be likely to create prejudice, for or against the proposed measure” (California Elections Code Sections 9050-9053). While it may intend to do otherwise, the Attorney General’s summary of the legislation reformats the public voice, with its essential bias for reform, into the abstract overtones of impartial and impersonal legal procedure. According to the Attorney General’s summary, Proposition 98:

“Bars state and local governments from condemning or damaging private property for private uses. Prohibits rent control and similar measures. Prohibits deference to

government in property rights cases. Defines ‘just compensation.’ Requires an award of attorneys’ fees and costs if a property owner obtains a judgment for more than the amount offered by the government. Requires government to offer to original owner of condemned property the right to repurchase property at condemned price when property is put to substantially different use than was publicly stated. Summary of estimate by Legislative Analyst and Director of Finance of fiscal impact on state and local government: Increased costs to many governments due to the measure’s restrictions. The fiscal effect on most governments probably would not be significant” (http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/elections_j.htm#2008Sprimary)

The Attorney General’s summary of Proposition 98 does not abstract the legislation metaphorically through concrete examples, which conform to or deviate from the proposed legal procedure. For example, it does not provide any specific situations where “the government used eminent domain to take property from its owner for the purpose of transferring it to a private developer” (Proponents Statement of Findings). The same omission of personal narrative is missing from the proponents’ filing for title and summary. From this example, we can see how petitions that call for and implement legal action, like the ballot initiative, often replace personal narrative with impersonal procedure.

Although petitions, such as Proposition 98, call for and enact legislation, it is not clear how political authorities can exercise exclusive control over the summarization of these petitions, which are supposed to come from the public, the people, or the masses. If ballot initiatives are essentially produced by the public at-large, if they can be produced by any citizen of California, independent of their occupation or professional training, and if they must serve as a direct means for publishing and enacting popular legislation, then political authorities, such as the Attorney General, cannot filter, revise, or modulate the language of a ballot initiative without contradicting the petition’s supposed public voice. If a petition contains a public voice, then its author did not have to meet any special

qualifications besides being a member of the public. In addition, if a petition contains a public voice, then its author basically controls the semantics of its message. Neither of these requirements of public voice is met by the Attorney General's summarization.

Moreover, it is not clear how the summarization of those public petitions could, in all cases, conform to the professional conventions of legal writing, when many people outside the juridical class cannot express or comprehend their grievances in legal terms. The public voice varies with the language of the people who write it, and since many people are neither lawyers nor administrators, to systematically employ legal writing conventions engages in a censorship of translation. How can the text adequately represent the people's voice when they cannot recognize it as their own, or understand what they have allegedly said? How can it be the people's voice when some other members of the public, namely government officials, dictate its terms to those who have said it?

As Würgler points out, petitions have always involved a scribe or translator, but "the influence of a [scribe, such as a] lawyer, priest, teacher, or petition writer could therefore severely alter the arguments [of the petition]" (van Voss 32). Public voice does not require petitions to omit translators of technical information such as legal procedures in ballot initiatives; public voice requires that every member of the public has the opportunity to freely choose their own translator, and that the persuasive force of their arguments is not lost in translation.

If proponents, such as those who authored Proposition 98, choose to translate their petition in a juridical register, one which abides by the traditions of legal writing, then they too may not be addressing or persuading the public, but their petition maintains its public voice because they, as members of the public, largely control the semantics of the message it presents, and their translation does not prevent any other member of the public from authoring an alternative petition. Public officials such as the Attorney General, in their capacity as democratic representatives, can also write petitions with the public

voice, but they cannot, without contradicting the meaning of public voice, overwrite or censor other petitions by imposing an official summarization.

For the ballot initiative to cohere with the concept of public voice, the proponents of the petition, whether they are private citizens or elected officials, must have authorial control over its summarization, both in the language of its title and detailed summary. Only then would it make sense to call a petition such as the California ballot initiative an object of public voice. Only then, could the petition be said to represent the collective identity of the public in a personal manner.

The third stage of the California ballot initiative process is circulation and signing. Petitioners in California cannot legally circulate the ballot initiative for signatures without including the Attorney General's dictated title and summary. To put the ballot initiative on the ballot, petitioners must gather a certain number of signatures (5% or 8% of votes cast in the last gubernatorial election) within a certain time frame (150 days since receiving a title and summary from the Attorney General). The number of signatures required and the schedule with which petitioners have to gather them varies by the kind of ballot initiative. Ballot initiatives that seek to amend the state Constitution must receive more signatures than those that seek to add a new statute (433,971 and 694,354 signatures respectively) (http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/elections_j.htm).

The State of California imposes specific requirements on the form of legally valid signatures for ballot initiatives and their method of production. According to the California Initiative Guide,

“Only persons who are registered, qualified voters at the time of signing are entitled to sign the petition. A person can only sign a petition that is being circulated in his or her county of registration. If a petition circulator is a registered voter, he or she may sign the petition he or she is circulating (Sections 102, 105, 9021). Each signer must personally place on the petition his or her signature, printed name, residence address (or physical description of the location if there is no street address), and the name of the

incorporated city or unincorporated community (Section 100). None of the above may be preprinted on the petition. Each signer may sign an initiative petition only once (Section 18612)” (Bowen).

These specific requirements seek to control who can sign the petition, where and when it is signed, what information is part of the signature, and the medium of signature. Collectively, these requirements define a signature space.

The signature space of the California ballot initiative is highly biased for geographic signature gathering using the print medium. Signatures must be physically signed by hand on paper documents. They must be signed in the county where they are gathered. Therefore, people cannot sign or gather petitions online, where there are no natural geographic boundaries and no paper material. Moreover, since signatures cannot be preprinted, personal information cannot be pre-loaded into digital media, such as web forms or word processing templates for faster online or offline signing. And proponents of petitions cannot legally leverage social media, such as existing online social networks or constituent relationship management databases to populate and situate computerized signature gathering.

The signature space of the California initiative also uses geographic information to authenticate and segregate the petitioners. If signees do not print an address that matches the county in which their signature was gathered, then the signature will be invalidated, thrown out, and ignored. In addition, community groups with members that span multiple counties cannot sign the petition together as a group or present their signatures as a non-geographically indexed social network. Instead they must organize their signed grievances geographically in accordance with the political jurisdictions of the State of California.

The rules and regulations surrounding the production of the California ballot initiative also control the social structure of the public voice, both in its process of expression and documentation. Only countywide blocks of signatures are allowed to take

legal effect, blocks that often list people in an asocial order. As people sign the petition, they frequently do not know the people who have signed it before them. They often cannot associate any person with any other signature they see. The signatures have unfamiliar names, seemingly gathered at random, chunked and obscured in text.

Instead of reflecting a highly connected social network, petitions such as the California ballot initiative often only present a list of strangers. When people read the list, they see names, but not people. Such petitions do not document or promote the social communication of a group or crowd; they do not document or promote interpersonal dialogue, evolving deliberation, or negotiated consensus. Instead, such petitions document the minimum history of an anonymous queue as it purchases immutable items from a boilerplate menu of potential legislation.

Throughout the circulation and signing stage, the California ballot initiative incorporates a variety of specialized performers, including petition proponents, circulators, signees, and elections officials. The proponents of the petition may hire or recruit circulators to gather signatures on the streets and at other public places.

Circulators are legally obligated to witness the signing of the petitions. They are charged by the State of California to provide the first degree of testimony for a signature's authenticity. They are not asked to remember the people who signed the documents; they are only asked to remember that they witnessed the signing of every signature on the petitions they submit, and that these signatures came from some socially relevant person. Petitioners are not asked to remember the specific personality of the signee, only that the signee had the status of a socially relevant person. Hence there is little expectation for prolonged personal relations between the circulator and the signees, but a major emphasis on the collection and protection of symbols that nominally notate people. While these symbols - textual names and addresses - may represent and index the people of a public, they do not resemble them or reflect the dynamism of their individual personalities or collective organization.

The circulators main charge is to provide potential signees full access to the official text of the ballot initiative, and to protect the privacy of the personal information on the signature. For example, circulators may not, under penalty of law, collect signatures for any other purpose than to qualify the initiative for the ballot. They cannot use the signatures for other ballot initiatives or sell them to marketing companies with large mailing lists. In fact, it is illegal for any person to buy or sell ballot initiative signatures (Bowen).

After the signatures are gathered, the proponents of the petitions must submit the signatures to each of the county offices. When the proponents submit the signatures to the county offices, they must submit all of the signatures for that county at once and only signatures gathered in that county.

County elections officials are the gatekeepers, hosts, and guardians of the petition. They receive, store, and secure the signatures of the petition. They review the submitted signature documents to enforce the state's official format. For example, circulators must print their names on every petition section. And the petitions must include the Attorney General's title and summary "in 12-point or larger roman boldface type" (California Elections Code Sections 9000-9015). If election officials find any infraction or violation of their formatting rules, they must exclude the signatures, thereby potentially censoring legitimate public demands for including the petition on the ballot.

The county elections officials also manage the removal of signatures. If a signee submits a written request prior to the petition receiving approval for the ballot, then the election official must remove it. But it may be difficult for signees to recall what they signed, because "as a general rule, initiative petitions, once filed with the county elections officials, are not public records and are not open to the general public for inspection" (Bowen). Consequently, signees must remember their history of petition signing without assistance from those who store or secure their signatures. In particular, county elections officials provide no way for signees to review or revise their signatures online.

The fourth stage of the ballot initiative process is validation. After the proponents of the ballot initiative have submitted all of the petition's signatures to a county, the county election officials count the signatures and report the raw numbers to the Secretary of State of California. The Secretary of State waits for all of the counties to report, and then sums the signatures.

If the total raw count of signatures does not meet the requisite minimum number of signatures, then the Secretary of State notifies the counties and petition proponents that the initiative has failed to reach the ballot. Otherwise, the Secretary of State issues a random count of signatures to each of the counties. Each of the counties then audits a random sample of the petitions (the larger of either 500 signatures or 3% of the signatures submitted to the county), comparing the signatures on the petitions with those in their voter registration records. This process depends on handwriting recognition, prioritizing it over other forms of personal identification, such as voice or face recognition.

After the random count, the county elections officials report their results to the Secretary of State. If the Secretary of State determines that the number of valid randomly audited signatures is less than 95% of the number of signatures required, then the ballot initiative fails to qualify for the ballot. If she determines that the number of valid randomly audited signatures is more than 110% of the number of signatures required, then the ballot initiative automatically qualifies for the ballot. Otherwise, the Secretary of State calls for a "full check" or recount of all signatures from all of the counties (Bowen).

The validation process for petitions like the California ballot initiative is labor-intensive and government-controlled, requiring significant coordinated and private communication between the county and state officials. The public does not participate in the validation process; it is largely a secret process between government officials. The vast majority of citizens who signed the petition have no opportunity to inspect or monitor the process of signature validation.

The fifth stage of the ballot initiative process is argumentation. After a ballot initiative has been approved for a ballot, the Secretary of State solicits arguments for and against the initiative from the public (California Elections Code Sections 9060-9069). She then chooses a single argument for the initiative and a single argument against the initiative to publish in a voter guide or ballot pamphlet. Once she has selected the arguments for and against the initiative, she sends those arguments to the opposing arguers, so that each can offer a single rebuttal.

Submitted arguments must have 500 or fewer words. Each argument must include, “the name, business or home address, and telephone number” of its authors. If the author is an organization, it must include the names and contact information “of at least two of its principal officers” (California Elections Code Sections 9060-9069).

The citizens do not get to choose which arguments are published, and they cannot choose to publish multiple arguments for or against a ballot initiative. Only the Secretary of State can choose which arguments to publish, and by law, she can only publish a single argument for, a single argument against, a single rebuttal for, and a single rebuttal against each initiative. The Secretary of State is legally bound “to give preference and priority” to specific arguments in the following order: members of the Legislature (if the measure was introduced by the Legislature), proponent of the petition (if it was an initiative or referendum), “bona fide associations of citizens”, and lastly, “individual voters” (California Elections Code Sections 9060-9069).

While the Secretary of State is forced to protect the authorial voice of the original proponents of the petition, she is not legally bound to protect, and may even be legally bound to censor, the public voice in general. For example, an individual voter may have a better argument for the same position than the one offered by an association of citizens, but the Secretary of State must publish the one offered by the association of citizens instead of the one offered by the individual voter. Since the Secretary of State cannot

legally publish both arguments, she must censor a member of the public, and thereby void the public voice.

The print-centric framework of argumentation used in the California ballot initiative process also neglects the public potential of online debate and deliberation. By law, the Secretary of State must provide an online version of the ballot pamphlet, but the online version of the ballot pamphlet does not take advantage of the digitally networked medium. Instead of permitting the public to post arguments and rebuttals, the website functions as a copy of the print version. It does not allow users of the online version to vote on the best arguments to include in the limited space of a print version. It does not employ any algorithm to randomly select popular arguments for the print version. Although it is a website, the online version gathers no public comments or feedback (<http://www.voterguide.sos.ca.gov/>).

The print version also fails to acknowledge its connectivity to the online medium. The print version has very limited page space, while the online version has almost unlimited page space. Instead of requiring the print version to include the entire argument for a single argument, it could provide a short header for multiple arguments, along with special codes that could be entered into a search form on the online version. Citizens could use web browsers at home or at public libraries to enter these special codes online, and then read their related arguments in their entirety as posted by the author. After reading the article, they could also post their own arguments, rebuttals, and questions.

Although there are many ways to leverage the digital online medium for public petitions, the California ballot initiative maintains a print-centric framework for argumentation, one that prevents the public as a whole from publishing their arguments and perspectives about the petition. Such perspectives are not peripheral to the petition, but are part and parcel of its message. Even arguments against the message are part of its

call for reform. For petitions that capture and recall the public voice, all citizens must have a way to document and incorporate their perspectives into its mediated object.

The final stage of the ballot initiative process is voting. If the Secretary of State determines that the petition has the requisite number of signatures, then the initiative is added to the ballot for the next statewide election. After the initiative is certified for the ballot, the Secretary of State notifies the proponents of the petition, and sends the Attorney General's title and summary to the State Senate and Assembly (Bowen). Then the state legislature sends the ballot initiative to internal committees, which schedule and hold public hearings.

Once the ballot initiative is added to the ballot, it cannot be removed from the ballot by the state legislature. However, state legislators can pass or introduce milder or opposing legislation, which split or undermine support for the ballot initiative (Howe). Legislators, "may [also] amend or repeal an initiative statute" if it is passed by the public (Bowen).

Eventually, after months of witnessing petitions push through government bureaucracy, the citizens of California have an opportunity to directly vote on whether to enact them. To enact a petition, those who likely signed it before a stranger in the streets must now show up to the voting booth for another isolated signature. If they make it to this annual event, then they must leave the empty public square for another anonymous queue inside a polling place. They only have one chance to vote correctly. They cannot rehearse their vote. They cannot revise their vote. In one rushed moment, they must cast their vote on all of the statewide petitions. They must try to remember all of the information they received in a ballot pamphlet from the Secretary of State. They must vote alone, in silence, without debate or conversation.

In our analysis of the California ballot initiative, we have discovered a petition-like object that not only requests or demands political reform, but enacts it through a complex performance of legislative writing, summarization, signature production,

signature validation and voting. We have examined the ballot initiative as a bureaucratic object, one that overwrites the public voice with juridical language and state-sanctioned censorship, that choreographs an asocial process of signature production, that mistakenly and systematically documents social networks of petitioners as anonymous queues of voters, that excludes citizen participation in the validation of signatures, and that relies on the convention of infrequent, information-overloaded, and isolated voting.

We have not examined supplementary perspectives, such as Howe's economic analysis of the California ballot initiative process as a "big money machine run by professional political operatives" (Howe). If we had explored these perspectives, we might have broadened petitions like the California ballot initiative to include television advertisements and other broadcast media, media which supports and opposes the demands of the petition.

Letters to the Editor

During the 2008 Presidential election, the Democratic and Republican parties designed websites that encouraged their members to: 1) sign textual petitions aimed at elected governmental representatives and 2) write letters to the editors of their local newspapers. Both political parties treated signing petitions as distinct from writing letters to editor, organizing these activities into separate web pages (<http://www.gop.com/ActionCenter/>, <http://www.democrats.org/page/content/partybuilderLTE/>). Both political parties assumed that letters to the editor were not "petitions" because they did not directly target politicians with the textual demands of the political party, but instead, targeted political authorities with the textual demands of the petitioner in an indirect manner through external proxies, such as the editors of newspapers. While there may be no other word in the English language besides "petition" for textual demands pre-authored by the leadership of an advocacy organization, such as a political party, and signed by its

members, conceptually, there are many other kinds of petitions, including letters to the editor.

Letters to the editor share many of the same goals as textual petitions sent directly to politicians. Both intend to influence public policy through mediated personal argument. Both target perceived political authorities, albeit through different political proxies. Both seek to publish their concerns to a public audience.

Unlike the pre-authored petitions of special interest groups, such as the Democratic or Republican parties, letters to the editor are largely authored by those who sign them – not those who publish them. Newspapers frequently decide to not publish a letter to the editor, but if they publish the petition, they rarely write the text itself.

However, newspaper editors still share some of a letter's authorship in terms of how they lay out the petition. The newspaper editors and their print designers visually organize placement, typography, and other multimedia, thereby circumscribing the petition with a media frame and interpretative environment. The webmasters of the Democratic and Republican Party websites also share in this medial authorship. While newspapers traditionally do not interfere with the language of their readers' submissions, they traditionally interfere with the publicity of their readers' petitions through their editorial policies.

Traditionally, to publish a letter to the editor, a reader of a newspaper or other print publication would write a letter to the editor and submit their political concerns in the context of a recently published article by that publication. Then the editors of the publication would privately select a sample of these letters for publication in the next edition of the newspaper, perhaps subject to minor revisions in grammar and spelling. Some of the letters to the editors would not be selected, and so some of the petitions from the public would not be published.

Such interference with the publicity of petitions is exacerbated by their editorial policies, and the ways in which they handle selection bias. The selection criteria for

submissions are often biased for accuracy, brevity, civility, exclusivity, timeliness, and diversity. For example, all of these editorial biases can be found in editorial policies of *The New York Times* Letters page. According to The Time's Letters Editor, Thomas Feyer, The Times' editorial policy requires:

“A few important ground rules: Letters should be kept to about 150 words. (Not enough space? Well, the Gettysburg Address was only about 250 words.) They should be exclusive to The Times and respond to an article that appeared in the newspaper in the last week. In fact, writing by the next day is a good idea. Like other sections of the newspaper, the letters page seeks to be timely, so even a very good letter that arrives three days later may get passed over” (Feyer, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/14/opinion/14READ.html?ex=1219809600&en=6776e89410da9fb3&ei=5070>).

Feyer defends the brevity bias by arguing that if the Gettysburg Address, a political speech by Abraham Lincoln, can bring together a broken nation in about 250 words, then ordinary citizens should be able to make their political points in about 150 words. Feyer's argument for brevity does not address the possibility that an argument from the public may require at least as much information as the article to which it responds. To support The Times' brevity policy, Feyer must explain why arguments from the public require less information than arguments from professional journalists. This is not to say that all brevity policies, even those with severe word counts, should be universally abolished.

It is understandable that a print publication requires a brevity policy with severe word limits because the physical space of the print publication is severely limited. Neither the publishers nor their natural environment could afford the paper and ink it would take to print every letter to the editor. But for the online version of the newspaper, there is no pressing reason why the author should have such severe word limits because there are no major spatial constraints on a publication's website. The strongest argument

for such severe word limits on online letters to the editor is that if the letters to the editor were not brief, then the editorial staff would not have the time to fairly review them.

According to Feyer, *The New York Times* newspaper receives more letters to the editor submissions than their editorial staff can publish. “Every day at least 1,000 submissions, and often far more, pour in to the letters office by e-mail, fax or postal mail. We print an average of 15 letters a day. That means the competition is intense, to say the least. Many, many worthy letters never see print, and those that do cannot reflect all the topics of interest to readers” (Feyer). Ostensibly, if *The Times* did not require brief letters to the editor, the editorial staff would not be able to review them all, and this would be unfair to those whose letters were overlooked.

However, *The New York Times*’ editorial policy assumes that the editorial staff are the only legitimate people who can review the letters to the editor. It overlooks the possibility of using the public to help filter letters to the editor submitted online. *The Times*’ format for online petitions, as defined by its editorial policy, does not take advantage of common social media norms, such as allowing the online public to review all of the comments and rate them. Both the editorial staff and the online public could help moderate the submissions, even long ones in a more democratic manner, by reviewing a random sample of submissions and then rating them. Users could rate letters to the editor in multiple ways to accommodate *The Times*’ editorial values and do so more consistently. For example users could rate submissions based on factual accuracy, style, civility, and spam. Using these ratings, more expert moderators could filter the submissions and focus their attention on those that have received disputed ratings. To minimize political bias, the letters to the editor, those that are not deemed spam, and which are not known to have any major factual inaccuracies, could be randomly sampled and published. Such an approach would provide a more democratic approach to selecting letters to the editor, one that would not only support diversity, but also systematically protect it through proportional representation. For example, if 1 out of every 5 letters to

the editor complained about some issue, and letters to the editor were randomly sampled and published, then the online newspaper would represent that issue 20% of the time.

Feyer admits that his selection process for letters to the editor on *The New York Times* Letters page lacks such proportional representation:

“The page is not a scientific survey of public opinion. So the variety of opinions expressed in a package of letters about one topic should not be read as poll results, but rather as a sampling of reader responses” (Feyer).

Feyer does not rhetorically frame his admission as an error or mistake, but as a feature of the petition format. By denying that the letters to the editor are a “scientific survey” or a “poll”, Feyer appeals to the rhetoric of personality over the rhetoric of anonymity. He encourages us to consider *The New York Times* Letters page as a personal petition format, one where we can open up a personal “package of letters” to the editor, as if they were hand-written, hand-picked, and hand delivered. He suggests that a poll or scientific survey, with its mechanical measuring instruments would somehow lose the personality of the petitioner it records. Feyer’s rhetoric assumes that a scientific survey or poll of public opinion would automatically anonymize the author. While many scientific polls of public opinion often represent the public anonymously, frequently reducing their individual perspectives into aggregate statistics on bar graphs and pie charts, the products of polling techniques are not always impersonal. As I have suggested above, polling techniques, such as random sampling, can be used to select and deliver personal content, including personal letters to the editor.

Feyer assumes that in order to select and deliver personal letters to the editor of public interest, the publishing organization must ultimately have a single person selecting them:

“Readers of this page know that all letters to the editor, by convention, begin with the same salutation, “To the Editor,” as if addressed to some faceless higher authority at

The Times. In fact, the mountains of mail that we receive every day pile up on a very real editor's desk” (Feyer).

He assumes that if the readers knew that the selection process itself was a personal process from a single individual, they would lower their demands for the publicity of their grievances, and accept the anonymity that accompanies censorship. If the reader knew that a single man had to sort through the mail, they would sympathize with his plight as a unitary editor and cut him some slack for not publishing their grievances.

In general, Feyer conflates personality with individuality. But there are strong reasons to think that personal letters of public interest can be selected and delivered with many people selecting them in a personal manner. Feyer overlooks the potential of collaborative filtering methods, methods that rely on the ratings of many people to socially select personally relevant content. For example, collaborative filtering methods used on sites like Amazon.com or StumbleUpon.com, have a track record of leveraging the input of many people to socially select personal books and personal web pages of public interest. If collaborative filtering techniques can be used to select and deliver personal books and personal web pages of public interest without relying on a unitary editor, then these techniques can be used to select and deliver personal letters of public interest to the editor of an online publication, such as The Times website.

Collaborative filtering not only can help petitioners socially select and deliver personal letters of public interest to the editor, but it can also help petitioners collaboratively author their work for prominent publication. For example, if users knew that their letter to the editor received a low style rating from other readers, readers that were socially relevant to them, they could spend more time revising their letter to the editor. Similarly, if they could review feedback from fellow readers on the factual accuracy of their petitions, they could provide additional factual information. But at the Times, letters to the editor are not published prior to an editor featuring them.

Moreover, only the editorial staff provides editorial feedback. Feyer elaborates on the The Times' editorial policy as follows:

“We reserve the right to edit for space, clarity, civility and accuracy, and we send you the edited version before publication. If your letter is selected, we will try to reach you and ask a few questions: Did you write the letter? (We're not amused by impostors.) Is it exclusive to The Times? (It should be.) Do you have a connection to the subject you're writing about? (Readers should be able to judge your credibility and motivation.)” (Feyer,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/opinion/23READ.html?ex=1219809600&en=15263f425a595170&ei=5070>).

Feyer does not provide any justification for *The New York Times'* exclusivity bias. If the letter to the editor's primary purpose is to serve the public interest through the public voice, then the exclusivity bias, and its requirement that the public exclusively publish their complaints with The Times, conflicts with that primary purpose. The exclusivity agreement is a form of censorship, which prioritizes The Times over other channels of publication. The editorial policy of exclusivity mainly serves the private priorities of The Times. There are many cases in which non-exclusivity is beneficial to the petitioner, and which would cause little or no financial harm to the publisher. For example, if a user first wrote a letter to the editor on her unpopular blog before submitting it to The Times, and the message of that letter was already echoed throughout the Internet by other authors using much of the same text, it is unlikely that The Times would derive significant advertising revenue from the non-exclusive letter to the editor. Even if The Times did lose advertising revenue, such revenue would not be of great benefit to the petitioner.

By examining petitions, such as letters to the editors, we have discovered that petitions can have both direct and indirect targets, and that some proxy targets, such as a newspaper editors, can interfere with the publication of the petition by imposing editorial

policies which censor or reformat it. We have discussed how these editorial policies often use the rhetorics of anonymity and personality to reflect the organizational priorities of the publisher over the priorities of the petitioning public. Moreover, we have found that some online petition formats purport to prioritize the public voice, such as *The New York Times* Letters format, but do not take advantage of extant social media norms, such as collaborative filtering or collaborative authoring, to maximize that public voice in a personal manner.

Political Bumper Stickers, Buttons, and T-Shirts

During the 2008 U.S. Presidential election, many Americans began to voice their political views by purchasing and presenting political bumper stickers, buttons, yard-signs, and T-shirts from popular e-commerce websites, such as CafePress.com (<http://www.cafepress.com/cp/buy/elections08>). CafePress.com sells these petition-like objects, which are organized by political party and issue, as gifts to voters who want to participate in the communication and mobilization of political campaigns.

To represent their political perspectives, users first select a graphic from the website that contains the message they wish to convey, and then choose the physical object to contain that message, such as a bumper sticker, button, T-shirt, pair of underwear, hat, bag, mug, or magnet. The company that owns the website then prints the political message on the selected object and ships it to the customer.

For example, CafePress.com customers can browse a variety of political messages under the Anti Hillary Clinton product category, such as “Hillary 08 Vote for me or I’ll cry!”, “Cry It Out Bitch”, “Hillary Is The Devil”, “Huck Fillary”, “Comrade Clinton”, and “Get Back in the Kitchen Hillary” (<http://www.cafepress.com/cp/buy/antihillary08>). These derogatory political messages not only have a textual component, but also express their meaning graphically through pictures and typography.

For example, the “Comrade Clinton” message depicts Hillary Clinton as a yellow woman saluting a red Soviet flag. With a frozen smile, Hillary stares obediently at the Soviet sickle and hammer. The letters are stylized in an industrial manner to imitate Cyrillic typography.

Other political messages on CafePress.com are less textual. For example, one political message depicts the face of Hillary in red with demon horns sprouting from her head. Without any text, this political message literally demonizes Hillary Clinton with an image of her as a devil.

While these political messages somewhat target Hillary Clinton, they make no explicit request or demand of her. Instead, these political messages in their various mediated forms primarily target Americans voters, implicitly or explicitly requesting that they refrain from voting for Hillary Clinton in the upcoming 2008 U.S. Presidential election. For example, U.S. citizens should not vote for Hillary Clinton because “Hillary Is The Devil”, a “Bitch”, or a communist “Comrade”. By displaying these messages on bumper stickers, office mugs, and other material objects, petitioners communicate their political perspectives and their justifications for those perspectives.

One distinguishing characteristic of this form of mobile political communication is its reliance on humor, particularly humor rooted in shock value. Calling Hillary a devil exaggerates the view that she is sinful. When encountered in the form of a bumper sticker by an unsuspecting driver, the reader experiences a sense of severe imbalance in the hyperbole and so grasps its message as a joke.

Political bumper stickers, in their normal use of humor, demonstrate that many petition-like objects make sophisticated use of literary devices and that their demands should not be interpreted literally because they often exaggerate their demands or ironically ask for incompatible states of affairs.

For example, when CafePress.com customers put Anti Hillary Clinton bibs on their babies that read, “Democrat It’s my party and I’ll cry if I want to”, they are not

saying that they oppose Clinton and the Democratic party because she is literally a baby or because the Democratic party is literally an event where people dance and drink punch, but rather that they oppose Hillary and her fellow Democrats because they are adults that act foolishly like crying babies when they cannot get what they want (<http://www.cafepress.com/buy/hillary+crying>). While they can support their own babies when they cry, they cannot support an adult woman such as Hillary Clinton when she tears up at a New Hampshire speech. Unlike a baby, Hillary she should know not to cry when she does not get the polling results that she wants.

To understand these mundane petition-like objects, requires a high level of political literacy. The messages of political apparel such as the “It’s my party and I’ll cry if I want to” bib are largely cryptic to members of the public unfamiliar with the Hillary Clinton crying episode in New Hampshire. If someone does not understand this brief event during 2008 U.S. Presidential election, they will not understand the message of the petition.

To understand the political messages of these petition-like objects, the public must know specific historical and cultural information. For example, they must know that in January of 2008, the polls showed that Barack Obama would win the primary in New Hampshire. They need to know that Hillary Clinton eventually won the New Hampshire because many women sympathized with her struggle to maintain her public image as a female politician (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1575094/Bill-Clinton-Tears-won-Hillary-New-Hampshire.html>). So petition-like objects such as political bumper stickers, buttons, and bibs often presuppose a complex literacy in political culture, a literacy that can only be achieved by remembering specific historical contexts, and by which, its humor often depends. As we redesign the online petition we will need to consider how it references and represents the historical events it reproves.

While political bumper stickers, buttons, and bibs express their grievances through historically situated references, they do not reference the support of the author

via signatures in a conventional manner. Instead of signing these material objects with pen and paper, petitioners assign them to their mechanical and organic bodies. In the case of political buttons, the petitioner's signature is her body. She signs it by attaching the button to her clothing, her artificial skin. With her political bib, she signals her grievance by wrapping its humorous message around her baby's neck. Her baby was once part of her body, but now with its own life, symbolizes and constitutes her complaint. The petitioner signs her political bumper sticker by sticking it to the rump of her mechanical legs. By attaching her signature to the mechanical and organic bodies of her person, she brands the petition as her own.

While the petition is bound to her body, it is not necessarily an organ. As long as the graphic is not tattooed to her arm, it can be removed without serious injury or scarring. Like fingernails, the buttons and their corporal signatures can be clipped without losing one's personal identity. Since the signatures of these petition-like objects depend on their spatial relationships to the petitioners' bodies, they can be severed and unsigned, and they can be rearranged, revised and resigned. So political bumper stickers, remind us that some petitions afford revisable signatures.

Legal Appeals

In the American legal system, lawyers and their clients rely on legal appeals to challenge and reverse unjust legal rulings in trial and appellate courts. They depend on legal appeals to formally request or petition relief from higher appellate courts, courts with the political authority to review and overturn prior rulings. On behalf of their clients, American lawyers can file two kinds of legal appeals, depending on the jurisdiction of the appellate court: appeals by right and appeals by discretion.

Appeals by right are appeals that must be reviewed by appellate courts according to federal and state statutes. For example, those sentenced to death in a lower trial court have the right to appeal their ruling to an intermediate or superior appellate court.

Appeals by discretion are appeals that require permission from an appellate court to receive its review and potential relief; whether or not the appellate court will review the appeal is at their discretion. To receive this review, appellants must first submit another formal petition to the appellate court. The petition asks the higher appellate court to review their appeal. For example, all appeals to the U.S. Supreme Court require petitions for writs of certiorari. Inherited from English common law, writs of certiorari are orders from a higher court to a lower court to send all records of the case to the higher court for review (<http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Writ+of+cert>).

In order to have their appeal heard by the U.S. Supreme Court, an appellant must first submit a petition for a writ of certiorari to the U.S. Supreme Court, and then the U.S. Supreme Court must issue a writ of certiorari to the lower court. In this case, some political authorities, such as the U.S. Supreme Court, impose an ordering on their reception of petitions. The U.S. Supreme court requires some petitions, such as petitions for writs of certiorari before other petitions, such as appeals by discretion. If the petitions are not presented in this order, the political authorities will not review the latter petitions. In hierarchical networks of political authorities such as the U.S. appellate court system, petitioners are legally forced to target and send their petitions to lower political authorities before they will be received and reviewed by higher political authorities.

Petition formatting and processing rules, such as those imposed by the U.S. Supreme Court, are in part an attempt by political authorities to manage large volumes of complex grievances. The U.S. Supreme Court relies on lower appellate and trial courts to filter and frame its interpretation. Lower courts filter out cases that have relatively established interpretations. As an appeal makes its way up the hierarchy of appellate courts, it must make the case via petition that it requires a new interpretation or that its former interpretations are in conflict with established interpretations.

Like the California ballot initiative, political authorities dictate the format for petitions for writs of certiorari, a format that emphasizes brief and standardized summarizations.

Petitions for writs of certiorari to the U.S. Supreme Court also demonstrate how targeted political authorities often follow customary and ad hoc rules for receiving and filtering petitions. For example, the U.S. Supreme Court follows the Rule of Four, “a working rule devised by the Supreme Court for determining if a case is deserving of review; the theory being that if four justices find that a legal question of general importance is raised, that is ample proof that the question has such importance” (Black, p.1331). It is not clear why the assent of four of nine justices is required instead of the assent of one, two, or three justices in order to issue a writ of certiorari and review its appeal. In particular, there is no clear reason why the opinions of one, two, or three justices, also a minority of informed interest, would not suffice to prove the importance of the legal questions involved. However, it is clear that political authorities, such as U.S. Supreme Court justices, often follow rules for receiving and filtering petitions, rules that were designed and could be redesigned by those political authorities.

Amongst those customary rules, the U.S. Supreme Court explicitly outlines the discretion with which it accepts or rejects petitions for writs of certiorari. According to Supreme Court Rule 10, “Review on a writ of certiorari is not a matter of right, but of judicial discretion. A petition for a writ of certiorari will be granted only for compelling reasons” (Rules of the Supreme Court of the United States, p.5). In this case, a political authority, the U.S. Supreme Court, has asserted its right to ignore petitions, even petitions that have compelling reasons. According to the U.S. Supreme Court, “compelling reasons” are a necessary, but insufficient condition for it to grant a writ of certiorari. If compelling reasons are insufficient, what else would compel the court? U.S. Supreme Court Rule 10 does not answer this question, but it does elaborate on its meaning of compelling reasons.

The U.S. Supreme Court provides three main reasons for granting a writ of certiorari: 1) if two appellate courts (potentially itself) rule in a conflicting manner on the same legal question; 2) if a higher appellate court “has so far departed from the accepted and usual course of judicial proceedings, or sanctioned such a departure by a lower court, as to call for an exercise of this Court's supervisory power”; and 3) if “a state court or a United States court of appeals has decided an important question of federal law that has not been, but should be, settled by this Court.” Supreme Court Rule 10 also provides two reasons, by which it will “rarely” grant a writ of certiorari and review an appeal: 1) if the petition’s “asserted error consists of erroneous factual findings”, or 2) if the error involves “misapplication of a properly stated rule of law”.

Besides petitions for writs of certiorari, American lawyers can file petitions for other prerogative writs, including writs of mandamus, writs of prohibition, and writs of habeas corpus. Writs of mandamus are orders that command or mandate public officials, lower courts, or organizations to fulfill their official duties as defined by statute. For example, if a lower court judge fails to adhere to due process statutes, a higher court judge could issue a writ of mandamus to coerce conformity to the statute. Writs of prohibition are orders to prohibit lower courts from judicial actions that exceed their jurisdiction. Writs of habeas corpus are orders to physically bring a detained person to trial to determine the legality of their detention and to prevent indefinite detention without trial.

In America, lawyers that do not represent litigants of a case may offer a third kind of legal appeal: an Amicus Curiae, or friend of the court, brief. An Amicus Curiae is “a person with strong interest in or views on the subject matter of an action, but not party to the action, may petition the court for permission to file a brief, ostensibly on behalf of a party, but actually to suggest a rationale consistent with its own views” (Black’s Law Dictionary, p. 82). Lawyers at advocacy groups, such as the ACLU and the Electronic Freedom Foundation, as well as law professors and their students, often write Amicus

Curiae briefs to provide a larger legal context for interpreting the case and its implications.

For an appellate court, such as the U.S. Supreme Court, to review the brief, the Amici Curiae must receive the consent of all parties, or alternatively, receive special permission from the appellate court.

Both petitions for certiorari and Amici Curiae briefs highlight the strategic use of expert signatures to persuade political authorities. Political authorities, such as the Supreme Court justices, not only consider the number of signees, but they also seriously consider the professional credentials of those signees. With the exception of the parties to a case, only their lawyers can officially author and sign the covers of petitions for writs of certiorari; “names of non-lawyers such as research assistants, law students, and advisors may not appear on the cover under any circumstances; nor are they to be credited with having contributed to the preparation of the petition either in the text, in a footnote, or at the conclusion of the petition” (Suter, 2). For petitions like those that target the U.S. Supreme Court, political authorities not only map their signatures to authentic persons, but also prioritize those signatures with respect to each person’s professional status and proffered legal arguments.

By analyzing the professional format and process of legal appeals to the U.S. Supreme Court, we have observed that petitioners and political authorities socially construct the signatures of petitions and their rhetorical values. We know that petitions such as legal appeals can develop hierarchical dependencies between petitions, where one will not be received until another is received. Such tree-like dependencies suggest that petitions can, in general, combine into networks of petitions, where smaller petitions can become parts of larger petitions. In the case of a sequence of legal appeals, the intended net effect is a reversal or annulment of a previous decision. By considering writs of certiorari and Amici Curiae briefs, we have identified a petitioning practice that is not

only rhetorically concerned about the quantity of signatures, but the personal qualities of the people who sign them.

Protest Videos

The U.S. Campaign for Burma (USCB), a U.S. based non-profit advocacy group that opposes the brutal military regime of Burma, publishes protest videos on the popular video-sharing website, YouTube. To “promote freedom, democracy, and human rights in Burma”, the USCB has produced and uploaded videos of celebrities who support their campaign against the military junta (<http://uscampaignforburma.org/about-us-campaign-for-burma>). For example, USCB published a protest video of Michael Stipe, lead singer for alternative rock band R.E.M., as he describes the rise and fall of another celebrity, Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, the democratic leader of Burma. Via YouTube, Stipe reminds a worldwide audience that Aung San had been democratically voted into political office as the Prime Minister of Burma in 1990, that she was denied that office by the military junta, that she was arrested by the military junta in 2003, and that she is now imprisoned under house arrest by the military junta (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zMDohGoz-0).

The video alternates between moving images of Aung San as she speaks about the hopes of the Burmese people, and moving images of the Burmese military as it marches in uniform with guns, arresting, beating, and imprisoning the people of Burma. Stipe asks us the rhetorical question, “Why is an army of 400,000 soldiers so afraid of one woman?” He begins to answer his question with another, “Is it because she might bring freedom of choice?” Suddenly, the video shows an explosion on a road; beating drums start to play; soldiers are marching through the streets at night; a handcuffed man is beaten by two other men; Buddhist monks in saffron robes are fleeing. Stipe continues the question, “She might allow freedom of speech?” The video zooms into a guard tower; shady faces flash past; the hands of prisoners try to reach outside the bars. The video

reaches its climax as Stipe asks, “Or she may develop something as uncontrollable as education?” Child soldiers are blindfolded as they practice reloading bullets into their machine guns. We see a Burmese child in a green military uniform, standing guard with an unwieldy automatic weapon.

The dénouement soon follows. The video attempts to resolve the dramatic tension by invoking the celebrity of Aung San Suu Kyi. To the tune of Coldplay’s song, Clocks, the video temporarily shifts its voice from Stipe to Aung San, as she proclaims the non-violent strength and resolve of the Burmese people. Aung San asserts, “Those who have already been in a Burmese prison, know that any day they are liable to be put back there, and yet they do not give up.” As a representative for the majority of the Burmese people, Aung San not only broadcasts their demands to a global YouTube audience, but also articulates and demonstrates their political motivation. Through her personal celebrity, she symbolizes the Burmese people’s struggle for collective identity.

Stipe’s video petition reveals a representational paradox for the authority of public petitions, a core confusion for the rhetoric of personality. How can one person, even a popular person such as Aung San, sufficiently represent the wills of multiple persons? How can one reflect the many? Is it Aung San that represents the people of Burma or her socially constructed persona? Is the celebrity of Aung San separate from her personal identity, or is it, like one’s style of handwriting, an aspect of her signature? We will not solve this paradox, but it is important to raise it as a point for future reflection as we consider how personality figures into the online petition.

At the end of the protest video, Stipe tells us to “Support Aung San. Free Burma. Free Your Mind.” It is not clear whether Stipe’s prescription is a request expressed as an order, or if it is simply an order. In either case, petition-like objects such as Stipe’s protest video challenge the assumption that the prescriptions of petitions only appeal to voluntary action; it challenges the assumption that the petition’s demands are at the

discretion of the audience. Stipe's demand suggests that as a political authority, we not only have the right to support it, but also a duty.

These video petitions also bring into question the scope of perceived political authority. Stipe is targeting the military junta through the YouTube public. Aung San Suu Kyi is not targeting the YouTube public; she is targeting the military junta, the Burmese public, and the international community. Both petitioners perceive political authority in their supporters and their oppressors, and both petitioners are using the online video format to manipulate these sources of power.

As online artifacts, protest videos on YouTube provide multiple ways for people to sign petitions. Users can pledge their support by giving it a positive rating, adding the video to their list of favorite videos, or posting a supportive comment to the website. They can create and sign brief textual counter petitions by posting oppositional comments. They can produce other protest videos as responses. Like YouTube's textual comments, these protest videos can serve as complementary, supplementary, or counter petitions.

When a person publishes a textual or video petition on YouTube, they also automatically sign it with their public profile, a common mark of social media. Each petitioner's public profile includes a pseudonymous username, a set of public videos they posted, a set of videos they have selected as their favorites, a set of friends on YouTube, a set of subscribers on YouTube, and a set of comments to their videos. So the YouTube platform provides one way to reformat online petitions as pseudonymous social networks of personal testimony. While socially networked and pseudonymous, YouTube's petition format ultimately fails to accommodate the public voice; YouTube is not an ideal petition platform because its methods of political ethnography are fundamentally undemocratic. Those who posted the video and those who own YouTube can unilaterally remove comments for any reason. Political authorities that post videos can censor legitimate criticisms and preserve illegitimate praise, thereby distorting public opinion.

While Stipe and Aung San are celebrities with much of their personal information revealed, petitions such as protest videos can also balance the disclosure of personality with a measure of anonymity. For example, noreast77 and chillout108 broadcast the personalities of the Burmese Buddhist monks who march against the military junta without disclosing every major aspect of the authors' or monks' lives.

(<http://youtube.com/watch?v=tuM8cCSkeZw>,
<http://youtube.com/watch?v=CEcXZxw6oU8>). However, since the videos are published online, the military junta could extract images of the monks from the videos and perhaps use biometric image processing software to search for individual dissidents who have been previously recorded.

While the problem of obfuscating signatures may be more critical for online petitions, it is not unique to the digital space. To protect the privacy of the monks online, parts of the videos must be blurred. Prima facie, the monks are already blurred by their uniform saffron robes, male bodies, and bald heads. Digital video and audio allow additional blurring to strike a balance between anonymity and personality.

Emails To Legislators

Email has become a common method of telecommunication between the public and political authorities, eclipsing material modes of correspondence, such as postal mail. According to the Congressional Management Foundation, the “total postal mail and e-mail to Capitol Hill have increased from approximately 50 million in 1995 to 200 million in 2004, nearly a 300% increase”

(http://www.cmfweb.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=68&Itemid=50). During this period, incoming postal mail decreased by 50% from about 50 million to 25 million parcels, while incoming email, since its introduction to Congress in 1995, generated over 175 million messages. While it is not clear exactly how much

communication occurred between constituents and their Congressional legislators during this time period, it is clear that many messages did serve as petitions from the public.

As Congress emerged on the Internet in the 1990s, constituents began to contact and petition their Congressional legislators by visiting their legislators' websites. These government websites published both online and offline contact information of each representative, including office addresses, telephone numbers, fax numbers, and email addresses. While visiting these websites, individuals and organizations used email technology to push their messages into Congressional offices, and Congressional offices used email to push their messages into the homes and offices of constituents.

In 1996, House.gov published a "Who's Who" listing of all of the House Representatives, including their names, office addresses, with telephone numbers (<http://web.archive.org/web/19961222235141/http://www1.house.gov/>). At this early stage, House.gov decided to omit the email addresses of House Representatives from the main contact page; it decided to publish a less conspicuous link to these email addresses on a related page

(<http://web.archive.org/web/19970428103929/www.house.gov/Index.html>).

House.gov's decision to segregate the email addresses from other kinds of contact information indicates a worry that the public as a whole could flood Congressional offices with email petitions. The government webmasters understood that anyone with a web browser could review and contact any legislator, even those that did not represent their districts.

In 1997, House.gov added a Contact Your Representative web form to control access to contact information. Government webmasters began to require potential petitioners to enter their state and zip code in order to read detailed contact information about Congressional legislators. These requirements to disclose one's personal geography made it harder for the public to individually compile lists of legislative contact information. If a citizen wanted to send an email to several legislators outside their

districts, they would have to know the geographic jurisdictions of those legislators and manually enter that knowledge. By design, the new legislator contact interface made inter-district petitioning cost-prohibitive, filtering out individual citizens who lacked sufficient time or knowledge to recast themselves as residents of each geographic jurisdiction.

After 2000, many Congressional legislators removed their email addresses from the web, replacing their personal and professional online contact information with a web-based contact form. The web-based contact form allowed politicians to receive email without publishing their email address. It helped anonymize the legislator and personalize the constituent. To send a Congressional legislator an email via the contact form, website visitors would enter their personal contact information and their message into a web-based form and then click a button to submit it. The contact form required each petitioning constituent to provide her name, address, email address, topic category, and message. Through clever web design, Congressional legislators dictated and enforced a new communication policy between the public and themselves: “As a Congressional legislator, I will listen to you via email only if you describe yourself as a resident of my geographic jurisdiction, and only if you build and send your message through my communication interface.”

By switching from regular email to web-based contact forms, Congressional legislators switched from client-controlled email to server-controlled email. In this way, Congressional legislators imposed their communication interfaces on the public, interfaces that they privately controlled and which narrowed the frame of public discourse. Citizens could no longer email petitions that had multimedia or file attachments; they no longer could email petitions as a single group with a history of forwarded and replied perspectives; they no longer could send it from their own email programs and other web environments; they no longer could fully control the summarization of their message; and they no longer could have a transactional record of

their petition. Instead, as a solitary author, citizens had to visit a government website in relative isolation; write, copy, and paste their grievances into a simplified textual form; select a single topical category, often one that misrepresents their message, from a pre-selected list of state-sanctioned categories; and submit their malformed petition to an undesignated address without any proof, receipt, or record of that transaction.

According to the Congressional Management Foundation, the introduction of the legislator contact form in 2000 started an “arms race... between Capital Hill and the grassroots community.” The CMF report argues that Congressional legislators replaced their email addresses with contact forms “to reduce the volume and improve the filtering and sorting of inbound communications.” It argues that Congressional legislators needed a mechanism to “more easily sort messages sent by their constituents from messages sent by non-constituents.” It does not elaborate on why Congressional legislators wanted to segregate constituents from non-constituents, or how they processed those messages differently once they were segregated.

While Congressional legislators were trying to filter millions of email messages from citizens, advocacy groups were trying to reproduce them. According to the CMF, the contact forms “frustrated the advocacy community, because they limited [the] organizations’ abilities to deliver messages to Members of Congress unless they were from constituents.” Limiting emails to geographically defined constituents undermined the communication strategies of many advocacy groups, which depend on email petitions from geographically dispersed memberships.

Unlike individual emails, petition emails from advocacy groups are often hierarchically solicited, organized, and branded. Advocacy groups do not tend to collaboratively write their petitions with their membership. Members do not typically know what other members have written, and they have no opportunity on the advocacy groups’ contact forms to review, adopt, or adapt the language of other members. Instead,

advocacy group staffers tend to send boilerplate emails to their members, petitioning them to petition their Congressional legislators with other boilerplate emails.

According to Jeff Dirksen, an advocate at the National Taxpayers Union, Congressional legislators seek to filter email from citizens to decrease the volume of emails, to exclude emails that are not authentically authored by the alleged senders, and to identify the advocacy groups that organized the emails. Dirksen admits that although many advocacy groups solicit citizens to sign their email petitions, many advocacy groups do not disclose their organizations identity anywhere in the email. Dirksen suggested that if an advocacy group behind an email petition campaign disclosed its identity in an email, it would undermine the perception that the email campaign is a “grassroots” effort.

Dirksen assumes that by hiding the collective identity of the advocacy group in the email petitions, Congressional legislators will tend to perceive the email campaign as a grassroots, bottom-up effort, despite the fact that the emails tend to conform to the boilerplate language of some organization, and despite the fact, that Congressional staff use software that automatically aggregates messages that contain similar language. Congressional staff can search for this boilerplate language on Google or another search engine to help identify the advocacy groups that organized the petition.

Finally, the CMF report argues that since the details of these contact forms varied by Congressional legislator, they made it difficult for advocacy organizations to coordinate the technical aspects of message delivery. To help manage email petitions between their memberships, and Congressional legislators, non-profit advocacy organizations have increasingly turned to for-profit advocacy companies, such as Capital Advantage and Convio, for constituent management systems or CRMs. As a replacement for standard email, these web-based platforms offer advocacy organizations turnkey solutions for sending textual messages to politicians in Congress. Using these web-based platforms, advocacy organizations can quickly generate a text-based petition, publish it

on their website or via email to their membership, and gather signatures. To sign a petition, users are often required to supply personal information, such as their names and home addresses. Using this information, their messages are routed to the politicians within their geographic districts.

The online communication between the public and Congress is largely structured around email and it involves four basic components. The first component of the Congressional email system is the contact form. Both Congress and advocacy groups use contact forms to gather information from their constituents. These contact forms gather personal information about the petitioner, including their name, home address, email address and message. Once submitted, the data from the contact form is transformed into an email and sent to the Congressperson's email server. Capital Advantage, Convio, and other online petition vendors store the gathered personal information before transforming it into an email and sending it to the Congressperson's email server.

The second component of the Congressional email system is the Congressional email server. The Congressional email server stores the emails sent to Congressional offices. It also sends reply emails from Congressional offices. The vast majority of Congresspersons no longer provide public email addresses to their constituents, and for the handful that do, none currently publish their email address on their contact forms. Moreover, according to USA.gov, no governmental agency has published these email addresses, and no public list is currently available on the web (<http://publicplease.org/2008/07/25/we-can-chat-with-the-federal-government-but-not-email-them/>). Contact form vendors, such as Capitol Advantage, have compiled a list of Congressional email addresses, but they have kept their lists private.

The third component of the Congressional email system is the constituent correspondence system. Congressional staff use the constituent correspondence system to filter and aggregate incoming emails, track constituent communication, and send batch boilerplate replies. According to a constituent correspondence system salesperson,

Interamerica's Capitol Correspond and Lockheed Martin's Intelligence Quorum are the most widely used constituent correspondence systems in the United States, representing about 40% and 50% of the Senators respectively, and about 20% and 70% of House Representatives respectively. These constituent correspondence systems interface with the Congresspersons' email servers. They import the emails from the email server and translate them into searchable communication records.

Congressional staff persons called Legislative Correspondents (LCs) typically process incoming email. Senators tend to have more LCs than House Representatives. Senators typically have about 5 LCs, while House Representative typically have only 1 LC. Senate LCs tend to specialize in several issues, while House LCs tend to cover constituent correspondence on most issues. House LCs tends to share the workload of corresponding with constituents with other staff members.

According to one Senate staff person whose office uses Lockheed Martin's Intelligence Quorum, LCs in his office process, on average, around 2000 emails gathered from contact forms per day. For each incoming email, the LC decides to either send a boilerplate response, or a personal response. For the personal responses, the LC typically writes them. After the LC writes a personal response, it is reviewed and vetted by senior Congressional staffers, including the Chief of Staff, and the Congressperson. The boilerplate responses are also vetted by senior staff and the Congressperson, but the LC's decision to provide a boilerplate response is rarely vetted.

According to the aforementioned Senate staffer, the bulk of the contact form emails are sent boilerplate replies via email. Typically, an LC will personally respond to about 100 incoming emails from constituents per day. This suggests that on average about 95% of incoming emails from constituents receive boilerplate email responses selected by an LC, and only 5% receive personal email responses with original content. To personally respond to each constituent given the existing correspondence management

system and organizational structure, the LC staff would need to be 20 times larger, with at least 100 LCs per Senator.

With a constituent correspondence system, such as Lockheed Martin's Intelligence Quorum, LC's can review a list of all of the messages from a particular constituent. According to the Senate staffer, they use the web-based system to attach affiliation codes to constituents who care about particular issues, such as animal rights. These affiliation codes could also be used to flag those who have developed a closer relationship with the Senator, perhaps a major donor or a family friend. If a person sends more than 50 email messages in 6 months, then the LC in the aforementioned office flags them as high frequency correspondents. As an internal communication policy, the Senate staffer's office does not send high frequency correspondents further response emails.

According to the aforementioned Senate staffer, his office receives daily email from about 200 high frequency correspondents. The Senate staffer argues it would be "unfair" to devote additional staff resources, which are very limited, to these constituents. When asked if he had removed the high frequency status from those who had not sent 50 messages in the last 6 months, he said that he had not done that, but that he would look into it and do it as soon as possible if required.

Many Senate staffers argue that constituent correspondent systems save them precious time by filtering out virus-laden spam and allowing them to provide boilerplate responses to a flood of common requests. According to the aforementioned Senate staffer, LCs use the constituent correspondence system to filter out messages from individuals who do not reside in their geographic jurisdictions. They also use the system to prioritize messages that come from contact forms on their website over those that come from contact forms on other websites, such as online petition websites and advocacy group websites. To do this, they look at the IP address of each incoming email message. They also use the constituent correspondence system to cluster email messages with similar language. This allows LCs to send boilerplate response to petitions from an

entire group, such as an advocacy group. Occasionally, advocacy groups will send an email petition to a Congressperson without their consent. In these cases, LCs can use the constituent correspondence system to blacklist these contact form vendors.

In general, Congressional staffers use constituent correspondent systems to favor personal communication with constituents who: 1) reside in Congressperson's geographic jurisdiction; 2) who rarely attempt to contact the Congressperson; 3) who's requests are not related to the staff's boilerplate responses; 4) who send their requests individually via the Congressperson's website; and 5) who are in general political agreement with the Congressperson. It is not clear that any of these criteria are very fair.

For example, a person from another state may deserve a priority reply from a Congressperson if that Congressperson has significant power over an upcoming bill that significantly affects their state of residence. The Congressperson may be the Chairperson of an important subcommittee whose legislation impacts multiple geographic jurisdictions, including the city of the petitioner.

Moreover, it seems plausible that this person may need to send multiple emails to clarify a complex issue, and that such a multiplicity would not by itself warrant excluding this person from further correspondence. Furthermore, it seems plausible that this person may deserve a personal response with original content, even if she is requesting information that relates to a general issue with an extant stockpile of boilerplate responses. While these boilerplate responses may address the issue in general, they may not provide the specific information requested.

Finally, it seems plausible that this person deserves a response, even if she is using a contact form from another website, and even if her views strongly disagree the Senator's voting record. A person may want to use a web service that tracks and publishes her dissenting correspondence with the Congressperson, a service which the Congressperson's website does not and perhaps would not provide. The Congressperson

may suffer politically for having complaints published against him, but this is an insufficient reason to deny correspondence with the petitioner.

From the perspective of the constituent, using contact forms is often a laborious and insecure process. Each time they want to send an email through the contact form, they must re-enter their personal information, information that is not secured with strong encryption on the pages of most contact forms. Unlike most e-commerce sites, most Congressional contact pages do not use a secure socket layer (SSL) certificate to transmit their constituents' personal information. If Congresspersons continue to require such personal information from their constituents, they should provide a secure registration system where users can register their email address one time through a secure web form. After their email address is registered along with their personal information, they should be able to use their own email accounts to send text and file attachments to Congress. A secure email registration process would cut down significantly on spam without introducing the burdens of supplying redundant personal information via web-based contact forms.

To this end, Congress should introduce an API to open up its email registration system to non-profit and for-profit contact form vendors. The API would provide methods for the registration, authentication, and authorization of constituents using their email addresses. Once this system is in place, the email addresses of all Congresspersons should be published. Worries about spam and viruses would be handled by comparing incoming email addresses with registered email addresses and scanning messages and attachments for viruses. Those with viruses should be blacklisted. Those that are on the whitelist of email addresses should be accepted, those on the blacklist should be rejected, and all others should be sent an email with a link to the registration page. Successfully registered email addresses should be white-listed. The email server should send incoming email from white-listed email addresses a confirmation email with a copy of their message and a link to confirm their attempt to communicate. After the user clicks

on this link, the message will be authenticated and sent to a Congressional LC for further processing. While these recommendations for identity management will solve many of the authentication problems associated with emailing petitions to Congresspersons, it does not address all of the rhetorical problems of online petitions. Email petitions of this sort still must find a way to frame its petitioners as socially relevant persons to other petitioners. One must find a way to reformat email petitions so that petitioners can review each other's grievances to Congressional legislators. One simple possibility is to create a program that archives and publishes one's email correspondence with Congressional legislators to a socially networked website.

Common Denominators

From the concrete prototypes of petitions, we are able to abstract several common denominators, the conceptual threads that run through the many kinds of petition-like objects, including the target, complaint, demand, constituency, signatures, and artifact of the petition. These common denominators of petitions are also consistent with those identified in the campus organizing literature on petitions (CampusActivism.org).

Target

The target of a petition is the perceived political authority to whom the petition is sent. The target of the petition is assumed to have the power to help fulfill the demand of the petition and redress its complaint. Political authorities can be individuals or organizations. The term "political" is not reserved for governmental authorities, but applies to all brokers of social power, including individual persons and corporations.

Exemplary targets are neither vague nor abstract entities. In his study of collective action, William A. Gamson argues that collective action depends on how we frame an injustice, and that "vague or abstract sources of unfairness diffuse indignation and make it seem foolish" (Johnston and Klandermans, 91). According to Gamson, "if

one attributes undeserved suffering to malicious or selfish acts by clearly identifiable persons or groups, the emotional component of an injustice frame will almost certainly be there.” Gamson views the “concreteness of the target, even if it is misplaced and directed away from the real causes of hardship,” as a “necessary condition of an injustice frame”.

If we accept Gamson’s requirement for collective action and extend it to the collective action of petitions, we recognize the importance of the rhetoric of personality for targeting political authorities. Gamson argues that if the targeted political authorities are represented as “impersonal and abstract forces,” reformers will be less likely to develop an emotion of indignation, and so less likely to act for reform. In the case of collective petitions, if the target of the petition is rendered impersonal, the constituency of a petition will be less likely to sign it (Johnston and Klandermans, 91).

While Gamson argues that a rhetoric of personality is important for those targeting political authorities, he also argues that a rhetoric of anonymity is important for those who seek to redirect such targeting, like political authorities and their supporters. Gamson argues that targeted political authorities “should emphasize abstract targets that render human agency as invisible as possible” (Johnston and Klandermans, 91). He suggests that the political authorities rely on reification as way to blame “actorless entities, such as ‘the system’, ‘society’, ‘life’, and ‘human nature’.” As we can see, the target of a petition is not only entangled in a rhetorical struggle between abstraction and concreteness, but between the rhetorics of personality and anonymity.

We have discussed petitions that have one target, but many petitions have multiple targets, and some of them targeted more directly than others. For example, the California ballot initiative ostensibly targets all citizens of California, while in practice it may primarily adopt language that targets special subgroups of citizens - people who will actively vote on its behalf. Similarly, a petition may explicitly target a single individual, such as an elected politician who is perceived to have the official political power to

address a grievance, while implicitly targeting the public who is perceived to have more political power, albeit unofficial, to effect reform and resolution.

Proxy targets are also often used for their ability to publish the complaint. For example, in a letter to the editor, Peter Singer, a famous bioethicist, uses the New York Times as a proxy target to publish his critique of news media's unwillingness to cover the candidate's positions on world poverty. (Singer, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/26/opinion/126dems.html?ex=1377489600&en=eb0429e39ec37594&ei=5124&partner=permalink&exprod=permalink>) He not only targets the New York Times directly, but indirectly targets the news media in general, by asking, "Why isn't this [world poverty] a campaign issue? How can it ever become one, if the news media never discuss the candidates' stands on it?"

Complaint

The complaint of a petition represents problematic part of the petitioner's grievance. It involves a critical judgment of human misbehavior, misbehavior that presumably can be remedied by the target of the petition. Petitions typically do not complain about misdeeds that are perceived to be unavoidable or of natural causes, but instead motivate demands on the future action of people who can solve, mitigate, or settle the problems behind the complaint. As Gamson points out, "we may think it dreadfully unfair when it rains on our parade, but bad luck and nature are poor targets for an injustice frame" (Johnston and Klandermans, 91).

In our analysis, the complaint does not specify a solution to its grievance; it only specifies the problem. However, the complaint is more than a problem statement; it links the problem to personal dissatisfaction. For example, the statement of an unsolved math problem is not a complaint, but it becomes a complaint after it has been expressly linked to the consternation of a person trying to solve it. Beyond a problem posed by the

petition, the complaint of a petition expresses the personal nature of its utterance, that it is a problem for a person.

Gamson's argues that targets of petitions should be recast in personal terms to motivate petitioners to act against a political authority. Similarly, the complaint of a petition should be recast in personal terms to motivate petitioners to act for other petitioners. If the constituency of the petition does not perceive the problem in personal terms, then they will not experience the requisite emotional response, such as indignation, to sign the petition and forward it to other petitioners. Gamson describes how news reports inspire emotional responses by recasting them as dramatic, personal narratives (Johnston and Klandermans, 92). If Gamson's theory of collective action is correct, petitions should frame their complaints as dramatic, personal narratives to motivate support.

Petitions do not need to frame their complaints as personal narratives in order to frame their problems as ones that affect people. For example, a California ballot initiative may describe a problem for many people, such as a high rate of unemployment, without invoking a single personal narrative to buttress their petition. In general, you can describe a social problem of a petition in a quantitative or abstract manner without specifying the qualitative impacts on individual persons. However, if Gameson's argument for personal complaints is correct, then at least for rhetorical reasons, petitions should frame their complaints as personal narratives.

Demand

The demand of a petition is the plan of action that the targeted political authorities are asked or instructed to take in order to resolve the petition's complaint. The demand provides a solution to the problem specified in the complaint. While the complaint of a petition describes problematic human behavior, the demand prescribes helpful human behavior that can resolve the problem. In particular, it prescribes alternate human

behavior for the perceived political authorities. Not all petitions fully explicate their demands – some only offer general or implied prescriptions, such as “Solve the problem.” These petitions leave it to the political authorities to infer an action plan for their resolutions.

Constituency

The constituency of a petition is the collection of people the petition purports to represent. The constituency of a petition is often a source of personal authorship and support for the petition. If a person deliberately signs a petition, then the petition represents them, and so they are constituents of the petition. Those who would or should sign a petition if they understood its meaning are also members of its constituency. There are many people who may help create a petition who are not constituents of a petition. For example, some professional signature gatherers help create a petition, but they are not constituents of a petition because they do not personally author or support it. And there are many people who are constituents who have not or cannot sign the petition, but who are nonetheless constituents of the petition that claims to represent their interests. For example, unborn babies cannot sign any petition, but they are constituents of anti-abortion petitions.

Signatures

The signatures of a petition are symbols that reveal the individual and collective identities of those who have intentionally expressed support for the petition. A signature documents a unique speech act, whereby a constituent has encountered the petition as an artifact and intentionally appended her personal mark to it, indicating that she understands and shares its complaints and demands. According to Cap, a “signature is a willful act by which an individual certifies his or her approval of the content of that document which gets signed” (Cap and Maibaum).

The signatures of a petition have various degrees of authenticity. Authentic signatures are those that were intentionally produced by those they represent. Since signatures are media objects, they can be forged. Forgery involves mimicking the perceptual form of an authentic signature by a person it does not represent. While forged signatures are often inauthentic, they are sometimes authentic. For example, a paralyzed person may intentionally produce his signature by persuading another person, such as his mother, to forge his signature on his behalf.

It is also possible to forge inauthentic signatures of authentic signatures, even for the same cause. For example, many protest videos are inauthentic forgeries of authentic signatures because they record protestors who intended to sign their grievances through street performance, often bearing posters and chanting slogans, but who did not intend to have their signature placards remediated and reframed as YouTube videos by fellow protestors. Since the videos are shot of a group of protestors without their informed consent, then their images do not count as their signatures. In this case, both the protest videos and the performed placards share the same complaints and demands, but bear different kinds of signatures; the former are inauthentic and the later are authentic.

The signatures of a petition reflect the personal identities of those they represent, including individual and collective traits, attributes, and preferences (Windley, 9). Traits are “inherent” or intrinsic personal properties, such as one’s fingerprint and place of birth. One cannot choose one’s traits. Attributes, on the other hand, are more amenable to deliberate manipulation, since they are “acquired” or extrinsic personal properties, such as one’s name, handwriting style, or set of friends. Windley notes that attributes “may change, while traits change slowly, if at all.” Preferences are personal properties that “represent desires”. Preferences are neither traits nor attributes, since they are personal properties that relate a person to a potentially non-existent external state. For example, a person may have a preference for something that does not or cannot exist.

In ordinary language, if a person authentically “signs a petition”, she indicates her preference for its demand, but a person can authentically sign a petition to indicate an alternative and perhaps incompatible demand. In general, signing a petition involves registering your personal preferences with respect to the petitions demands.

Petitions may have multiple authentic signatures per petitioner, but petitions typically have one signature per petitioner. Petitioners and political authorities often evaluate the quality of a petition by the number of socially relevant constituents that have signed it. To count the socially relevant constituents, petitions typically rely on the petition format to enforce a one-to-one mapping between the petition’s signatures and socially relevant constituents. In this case, the quality of a petition is directly related to its quantity of signatures.

This quantitative evaluation process conforms to democratic evaluations of voting, such as simple majority rule. If two petitions call for incompatible demands, the petition with the most signatures demonstrates the most popular support. While simple majority rule is a typical method for evaluating the quality of support for a petition, it does not exhaust the range of potential quantitative and qualitative assessment methods. For example, drivers who encounter petitions such as political bumper stickers often employ specific historical knowledge about political candidates; they do not primarily rely on counting bumper stickers to assess popular support for the message.

Qualitative methods for assessing petition signatures are important because some petition formats allow petitioners to append multiple signatures to the same petition. In this case, one can have many signatures, but few petitioners. To judge the quality of such petitions requires the political authority to not only count signatures, but to read them.

Reading the quality of a petition recognize that petition signatures are not just abstract numbers. They are socially constructed media artifacts that encode valuable personal information. Political authorities and petitioners use this mediated personal information to evaluate the authenticity of the signature. Mediated personal information

not only illustrates that the person it represents produced it, but that the person it represents is a socially relevant person. For example, the personal information encoded in a protest video not only illustrates the fact that its author was a person, but that the person was a socially relevant person. The person partially demonstrated her social relevance by producing a thoughtful, multimedia petition, one that involved serious intellectual labor to represent her views.

However, some scholars overlook the personal information encoded by the media of signatures. They reduce the mediated form of signatures - especially that of digital signatures - to an anonymous receipt of personal assent. For example, Abelson and Lessig argue that unlike “real” signatures, the possession of a single digital signature, in virtue of its digital media form, suffices to duplicate one’s identity, and so cannot authentically map to personal information. These authors assume that the signature does not formally encode the act of its signing: “In real space, I reveal to the recipient the exact form of my signature, but the difficulty of mastering the art of forgery protects me from the possibility that the recipient would begin signing letters with my signature. However, if I send a digital letter that contains the digital representation of my signature, the recipient could easily duplicate and use my signature to assume my identity when signing documents.”

While Abelson and Lessig’s assumption identifies a major representational issue for digital text - that textual signatures can obfuscate the personal acts of signing them and so are easy to duplicate, it overlooks the safeguards inherent in complex multimedia representations for preserving personal information. In particular, the authors overlook the possibility that the media of a signature, as it tends toward increasingly complex verisimilitude with its content, could record the personal history of its signing. They overlook the possibility that a media rich signature could formally resemble the historically situated act of personal support, and that if duplicated out of context would

only copy part of the signee's identity and thereby prevent the signature from being fraudulently used out of context to indicate personal support.

For example, even with sophisticated video editing software, the video protests of Buddhist monks against the Burmese junta could not be easily reframed and translated as a video protest against a Japanese whaling vessel. The semantic translation of support is difficult because the meaning of the signature, in virtue of its complex multimedia form, is inextricably tied to the historical act of signing the petition; marching in the streets does not visually resemble jumping onto whaling vessels. In this case, the signature of the petition visually resembles the speech act of signing it. If the video editing software took extreme liberty in its media manipulation, it would have to leave behind the former media artifact, substituting it with a new one.

In general, the sophistication of the forgery depends on the sophistication of the original. So one strategy for protecting the authenticity of the digital signature is to reproduce it as a multimedia signature steeped in situation, a situation that is computationally expensive to translate out of context.

Artifact

The artifact of a petition is the socially constructed and interpreted media object that formally constitutes it. The artifacts of petitions can take a variety of media forms with various levels of interpretation, from direct sense data to indirect text. What unites these media artifacts is their ability to serve as communicative objects, as potentially public entities located in time and space that convey various degrees of knowledge through symbolic language. Like all forms of media, petitions and their signatures have material and social dimensions; they co-mingle and interface with physical bodies, including those of persons.

To the extent that a petition is an artifact, it is necessarily a production, a piece of material crafted by some persons for some purpose. Thus what may begin in the mind's

eye as a lonely, fixed object, perhaps a document made of printer paper and ink, eventually indicates an antecedent activity by people, a historical process of personal dissent, a political event in retrospect. Put simply, every petition encodes prior petitioning. As an artifact, the petition not only represents the complaints and demands of people, but it also represents the historical process of producing those complaints, demands, and peoples. The artifact of the petition is not only a mediated memory of political grievances, but also a mediated memory of organizing and expressing political grievances. In this way, the petition is more than a reference to some final result, product, or conclusion; it is a multi-pronged pointer to the process of reaching those results, products, and conclusions.

General Definition

The definition of “petition” takes a diverse array of abstract forms in the scholarly literature. According to van Voss, “petitions are demands for a favour, or for the redressing of an injustice, directed to some established authority” (van Voss 1).

Zaeske claims that, “at its core a petition is a request for redress of grievances sent from a subordinate (whether an individual or a group) to a superior (whether a ruler or a representative)” (Zaeske 3). Zaeske views the petition as a “genre of political communication ... characterized by a humble tone and an acknowledgement of the superior status of the recipient” (Zaeske 3). Zaeske’s definition of the petition almost captures the concept of the petition, but falls short of its full rhetorical scope.

While petitions have historically voiced a humble tone between subordinates and superiors, neither humility nor subordination is essential to the expression of its complaint or demand. One can imagine, without contradiction, an angry, assertive, or arrogant petition that denies, ignores, or mocks the social status of its targeted “superiors”.

Petitions need not assume, as Zaeske suggests, the perception of some well-defined, fundamental political hierarchy. Political power could be perceived as a much fuzzier affair, as a nexus of overlapping and opposing potential forces, the sum of which is fundamentally equal between people, but which superficially varies per person depending upon the situation. In this case, one could petition a person of basically equal power to lend their variable situational power. So what is essential to the petition is not the perception of fundamental political superiority, but that the petitioner perceives and pursues political power in another authority.

In the legal community, a petition is “a written address, embodying an application or prayer from the person or persons preferring it, to the power, body, or person to whom it is presented, for the exercise of his or their authority in the redress of some wrong, or the grant of some favor, privilege, or license” (Black, p.1145).

The petition is also distinguished from several other predominant forms of political communication, including the poll, the vote, and the protest. Polls are very similar to petitions in that they seek to represent the opinions of a group of people. However polls are rhetorically at odds with petitions in that they privilege anonymity over personality. Unlike petitions, a poll characteristically hides the individual identities of the people who have taken the poll. Polls tend to only highlight macroscopic information about collective identities, such as “59 percent of black Democrats backed Obama” (<http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/01/18/poll.2008/index.html>).

Votes are also similar to petitions and polls in that they represent public opinion. In particular, votes relate to the public opinion about a specific decision. Polls, however, need not relate to a specific decision. For example, a political poll would not be a vote if it asked a general question free from a specific decision, such as, “Do you like any of the Democratic presidential candidates?” Alternatively, a poll could be a vote if it relates to a specific undecided decision, such as “Do you want Hillary Clinton to serve as President in 2008?” Such a poll would be a vote, even if the vote was not causally binding.

Like a petition, a vote does not conceptually require the enactment of its demand; it does not necessarily cause what it intends. For example, we would not say that the people of Burma did not vote for Aung San Suu Kyi as Prime Minister of Burma because their vote did not cause her to attain the powers of the office. Similarly, a petition is no less a petition if the political authorities to which it targets do not respond as requested. Instead of precluding the conceptual status of a vote or petition, such causal failures indicate an unsuccessful vote or unsuccessful petition.

Votes may also serve as petitions if they personally highlight the individuals who cast them. For example, if a teacher asks her class to raise their hands if they wish to eat outside, then such a hand-raising vote may count as a petition. In contrast, Australian ballot votes are closer to polls than petitions because they attempt to hide the individual identities of the voters. So votes can either be polls or petitions, but neither polls nor petitions need be votes.

Finally, petitions are always protests, but protests are not always petitions. A protest is an overt expression of dissent. A petition makes this dissent overt via some durable media, like pen and paper, a bumper sticker, a video, or the human body. To the extent that protests durably link the medium of their representation to the people who support them, they function as petitions.

The durability of the medium is a major feature of petitions. If the performance of the personal signature does not clearly endure, then its status as a petition becomes suspect. For example, oral requests and street theatre, which tend to endure briefly as bodily sensation, are at best liminal cases of petitions. Unlike a paper or video petition, people cannot easily review these embodied performances. They rely heavily on adumbrated human memories for future analysis, memories that are largely private and inaccurate. In this sense, petitions, as a species of protest, are public media practices that externalize and preserve political dissent in material objects. The intent of these petitioning practices is to document personal dissent as prescriptive artifacts.

In general, a petition is a personally signed media artifact that intentionally prescribes a state of affairs to a perceived political authority.

Definition of Online Petition

Online petitions are a special kind of petition. They are the petitions located on the Internet. In general, online petitions are petitions with digitally networked artifacts, media artifacts that are accessible through computer networks. As digital media objects, online petitions are stored symbolically as bits and bytes, but are ultimately translated and represented by computers as human-readable and human-writeable language, which may take digital and analog forms. For example, online petitions may be spoken or printed in both analog and digital forms, in both a perceptually continuous human voice or in the discrete staccato of text. To the extent that the petition is fluid, it is analog. To the extent that it is discrete, it is digital. While these two discrete categories suggest an analog spectrum of meaning, for our purposes, it suffices to define the digital aspect of online petitions as that representational quality which allows them to be manipulated by networked computers and the people who use them.

CHAPTER 3

THE POLITICAL TRADITIONS OF PETITIONS

The core concern of this thesis is to expose the rhetorical trade-offs between anonymous and personal signatures in online petitions, and to advance the view that a movement towards anonymous signatures poses a serious threat to the legitimacy of the online petition as a personal mode of political communication, while appreciating the legitimate privacy concerns of petitioners. To understand these rhetorical trade-offs, we must first peer into the past, and review the political history of petitions, a history of rhetorical practice, which walks hand in hand with our democracy. The history of petitions is not a simple progression, but involves a variety of functional developments. For our purposes, we will neither review the entire history of petitions, nor consider them in chronological order. Instead, we will consider the political history of petitions from a functional perspective. We will focus on the political functions that motivated the historical use of petitions. As we will see, the petition has historically served a variety of political functions for both petitioners and political authorities. By considering these political functions we will develop a better understanding of what political traditions are at stake with the use of anonymous signatures, and those that could be developed with the advancement of a more personal signature format.

Petitions as Personal Pleas

Traditionally, petitions have functioned as personal pleas to political authorities. From hand-written letters to hand-typed emails, people of almost every generation have sent petitions as personal pleas to perceived political authorities. In doing so, petitioners not only appealed to their status as socially relevant persons, but they sought to strengthen the social bonds between themselves and their political authorities. Petitions as personal pleas have functioned politically as a form of social glue, the material of a

political network that links together samples of the public with their political authorities. They have reminded both petitioners and political authorities of their social obligations to each other and toward reform.

For example, by studying petitions in early modern central Europe, in the areas “only weakly tied together by the Holy Roman Empire or the Swiss Confederation,” Würgler found that “many [people] pleaded [with political authorities] for help in situations of need and trouble, such as disasters and accidents, or imprisonment, illness, and death of family members” (van Voss, 13 and 26). Würgler describes a personal plea from a recent widow who had a young child and was petitioning the Zurich city council for a job as a teacher. He notes how the widow, “mentioned her feelings when writing her request: [describing how] her hands were shaking for fear, as if she had a feverish cold, and therefore she was unable to write proper letters” (van Voss, 33). While the Zurich city council denied the widow’s request, and instead, only offered her alms of grain, the petition reminded the political authorities of their social obligation to care for poor, widowed mothers. Moreover, it documented her personal situation for further review and judgment.

In another account of a personal plea, Würgler describes how Bavarian peasants petitioned political authorities for the right to gather firewood. The peasants claimed “a refusal of firewood requests would make ‘the babies freeze in their mothers’ wombs” (van Voss, 33). Again we find petitions as personal pleas appealing to social obligations between petitioners and political authorities. The rhetoric of the petition suggests that the political authorities, as virtual parents of the people, have a social obligation to prevent their babies from dying.

According to Würgler , such supplicatory petitions often characterized the social relationships between petitioners and political authorities as one of dependence, especially divine dependence. The petitioners’ religious rhetoric not only “hoped for acts of grace by the addressees,” but also intimated that the political authorities, in virtue of

their higher, God-given authority, imitate God's grace and assist the petitioners (van Voss, 15).

Although many of these supplicatory petitions did not explicitly demand assistance, their humble requests implicitly reminded political authorities to observe the social obligation to dispense mercy to weaker subordinates. In exchange for such mercy, petitioners often promised to pray to God for the political authority's "good health and happy government" or "to be obedient and to improve the observance of orders" (van Voss, 16). By demonstrating mercy toward petitioners, and fulfilling their socially constructed obligations to petitioners, political authorities strengthened their political network of supporters, and reinforced their status as legitimate rulers. If they did not provide some relief to their dependents, the political authorities would appear weak, and so undermine their status as legitimate rulers. So receiving and responding to petitions was an important way for political authorities to demonstrate and maintain their personal power.

In England, during the reign of King James I, petitioning "was a popular activity because it provided a substitute for proximity and influence conveyed by wealth or connection to the Court" (Zaret, 85). The King was at the center of a vast political network, whose periphery was occupied by the poor and the geographically distant. According to Zaret, petitioning was the main way for the periphery to personally communicate with the political center. With "deference, humility, and supplication", the "rich and poor alike petitioned" the King, hoping to win his favor, even if they could not meet with him in person (Zaret, 81 and 85).

While the rich and poor petitioned the King, their personal pleas were not received or processed in the same manner, and relatively few were received or processed directly by the King. The petitions from the rich were received and processed by "secretaries of state", while those from the poor were received and processed by the "Court of Requests" (Zaret, 85). So petitions as personal pleas not only had to traverse

great geographical distances to reach the King, they also had to move through a complex political bureaucracy that privileged those with wealth and political power. To relay a petition to the King, one had to ensure that it did not offend any intermediate bureaucrat, and that if it did offend an intermediate bureaucrat who might censor it, other powerful political allies would push it forward. In this case, the petition not only served as a personal plea to the King, but it required a variety of additional personal pleas between bureaucratic intermediaries.

Those who pleaded with the King and other political authorities had to balance privacy and publicity concerns. Petitioners had to convey their personal situation in a manner that identified themselves for redress without disclosing political relationships that could jeopardize the transmission of their petition or incur personal retaliation. For example, if a petitioner disclosed that he was friendly with an enemy of the King or one of his subordinates, then the King or one of his subordinates would have a reason to deny him redress or retaliate against him.

To improve their chances for redress, petitioners would often identify a subordinate of the King who was culpable of the complaint - even if the King was actually culpable - and suggest that the King has the ability and responsibility to remedy it. So petitions often distort history in ways that exculpate those with power in order to tap their power. The personal relationships between petitioners and political authorities, like the personal relationships between the people and their King is paramount for petitions to function as personal pleas.

Petitions as Vents for Dissent

Although petitions often criticize the performance of political authorities on behalf of afflicted people, petitions can also serve the political authorities that afflict those people. From the perspective of the political authorities, receiving a petition can provide a vent for dissent and its threat of organized revolt. Petitions can serve cathartic

and pacifying functions, organizing a group of people to vent their frustration and drain their political energy into a more passive communication process. Instead of engaging in more direct forms of political action, such as civil disobedience or revolutionary war, political authorities encourage frustrated citizens to exhaust their political will on the production and dissemination of relatively passive petitions.

For example, according to Zaret, King Henry VIII told rebels in northern England that he was reviewing their petitions, but used this excuse as a “tactic” to appease and quiet them (Zaret, 82). As Zaret explains, King Henry VIII suggested that the rebels petition him in a lawful manner instead of organizing, what the King called “unlawful assemblies”. Petitioning, in this way, functioned as a stalling tactic against the organization and mobilization of opposing political authorities. Petitioning was used to bait and switch petitioners with false hope.

Francis Bacon describes such false hope in his essay on how to prevent sedition: “Certainly the politic and artificial nourishing and entertaining of hopes and carrying men from hopes to hopes is one of the best antidotes against the poison of discontentments” (Bacon, 68). Bacon argues that offering false hope can prevent sedition by venting the frustration of the people: “And it is a certain sign of a wise government and proceeding, when it can hold men’s hearts by hopes, when it cannot by satisfaction; and when it can handle things in such manner, as no evil shall appear so peremptory but that it hath some outlet of hope.” (Bacon, 68). Petitions have historically followed Bacon’s advice, serving as a vent for popular dissent and an outlet for false hope.

To falsify this hope for reform and prevent a petition from turning into an effective social movement for reform, political authorities have leveraged their rights as recipients of a petition to redefine and circumscribe its format. For example, political authorities often exercise their right to refuse petitions that do not fit their official format. In response, petitioners often reformat their petitions in a manner amenable to their political authorities. For example, petitioners have offered political authorities polite

handwritten letters, messages that fit within web-based contact forms, or ballot initiative petitions that list signatures by county.

From the perspective of political authorities, a petition helps reformat a protest from a physical assembly of persons into a virtual assembly of persons. Receiving a petition as a single artifact of signatures is often less threatening than receiving an assembly of the signees' physical bodies. So political authorities offered dissenting subordinates a right to petition in the hopes that it would prevent them from organizing and mobilizing revolt.

For example, in 1215, King John decided to sign the Magna Carta, a petition that limited the powers of the King and conferred additional powers to the petitioning nobility, including the right to overrule the King by a committee of 25 barons. The petitioners were an organized group of barons who mobilized their armies against the King. With violence, they coerced the King to receive their petition, sign it with his royal seal, and accept its demands.

The Magna Carta was a meta-petition that petitioned the King for the right to petition. By accepting it, the King agreed to receive all future petitions from the barons, offering the barons increased rights to petition in the hopes that it would prevent further revolution. Specifically, the Magna Carta provided that if at least four barons were notified that the King or his subordinates "be in anything at fault toward anyone", then the barons "shall repair to us [(the King or his chief judge)] and, laying the transgression before us, petition to have the transgression redressed without delay" (Winters, 19).

King John later revoked his support for the Magna Carta, and went to war with the barons, but his successors, including his son Henry III, accepted the terms of the Magna Carta and established the right to petition in England. In England, the right to petition gradually moved from those with the most power to those with less power, from the barons to the common folk. Zaret argues that this broadening of political

communication from the center to the periphery relied on the media format of the petition and the innovative communicative practices it afforded.

In particular, Zaret contends that the printed format of the petition developed communicative practices that circumvented the traditional norms of secrecy and privilege that accompanied oral and scribal petitions. For example, Zaret describes how in early modern England, open debate on public issues was officially “confined to Parliament,” but members frequently violated its official format by copying the parliamentary proceedings by hand and relaying them to friends and family (Zaret, 44).

While transcribing parliamentary proceedings to political insiders was normally tolerated, some violations of the petition format, such as the publication of parliamentary discourse to the public, was a compelling legal ground for severe punishment (Zaret, 44 and 52). According to Zaret, “in February 1642, Sir Edward Dering was expelled from Parliament after he published his speeches and, worse yet, parliamentary passages that disclosed identities of other speakers by initials appended to their comments” (Zaret, 52). As the printing technology moved from the quill to the printing press, the potential for widespread publication of dissent increased, and with it the potential for public assemblies beyond the Parliament.

Outside of Parliament, signing and delivering a printed petition became a public occasion for assembling people. The dissenting opinions of these assembled people developed into another political authority: public opinion. By granting subordinates the right to petition, political authorities hoped to obviate and undermine their ability to assemble, but ironically, the right to petition exercised their right to assemble. During early modern England, throngs of people delivered printed petitions to Parliament. The physical size of these crowds intimidated the political authorities and challenged their authority. In 1648, the Parliament attempted to reassert its political control over public assembly by reformatting the petition. Parliament required that: 1) no more than 20

people could deliver a petition to Parliament and 2) that the petitioners must deliver it in a peaceful and orderly manner (Winters, 21).

In his study of the right to petition, Norman B. Smith concludes, “the availability of petitioning as a popular right allows public feelings to be expressed in a peaceful, orderly way and may be a foil to revolution” (Winters, 29). While petitioning as a popular right can serve as a vent for public feelings of dissent, it has not always proceeded in a peaceful, orderly manner or prevented direct challenges to their authority.

Even with its multiple reformations and expansions, the right to petition could not stop the organized revolt of the American Revolution or its Declaration of Independence. Personally signed by 56 representatives from 13 American colonies, the Declaration of Independence complains that its “repeated petitions have been answered by repeated injury” from the King. Departing from norms of deference, the Declaration of Independence, one of the most important petitions in American history, describes the King as a tyrant and defiantly states America’s natural autonomy. While the Declaration of Independence makes no explicit request of the King, it implicitly requests that the King acknowledge and honor its proclaimed independence.

To preserve the right to petition in the newly minted United States of America, the founding fathers added it to the First Amendment of the Constitution. According to the First Amendment, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.” Unlike the Magna Carta, the First Amendment does not articulate the format of the petition. For example, it does not require a specific number of barons to approve its grievance prior to redress.

According to the First Amendment of the Constitution, Congress is not supposed to make any law that abridges the right of the people to petition their government for redress of grievances, but for much of American history, Congress did not make laws that

treated over half of the American people as full fledged people. Congress mistreated African Americans as slaves and women as second-class citizens. These groups of people were denied their “unalienable Rights,” as outlined in the Declaration of Independence, including “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”. Because their status as American people was severely abridged by Congressional law, political authorities considered it legal to severely abridge their right to petition.

While wealthy, white men had the power to freely petition independence from a tyrannical king, African Americans and American females did not have the power to freely petition independence from a tyrannical Congress of wealthy, white men. Instead, these oppressed Americans followed the petition formats prescribed and enforced by their Congressional masters, formats that required the petitioners to rehearse undue deference and humility. By rehearsing deference and humility, the petitioners reinforced the notion that the political authorities were legitimate authorities.

In her studies of antislavery women in America, Zaeske describes how female abolitionists rehearsed deference and humility in their attempt to petition Congress to abolish slavery. According to Zaeske, many of the petitioners “approached as ladies rather than citizens or voters”; they “described themselves as ‘wives and daughters of American citizens’” – not citizens themselves (Zaeske, 54). Their humble rhetoric formally respected the legitimacy of the targeted political authorities. The format of the petition externalized the social relationship between the authority and the signees, framing the signees as victimized dependents and the authorities as capable and concerned caretakers.

The female petitioners in 19th century America broke many cultural norms of female political participation. They organized and asserted their collective will against slavery by boycotting slave-made goods, and by teaching former slaves to read and write, but relatively few female petitioners directly challenged the political authorities or their underlying patriarchy (Zaeske, 40-42). For example, the majority of female abolitionists

neither nominated a female abolitionist to Congress, nor directly challenged the divine supremacy of Adam over Eve when they appealed to Biblical scripture. Instead, many female abolitionists explained that they offered their petitions to “fulfill their Christian duty” as religious women (Zaeske, 61). They petitioned their male representatives in Congress to abolish the evils of slavery with the same moral obligations and under the same patriarchy that they prayed to their male God in Heaven to abolish the evils of slavery.

Cultural currents of racism and male chauvinism largely dictated the format of the petition. Many women feared inflaming these mainstream social norms with overt opposition. While they sought reform, many did not want to be perceived as radically countercultural. To gather signatures from such conservative women, the authors of the petition had to maintain a humble and deferential tone toward political authority (Zaeske, 54). For example, one very popular antislavery petition signed exclusively by women begins by addressing Congress with “To the Fathers and Rulers of Our Country,” while anti-slavery petitions signed exclusively by men were less deferential, addressing Congress with “To the Honorable Senate and House” (Zaeske, 55).

These all-male petitions did not frame the collective identity of petitioners as persons of gender, but as citizens. In contrast, anti-slavery petitions signed by both males and females clearly framed the petitioners as persons of gender by segregating the adult male and adult female signatures into different columns on the paper of the petition. This gendered format of the petition allowed the political authorities to appreciate the male signatures and discount the female signatures at a glance. The standard petition format of the 1830s also included a column for signatures from minors. Again, by grouping the children’s signatures into a separate physical space, political authorities could, at a glance, discount the grievances of the disenfranchised.

Although the American female abolitionists reformatted their petitions with humility and deference toward political authority, Congress still refused to redress their

grievances. Inundated with anti-slavery petitions, pro-slavery Congressmen, many from southern states, used their majority status to legislate gag rules. In 1836, Representative Henry L. Pinckney of South Carolina headed a special committee to which all petitions were referred. Pinckney's committee passed three resolutions to silence anti-slavery petitions.

The first resolution passed overwhelmingly 182 to 9 and held that Congress had no Constitutional authority to reform the status of slavery in any of the states. The second resolution extended this notion on non-interference in slavery to the District of Columbia, and passed 142 to 45. The third resolution, the so called "gag rule", passed 117 to 68, and held, "that all petitions, memorials, resolutions, propositions or papers, relating in any way, or to any extent whatever, to the subject of slavery, or the abolition of slavery, shall, without being either printed or referred, be laid upon the table, and that no further action whatever shall be had thereon" (Zaeske, 71). Representative John Quincy Adams from Massachusetts protested vehemently to the resolution, claiming that its censorship violated "the constitution of the United States, the rules of this House, and the rights of his constituents" (Zaeske, 71).

Pinckney seems to assume that his gag rule is compatible with the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution because Congress physically received the artifact of the petition. He assumes that his censorship law does not abridge the right of the people to petition their government for redress of grievances because it does not abridge their ability to have the tangible artifact of their petition physically received by Congress. However, Pinckney's law prevents the government from redressing certain grievances, namely those against slavery. Therefore, Pinckney's law abridges the right of the people to petition their government for redress of some grievances.

In general, it is unconstitutional to prevent a person from petitioning their government based on the content of the petition. However, one may argue that the petitioning event is part of the content of the petition, that the petitioning event must be

peaceful, and that the petitioning events involved with anti-slavery petitioning events were not completely peaceful. Along these lines, anti-slavery petitions are tantamount to screaming fire at a movie theatre; far from peaceful their performance would incite fear and violence. According to this argument, censoring anti-slavery petitions with gag rules does not violate the First Amendment because it does not abridge peaceful petitioning; it only abridges violent petitioning that might lead to war.

Although Congress rescinded the gag rule in 1844, nine years of abridging the right to petition infuriated Northerners and helped galvanize their collective will for the Civil War. Northern petitioning continued with renewed vigor at the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, which extended federal support for returning escaped slaves to their Southern masters, and which denied accused slaves of a trial by jury (Zaeske, 161). During this time, 400 free blacks from Pennsylvania sent their own collective grievances against the Fugitive Slave Act to Congress, arguing that free blacks would be enslaved (Zaeske, 162). Far from venting dissent, the petition helped organize and mobilize Northerners against Southerners, reinforcing and rehearsing conflict between them.

While petitioning helped spark a social movement against slavery, petitioning also helped maintain the illusion that the political authorities could respect democratic governance without adhering to democratic procedures. To maintain a semblance of democratic rule, political authorities, such as the U.S. Congress, did not have to act according to the democratic demands of petitions – they did not have to immediately end slavery or enfranchise women; they only had to give those demands the appearance of a fair hearing and the appearance of a reasonable response. By rescinding Pinckney's gag rule, Congress attempted to reformat the petition so that it appeared to fairly receive and process a petition. The political authorities attempted to postpone reform by extending the right to petition.

In contemporary politics, many Congressional legislators still try to maintain the appearance of a fair hearing of grievances by responding to email petitions with boilerplate thank-you emails. These automatic responses are supposed to convince the petitioner that their Congressional legislator will carefully review their complaints and demands. For example, Congressman John Lewis sent the following generic email message to petitioners, “Thank you for contacting me via e-mail. I appreciate hearing from you and learning your views. Unfortunately, due to the volume of mail that I receive, I am unable to provide an individual response to each letter. Rest assured that I read every piece of mail sent to me” (Lewis, January 2007).

Since the automatic email does not include a copy of the petitioner’s message, there is no manifest proof that the message was received by Congressman Lewis, much less read by him. The automatically generated, boilerplate email appeals to the prospect of a fair hearing by the political authority, but it does not demonstrate a fair hearing. It describes a fair hearing of grievances from the public, but it does not provide one to the public. By foreshadowing a fair hearing, Lewis attempts to personally console the petitioner and militate against holding him personally culpable for the complaint of the petition.

After the thank-you email, Congressional legislators often provide a follow-up boilerplate position email, which expresses a shared concern for a general issue closely related to the ones raised by the petition. These emails are not “individual response[s] to each letter”, but standardized stock responses that reframe the issue with facts chosen by the political authority. Political authorities, such as Congressman John Lewis, provide petitioners with their official position on the closest related general issue to provide petitioners with a reasonable response to the petitioner’s particular grievances.

For example, to a petition complaining about his decision to neither vote for nor against the Military Commissions Act of 2006, John Lewis’ emailed this boilerplate position on the related, but alternative topic of Iraq, “Thank you for sharing your

concerns on the war in Iraq. I look forward to hearing more of your thoughts on this and any other issue that concerns you” (Lewis, March 2007)

Boilerplate emails and other automated writing often fails to convey the social gravity of the situation. In 2004, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld used the autopen, a machine that copies autographs, to sign letters of condolences sent to families whose sons and daughters have died in the unpopular Iraq War. While these forged signatures were supposed to automatically comfort the soldiers’ families, after their mode of production was published, they no longer were received as a personal condolence, but as an impersonal insult (Meek).

Petitions as Signature Spam

As petitions have moved online, they increasingly served another rhetorical function: spam. According to abuse.net, “Spam is flooding the Internet with many copies of the same message, in an attempt to force the message on people who would not otherwise choose to receive it” (<http://spam.abuse.net/overview/whatisspam.shtml>).

McCaughey criticizes online petitions as spam:

“People feel like they are doing something useful when they push the send button, even though spamlike petitions and e-mailed chain letters have not been proven effective and are often experienced by recipients and systems administrators as unethical abuses of network systems. If we don’t even know who gets the e-mail petition that we’ve just e-signed, then what counts as political involvement?” (Cyberactivism, Martha McCaughey, p.6).

As a rhetorical strategy, spam leverages the online medium’s low cost to reproduce and redistribute petitions. To construct the appearance of popular support for their demands, spam-like petitions play a numbers’ game of collecting and redistributing signatures. The spam strategy assumes that a relatively small fraction of any large population will likely review and sign the petition. The spam strategy attempts to

compensate for this lack of support by sending a standard copy of the petition to a large, random sample of the population. For example, if a petitioner needs to collect 1000 signatures, but she expects only 5% of the public to sign the petition, then she may opt to spam 20,000 randomly selected people from her organization's membership database with a boilerplate petition via email.

Since the spam strategy relies on sending high volumes of petitions, the production and redistribution costs of each petition must be low. To lower these costs, spam-like petitions often standardize their complaints and demands into one-way messages and transmit them to their constituency via the Internet. Instead of trying to convince people to sign the petition through personal conversation, a process that relies on relatively expensive intellectual and social reproductions, spam-like petitions seek to convince people to sign their petitions in reaction to the presentation of a standardized, generic argument. Typically, a small group within an advocacy organization will produce and redistribute a generic argument to their entire constituency via an email blast. Some of their constituency will read the email, click on an embedded link, and sign the petition on the organization's website.

Like fishing in murky water, spamming for signatures is a largely anonymous process, one that baits a pool of relatively unknown constituents with a standard lure. Most of the petition's constituency did not create or request the boilerplate bait; they just saw it, lead other people to it, or bit it with their signatures. Most of the petitioners who were fishing for signatures had no pre-existing personal relationships with those they solicited. Those that provided the bait for the petition were not expected to develop a personal relationship with those that bit it.

Consequently, the bait-and-bite relationship of spamming for signatures rhetorically recasts the petition's organizer as a client and their petition's constituency as a server. The petitioning organization sends the petition as a request to a targeted constituency, which responds by sending their signatures. While the spamming protocol

has a request and a response, it lacks the back-and-forth quality of a conversation. Unlike conversation, where any party can request or respond to specific demands, the spamming protocol does not share expressive power. Expressive power is concentrated in the spammer.

In this way, petitions as spam not only impose generic demands on political authorities, but they also impose them on their constituency. With spam-like petitions both the targeted political authorities and the constituency of a petition are supposed to serve its organizer, an organizer which is often neither the political authorities nor the affected constituency, but the relatively anonymous leadership of an advocacy organization.

Advocacy organizations not only spam their membership for signatures to online petitions, but they also encourage their members to spam political authorities with emails, phone calls, and other forms of petitions.

Petitions as Membership Lists

Petitions have been used by advocacy organizations as membership lists to recruit, organize, and mobilize its members. From the perspective of advocacy organizations, signing a petition is tantamount to joining their community of interest. Advocacy groups often use the personal information gleaned from petition signatures to initiate additional contact with the petitioner. For example, MoveOn.org, a liberal advocacy group, uses the signatures it gathers from its online petitions to grow its membership database. To sign a petition, users must provide an email address. MoveOn.org uses these email addresses to solicit further actions from petitioners, actions that may have little in common with the petitions they signed. Congressional legislators also compile lists of their constituents' email addresses from their constituents' email petitions. To contact a Congressional legislator via their web-based contact form, the constituent must provide their email address. In return, Congressional legislators

occasionally send emails to their constituents that petition their constituents to vote for them or to support their voting records.

Petitions as Gauges of Public Opinion

In societies with democratic tendencies, petitions frequently functioned as gauges of public opinion to those who signed them and those who received them. Both the constituencies and targeted political authorities of petitions reviewed the quantity and quality of their signatures to gauge public opinion on the issues they raised. Ideally, petitions with a large number of signatures from socially relevant persons signal that the public broadly shares its complaints and supports its demands. Accordingly, if a petition has a small number of signatures, or if its signees are socially irrelevant, then the public does not broadly share its complaint or does not broadly support its demands. However, there are many objections to the notion that petitions accurately gauge public opinion.

The first objection to the notion that petitions accurately gauge public opinion is that the number of signatures on a petition may not be the most accurate gauge of public opinion. Since the promoters of petitions tend to be a vocal minority, the majority of a population may still strongly disagree with it. Thousands of signatures indicate collective support, but this collection of supporters may be relatively small compared to the public at large.

As Zaret points out, “Thousands of signatures on a petition might be a better indicator of the initiative and resources of its promoters than the extent of its local support” (Zaret, 235). For example, during early modern England, the promoters of petitions were often the political authorities themselves and not the public at large. According to James Fishkin, “in the early mobilization of Parliament against the King in the 1640s, members of Parliament circulated petitions themselves, even though the petitions purported to be spontaneous initiatives from the people” (Fishkin, 48).

The second main objection to the notion that petitions accurately gauge public opinion is that the manner in which petitions have historically gathered signatures calls into question their claims of representing public opinion. Petitions have historically failed to gather signatures in a scientific manner; they have not adopted the random sampling methodologies of scientific polling. Instead petitions have relied on highly biased approaches to signature gathering through personal networks, busy geographic hubs, and advocacy group membership lists.

However, some savvy political authorities have attempted to incorporate scientific polling into their signature gathering process. For example, American politicians like Newt Gingrich, still drum up support for their causes by producing misleading scientific public opinion polls and online petitions. Newt Gingrich, a former Republican Speaker of the House produced misleading public opinion polls and online petitions through his advocacy organization, American Solutions for Winning the Future, “a unique non-partisan organization designed to rise above traditional gridlocked partisanship, to provide real, significant solutions to the most important issues facing our country” (<http://www.americansolutions.com/About/>). Putting aside the organizational wrapping paper, American Solutions is an advocacy organization used by Gingrich to promote Republican policies by asking people to sign online petitions based on partisan public opinion polls.

Gingrich attempts to convince the American public that his organization accurately reflects public opinion in America. Firstly, he rhetorically disclaims any personal authorship of the Republican policies he advances through his advocacy organization. According to American Solutions website, Gingrich did not formulate the policies outlined in his Platform of the American People – his advocacy organization gathered these policies from the American people. Secondly, he disclaims that the policies are partisan. According to American Solutions website, Gingrich’s advocacy

organization is not just Republican – it’s not just red; it’s “Red, White, and Blue”, combining the perspectives of Republicans, Independents and Democrats.

But Gingrich’s rhetoric is not very persuasive. Gingrich’s Platform of the American People focuses on Republican policies and priorities, such as making English the official language in America, protecting religious language in governmental settings, drilling for more oil off the American coasts, and building more nuclear power plants. The Platform of the American People was culled from six nation-wide telephone surveys, but some of its survey questions were very misleading and none were democratically authored.

Gingrich’s advocacy organization and the various private companies it commissioned to conduct the public opinion survey largely authored the survey questions. They chose which national issues to focus on and the manner in which to frame their corresponding survey questions.

For example, on energy and environmental policy, Gingrich’s advocacy organization reports “80% of Americans say that ‘we will solve our environmental problems faster and cheaper with innovation and new technology than with more litigation and more government regulation’,” thereby framing a false dichotomy between government regulation and litigation on the one hand, and innovation and new technology on the other hand (Six Polls Analysis, <http://www.americansolutions.com/media/4CDF1CEC-779C-4699-A123-A8992F4D9219/16945ed9-02ec-4d28-89ce-6cbb341abba9.pdf>, Slide 77). From the survey question, it is not clear that all government regulations and litigation increases the costs of innovation and new technology. It’s plausible that many government regulations, such as anti-trust regulations, consumer protections, and environmental standards, have efficiently spurred innovation and new technology.

Gingrich continues with another false dichotomy between entrepreneurs and bureaucrats by reporting that, “72% agree that ‘entrepreneurs are more likely to solve

America's energy and environmental policy than bureaucrats'". However, it's plausible that both bureaucrats and entrepreneurs are necessary to solve America's energy and environmental policy.

In a clever rhetorical move, Gingrich contextualizes these false dichotomies by denying another false dichotomy. The title of the slide that frames the aforementioned survey results is, "Healthy Economy & Clean Environment NOT Mutually Exclusive." While the slide's title is reasonable, the survey questions framed by the title still foist false dichotomies onto the public. In general, Gingrich's survey forces the public to choose between government regulation and private industry, which is also a false dichotomy. Since Gingrich's survey questions attempt to rhetorically pre-empt these considerations, and since partisan ideologies hinge on maintaining these false dichotomies, the survey questions are largely partisan.

Like many other political authorities before him, Gingrich misleadingly invokes public opinion in favor of his Republican agenda. Through the voice of his advocacy organization, Gingrich's petition states, "We, therefore, the undersigned citizens of the United States, petition the Republican and Democratic parties to formally consider -- by allowing for a full and open debate, and a clear and fair vote at their respective district, state, and national conventions -- each of the planks in the Platform of the American People" (<http://www.americansolutions.com/actioncenter/petitions/?Guid=bf4a5257-45e3-4a94-97fc-57e2d7ecb6f9>). Gingrich calls his platform America's platform, and justifies it with misleading public opinion polls. Gingrich calls on the two dominant parties to fully and formally debate and vote on the issues, but he does not call on the public to fully and formally debate and vote on which survey questions to include in his public opinion polls.

The third main objection to the notion that petitions accurately reflect public opinion is that even if petitions had adopted a more scientific approach to signature gathering, it is not clear that those who signed them understood what they signed. Signing

a petition is supposed to represent a signee's informed consent to the petition's complaints and demands, but simply signing a name to complaints and demands authored by other people offers little formal evidence of the signee's deliberation, and hence, it offers little evidence that the signee had given her informed consent.

For many petitions, it is not clear that their constituencies had sufficiently deliberated on what they signed. In order to sign the petition, the signee did not have to author the petition in a deliberative fashion; they did not have to provide any personal account of their support; they did not have to personally justify their demands and complaints, and they did not have to personally describe and rule out alternative perspectives and plans of action. Without sufficient evidence of deliberation, it is not clear that signing a petition reflects any belief at all – much less the aggregate beliefs of a population.

We cannot increase deliberation in online petitions by simply modeling them on public opinion polls because public opinion polls also lack sufficient deliberation. According to James Fishkin, the quality of public opinions depends on the public's knowledge of public issues, and that traditional public opinion polls often fail to “bring the people into the process under conditions where they can be engaged to think seriously and fully about public issues” (Fishkin, 41). According to Fishkin, “poll results on any given goal, in isolation, give us no information about how people would actually weigh trade-offs among valued goals and among alternative means to achieving those goals” (Fishkin, 43). Similarly, petitions, even those whose signatures are scientifically gathered through polling techniques, do not necessarily engage the signee to carefully comprehend the complaints and demands they allegedly support. Simply viewing a list of signatures attached to a petition's complaints and demands gives little indication that the signees actually weighed alternative complaints or demands.

To mitigate these problems, Fishkin advocates increased deliberation in polling procedures. He argues that we should scientifically select a small, but representative

sample of people for face-to-face deliberation. Fishkin agrees with Jürgen Habermas that the ideal form of deliberation is a situation where “all arguments are answered in a free and equal discussion,” but Fishkin also recognizes that the time and effort available for deliberation from human beings is limited, and that if one seeks a practical form of mass deliberation, one must take into account the human costs of making decisions (Fishkin, 40). Accordingly, Fishkin defines the practical goal of deliberation as “a wide range of competing arguments ... given careful consideration in small group, face-to-face discussion.” (Fishkin, 34).

In particular, Fishkin rejects the view that political sound bites found in many political news programs are sufficient for deliberation, arguing “nine seconds (or seven and a half) is never enough to say anything adequate to the complexity of important public problems” (Fishkin, 34). He views face-to-face discussions as a substantial improvement on the abbreviated communication of political sound bites and telephone polling scripts. We can see that Fishkin’s argument against sound bites also applies to petitions to the extent that their signatures, complaints, and demands are sound bites, “messages worthy of fortune cookies and bumper stickers” (Fishkin, 42).

If Fishkin’s argument is reasonable, it cannot be arguing against discrete communication – after all, practical language is replete with discrete symbols and disjointed conversations. To remain reasonable, Fishkin must be arguing against extremely limited discussion, discussion that begins and ends within a semantically sparse context, such as those constructed from relatively few sound bites representing relatively few perspectives. Many petition formats designed to gauge public opinion have a semantically sparse context because they have not formally represented an extensive discussion with the public.

Many petitions encode one collective position with no internal dissent and then direct it in a one-way fashion toward political authorities. Dissenting views, between

petitioners and other petitioners, and between petitioners and political authorities, are normally separated into competing counter-petitions.

For example, the e-petition website to the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, explicitly argues against allowing petitioners to “sign against” a petition, and instead suggests that petitioners write separate counter-petitions. According to the e-petition website: “One of the most popular proposals has been the creation of a 'sign against' mechanism, which would allow users to disagree with petitions. After much discussion, we have decided not to add this function. The rationale is this: ‘e-petitions’ is designed essentially as a modern equivalent of the traditional petitions presented at the door of No.10. It enables people to put their views to the Prime Minister. It is not intended to be a form of quasi-referendum or unrepresentative opinion poll (professional polls use special techniques to ensure balanced samples). With a ‘vote against’ function, that is what it would effectively become. It is of course possible to create a counter-petition to an existing campaign (as many people already have). This remains the best option if you disagree with a particular petition”

(<http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/faq>).

The PM’s e-petition website worries that the e-petitions it hosts will be used to misrepresent public opinion. The designers of the online petition website assume that by formally separating political dissent into competing petitions, they will prevent or discourage the public from judging the petitions as quasi-referendum or unrepresentative opinion polls. While separating incompatible demands into separate petitions may prevent or discourage some of the public from judging petitions as quasi-referendum or unrepresentative opinion polls, it does not eliminate the popular demand from users to simultaneously compare and contrast support amongst incompatible petitions. Allowing users to sign petitions with opposing perspectives is one way to juxtapose incompatible demands.

The PM's petition designers also assume that petitions were never meant to serve as quasi-referendum and that unscientifically sampled public opinion polls are necessarily unrepresentative. However, traditionally, many petitions were intended to be quasi-referendum and unscientifically representative public opinion polls. In many cases, they were intended to bring to bear the comparative weight of dissenting views from the perspectives of socially relevant people, often a minority of people, sampled unscientifically, who claimed to represent the public with the most informed views on the public issues at hand.

Many of these vocal elite offered their putative expert knowledge to represent the public. This group of lawyers, clergy, scientists, teachers, and other professionals were not scientifically sampled for their signatures and they only comprised a minority, but their expert opinions were often considered more socially relevant than others on particular public issues.

For example, during the 1960's, thousands of professors from American universities and colleges organized and signed petitions against the Bay of Pigs and the Vietnam War that were printed in newspapers such as the *New York Times* (Ladd, 1). These professors, many from elite Northeastern universities, leveraged their status as experts in the natural and social sciences to influence conflicting political authorities. In 1961, while petitioning against the public financing of bomb shelters and its acquiescence to nuclear war, one professor describes his rhetorical strategy: "These are the kinds of conditions in which the petitions can have real results, real impact: when there are divided counsels in the seats of power, and a statement by a lot of responsible and well-known academics, many with real expertise, can help tip the balance" (Ladd, 3).

But petitions signed by people with social status and putative expert knowledge are not always the best gauge of public opinion. For example, Dr. Arthur Robinson's Global Warming Petition includes over 31,000 signatures from Americans with various science degrees who claim that, "There is no convincing scientific evidence that human

release of carbon dioxide, methane, or other greenhouse gasses is causing or will, in the foreseeable future, cause catastrophic heating of the Earth's atmosphere and disruption of the Earth's climate. Moreover, there is substantial scientific evidence that increases in atmospheric carbon dioxide produce many beneficial effects upon the natural plant and animal environments of the Earth.” These scientists “urge the United States government to reject the global warming agreement that was written in Kyoto, Japan in December, 1997, and any other similar proposals. The proposed limits on greenhouse gases would harm the environment, hinder the advance of science and technology, and damage the health and welfare of mankind” (<http://www.petitionproject.org>).

While thousands of unscientifically sampled scientists may think that global warming is not caused by human activity, according to a 2007 scientific poll conducted by Dr. Anthony Leiserowitz, “a large majority of the American public is personally convinced that global warming is happening (71%)” and “69 percent of Americans now believe that global warming is [either] caused mainly by human activities (57%), or caused equally by humans and natural changes (12%)” (<http://environment.yale.edu/news/Research/5310/american-opinions-on-global-warming-summary/>). Leiserowitz’s poll indicates that “only 48 percent [of Americans] believe there is consensus among the scientific community”. But according to Dr. Robert Lichten, there is consensus in the scientific community. Lichten reports, “Over eight out of ten American climate scientists believe that human activity contributes to global warming, according to a new survey released by the Statistical Assessment Service (STATS) at George Mason University” (http://stats.org/stories/2008/global_warming_survey_apr23_08.html). While Robinson’s petition relied on a variety of scientists with a variety of scientific backgrounds circulating and soliciting support via their personal networks, the 2007 STATS survey relied on open-ended questions to “a random sample of 489 self-identified members of

either the American Meteorological Society or the American Geophysical Union who are listed in the current edition of American Men and Women of Science.”

Robinson’s Global Warming Petition opens up an important problem for how to evaluate public opinion based on petitions with support from socially relevant people. How does the public evaluate the expertise of the signees, especially when putative experts disagree? Robinson argues that “all of the listed signers have formal educations in fields of specialization that suitably qualify them to evaluate the research data related to the petition statement,” but only 9,021 of the 31,072 signees (about 30%) have PhDs and only 3,697 of the 31,072 signees (about 12%) have degrees that specialize in study of the atmosphere, earth, and environment (http://petitionproject.org/gwdatabase/GWPP/Qualifications_Of_Signers.html).

Robinson’s website petition does not specify how many of these scientists have PhDs, but if we suppose that 30% of the signees who specialize in the study of the atmosphere, earth, and environment have PhDs, then only 4% of these signees (about 1,242 signees) would have PhDs in the study of the atmosphere, earth, and environment. Is public opinion better represented in the scientifically sampled views of those that have been nominated to the American Men and Women of Science for their contributions to the atmospheric and earth sciences, people who have published in the leading peer-reviewed scientific journals, or is public opinion better represented in the unscientifically sampled views of less than 2000 scientists who may or may not be members of the American Men and Women of Science? According to the Leiserowitz’s poll, the American public sides with the former and against Dr. Robinson’s Global Warming Petition. It is unclear why public opinion diverges from some socially relevant experts in favor of other socially relevant experts, but it is clear that: 1) non-random samples of the public, like groups of scientists, are often socially relevant, and 2) petitions that invoke the signatures of socially relevant people do not always accurately gauge public opinion.

While petitions may not have always accurately represented public opinion in aggregate, they have often created a powerful representation of public opinion. Political authorities frequently had to deal with what Zaret calls the “authority of opinion,” which as he points out, moved in a “liberal-democratic direction” with the advent of petitioning (Zaret, 257). Zaret argues that, “out of practical experiences with political petitioning emerged new ideas that attached unprecedented authority to public opinion in politics” (Zaret, 257). These practical experiences depended on the format of the petition. As the format of petitioning became more accessible to the public, political authorities were increasingly pressured to challenge nominal representations of public opinion – ‘public opinion’ in name only - with persuasive proposals of ‘actual’ representations of public opinion. Political authorities were increasingly tempted invoke the word ‘public opinion’ as the anonymous source of their support, but if pressed for personal names, to point to petitions as evidence of ‘actual’ public opinion. As innovations in petitioning decreased the costs of personal publication, petitions increasingly favored personal perspectives.

Unlike public opinion polls, petitions tended to represent people as individuals in a personal manner, and as such they commanded the attention of the public with the rhetoric of personality. While public opinion polls emphasized demographic differences through statistics, petitions emphasized individual differences through personal narratives. To emphasize these individual differences through personal narrative, online petitions increasingly relied on dramatic multimedia portraits of their constituency.

For example, the Make Room For Jordan petition on GoPetition.com recalls the tragic, personal narrative of Jordan Taylor to persuade ABC’s “Extreme Makeover Home Edition” to build a home for Jordan’s family. The petition describes how “two-year old Jordan nearly drowned in the family pool”, how he lost and regained his heartbeat, how “he was left in what his doctors perceived to be a ‘permanent vegetative state’, and how he eventually recovered his ability to breath on his own and return home to his family (<http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/make-room-for-jordan.html>). The petition’s

narrative encourages potential signees to sympathize with its characters, describing how his mother, grandparents, and siblings struggled to finance Jordan's care. Instead of appealing to statistics of Jordan's transformation, the petition shows a smiling, happy picture of Jordan prior to drowning and a pitiful picture of Jordan after the accident, where he is laying on his back, his mouth agape, and his eyes staring at the ceiling.

Jordan's petition also attempts to personalize the signature gathering process by increasing the appearance of interpersonal communication. For example, the petition includes a personal update from Jordan's grandmother, which thanks the signees for their comments, indicating that "Jordan's mom, Jeannie, reads to Jordan everyday the comments of people who sign his petition" and that these comments are helping Jordan recover. Thus, by signing the petition, a petitioner is not only an anonymous vote to provide Jordan's family with a new home, but also a socially relevant person whose comment helped heal Jordan and his family.

Petitions, unlike public opinion polls, suggest personal narratives and personal narratives do not rhetorically add up in the same way as the percentage points of public opinion polls add up. In the minds of a largely unscientific public, publishing a small set of personal narratives in support of a demand may still rhetorically trump publishing a careful scientific poll that describes a larger number of people who oppose that demand. While many petitions incorporate statistical figures, petitions ultimately appeal to the personal support of their signees and the personal narratives that characterize their demands and complaints.

In his historical analysis of political communication in early-modern England, Zaret identifies a central development in democratic political thought concurrent with innovative petitioning, the issue of how to attribute authority to public opinion based on the quantity and quality of the people who hold those opinions. As he concludes his book, Zaret asks the question, "Did numbers or social status of supporters convey more authority for opinions advanced in rival petitions?" (Zaret, 257). As we begin to redesign

the petition format, we pose a similar question with respect to the rhetorics of anonymity and personality: How does social size and social status persuade political authorities, and how can we use digital media to achieve these rhetorical affects in online petitions? Moreover, how do existing online petitions express social size and social status, and how do these expressions relate to the rhetorics of anonymity and personality?

As we continue our investigation of online petitions, we will discover that the rhetoric of anonymity emphasizes social size over social status, while the rhetoric of personality emphasizes social status over social size. So in our attempts to balance the rhetorics of anonymity and personality in online petitions, we will also be balancing the authorities of social size and social status.

CHAPTER 4

THE ANONYMIZATION OF THE ONLINE PETITION

In this chapter, we will examine the anonymization of online petitions and discover that the use of anonymous signatures seriously undermines the rhetorical power of the petition. First, we will unpack the core concepts underlying the rhetorics of anonymity and personality, including identity, signature, anonymity, personality, and pseudonymity. Using this conceptual framework, we will analyze several online petition websites, paying particular attention to the ways in which these petitions anonymize their signatures, complaints, and demands. Next, we will tease out some of the publicity and privacy concerns of these websites and explore the rhetorical trade-offs between anonymity and personality with respect to persuading political authorities. Finally, we will consider the pseudonymous compromise, a way to balance the rhetorics of anonymity and personality, along with their privacy and publicity concerns, by reformatting the signatures of the online petition into a pseudonymous network of personal testimony.

Personal, Pseudonymous, and Anonymous Signatures

Anonymity literally means without a name, but it connotes a person who lacks a name. In general, anonymity indicates the absence of personal identity – that there are no qualitative criteria by which to uniquely map an object to a particular person. In a more general sense, anonymity indicates the absence of individual identity - that there are no available qualitative criteria by which to uniquely distinguish one object from all other objects. A signature, on the other hand, is an object that can be used to distinguish one object from all other objects; it is a qualitatively unique mark of individuality. An object may have multiple signatures because it may have multiple ways to uniquely identify it. In the context of people, a signature points out one's unique personality. So an

anonymous signature - something that simultaneously lacks individuality and indicates individuality - is a somewhat paradoxical object.

To unpack the paradox, we must consider the relative nature of anonymous signatures. Suppose every person had a unique fingerprint. Then fingerprints would be signatures for people. A person may have multiple fingerprints, multiple signatures, but each fingerprint uniquely maps to one and only one person. Now suppose another person was added to the set of people, a person who was a cloned twin of one of the extant people, such that he had the same fingerprint as his twin, but different thoughts and feelings. In the case of the person and his twin, a fingerprint would not be a signature for people because it would not uniquely map to one and only one person. What once was a mathematical function from the set of fingerprints to the set of people, is no longer a mathematical function because it maps one fingerprint to two different people. The fingerprint that maps to two or more persons is not a signature to the extent that it maps to multiple people. So signatures function contextually, relating a set of references to a set of referents; if the set of fingerprints or the set of people changes, then the context changes, and the signature status of the objects that reference those people also may change. In general, the signature status of an object depends on the set of objects from which and to which it refers.

As a reference loses its signature status by mapping to multiple objects outside of the reference, it increases the anonymity of the referent. For example, as a single fingerprint maps to more and more cloned people, the anonymity of the cloned people increases. In this very general sense, cloning people anonymizes the fingerprint “signature”. However, in our analysis, we will draw a sharp, orthogonal distinction between degraded signatures, such as twin fingerprints, and anonymity.

To resolve the paradox of anonymous signatures for persons, we will rely on the more specific sense of anonymity, the view that an object is anonymous to the extent that it does not reflect personality. For example, a person’s bank account number is an

anonymous signature for that person because it uniquely references that person, but does not reflect the personality of the person it uniquely references. Conversely, a fingerprint or photographic portrait of person would be a less anonymous, and more personal, signature than a bank account number because it reflects the particular physical form of the person.

In this sense, anonymity of a signature is also relative to the set of objects from which and to which it refers. If additional objects emerge that offer a more accurate reflection of a particular personality, then the anonymity of the former signatures changes. For example, credit cards with handwritten signatures used to be the least anonymous and most personal signatures for credit card users until credit cards with photographic portraits appeared.

Personality, unlike signature status, is mainly concerned with the qualitative fidelity of the representation – that the reference somehow accurately reflects, resembles or remembers the referent, in this case, a person. Visual resemblance is an obvious example of personality, but other modes of personal fidelity are also possible. For example, a tarnished teddy bear may not visually resemble its owner, but for the mother who lost her child, a child who owned the teddy bear and who caused its particular odor, stains, and scratches, the teddy bear serves as a personal reminder of her child.

Anonymity is also relative to the reader of the reference, and whether the person has sufficient epistemic access to the reference and its referent. With respect to the reference, a person's signature may be anonymous to one reader, but intimately known by another. For example, a native English speaker may instantly recognize an English phrase as a particular person's name, while a person who does not read or speak English may not know that the phrase references a person, much less a particular person.

Even if a reader knows that the phrase is a name of a particular person, the phrase may remain a relatively anonymous signature if it does not sufficiently help the reader recognize its reference. For example, a native English speaker may know that the

handwritten phrase “John Smith” at the bottom of an archived letter refers to a particular person, but not know which particular person. While the hand-written phrase “John Smith” may formally contain enough information for handwriting software to identify a particular person, this information may not sufficiently help human readers recognize a particular person. For these human readers, handwriting is too impersonal; the handwriting does not reflect particular personalities in a meaningful manner. In this case, the hand-written phrase “John Smith” would be an anonymous signature to human readers and a personal signature for computer readers.

With respect to the referent of a signature, some people involved in the production and publication of petitions may be anonymous to a reader, while others are not. For example, the original author of a petition’s demand and complaint may be an anonymous signature to the targeted political authority that reads it, while the names of those who subsequently sign the petition are not anonymous signatures to that political authority. This is often the case for boilerplate email petitions originally authored by an employee of an advocacy group, and nominally signed by its members.

The Congressman who reads the petition may know some personal information about the signees, such as their names, zip codes, and email addresses, but know almost no personal information about the petition’s original authors, namely the employees of some advocacy organization. Often, the Congressman only knows that the signees have sent him the same boilerplate complaint and demand. For the Congressman, the textual complaints and demands of the petition is an anonymous signature of the advocacy organization. So, anonymous signatures are not only defined by an ontological context – the artifacts of the petition and those that are involved in the production of the petition, but an epistemic context – the extent to which those that are involved know about each other and the extent to which they can discriminate between similar signatures.

Both anonymity and personality are difficult or impossible to fully obtain for signatures and other objects. A completely anonymous object requires its provenance to

be purged of every set of clues, which if combined would disclose the personal identity of its author to some reader. Complete anonymity is difficult online because IP logs, session cookies, cached web pages, hyperlinks, and other digital residue help trace and document personal identities. For an object to become completely anonymous, it would have to serve as a reference to an object with the least personality for all readers. It is difficult to imagine what such an abstract and indubitable object would be.

Completely representing one's personality or personal identity is also far fetched. A person's personality includes a complex history of experiences, a history that is often impossible to publish in its entirety, even to the person who has lived through it and who comprises its effects. For a signature to become completely personal, it would have to represent a person in a comprehensive manner, a manner that would be able to distinguish between nearly identical twins and all potential clones of that person in the future.

Instead of publishing every aspect of a person in a signature, a process that would potentially involve repeating history to duplicate a person's entire sentient life, one's personality can only be remembered and exposed from particular perspectives. Formally, the publication of personality is always partial because individual sensorial perspectives necessarily occlude other sensorial perspectives. For example, we cannot simultaneously integrate our visual experience of delivering a baby with our visual experience of burying that baby into a single visual experience; some of our sensorial perspectives are necessarily fragmented into separate perceptual forms. We could perhaps perceive a video that juxtaposes parts of these two experiences, but their unity would necessarily censor some details of the former experiences.

For the most part, representations of personal identity, including personal signatures, lie somewhere between complete anonymity and complete personality; they lie somewhere on a spectrum of pseudonymity. The precise degree of personality is debatable for any object, but for us, we will consider signatures to be anonymous if they

tend toward complete anonymity within a particular social context, and signatures to be personal if they convey the opposite tendency within that context. Before we survey the use of anonymous and personal signatures, we will analyze several aspects of personal identity in more detail, namely how individual personal identities aggregate into collective personal identities.

Individual and Collective Identities

Persons have both individual and collective identities; personal identities include individual and collective identities. As we have discussed in our analysis of a petition's signature, individual identities involve the traits, attributes, and preferences of a person. A person's individual identity distinguishes her from every other person, and hence if sufficiently represented, could serve as a signature for that person.

Collective identities involve "an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and it is distinct from personal identities, although it may form part of a personal identity" (Colletta & Jasper, 285). Since a person's collective identity does not distinguish her from other people who share that collective identity, representations of it may not serve as a signature with respect to other people who share that collective identity. For example, an American flag represents the collective identity of being American, but it does not distinguish those Americans as individuals.

While representations of collective identities such as American flags may not serve as signatures for individuals, they still may serve as signatures for the related group to which an individual belongs, distinguishing that group from all other groups. For example, an American flag may still serve as a signature for American citizens, distinguishing American citizens from the citizens of other nations.

Collective identities emerge from shared individual differences, including those based on gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, disability, and class. Many of these collective identities are not chosen by any individual because they depend on individual traits that are not chosen by any individual. Other collective identities have more room for deliberation and individual choice, such as collective identities based on religious and political attributes. A person may have more freedom to individually decide on whether to become Baptist or Quaker, or whether to become Republican or Democrat, than on whether to be a congenitally blind person or a congenitally sighted person. Some collective identities are neither inherent nor chosen by their bearers, but are attributed by other people. For example, children often receive negative collective identities from other children, such as being a nerd, geek, slut, or jock.

In his literature review on the concept of collective identity, David Snow distinguishes between personal, social, and collective identities. Snow defines personal identity in a more narrow sense than what I propose, constraining personal identity to “the attributes and meanings attributed to oneself by the actor; they are self-designations and self-attributions regarded as personally distinctive” (Snow, 4). Unlike Snow, I argue that personality applies to people independent of whether they self-designate their differences or whether they represent themselves individually or in a more complex social unit, such as a collection of people. Since all of Snow’s categories of identity fundamentally involve and relate to persons, I consider them all to be varieties of personal identity. In this way, I deviate from the literature, broadening the concept of personal identity from merely autobiographical or selfish identities to those identities that pertain to persons and not other kinds of objects, such as vegetables, rocks, and numbers.

The notion that a group of people may have personal properties should not be strange. Although a group of people is not a person, a group of people is still a personal object in that it fundamentally involves and relates to people. Accordingly, representations of groups of people and their collective identities, such as national flags,

corporate logos, gang tattoos and other signatures of groups of people, may still be deeply personal objects. For many Americans, the meaning of the flag is more than a collection of geometric shapes; it is a personal symbol of the American people, pointing back to their personal experiences in grade school where they pledged their allegiance to flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands. Others remember the American flag as a symbol of military service, both honorable and dishonorable. Personal signatures, like the American flag, do not represent a pile of random rocks, the set of negative integers, or other largely impersonal collections; they represent a group of people imbued with individual and collective identities.

The nature of the representation, whether it's a flag or a portrait, affects its degree of personality. Consider the victims of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center. While some victims of the attack may have representative memories of the American flag, a portrait or a family story of a victim of the September 11 attacks, probably reflects a higher degree of personality for that particular person than an American flag erected in her memory, a point overlooked by some student memorials of the tragic event

(<http://www.11alive.com/news/national/story.aspx?storyid=121004&catid=166>).

Student memorials of the September 11 attacks, such as those organized by the Young Republicans at the Georgia Institute of Technology, planted American flags for each person who died in the attacks, forming what appeared to be a graveyard of dead Americans. The memorial served as an anonymous signature for those who died in the September 11 attacks because it largely failed to reflect the personalities of the victims, both individually and collectively. With respect to their collective identities, many of the victims were not American, and so American flags did not accurately represent their national collective identities. With respect to their individual identities, the flags did not reflect the individual biographies or voices of the victims. Even for the American victims, the collective identity of being an American was probably not among the most

salient aspects of their personal identities. If given only one symbolic document to place on their gravestones, how many of the victims, or those that knew them well, would have chosen an American flag as their main memorial?

Snow defines social identity as an identity “attributed or imputed to others in an attempt to situate them in social space” (Snow, 4). Snow offers examples of professional and familial roles as social identities, such as being a teacher and being a mother. In our analysis, I hesitate to exclusively apply the word “social” to this variety of personal identity because it suggests that self-attributions are automatically asocial. There are many self-attributions that serve to situate themselves in a social space. For example, a teenage goth girl may individually decide to only wear black clothing in order to situate herself in the social space of a subculture.

Finally, Snow’s definition of collective identity echoes Colletta’s and Jasper’s definition. Snow defines collective identity as an identity whose “essence resides in a shared sense of ‘one-ness’ or ‘we-ness’ anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity and in relation or contrast to one or more actual or imagined sets of ‘others’” (Snow, 4). Snow stresses the relativity of collective identity; he stresses that what one believes, wants, imagines, or perceives to be a shared attribute between members of a group can often substitute for metaphysical similarity. For example, people may collectively identify as Christians without having, in fact, any shared religious beliefs in common with all members. While they may lack any core Christian religious beliefs, they still believe that they share some core religious beliefs, and so maintain their shared sense of we-ness.

Snow also stresses the collective agency of this sense of we-ness, that one’s collective identity “not only suggests the possibility of collective action in pursuit of common interests, but invites such action” (Snow, 4). For example, a person’s individual identity as a white person may also serve as a collective identity only if it calls them to act on behalf of white people. Snow suggests that one’s collective identity has common

interests which serve their group, but the common interests of many negative collective identities, such as poor people or geeks, is to escape that collective identity, and so it is not clear that the pursuit of such common interests are always on behalf of the group. For example, a group of poor people may adopt a strategy to save money by shopping at Wal-Mart, a practice that may help that particular group of poor individuals escape poverty, but hurt the economic interests of poor people as a whole.

While some shared aspects of individual identities aggregate into collective identities, some intersections of individual identities do not form collective identities. People often share many traits, attributes, and preferences without knowing or appreciating those similarities and without establishing or connecting to a broader community, category, practice, or institution. Collective identity requires an awareness of one's shared personal identity and the potential for collectively joining with others as a group or network.

The structure of this collection of individual identities can be represented in multiple ways – as sets of people, where each person assumes equal membership; as ordered lists, where people are ranked according to their degree of membership; as hierarchical trees, where people are stratified into levels of membership based on their distance from a root person; and as connected graphs, where one's membership is characterized by various measures of network centrality. So descriptions of collective identities, often involve a topological description of similar people. These social topologies are part of one's personal identity; they constitute personal information, and so are subject to the rhetorics of anonymity and personality. For example, one can use anonymous signatures or personal signatures to represent these individual and collective identities. I will later argue that the publication of some social network information may help strike a balance between these rhetorics and the publicity and privacy concerns that motivate them.

Anonymity or Personality

While personality and anonymity represent opposite representational tendencies, they are not mutually exclusive. Representations of people often mix elements with various degrees of personality and anonymity. For example, video portraits provide visual information about the appearance of persons, but they do not inherently convey a person's expressions, and may even mask them with a black box or blurred distortion. Personality can take a variety of mutable and empirical forms, each of which indicates one's individual and collective identities.

To shift one's representation toward a personal signature, one must emphasize and highlight the personal properties of one's individual and collective identities. In the context of petitions, a petitioner must indicate that they are a unique and socially relevant person to the targeted political authorities. To this end, their signatures must provide sufficient evidence that 1) they are a unique person – and not a computer program or a duplicitous spammer, and 2) that they are socially relevant because they wield some social power – whether they are a beggar that commands conventional sympathy, or a baron that invokes a traditional privilege, or an activist that wields a large list of email addresses. By reflecting their personality and drawing out their signature with respect to other people, the petitioner responds to and advances the rhetoric of personality in an ethnographic manner. Petitioners are literally and figuratively attempting to transcribe their collective grievances through their personalities. They are trying to draw a people.

To anonymize a person, one must confuse those personal properties with those of others, especially those that are shared with non-persons. For example, one can represent a person as number, as a member of a collection of similar objects, emphasizing and highlighting their impersonal property of being countable. Hence, representing people as voters, where each person is reduced to a number, where their individual identity is boiled down to numerical distinction, is a classic example of anonymization.

In the context of petitions, some personal information, such as Social Security numbers or home street addresses, may require anonymization because they pose serious privacy concerns. However, anonymization also poses serious publicity concerns, such as not being able to authenticate a person as a socially relevant person. We will discover and discuss these concerns in more detail through our survey of several online petition websites.

Identity Survey of Online Petition Websites

To understand the ways in which online petitions are used to persuade perceived political authorities, we will survey several online petition websites. As we consider the mechanics of online petitioning, we will evaluate the ways in which they manage the rhetorical tensions between anonymity and personality. We will review the basic format of each petition site: its purpose, its core interactions, and the ways in which it collects, manages, and uses personal information. In our analysis, we will pay particular attention to how these petitions anonymize their signatures, complaints, and demands.

gopetition.com

GoPetition describes itself as “a leading international petition hosting portal”, claiming to host “over 20,000 petitions in more than 75 countries” (<http://gopetition.com/aboutus.php>). The website represents itself with a single logo, an abstract globe on a bright blue backdrop, beside which rests its slogan, “Changing the World”.

In keeping with the global theme, GoPetition prominently organizes its online petitions by political geography. People from around the world can browse these largely text-based petitions by the countries in which the petitions’ constituencies reside. Most countries have their own overview pages, which list a subset of their petitions. For example, the USA overview page contains an assortment of petitions with titles such as

“Save the Pinellas County Artificial Reef Project”, “Vote Against BailOut Supporters In Congress”, “End the Electoral College”, and “US Horse Owners Against American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act” (<http://gopetition.com/region/238.html>). Links to countries without overview pages jump directly into a search results page that lists all petitions associated with that country. There is also an overview page for “International” petitions, petitions that contain both global and country-specific petitions. The International overview page serves as the home page for the site.

Each overview page organizes a sample of the associated petitions into five subsections, “Featured Petitions”, “Latest Petitions”, “Active Petitions”, “Most Popular”, “Archived Petitions” and “Sponsored Petitions”. While the general meanings of these subsections are understandable, the website does not adequately explain their specific meanings. The website does not specify what it means for a petition to be featured, the latest, the most popular, archived, or sponsored, or how those meanings would help users locate petitions with socially relevant support. Ostensibly, a user would first browse by political geography, moving to her country’s overview page, and then decide to select a petition that was among the most popular, the most active, the latest posted, featured, or sponsored.

Users may also browse petitions by topic. From any overview page, users can browse to a topic page. Topics organize a wide variety of petitions that target both governmental and corporate political authorities. Topics include “Animal Welfare”, “Business”, “Civil Rights”, “Education”, “Employment”, “Environment”, “Health”, “Religion”, “Science & Technology”, and “Transport”, as well as topics such as “Film & Movies”, “Internet”, “Music”, “Sports”, and “Television”. While a petition may semantically relate to multiple categories, GoPetition’s petition format requires that a petition formally relate to one and only one topic. Like the country overview page, each topic page allows the user to filter by many of the same overview categories, including “Active”, “Latest”, “Popular”, and “Archived”.

Although users may personally identify with a particular political geography or topic of interest, the overview categories used to filter and browse petitions do not reflect the individual or collective identities of the petitioners in a personal manner; they do not allow users to assess whether they belong to the petition's constituency based on their own individual or collective identities, but instead focus on impersonal characteristics of user activity, such as how many people have signed a petition or whether some sponsor paid enough money to showcase it.

In general, GoPetition's overview categories offer users an incredible rhetoric of anonymity. They suggest that users should be interested in a petition because that petition received a high quantity of user activity – not because the petition qualitatively reflects the personal concerns of the user. For example, users cannot filter or browse petitions by more personal categories such as Supported By Men, Supported By Black People, Supported By High-Income People, Supported By Educators, or Supported By Bill Cosby. They omit more personal categories, such as Supported By My Friends, Supported By My Family, Supported By My Coworkers, and Supported By My Clients.

By representing the petitioners and their interests as quantitative measures of generic user activity, overview categories, such as Most Popular and Active Petitions, anonymizes petitioners into anonymous users. The website anonymizes its petitioners further by not specifying how it measures its overview categories. The website does not indicate how it measures petition activity or popularity, and it does not indicate the dates by which it orders the latest petitions. In the Active Petitions section, some of the petition listings are prepended with up and down arrow icons, some of which blink. The website does not define the meanings of these symbols, although up arrows suggest that one petition has recently become more active, moving up in the rankings, while another has become less active and moved down in the rankings. Again, the measure of activity is not well defined, neither in its scope or time interval. For example, petition activity could mean the number of page views this week or the number of signatures in total.

Some of the overview categories also anonymize those who host and promote the petitions. For example, the petitions in the Featured Petitions category are selected by Gopetition.com Pty. Ltd., the largely anonymous company which manages the website. Neither the About Us page nor the Contact Us page contains the company's name, telephone number, street address, or employee profiles. People can only contact this mysterious company via email. In sending this email for the first time, the user cannot address a specific person in the company. In general, the user does not know much about who selected the featured petitions, and so they lack information with which they could evaluate whether to trust the featured petitions.

Featuring a petition is also a somewhat anonymous process. According to the FAQ, "for a small monthly contribution you can feature your petition of choice on one of our regional homepages" ("How can I promote my petition?", <http://www.gopetition.com/help.php>). The website does not specify the size of the contribution, or whether this contribution is a donation or a payment for a service; the user does not know whether GoPetition is a non-profit or for-profit corporation.

However, for an indeterminate fee, users can promote their petition in a somewhat personal fashion by paying GoPetition to become a Featured Patron (<http://www.gopetition.com/patrons.php>). Becoming a patron adds your petition to a list of featured petitions. GoPetition attempts to personalize each featured petition by including the name of its patron, the date when the patron became a member, and a link to the petition. While the list of featured petitions may frame a personal relationship between GoPetition and the patron, it offers no frame of reference with which the typical user can personally relate to the patron.

The website "also recommend[s] that you consider purchasing a sponsored link from GoPetition to place your petition link on one of our high traffic pages." Again, from the information provided on the site, it is not clear what sponsorship entails. Can any signee "sponsor" a petition, or can only the author of the petition "sponsor" it?

While the site does indicate that anyone can make a monetary contribution to “someone else’s campaign”, it does not indicate whether a campaign is the same as a sponsorship.

The financial details of sponsoring a petition are also somewhat cryptic. The site does not indicate the cost of sponsorship/contribution. No specific money amount is mentioned. The PayPal credit card payment page used by GoPetition does not specify what one is paying for, or how much one must pay. The website hides the petitioning process by instructing petitioners to privately contact the company to “discuss your level of sponsorship”, or “after you make your contribution, simply email info@gopetition.com with details of the campaign you are supporting” (<http://www.gopetition.com/content.php?type=help>).

However, the GoPetition website does specify the price of some of its premium services. For \$29 per year, the site offers the user several premium services. Petition authors that pay the annual fee can download the email addresses of those that sign their petitions. With these email addresses, they can send batch emails to their petitions’ signees. Petition authors can also filter signatures from specific IP addresses to reduce signature spam. They can customize their petition URL so that the URL is easy for potential signees to remember and share. Petition authors can also back up their petition to prevent data loss. They can download a list of signatures in multiple file formats, including HTML, CVS, and PDF. And finally, petition authors can customize the privacy policy of petition signatures so that they decide which signature information is available for public review and which signature information is reserved for the petition author. For example, a petition author may decide to publish a signee’s name as part of her public personal signature, but not publish her associated comment.

While users can write and sign petitions for free, GoPetition.com charges users additional monies to promote a petition on its website. They must pay GoPetition to sponsor a petition on a regional overview page, and to remove Google Ads on the petition page. Apparently, GoPetition relies on these Google Ads for funding, both in their

presence and absence. GoPetition tells petitioners that removing the banner ads from their petitions makes their petitions look “cleaner and sharper”, and that it “prevents the display of advertisements that may be contrary to the goal of your petition, or ads that may be of a competitive nature” (<http://www.gopetition.com/advremove.php>). In this way, the petition company artfully threatens its client petitioners with the co-publication of anonymous counter-petitions.

GoPetition also offers petitioners a free way to personally promote their petitions. Each petition page contains a set of hyperlinked icons that can submit the petition to a variety of social bookmarking websites, including Digg, Del.icio.us, Facebook and Reddit. By clicking on an icon and submitting a petition to a social bookmarking website, a petitioner can personally broadcast her petition to a broader community of interest via some of the online social networks to which she belongs. Many social bookmarking sites like Digg allow users to collectively rate and recommend their submitted links, including links to petition pages. The social bookmarking websites provide highly rated links with higher visibility. Highly rated links tend to have a higher chance of visitation, as well as a higher chance of additional ratings. Social networking websites with bookmarking features, like Facebook, enable users to share links, including links to their petitions, with friends and family members.

The increased traffic to petition pages from social bookmarking websites is supposed to increase the number of signatures for that petition. As the traffic increases to a particular petition, potential petitioners are exposed to more Google Ads. From the perspective of a petition organizer like GoPetition, promoting a petition means more money from Google Ads and more money from future petitioners who subscribe to their premium petition promotion services.

Like many petition websites, GoPetition tries to strike a balance between anonymous and personal signatures, but achieves mixed success. The website tries to strike a balance by allowing petition authors to specify: 1) the personal information they

want to collect from other petitioners; 2) whether or not that personal information is required from the user to sign the petition; and 3) which personal information is published to other potential signees as their public signature. In this way, the petition author decides the degree of anonymity and personality afforded to its signees. For example, petition authors can specify whether to collect a signee's: gendered title; email address; street address; city or town; state, county or province, post code or zip code, country, and short comment to target. GoPetition requires signees to provide their first and last names, and it automatically collects the signature date and IP address of the computer used to sign the petition. Petition authors can also specify two custom fields of their choice, which could be used to gather additional personal information, like age or membership number.

While GoPetition allows petition authors and signees to anonymize their signatures to some extent, it strongly recommends for rhetorical reasons that they collect and publish personal information. For example, GoPetition warns petition authors "that anonymous petitions are far less well supported [by other petitioners], so we recommend you use your real name and where this is not possible, your username" (<http://gopetition.com/help.php>). To prevent their real names from appearing in Google search results, GoPetition allows registered users to hide their real names, so that it does not appear in their public signatures. Instead of displaying their real name, the signature will show "Anonymous". However, signees are still required to enter their first and last names, and petition authors still have access to this information. Signees also have the ability to edit or remove their signatures from the petitions they sign. So GoPetition's petition format affords revisable signatures.

In general, GoPetition's petition format provides petition authors with enormous power over the personal signatures of those who sign their petitions. Petition authors can edit or remove every signature of their petitions. Hence, petition authors have the power to misrepresent those that sign their petitions. They could change the name of a signee,

their gendered title, their comment, and even hide their real name. Such power over signees' signatures calls into question the authenticity of GoPetition's signatures, and whether they represent the personal identities of the petitioners. Even if we put aside these concerns, GoPetition's petition format does not provide signees adequate authorship over the petitions they sign.

Although GoPetition's petition format allows users to attach a single textual comment to their signature with the consent of the petition author, GoPetition does not allow the signees to personally author the complaints and demands of the petition. Instead GoPetition formats the petition into two main parts – the body and the signatures. Petition authors write the body of the petition, while the other users write the signatures, signatures whose format is partially decided by the petition author.

For the body of the online petition, petition authors specify: the petition name; a country or region in which the “petition is primarily relevant”; the person or organization that the petition targets; a single, topical category; a history of the petition which “briefly outline[s] the facts and/or circumstances that support your submission to the target”; and the complaint and demand of the petition, which is the “exact text you will be asking people to sign”, and which “should usually include a request to the target to take action or refrain from taking some action”.

According to GoPetition's petition format, a petitioner is not signing the history of the petition; petitioners are only signing the complaint and demand of the petition. GoPetition's petition format assumes that the history of the petition, the facts and circumstances around the petition are distinct from its complaints and demands. But in fact, the history of a petition is a fundamental part of the petition – history not only frames facts around the petition; it frames the petition with supporting facts. For petitions, a complaint is always about an alleged fact. The alleged fact is not furniture for the complaint; it is a necessary ingredient. The alleged facts of a complaint may be false or irrelevant, but they are represented as true and important evidence. For petitions,

demands have a similar intentional structure. A demand is always a request for reforming some alleged fact, and it often involves a representation of a future fact that the petitioner seeks. In general, the GoPetition petition format forgets that the complaints and demands of petitions inherently have a historical structure. It forgets that history is not just a picture frame to externally focus the reader on the petition, it is the touchstone skeleton of the grievance, upon which a sound argument for reform is built. If a petition's history is unfounded, so too is its justification. If petitioners cannot contribute to its history, then they cannot contribute an important part of its justification. If petitioners cannot contribute significantly to a petition's justification, then the petitioners' contributions offer little evidence to those that read the petition that the petition was signed with informed consent.

GoPetition's petition format also assumes that the complaints and demands of a petition are distinct from the signatures. They assume that a signee's role is to affirm a single author's perspective of a petition's history, its complaints and demands. Like many other online petition formats, GoPetition's petition format fails to recognize the importance of the other signees' historical perspectives on a petition's complaints and demands, and that their historically grounded grievances contribute significantly to their personal signatures. While GoPetition does allow signees to attach a single comment to the petition as part of their personal signature, it does not foreground this grievance on a par with those of the petitioner who initially wrote the petition.

The original petition author's grievances are featured prominently on the front page of petition; potential signees tend to read it first. To read the signatures of petition, including the comments of the extant signees, potential signees must navigate to another page and scroll through a table of all signatures. These signatures are listed in the reverse chronological order of their production. So GoPetition's format is biased for the most recent signatures. In this way, GoPetition's petition format first favors the signature of the original author of the petition as expressed through their description of the petition

and then those of the most recent signees. By formatting the signatures as a chronological list, it largely ignores and deemphasizes those signees that helped construct the vast middle history of the petition.

Moreover, GoPetition's chronological list of signatures ignores a more personal topology. While GoPetition's list of signatures allows potential signees an ability to see the names of other signees, it offers no focused way for them to view the parts of their social networks that helped construct the petition. Given GoPetition's petition format, potential signees have no way to clearly view the signatures of the people they tend to trust, their friends and family, and the reasons which led them to sign the petition. Potential signees cannot filter this largely anonymous list of signatures into a more personal subset of signatures from their own social networks. As we will discover, reformatting the petition's traditional list of signatures into a social network of signatures helps establish the signatures as socially relevant to potential signees.

tearitdown.org

Amnesty International, an international human rights organization, created Tearitdown.org to "end illegal U.S. detentions" in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. To this end, the website invites users to tear down a piece of a prison wall by signing a pledge against illegal detentions, a pledge which darkens a pixel from a picture of the prison wall. The picture has 500,000 pixels, each pixel corresponding to a pledge. As people sign the pledge, the picture is darkened, until the wall is symbolically torn down.

To sign the pledge, users are asked to provide their first name, last name, email address, and country. They are also asked to indicate whether they want to receive future email updates. Users are not explicitly told the method of the update. For example, they are not told that they will receive email updates; the option only offers to "Keep me informed."

By reframing the petition as a pledge and prompting the user to target himself, Amnesty International attempts to persuade the user to believe that he was the original author of the petition. While the petitioner pretends to author the petition, Amnesty International dictates the complaint and demand of the petition, reframing it as a personal promise, "I sign up to Amnesty International's framework for ending US illegal detention, the first step of which is closing Guantánamo in a way that respects the rights of detainees. The US government must also end the practice of enforced disappearance, secret transfer of detainees to locations where they may face torture and other ill-treatment and indefinite detention without charge."

The full text of Amnesty International's framework is hidden from the user as they are signing it. Users must click a link to read the precise complaint and demand of their petition. Consequently, when a person pledges their support for the petition, they may not know what they are supporting. For example, they may not know that by signing up to Amnesty International's framework for ending US illegal detention, they have also signed onto a policy which claims that "there should be no recourse to the death penalty" (<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR51/167/2007>). Hiding this information is problematic because once submitted, users cannot modify their pledge.

While the Tearitdown.org pixel petition format emphasizes personal pledges, it heavily employs the rhetoric of anonymity. The pixel petition format does not allow users to specify the nature of their support, view the personal identities of those who have signed it, or the personal identities of the Amnesty International staff that authored the pledge. Instead, petitioners are reduced to anonymous pixels. These mathematical points are a colorful example of anonymous signatures.

thepetitionsite.com

Care2's ThePetitionSite.com provides a social networking approach to online petitions. Care2 is a social networking site for people who want "to live a healthy, green

lifestyle” (<http://www.care2.com/aboutus/>). Like many social networking sites, users on Care2 can post blog articles, send private messages to one another, search for dates, join groups, and answer public opinion polls. As part of the Care2 website, the PetitionSite also allows users to create, sign, and share online petitions.

The PetitionSite’s home page frames the petitioning process as a social process in several ways. Firstly, the home page displays the number of Care2 users, the number of petition signatures, and the number of petitions created. According to the home page, Care2 has over 9,586,617 users, some of whom have created over 450,723 petitions and signed over 30,697,070 signatures. By showcasing these user activity statistics, the PetitionSite attempts to persuade users that its website is a social place where people come to petition.

Secondly, the PetitionSite home page frames its petitioning process as a social process by providing a subsection to advertise its success stories in social terms. For example, one of the petition’s success stories shows a picture of a fireman, next to which is the name of its author, “Molly Prochazka, Care2 Member”, and then a brief description of the petition’s outcome, “Care2 members helped the James Island Fire Department in South Carolina win their budget struggle.” By providing stories of socially successful petitions, the PetitionSite indicates that there are offline social outcomes to online petitioning.

Thirdly, the PetitionSite home page frames its petitioning process as a social process by displaying a subsection for people who have recently signed petitions on the site. This subsection contains personal avatar icons for a sample of eight users who have recently signed some petition on the site. As a user hovers her cursor over one of these avatar icons, a petitioner profile box pops up. The petitioner profile box reveals the name of the petitioner, their length of membership in the Care2 community, the number of friends they have in the Care2 community, the social issues they care about, and the number of petitions they have signed. If a user clicks the petitioner’s avatar icon, they go

to the petitioner's profile page, where they can find a list of recently signed petitions. The pop-up profile also provides links for the user to add the petitioner as a friend or give them a Green Star.

Green Stars are one of Care2's virtual currencies used to socially network petitioners. Users can send virtual, green stars to other users as "kudos" for their contributions to the site. They can send as many Green Stars as they wish to whichever user they wish as long they have added at least one friend on the site and have uploaded an avatar icon as a form of personal representation. In this way, Green Stars play upon the rhetoric of personality; to effectively participate in the community, one must give Green Stars to other users, and to do this, one must first publish personal information, namely an avatar icon of themselves and the disclosure of friendship with another user.

By giving Green Stars to other users, petitioners encourage additional social interaction, trust, and support. For example, users that receive Green Stars may be more likely to reciprocate with private thank-you messages. These messages may lead to conversations between users. Friendly conversations may lead to friendships between users. If users are friends, they may be more likely to support each other's petitions.

The PetitionSite itself also rewards users with symbols of social recognition for creating and signing petitions. The PetitionSite gives users 1 Butterfly for signing a petition, and 1 Butterfly for every 500 signatures received by a petition they have authored (http://www.care2.com/c2c/my/kudos_butterflies.html). The PetitionSite favors signing petitions over authoring them – signing a petition always results in a Butterfly, while merely authoring a petition never results in a Butterfly. Authors only receive Butterflies after their petitions attain a certain degree of popular support. Butterflies and Green Stars are symbols of social status in the Care2 community. Having many Butterflies or Green Stars indicates that a user is active or popular in the community.

According to the site, "the butterfly symbolizes your ability to make a difference" (http://www.care2.com/c2c/my/kudos_butterflies.html). Like the butterfly effect, where

“the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil can set off a storm in Texas,” the PetitionSite argues that small, individual actions, like signing a petition, can have a major overall impact on political authorities and their policies. The site claims that, “if a petition gets a large number of signatures it can have a significant impact by raising the awareness of the policy maker/target” (<http://www.thepetitionsite.com/petitionfaqs.html>). The PetitionSite confidently claims, “start a petition, change the world”.

Like GoPetition, the PetitionSite formats its online petition into two main parts: the body and the signatures. Like GoPetition, the PetitionSite divides the labor of the petition production process into two distinct roles: the petition author and the petition signee. Under this division of labor, a single petition author creates the body of the petition, and other users sign it. Both GoPetition’s petition format and the PetitionSite’s petition format do not allow the signees to significantly co-author the petition’s complaint and demands. Without evidence of significant co-authorship, readers have little reason to believe that the signees are personally invested in the petition’s complaints or demands.

The PetitionSite’s signing process has five main stages: review, sign, confirm, share, and thank-you. Before signing a petition, signees must review its body. The body includes the petition’s title, its target, its sponsor (either an individual or organization), an overview of the petition, a video or picture related to the petition, and the text or “letter” sent to the target with the petitioners’ signatures.

Like GoPetition’s petition format, the PetitionSite’s petition format makes an artificial distinction between the letter of the petition - those complaints and demands officially signed by the petition - and the overview history of the petition that was initially pitched to the signee. The overview history of the petition is supposed to educate the petitioner before he signs its complaints, but by factoring out this information from the letter, the political authority may be denied a similar education. While the pitch for support from fellow petitioners may be formally different from the pitch for support from the political authorities, both pitches should rely on the same historical reasoning. By

separating these pitches into overviews and letters, the PetitionSite's petition format runs the risk of creating a semantic disparity between the two pitches for support. For example, compelling historical reasoning pitched to the signee in the overview of the petition may be omitted in the letter sent to the political authority.

The body of the petition is surrounded by promotional metadata. To encourage users to sign the petition, the PetitionSite displays a signature thermometer. The signature thermometer indicates the number of signatures that the author is seeking and the number of signatures currently gathered. Above the signature thermometer is the petition deadline.

After a potential signee reviews the petition, they may decide to sign it. To sign a petition, users must provide several forms of personal information, including their first name, last name, email address, postal address, city, state, zip code, and country. Users can optionally provide their gendered title, personal comment, and an attached photo. By providing a relevant photo, petitioner's demonstrate additional personal effort in the production process.

Before submitting their signatures, users must first confirm their signature. During the confirmation stage, users have an opportunity to edit any writing mistakes. They are also asked if they would like to receive email updates from Care2. If the petition was sponsored by an advocacy organization, the users are asked if they would like to receive email updates from the sponsoring organization.

After confirming their signature, users are encouraged to share the petition with their friends. During the sharing stage, the PetitionSite provide signees with a contact form to write an email and send it to their friends. With this email, users are expected to solicit additional signatures for the petition. The PetitionSite helps users address existing social networks by providing them with a web widget that can add email addresses from their Yahoo and Google email accounts. After selecting the friends they wish to target, users are provided with a default solicitation message. Users can edit this solicitation

message so that it personally resonates with their friends. While the PetitionSite encourages users to share their petitions with friends, it does not require it. Users can skip the sharing the stage.

After the sharing stage, users arrive at a thank-you page. During the thank-you stage, the PetitionSite attempts to personally thank users for signing the petition by writing “Thank you”. To reinforce future participation, the PetitionSite’s thank-you page indicates the extent of their participation; the PetitionSite displays the number of petitions that the user has signed, the number they have forwarded to friends, and the number of petitions they have created. By showing these petition production statistics, the PetitionSite frames the petitioning process as a competitive social process, where users are expected to maximize their participation in petitioning and honored for maximum participation. Moreover, these petition production statistics suggest to users that the extent of general petitioning activity is more socially relevant than the personal content of the specific petitions. In this way, petition production statistics leverage the rhetoric of anonymity.

On the other hand, the thank-you page also employs the rhetoric of personality to suggest the opposite notion. By showing a list of related petitions and telling the user, “don’t stop now; you can do more to help,” the PetitionSite suggests that the personal content of the petitions is more socially relevant than the extent of general petitioning activity. While these additional petitions may not be semantically related to the one signed by the petitioner, the PetitionSite bundles them as if they are semantically related, as if they were selected with respect to the petitioner’s personal interests.

Unlike GoPetition, once a user has signed a petition on the PetitionSite, it is permanent and cannot be retracted. The PetitionSite does not allow users to edit or remove their signatures. While preventing users from editing or removing their signatures may seem to protect the historical record of the grievance, it may actually distort it. If a petitioner no longer supports a petition and the petition format incorrectly

counts them as among its current supporters, then the petition is historically inaccurate. It shows past dissent as the present dissent, thereby providing a misleading measure of present dissent.

prochoiceamerica.org

In its advocacy of abortion rights, the non-profit organization NARAL Pro-choice America has experimented with picture petitions, both as traditional petitions and in more subtle forms, such as a membership gallery (<http://www.prochoiceamerica.org/choice-action-center/prochoiceamerica-gallery.html>). The NARAL Pro-Choice America website encourages the public to submit photographs of themselves holding signs which pledge their support for a woman's right to choose to have an abortion.

The process of creating and submitting the picture petition is a highly creative, simple-to-understand, and socially interactive process. It encourages the public to participate by submitting and recasting their signatures as personalized photos. The site provides a link to a printable poster, which reads, "I am Pro-Choice America." The poster also contains the NARAL Pro-Choice America logo and the URL to the organization's website. Supporters print the posters and take pictures of themselves in various backgrounds, sometimes with their friends, families, and pets. To submit their picture petition, supporters must enter their first name, last name, and email-address. After the photos are submitted, the organization adds their picture to a cycling slideshow.

The petition gallery on NARAL Pro-Choice America's website attempts to balance the rhetorics of personality and anonymity by publishing the submitted photos without publishing the names or email addresses of the petitioners.

For example, several components of NARAL Pro-Choice America's picture petition are ambiguous. The petition does not specify who the petition targets, what the petition complains about, and what the petition demands. By not clarifying the target, complaint, or demand of the petition, we are lead to assume that the petitioners have

written a blank check for their support of the organization - that they support whatever policies NARAL Pro-Choice America advocates. In this case, the rhetoric of anonymity is not only applied to the petitioner, but is also applied to the primary author of the petition – the advocacy organization. The author of the petition is clearly NARAL Pro-Choice America, but it is unclear which policies of the organization each petitioner supports and it is unclear which individuals within the organization authored those policies.

The site claims, “our gallery shows what the pro-choice majority really looks like,” but it does not acknowledge that its slideshow gallery is a kind of petition. In many ways, the slideshow gallery is a picture petition. Supporters sign the petition by producing and posting pictures of themselves holding paper signs that textually demand and prescribe some kind of pro-choice policy. The picture petition brands itself with the membership of the organization, linking smiling human faces of its women, men, and children to a highly controversial social position, which many opponents claim is tantamount to murder. By wrapping the pictorial signatures of their membership around their political demands, NARAL Pro-Choice America rhetorically counters the image of pro-choice advocates as cold-blooded killers. The personal imagery asks those who view it whether all of these smiling, ordinary faces support murder. Moreover, Pro-Choice America uses the rhetoric of personality against itself in the opposing context, pitting pictures of their living membership against their opponents’ imagery of unborn babies.

The picture petition also enables NARAL Pro-Choice America to use the rhetoric of anonymity to redistribute any perceived culpability aimed at them by those who oppose their abortion policies. The picture petition forces those who oppose its demands to decide how to divide the blame between the staff and members of NARAL Pro-Choice America. Like a school of fish, the picture petition is organized in a collective manner, offering no central command and no definite dimensions. All of the petitioners, co-authored the picture petition, each with their picture. In addition, the picture petition

does not explicitly summarize the total number of pictures involved, suggesting that the political authorities interpret the size of the petition using their general sense of magnitude instead of counting. Moreover, the pictures do not include the names of those they represent. Unlike a school of fish which tends to anonymize its members through one, homogenous color or form, the picture petition masks its members with diversity. While the white, printed paper signs are very similar from picture to picture, the people who hold these petitions have various skin colors, clothing colors, genders, ages, and background environments. This diversity of support disorients and confuses the assignment of blame for the production of the petition. Since the legal names of the petitioners are kept anonymous, their opponents cannot easily retaliate against them.

Unlike YouTube, NARAL Pro-Choice America's picture petition format offers no channel of communication for critical feedback. For example, petitioners cannot attach textual comments that help formulate and challenge the complaints and demands of the picture petition. Like many other petitions organized by advocacy organizations, the advocacy organization has complete control of the content of the petition. They can censor any submitted signature for any reason. For example, NARAL Pro-Choice America could unilaterally exclude submitted picture signatures that include critical information about abortions. They could unilaterally block picture signatures that show people holding pro-choice signs in front of background images of aborted fetuses. In petitions like NARAL Pro-Choice America's picture petition, the advocacy organization – not the signees – ultimately control the content of the petition.

pledgebank.org

The PledgeBank website aims to help people “get things done, especially things that require several people,” by enabling users to create and solicit individual pledges to take collective action (<http://www.pledgebank.com/faq>). Users create pledges on the website, and then encourage other people to sign them. The author of a pledge agrees to

take an action only if a certain number of other users individually commit to take an action. The action of the author may be different than the actions required of the other signees, but it may be the same. Each pledge has an action for the author, an action for the signees, a target signature quota, a geographic location, a deadline date, and a description for additional details.

For example, Albert Abramson, a Free State Project activist in New Hampshire, authored a pledge, claiming: “I will become a liberty activist in New Hampshire by September 30, 2011 but only if 999 others will do the same” (<http://www.pledgebank.com/Next1000>). Abramson’s pledge targets 1000 Libertarian leaning individuals from other states, petitioning them to move to New Hampshire and help the Free State Project gain control of the state government.

To sign this pledge petition, and promise to act on its demands, a user must provide a name and an email address. Users are not required to use their real names and the names they provide are not required to be unique. However, users are required to provide a unique email address and validate it by responding to an email sent to that address. Together, the signee’s name and the email address are supposed to create a credible signature for the signee’s support of the petition.

Abramson’s petition demonstrates how online users personalize and anonymize their signatures. Of the 86 signatures evaluated on October 17th, 2008, 62 people (72%) offered first and last names to represent themselves, 14 people (16%) offered only first names or usernames, and 10 people (12%) chose to have their names hidden. For Abramson’s petition, the majority of users (72%) decided to leverage a rhetoric of personality by offering their first and last names, while a minority of users (27%) decided to adopt a rhetoric of anonymity by providing a pseudonymous first name or username, or by choosing to hide their name from the public.

While the majority of users were willing to share their names as personal information, these names do not suffice as personal signatures. The names of the signees

do not provide sufficient evidence that a person signed the petition; a computer program impersonating a human user may have provided the input required to sign the pledge, including the requisite name and email address. In this case, the name and email address does not serve as reliable signature for a person.

In a more likely scenario, even if a person did sign the petition with their real name or a contrived username, these names do not adequately reflect the informed consent of the user for the pledge. The user may have accidentally signed the wrong pledge. In isolation, a username does not encode the person's deliberation about signing the petition, it does not represent the user's particular perspectives on the petition, and so does not adequately reflect the signee's personality with respect to the petition. Without sufficient personality, one's name cannot serve as personal signature.

On similar grounds, signing a pledge with one's name does not persuasively indicate that the signee is a socially relevant person. Indeed, the names of those that have signed Abramson's petition do not reliably indicate that the signee holds a Libertarian worldview, that she has genuine intentions of moving to New Hampshire, or that she would offer assistance to the Free State Project. Far from a personal signature, the name offered by the user is only a starting point for the author of the petition and its proponents, so that they may investigate the credibility of its alleged support.

PledgeBank's petition format tries to strike a balance between the rhetorics of anonymity and personality by discouraging and encouraging the disclosure of personal information. With respect to petitioner names, PledgeBank encourages people to reveal their personal identities to the public. For example, the petition format shows the names of the signees to the public, unless the user opts out. By default, the "Show my name publicly on this pledge" option is already selected on the web form when the user tries to sign the pledge. On the other hand, with respect to email addresses, PledgeBank discourages users from publishing their personal identities. The website does not publish the users email address to other signees besides the author of the petition. In anticipation

of its user's privacy concerns, mySociety, the non-profit that created and manages PledgeBank, attempts to assure its users that "we only use this [email address] to tell you when the pledge is completed and to let the pledge creator get in touch". While not publishing one's email addresses may help protect petitioners from malicious spammers who harvest email addresses, it also inhibits other petitioners from privately communicating.

The PledgeBank petition format only allows signees to communicate with each other via public comment on the petition. Unlike the PetitionSite, petitioners cannot send private messages to each other. On the other hand, PledgeBank does not require users to sign a petition with their support in order to attach public comments to the petition. This allows users to discuss the pros and cons of the petition, document their deliberation, and organize alternative or supplementary action.

PledgeBank's concept of a pledge is somewhat confused. Firstly, PledgeBank's definition of pledge is too narrow. The website defines a pledge as "a statement of the form 'I will do something, if a certain number of people will help me do it'" (<http://www.pledgebank.com/faq>). But in general, a person can pledge to act without having any conditions to trigger or preempt that action. So PledgeBank's brand of pledge is actually a specific kind of pledge, a conditional pledge.

Secondly, PledgeBank's notion of conditional pledges is ambiguous. While the website's Frequently Asked Questions page suggests that gathering a certain number of pledges is sufficient for the petition author to follow through on their conditional action, claiming that a petition author will act "if" a certain number of other people also pledge to act, the website's Start a Pledge page frames the pledges as a necessary precondition for action, claiming the petition author will act "only if" a certain number of other people pledge to act. Petitioners often resist this subtle, logical distinction, claiming they will act as they want others to act, even if a certain number of other people do not pledge to act. For example, a petition author who identifies himself as "Dave" pledges, "I will vote

against all incumbent Federal politicians if the \$700 billion bailout passes but only if 100 other people nationwide will do the same!! (hell, Im doing it anyway)"

(<http://www.pledgebank.com/VoteOut4Bailout>).

Dave's pledge is an example of how petitioners often subvert and circumvent the imposed logics of online petition formats. PledgeBank's online petition format requires Dave to fill in the variables of the following format: "I will" + A + "but only if" + B + C + "will" + D. By default, PledgeBank defines B = "10" and C = "other people", but petition authors can change the values of A, B, C, D to any string of text. Dave appended his parenthetical protest to D, setting D = "do the same!! (hell, Im doing it anyway)". In this way, Dave contradicts PledgeBank's "but only if" language, language which PledgeBank keeps constant.

PledgeBank also imposes its petition format by requiring a pledge to have a deadline date. The deadline date is essential to the mechanics of PledgeBank's petitioning process. If a petition cannot gather enough signatures in the form of pledges from other members by the deadline date, then the petition is archived as a "Failed pledge". Those that gather enough signatures by the deadline date are archived as a "Successful closed pledge". Like the PetitionSite, PledgeBank frames petitioning as a competitive social process, one where there are winners and losers.

Privacy and Publicity Concerns for Online Petitions

Petitions, especially those online, present serious privacy and publicity concerns for those who author, sign, and receive them. With respect to privacy concerns, petitioners who disclose too much of their individual and collective identities risk retaliation from political authorities through censorship, litigation, employment discrimination, imprisonment, and physical violence. They risk identity theft from enterprising cyber-criminals with little interest in their grievances. And petitioners risk

distracting readers away from the rational, moral arguments of their petitions with irrelevant personal details.

With respect to publicity concerns, petitioners who fail to sufficiently disclose their individual and collective identities risk losing credibility with political authorities and other potential petitioners. They risk distorting the historical record of their grievances. And petitioners risk denying their petition a civil and deliberative discourse rooted in personal concerns. So there are important tradeoffs between the rhetorics of anonymity and personality.

Let us first consider some of the potential costs of the rhetoric of personality. Although providing accurate, personal information may help political authorities determine that a petitioner's complaint is credible and deserves relief, this adherence to the rhetoric of personality also exposes petitioners to retaliation from those political authorities. Political authorities have frequently resisted personal pressures from petitioners through retaliatory censorship, litigation, discrimination, and violence.

For example, whistleblowers that disclose too much personal information in their petitions are often the targets of severe political retaliation through threats of employment discrimination, imprisonment and physical violence. According to Joseph C. Wilson, high-ranking officials in the Bush Administration leaked the identity of his wife, Valerie Plame Wilson, a covert CIA agent, in retaliation to a whistle-blowing op-ed article he published in the *New York Times* ("An Interview With Joseph Wilson", <http://www.truthout.org/article/jason-leopold-an-interview-with-joseph-wilson>). The op-ed article, entitled "What I Didn't Find In Africa", petitions the American public to investigate whether the "Bush administration manipulate[d] intelligence about Saddam Hussein's weapons programs to justify an invasion of Iraq", ("What I didn't find in Africa", <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C07E3D61E3AF935A35754C0A9659C8B63>).

To help the CIA “provide a response to the vice president's office”, Wilson officially visited Niger in 1999 and investigated a report that Niger sold uranium yellowcake to Saddam Hussein. After interviewing Nigerian government officials, the U.S. Ambassador to Niger, and uranium business people in Niger, Wilson concluded, “that it was highly doubtful that any such transaction had ever taken place” because of the strict international oversight of all Nigerian uranium sales. He reported his conclusions orally in accordance to “standard operating procedures”, the documentation of which “should include the ambassador's report of my debriefing in Niamey, a separate report written by the embassy staff, a C.I.A. report summing up my trip, and a specific answer from the agency to the office of the vice president”.

Despite these official reports, the Bush Administration began to justify its case for invading Iraq based on the Niger case. In his 2003 State of the Union address, Bush claimed, “The British Government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa” (http://www.factcheck.org/bushs_16_words_on_iraq_uranium.html). Instead of interpreting Wilson’s report as evidence against potential sales of uranium between Niger and Iraq, the CIA interpreted it as evidence for potential sales of uranium between Niger and Iraq.

According to a 2004 Senate Intelligence report, the CIA “judged that the most important fact in the report was that the Nigerian officials admitted that the Iraqi delegation had traveled there in 1999, and that the Nigerian Prime Minister believed the Iraqis were interested in purchasing uranium” (http://www.factcheck.org/bushs_16_words_on_iraq_uranium.html). Wilson paints a different picture; he claims that “uranium was not discussed” between the Nigerian Prime Minister and the Iraqi delegation and that the Nigerian Prime Minister “steered the conversation away from any discussion of trade” because “Iraq remained under United Nations sanctions” (http://www.factcheck.org/bushs_16_words_on_iraq_uranium.html).

So with respect to the Niger case, Wilson argues in his op-ed petition that, “some of the intelligence related to Iraq's nuclear weapons program was twisted to exaggerate the Iraqi threat.”

Like most petitions, the credibility of Wilson’s op-ed petition relies heavily on his personal signature. He begins his petition with his personal signature, including his name and a brief autobiography, which explains his extensive experience in African and Middle Eastern affairs as an ambassador to Gabon and São Tomé and Príncipe, as an African policy director at the National Security Council, and “as chargé d'affaires in Baghdad,” serving as “the last American diplomat to meet with Saddam Hussein”.

In response to Wilson’s application of personal pressure on the Bush Administration, Karl Rove, a senior Bush Administration official, leaked the identity of Valerie Plame Wilson to conservative columnist Robert Novak. While Rove supposedly did not leak Mrs. Wilson’s identity by “mentioning Valerie Wilson’s name or covert status”, he did indicate that, “Joseph Wilson’s wife ... worked for the CIA” and “played a role in Joseph Wilson’s trip to Niger” (http://www.factcheck.org/society/the_wilson-plame-novak-rove_blame_game.html).

Six days later, Novak published “Mission To Niger”, the “first published mention of Joseph Wilson’s wife’s name, her employment at the CIA, and her role in his trip to Niger” (http://www.factcheck.org/society/the_wilson-plame-novak-rove_blame_game.html). In it, Novak writes, “Wilson never worked for the CIA, but his wife, Valerie Plame, is an Agency operative on weapons of mass destruction. Two senior administration officials told me Wilson's wife suggested sending him to Niger to investigate the Italian report. The CIA says its counter-proliferation officials selected Wilson and asked his wife to contact him.” Novak not only specified Valerie’s covert work for the CIA, but also named her by her maiden name, which was the name she used in covert operations. According to Joseph Wilson, “Naming her this way would have compromised every operation, every relationship, every network with which she had

been associated in her entire career” (“A White House Smear”, <http://www.thenation.com/blogs/capitalgames?bid=3&pid=823>). Wilson used the phrase “would have” instead of “did” because at that point, he did not want to confirm or deny his wife’s identity as a CIA operative. Whether Rove surreptitiously outed Wilson’s wife or accidentally confirmed her identity while attempting to discredit her husband, Wilson’s personal petition demonstrates how it is possible for political authorities to retaliate against petitioners by endangering their professional and physical lives, as well as those of their families and co-workers.

As petitioners leverage the rhetoric of personality to persuade political authorities to seriously consider their grievances, they also increase the risk of litigation for defamation and intrusion of privacy. If a petitioner discloses too much personal information and falsely defames a political target with their petition, then the political target may charge the petitioner with libel and sue them in civil court for damages. The threat of defamation litigation is especially pronounced when the political targets are private corporations. Under U.S. law, “a corporation may bring a libel claim if the alleged defamatory statement raises doubts about the honesty, credit, efficiency or prestige of that business” (<http://www.rcfp.org/handbook/c01p05.html>).

There are many legal cases where corporations and their executives attempt to force web service providers to disclose the personal identities of anonymous and pseudonymous petitioners so that they may sue them (<http://www.eff.org/related/3005/case>). In the case of E. Van Cullens v. John Doe, Cullens, a corporate executive, charged an anonymous user, John Doe, with libel because he “made two statements critical of a publicly-traded company run by Plaintiff Cullens” (<http://www.eff.org/cases/e-van-cullens-v-john-doe>). By charging John Doe with libel, even one without much merit, Cullens was attempting to force John Doe to reveal his legal name and personal identity. Ultimately, the ploy did not work. The defense argued that the case should be dismissed because 1) the plaintiff could not show that the John

Doe's criticism uniquely targeted Cullens and 2) the alleged defamation relied too heavily on extrinsic information not contained in the petition. While the case was dismissed, it demonstrates that the threat of defamation litigation looms largely for petitioners that personally target corporate political authorities.

A petitioner's legal risk largely depends on their political target. Political targets such as candidates for public office, television entertainers, sports celebrities, and other public figures have a much higher burden of proof to demonstrate personal injury from defamation than private individuals. For example, to recover damages for emotional distress caused by defamation, public figures must show that "the material in question contained a false statement of fact that was made with actual malice" (<http://www.rcfp.org/handbook/c01p11.html>). In legal terms, malice "means the defendant knew that the challenged statements were false or acted with reckless disregard for the truth" (<http://www.rcfp.org/handbook/c01p07.html>). Malicious petitioners may for example intentionally spread a false rumor about a public figure, or intentionally ignore contrary evidence to the purported misconduct of the public figure.

Private individuals have a lower burden of proof to warrant the charge of libel; they are only required to "prove that the publisher or broadcaster was negligent in failing to ascertain that the statement was false and defamatory" (<http://www.rcfp.org/handbook/c01p07.html>). Libel cases are normally dismissed if their claims are true, but private individuals may also sometimes successfully sue petitioners for "the publication of embarrassing, truthful facts", especially if the publication of those facts do not serve a public interest (<http://www.rcfp.org/handbook/c01p11.html>).

Petitioners who disclose too much of their personal identities also increase their risk of litigation for invasion of privacy. If personally identified, a petitioner can be sued in the U.S. if she "intentionally intrudes, physically or otherwise, upon a[nother] person's solitude or into his private area or affairs" (<http://www.rcfp.org/handbook/c02p02.html>). Therefore, as a legal precaution, petition formats should not record the lives of their

political targets or signees as video or audio without first gathering their informed consent.

If the petitioner discloses too much personal information, she can also be sued for publishing private facts about another person that “would be highly offensive to a reasonable person and not a legitimate public concern” (<http://www.rcfp.org/handbook/c02p03.html>). For example, a petitioner could be sued if she reveals private details about a person’s sexual life that have no bearing on a public issue. Therefore, as a legal precaution, petitioners should frame personal details about their political targets as legitimate public concerns.

Finally, if personally identified, a petitioner could be sued for casting a political target in a false light. Unlike defamation, false light “tends to occur when a writer condenses or fictionalizes a story” that purports to be true (<http://www.rcfp.org/handbook/c02p04.html>). The meaning of false light is complex, controversial, and media-specific. For example, one might argue that John McCain’s sex education ad, which petitions the public to vote against Barack Obama, depicts Obama in a false light. In the video ad, children’s music is playing, kindergarteners are revealed, and then the narrator asks, “Learning about Sex Before Learning to Read?” As the video ends, Obama is shown smiling downward, as if he is looking at the previously displayed children, thinking perverse and pedophilic thoughts about them (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/09/09/mccain-ad-obamas-lone-edu_n_125205.html). On the other hand, one might also argue that the video ad never mentions pedophilia and that the alleged false light is merely a fantastic and perverted notion conjured up by a partisan reader, well beyond any rational interpretation. Based on the video, why must one assume that Obama is looking at the children? While Obama and the children are in the same video, they are not in same picture. Why must Obama’s smile indicate sexual perversion? Perhaps Obama is smiling about his prospects at winning the 2008 election.

The rhetoric of personality not only threatens the petitioner with retaliation from political authorities, legally and illegally, but it also threatens to overwhelm the rationality of the petitioners' moral argument with distracting personal details. For example, in the case of celebrity petitioners, the rhetoric of personality threatens to distract the readers away from the moral reasons of the petition with honorific and pejorative language about the celebrity. A reader may value the grievances of a celebrity petitioner – not because the petitioner's claims offer moral reasons that warrant these judgments, but because their popularity or notoriety inspires misleading affection or rejection from the readers.

For example, the Support Bill Ayers online petition overwhelms a potentially rational, moral argument about Bill Ayer's character with over 3000 personal signatures from scholars that offer their honored social status to reframe Ayers' negative celebrity. These personal signatures, which conjoin a professor's name and their affiliated university, neither provide the reader with a rational argument for Bill Ayers character nor a rational argument against his "demonization" (<http://www.supportbillyayers.org/>). Ostensibly, the petitioners pledge their support for Ayers "to promote critical inquiry, dialogue, and debate," but in their attempt to stamp out Ayer's newfound notoriety, the petition pre-empts any deliberation over his involvement with the Weather Underground Organization. According to the petition, "It's true that Professor Ayers participated passionately in the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s, as did hundreds of thousands of Americans. His participation in political activity 40 years ago is history; what is most relevant now is his continued engagement in progressive causes". The petition attempts to anonymize Ayer's past by publishing the personal social network of his present. In this case, Ayer's social network is an irrelevant personal detail because Ayer's alleged culpability in the violence from the Weather Underground does not hinge on the goodwill or compliments of his academic colleagues.

To protect against political retaliation and personal prejudice, many petition formats have employed the rhetoric of anonymity, suggesting that they can hide the personal identities of the petition authors and signees, especially information, like legal names and mailing addresses, which would significantly narrow the search for the petitioner's individual identity.

Petition formats have also employed a rhetoric of anonymity when they suggest that they can distribute the responsibility for the petition. Petitions are often framed as collective constructions with no single author. In the case of female abolitionist petitions, "Because no one person took credit for writing the petition, by ascribing her name, each signer assumed responsibility for its content" (Zaeske, 54). All of the signees of a petition are cast as its authors, so both blame and praise for its production and dissemination is rhetorically divided among its signees. According to this rhetoric of anonymity, as the number of signees increases, the blame assigned to each signee ought to decrease and the costs for the political authority to mete out punishment increases.

Let us now consider some of the potential costs of the rhetoric of anonymity. If petitioners do not disclose sufficient personal information, they risk losing credibility with political authorities and other potential petitioners. For example, signing a petition with one's name does not always rhetorically suffice to convey deliberate authorship or support for it. By not formulating a personal complaint or demand for the petition, signees suggest that they neither value nor understand its complaints or demands. As Kush argues, "on-line petitions are too easy and too simplistic to either educate the constituent or to convince your legislators that you understand the issue, care deeply about it, and will hold them accountable on Election day" (Kush, *Cybercitizen*, 176).

In the case of boilerplate form petitions, pre-authored by advocacy organizations, and sent to Congressional legislators and their staff, a petitioner's name is often the only sign of authorship and support, but according to the Congressional Management Foundation, "many congressional staff doubt the legitimacy of identical form

communications, and want to know whether communications are sent with constituents' knowledge and consent" (Congressional Management Foundation, 35). Only 25% of Congressional staff agreed or strongly agreed that petitioners had knowledge about and gave their consent to these identical form communications. Political authorities, such as those in Congress, are looking for the production of more personalized messages, one's that require intellectual and physical labor.

A labor theory of value applies to petitions, especially with respect to their perceived credibility and authenticity. Providing personal information in the complaint and demand of a petition requires intellectual and physical labor. Petitions that demonstrate individual effort at informed dissent are more authentic and credible to political authorities and potential petitioners. Incorporating personal details into one's grievances provides strong evidence of a petitioner's individual effort, and so it helps increase the authenticity of the petition. If an individual indicates a strong effort to rationally justify their grievances based on personal experience, they increase the credibility of their petition.

For example, Congressional staff report more influence from communication that requires more individual effort at informed dissent. According to the Congressional Management Foundation, Congressional staff claim that the following communication technologies have "a lot of influence": "in-person issue visits from constituents" (60% of Congressional staff), "contact from a person who represents many constituents (e.g. organization leader, elected official, large business owner)" (47%), "individualized postal letters" (44%), "individualized email messages" (34%), "phone calls" (20%), "visit from lobbyist" (15%), and "form email messages" (3%) (Congressional Management Foundation, 34). Ostensibly, in-person visits require more intellectual and physical labor than sending a postal letter, and sending a postal letter requires more labor than sending an personal email message, and sending a personal email message requires more labor

than a personal phone call, and a personal phone call requires more labor than signing an online petition through a web-form with a pre-written boilerplate message.

According to the Congressional Management Foundation report, Congressional staffers claim that visits from lobbyists are substantially less representative than those from constituents and their representatives, indicating that the origin of that labor is also significant – constituent labor is putatively more socially relevant to political authorities than non-constituent labor. So if a petitioner does not work to establish their status as a socially relevant person, as a constituent of a political authority, they also risk losing credibility.

Petitioners that do not reveal enough personal information also risk distorting the historical record of their grievances. For example, by not disclosing one's personal perspective, and instead relying on a singular univocal perspective pre-authored by an advocacy organization, petitioners may inadvertently trade historical accuracy for political solidarity. Such a univocal complaint risks precluding critical historical perspectives that would provide a more comprehensive analysis of what caused the grievance, who is responsible, and who is blameworthy.

Finally, by anonymizing their individual and collective identities, petitioners risk denying their petition a civil and deliberative discourse rooted in personal concerns. For example, permitting anonymous comments on discussion forums creates a moral hazard for petitioners to publish ill informed and abusive comments, comments that replace genuine expressions of personal concern with impersonal banter and invective. The revelation of personal identities, both individual and collective, often invokes norms of civil and deliberative communication. While petitioners may ignore these norms and push forward an ill informed rant against a political authority, putting a personal signature on one's comments still increases the likelihood that they will be held accountability.

There are useful, social mechanisms for dealing with abusive anonymous comments, such as encouraging users to flag abusive comments for moderator review, but ultimately, moderators must negotiate the meaning of abuse based on the personal context of the discourse. For example, knowing that two users are friends may change the meaning of a snide remark into a friendly joke. If a petitioner does not reveal sufficient personal information in their complaints and demands, then they may prevent moderators from determining whether their discourse is civil.

Informed, personal discourse is also important to many political authorities. With respect to online petitions for or against legislation, Congressional staffers are looking for personal reasons to support or oppose legislation, and personal narratives related to the pending legislation. Around 90% of staff claim that it would be helpful or very helpful if constituents would provide their “reasons for supporting/opposing a bill or issue”, and 68% claim that it would be helpful or very helpful if constituents provided a “personal story related to the bill or issue” (Congressional Management Foundation, 34). If a petitioner does not reveal sufficient personal information, they cannot share a personal story with a political authority.

The main question we must answer is how to reformat the social signatures of petitions so that they: 1) personally indicate the individual and collective identities of their constituents, and 2) provide a sufficient degree of anonymous protection to the petitioners. To characterize the support of the petitioners, these signatures must convey both the quantity and quality of their support.

The Pseudonymous Compromise

To strike a balance between the rhetorics of anonymity and personality in online petitions, we must find a pseudonym for each petitioner, so that they may sign the petition in a way that 1) emphasizes their status as socially relevant persons to political authorities, and 2) obfuscates their personal information so that it cannot be easily

misused against them. What is needed is a pseudonymous compromise between what personal information will be published and what will be kept private. Publishing parts of one's social network, especially the personal testimony of its members, is one way to balance these concerns.

A person's testimony to members of their social network can function as their social signature; it indicates to political authorities that they are not just people, but socially relevant people. Unlike many online petition formats that rely on simple lists of relatively anonymous names, socially networked personal testimony can distinguish the individual and collective identities of the petitioner and convey the quality of their petition's support.

Sharing one's individual and collective grievances through personal testimony to trusted friends does not fully prevent serious privacy concerns such as political retaliation and irrational celebrity bias. Serious privacy concerns remain for every relatively free and expressive mode of interpersonal communication, but personal testimony via pseudonymous social networking does not systematically require or encourage the disclosure of personal information that could easily be misused against them. For example, users on many social networking websites, like YouTube, do not need to publish their street addresses or legal names to convey their status as socially relevant persons to other users. With pseudonymous usernames and general geographic information, users of social networking websites can disclose socially relevant fragments of their lives through their writing, videos, and photographs. The publication of personal testimony within a pseudonymous social network can balance the privacy and publicity concerns of the petitioner. It still permits the petitioner and those within a petitioner's online social network to disclose damaging personal information, but the format of the online petition as a pseudonymous network of personal testimony does not require it and it can even inhibit it.

The online social network component of the petition format can still largely protect the privacy of petitioners through traditional identity management policies and practices that emphasize anonymity and norms of secrecy, such as requiring pseudonymous user names, encrypted passwords and Captcha codes. These practices to anonymously authenticate the user can still play a major role in establishing users as numerically distinct persons, but the larger burden of establishing the user as a socially relevant person to political authorities, a burden that cannot be met through anonymous signatures, can be shifted to socially networked personal testimony.

To protect users from accidentally disclosing personal information that may be easily used against them, the online petition format can explicitly and prominently describe the audience of personal information before it is published and warn the user that their dissent will be published to these specific audiences. However, the decision to disclose personal information must ultimately be negotiated with those that belong to the petitioner's online social network. Petitioners that maintain strong relationships with the members of their social networks will have a better chance of preventing their friends and family from misusing their personal information than petitioners that broadcast their personal signatures to a largely anonymous and untrustworthy audience.

By reformatting online petitions as pseudonymous social networks of personal testimony, one can formally discourage the misuse of personal information. Pseudonymous social networks of personal testimony represent and disclose a social history of communication, communication that is too expensive for large-scale fraudulent reproduction. A clever hacker may be able to digitally copy the archived petition and alter its personal testimony, perhaps shuffling the usernames of the authors or replacing some keywords with other incompatible keywords, but to radically transform the semantics of a complex discourse in a coherent fashion that withstands expert scrutiny is a major computational challenge for hackers, one that is probably too expensive in terms of human time and effort.

The production value of this social history, the effort it takes petitioners to recount their grievances through deliberate dialogue demonstrates and highlights the petitioner's individual identities, including their cognitive, moral, and emotional character, to political authorities. If the format of a petition roots its signatures in deliberative discourse, the discourse becomes a social signature and all of the signees become co-authors of a complex, collective message. Generally, it is significantly more difficult and expensive to forge deliberative dialogues between a relatively large group of people than it is to forge a conventional online petition, one with a single complaint, a single demand, and list of names that putatively support them. Personalizing these communications with multimedia increases the difficulty of forging an inauthentic petition. To the extent that the social network publishes complex and deliberative communications between petitioners about personal problems to political authorities, political authorities have access to authentic, social signatures.

CHAPTER 5

REFORMATTING ONLINE PETITIONS AS PSEUDONYMOUS SOCIAL NETWORKS OF PERSONAL TESTIMONY

Thus far, in our effort to unpack the rhetorical nature of petitions and expose the threat of anonymous signatures, we have abstracted the concept of the petition, including its online variety, from multifarious concrete examples, noting the essential role that personal signatures play in characterizing the petition as a prescriptive media artifact; we have reviewed some of the political theory behind the use of petitions as a tool for personal political persuasion, recognizing that petitions have historically served a wide variety of rhetorical purposes for both petitioners and political authorities, but have generally helped represent, organize, and manipulate social networks and the perspectives of their members; we have surveyed the ways online petitions encode individual and collective identities, reaching the conclusion, that online petitions, in order to address their online publicity and privacy concerns, must strike a balance between anonymity and personality through some pseudonymous compromise; and we have suggested that we can strike this balance by transforming online petitions into pseudonymous social networks of personal testimony.

In this chapter we will flesh out how we can reformat online petitions as pseudonymous social networks of personal testimony with several basic design recommendations. To personalize online petitions in a manner that respects both publicity and privacy concerns, the socially networked signatures of online petitions should incorporate social frames, co-authored complaints and demands, multimedia voice, and revisable support.

Social Networks, Social Signatures, and Social Frames

To strike a balance between anonymity and personality, we can reformat the petition as a pseudonymous social network of personal testimony. Every person has a social network, a set of people with which they directly relate. The union of multiple, overlapping social networks forms a “whole” social network for a collection of individuals (Wellman, p.60). Online petitions can be recast as social networks because the signatures of online petitions reflect a social structure between dissenting individuals. When a user signs a socially networked online petition, they are telling other people that they are joining this social structure and modifying it with personal testimony of their grievances. The social contexts of their support – the people whose signatures socially frame their own – serve as part of their social signatures.

A social signature for a petitioner is a personal signature that indicates to a political authority or another potential petitioner that the petitioner is a socially relevant person, a person whose grievances are worth reviewing in virtue of their social situation. In some social contexts, such as petitions between close friends, a first and last name functions as a social signature because it suffices to establish the petitioner as a socially relevant person to his close friend. In other social contexts, such as petitions between U.S. residents and the President of the United States of America, a first and last name would probably not suffice to register the petitioner as a socially relevant person because the President does not know every resident of the United States, and would probably need to search for additional personal information to determine if their grievances are worth reviewing. Those that design online petition formats must take into account the social networks that frame the communication they intend to host; they must reframe the signatures of online petitions as social signatures.

In general, to reframe an online petitioner’s signature in a socially relevant manner, and in a manner that balances the petitioner’s privacy and publicity concerns, the petition format should disclose pseudonymous parts of their online social network to

other potential petitioners and political authorities, especially their correspondence with other pseudonymous petitioners in their social network about their grievances.

For example, to socialize its signatures, the PetitionSite should allow pseudonymous friends to comment on their friends' signatures in a way that explicitly indicates their support, opposition, or need for clarification to their friends' complaints and demands. The comments do not need to support their friends' petitions; comments may expose incompatible complaints and demands, serving in part, as signatures to counter-petitions. Petitioners should be able to respond back and forth with informative comments that personally testify to their grievances. Ideally, in order to leverage the rhetoric of personality, the comments should contribute evidence from their own personal experiences to justify their perspectives, thereby reframing the petition signatures with interpersonal narrative.

The interpersonal narrative that surrounds, contributes, and responds to a petitioner's signature functions as a social frame. Social frames represent the social situation of the petitioner, creating the opportunity to convince potential petitioners and political authorities that the petitioner is socially relevant. To the extent that such social frames suggest that the petitioner is socially relevant, the social frames serve as a social signature for the petitioner. The list of signatures appended to many online and offline petitions are often considered as social frames for the petition, but these lists often fail to frame the social situations of each petitioner. They fail to individually situate the signees within the social context of the petitioning process.

When a reader reviews a petitioner's signature, they should be able to see how the pseudonymous friends of that petitioner responded to their sign of support, and specifically how mutual pseudonymous friends between the reader and the petitioner responded to that signature. By incorporating the signature of a petitioner with the critical signatures of mutual pseudonymous friends, online petitions like GoPetition can

help convince other friends to contribute their own personal testimony, testimony that is more likely to be civil and deliberative.

Online petition formats should also recognize and represent its signatures as a social networking process. When a petitioner signs a petition, they should have the option to notify other pseudonymous friends and invite them to lend their support, opposition, or queries. Exposing the petition incrementally through a social network of trusted friends in an critical and inclusive fashion helps draw out the most informed views and perspectives of a group of people. Friends are less likely to harass or spam each other and they are more likely to participate. Unlike many online petition formats that advertise an ability for anonymous signatures, as if one's personal perspectives and social situation should generally be kept secret from fellow petitioners, our approach to signature production should advertise the social signatures of its signees and explicitly point out the social process of petitioning – that the petitioner is part of a social network that is organizing a collective expression of dissent. In this way, online petitions leverage political ethnography to incrementally convince potential petitioners and political authorities to seriously review and support their grievances.

The major downside with a socially networked, ethnographic approach to petition signing is the potential for collective confusion. The reader of a petition may have difficulty discerning a single, global, and coherent set of complaints and demands from the whole social network to which they belong. Moreover, readers may reside in relatively disconnected parts of the social network, sub-networks that may prevent them from encountering or transmitting socially relevant grievances to those outside their local friends. To mitigate this concern, online petitions can incorporate collaborative filtering mechanisms. For example, petition formats may allow users to collectively rate their signatures and sort them based on those ratings. To protect minority voices from being systematically silenced by majority voices, petition formats may require petitioners to review and rate random samples of petition signatures from the whole social network.

While collaborative filtering mechanisms may be used to mitigate the potential for confusion in complex, collective petitions, they cannot rhetorically substitute for socially networked signatures and the personal testimony they encode.

Social signatures of personal testimony rely on the discourse itself and the discretion of a petitioner's social network to personalize the petitioner. They do not primarily rely on abstract and impersonal measures of collective support to justify the social relevance of the petitioner. A petitioner's signature may include a popular complaint or demand, but the signature's popularity is rooted in the social context of trusted friends and their critical comments. Moreover, the personal testimony of socially networked signatures tends to address the privacy concerns of petitioners. Users typically only share their concerns with relatively close friends, and their personal testimony does not require the disclosure of legal names, postal addresses, and other forms of personal information whose general publication poses serious privacy concerns.

Co-authored Complaints and Demands

To convince political authorities and other potential signees that a petition's current signees are socially relevant persons, petitions should permit signees to coauthor the petition's complaints and demands, and reframe these co-authored content as part of their social signatures.

Traditional petition formats often focus on the complaints and demands from a single author to which nominal signatures from other users are appended. These nominal signatures typically only include the legal names and postal addresses of the signees – information whose primary function is to identify the signee as a numerically distinct person. Such information does not primarily function to identify the signee as a socially relevant person. Attaching one's names in this manner rarely suffices to persuade another petitioner or a political authority to seriously review the petitioner's complaints and demands and lend their support. For example, looking at a petition's list of names,

one does not often react with, “Hey, I know John Doe! He’s my neighbor. Oh, he supports this petition. Well, if he supports it, then maybe I should too”. A more likely reaction would be, “Who’s John Doe? I don’t know John Doe, and don’t know the vast majority of names on this list of supporters. Well, that doesn’t matter anyways. No, I don’t care to read the third page of names you have collected. What matters is the body of the petition, its complaints and demands, and who organized it. By the way, who’s behind this petition and what does my signature support?”

While it is theoretically possible for long lists of names to function as social signatures, they typically do not suffice because they rarely reflect the social relationships between the petitioners. Nominal signatures and the lists that contain them are not designed to socially network petitioners. Instead they mistreat petitioners as raw mathematical collections – items to be counted, but not read. Those who try to read the petition soon discover that they cannot read about the signees, their individual and collective grievances, or their reasons for supporting or opposing the petition’s demands. Lists of names do not leverage the rhetoric of personality to gain support for the petition. They do not leverage a rhetoric that highlights the personal qualities of petitioners, including their attributes, traits, and preferences. Lists of names mainly employ the rhetoric of anonymity, a rhetoric that tries to impress petitioners with the sheer size of its organization, a very impersonal quality and insufficient for social relevance.

To recast signees as socially relevant persons, petition formats should remodel the basic structure of the petition. Petition formats should move away from mono-authorship, where a single petitioner owns the petition and dictates its message, and move towards co-authorship, where multiple petitioners share the petition and contribute to its voice. Allowing signees to attach comments to their signatures does not suffice for co-authorship; petition formats like GoPetition and the PetitionSite allow signees to attach comments, but these comments still unfairly prioritize the personal voice of the original author over the personal voices of the other signees.

To establish co-authorship, the body of a petition, its complaints and demands, should be jointly produced by all of the signees on equal terms. Every signee should have the same opportunity to contribute their individual grievances to a collection of related grievances. Co-authorship does not require users to collaboratively write a singular grievance, such as a group of petitioners might write on a Wiki page. Co-authorship of a single petition permits the aggregation and display of multiple grievances. For example, aggregating the complaints and demands written individually by each petitioner and then randomly displaying is one form of co-authorship.

Co-authorship requires: 1) that every user has an equal opportunity to contribute their complaints and demands to the petition; and 2) that every user has an equal opportunity to control the manner in which their complaint and demand is displayed, hidden, and destroyed. Co-authorship does not require that all users contribute to a petition; it only requires that all potential petitioners have an equal opportunity to petition. For example, a co-authored online petition could allow everyone to apply to petition, but only include the grievances of a random sample of applicants. While co-authorship does not conceptually require the involvement of all potential petitioners in what might be called universal co-authorship or public voice, online petitions should attempt to maximize its sample size and adopt a public voice.

For example, C-Span's public opinion line for its television program Washington Journal is a co-authored online petition, but not one with much public voice. Callers from around the United States can call the Washington Journal's televised hotline and presumably have an equal chance to register their complaints with the television show's moderator and guest, but the sample size is quite small, which distorts the history of public opinion surrounding the petition. Only a few pseudo-randomly selected users can actually voice their dissent; the remaining callers encounter a monotone busy signal, effectively censoring their complaints and demands. To improve the public voice of the Washington Journal's public opinion line, C-Span should send callers to a voice mail

system that records the user's complaints and publishes the audio clips to the episode's web page. The web page should also allow the television guest and other users to respond to the recorded comments and questions with additional comments and questions. Users should also be able to call a phone number associated with the episode, hear random samples of audio clips associated with the episode, and leave their audio responses. These audio responses should also be recorded and published to the episode's webpage. Users should be able to see which questions or comments the television guest and moderator addressed, and which ones were left unanswered. In this way, C-Span will help address the publicity concerns of its petition format. Improving the public voice of the Washington Journal's petition format would provide a more historically accurate account of the public opinion it claims to record.

Multimedia Voice

While many online petition formats permit petition authors to attach videos and pictures to their complaints and demands, they rely too heavily on plain text to persuade political authorities and other petitioners to review their grievances. We should reformat the online petition so that all petitioners can voice their complaints and grievances through multimedia, including video, audio, and text. By reforming and articulating their signatures through multimedia, petitioners can demonstrate a high level of personal commitment to their complaints and demands. As we have already mentioned, political authorities such as Congressional legislators appreciate petitions largely because of the intellectual and physical labor required to create them, and multimedia signatures are more laborious in these respects than those that only involve the signing of textual names.

Petitions with multimedia signatures not only signal significant effort from petitioners, but they also provide evidence against historical distortions of grievances. As we have discovered through our analysis of signatures and protest videos in the second chapter, the semantics of complex multimedia signatures are more resistant to fraudulent

reproduction. While one can radically edit the historical meanings of multimedia petitions by cutting and resequencing clips of video, audio, and text, these fraudulent counter-petitions cannot offer completely ahistorical content to the extent that they resemble what they represent. Multimedia productions that resemble their petitioners always leave empirical hints as to their production, hints that can be empirically analyzed for historical inconsistencies. By providing complex and continuous multimedia that documents the act of signing the petition, petitioners provide historical evidence that argues against fraud and for authenticity. With this in mind, petitioners should record themselves voicing their grievances, and petition formats should incorporate these recordings into their signatures.

Petitioners should assess the risks of disclosing accurate images of their personal dissent based on the content of the petition and its potential audience, and then formally blur or distort those parts whose details contribute most to that risk. In general, petitioners can blur the multimedia representations of their personal identities without completely reverting to more anonymous forms of individual and collective representation.

Revisable Support

According to Zaeske, “a major rhetorical challenge for the authors of petitions ... [is] to create within the petitions the ethos of those most likely to sign, so that signers could feel confident that the petitions embodied their personal ideas and language ” (Zaeske, 54). Many online petitions do not reflect the personal ideas and language of their signees because their format does not permit petitioners to revise or remove their signature from a petition. Following the formats of traditional pen and paper petitions, once a petitioner has signed an online petition, their pledged support is as permanent as the petition artifact itself. Since online petitions are digital artifacts, they have the potential to endure longer than those who could care to read them.

In many cases, those who author, organize, or receive the petition control its potential modification. For example, GoPetition allows original petition authors to delete any signature without the consent of the signee. This model of online petitions allows the original author of the petition to resignify its overall support by censoring certain signatures. The GoPetition model of online petitioning assumes that a single author owns the petition. It assumes that those who sign it do not own any part of the petition, including their own signatures.

In the case of GoPetition, signees can remove their signature, but they cannot prevent their signature from being removed by the original author of the petition or GoPetition. Since removing a signature effectively destroys it, signees do not have the right to prevent the original author of the petition from destroying it. Without this basic right to prevent others from destroying an object, one cannot properly be said to own it.

Petitioners should have greater ownership of what they produce for online petitions. At a minimum, online petition formats should email petitioners copies of what they originally produced if other users decide to edit, block, hide, or remove their submission. Petition formats should also email petitioners with the status of their submissions and the specific reasons for any modification to that status. For example, if a petitioner submitted a signature to a petition and the moderator of the petition rejected the post for publication, then the petitioner should be emailed a copy of what they had submitted, the name of the moderator who rejected it, and the specific reasons for its rejection.

Petitioners should also be able to edit their signatures, including their complaints and demands. Unless explicitly deleted by the signee, every signature should be permanently preserved and archived for future reference. In general, petitioners should not be able to erase the past, but they should always be able to personally highlight and justify their departure from it.

One way to manage historically accurate signatures for a petition is to enable multiple versions of the petition. Petition formats could adopt a versioning system for their petition as a pseudonymous social network of personal testimony, one that incorporate social frames, co-authorship, multimedia voice, and revisable support into the signatures of petitioners.

Petition formats could allow any signee to contribute their complaints and demands to the petition. They could either organize these collective contributions individually, like collections of individually authored blog comments, or collaboratively, like a standard Wiki page.

Petitioners could add their signature to any version of the petition. If a petitioner tries to add her signature to a version of the petition, the petition's versioning system would spawn a new version of the petition that inherits all of the contributions and signatures of the old version of the petition. The old version of the petition would become the parent of the new version of the petition and the new version of the petition would become the child of the old version of the petition. All petitioners who had signed the parent version of the petition would then be notified and given a chance to add or transfer their signature to the child version of the petition. If a petitioner decided to transfer her signature, the parent version of the petition would indicate that it has been transferred and no longer represents the petitioner's latest preferences with respect to the petition as a whole.

Petitioners could also remove their signature from any version of the petition. If a petitioner tries to remove her signature from a version of the petition, a new version of the petition would be created that inherits all of the contributions and signatures of the old version of the petition, except for the petitioner's signatures. Similarly, other users would be notified if they would like to remove their signatures as well. If a petitioner decided to remove her signature, the parent version of the petition would indicate that it

has been removed and no longer represents the petitioner's latest preference with respect to the petition as whole.

When a petitioner views the new version of the petition, they could view it in the context of its historical development. Petitioners could view a timeline of the petition and browse through its parent, sibling, and child versions. Petitioners could also view the social signatures attached to each version of the petition. They could learn about the signees by reading their personal testimony, including the complaints and demands they contributed to each version of the petition. To help navigate these social frames, petitioners could filter the versions of petitions, and the signatures each version contains, by socially relevant categories, such as "My Friends Versions" and "My Friends Signatures". Petitioners could also invite and remind their friends to review and sign their petitions. Petitions could also invite political authorities to review and sign their petitions. Targeted political authorities that had not yet reviewed or signed the petition could be prominently featured, and those petitioners who successfully invited political authorities to review and sign a petition could also be prominently featured.

Still Undersigned

In this thesis, we have not discovered the perfect petition format, one that accounts for all of the various social contexts in which petitions can occur, but we have pushed forward in a promising direction. We have discovered that reformatting online petitions as pseudonymous social networks of personal testimony helps us strike a balance between our publicity and privacy concerns. We have discovered that the sundry, concrete forms of petitions and the multiple interests that they serve can be systematically analyzed and socially understood. We now have some experience evaluating the rhetorical pros and cons of various petition formats from the perspectives of both petitioners and the political authorities they target. We know that we are still undersigned, that our petition formats continue to anonymize our signatures and

undervalue our personal identities. We know that political authorities like Congress and the corporate media continue to ignore us. But now we know that we can struggle against this imposed anonymous dissent. Now, we can begin to reformat the online petition in our own personal image.

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