Representational Ideologies

Try the following thought experiment. Describe your life without mentioning anyone you know. Now imagine making a video that illustrates who you are but never depicts family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, teachers, schoolmates, fellow commuters, or anyone else with whom you come in contact. Personally expressive media involves using words or images to share the self. But it is hardly possible to accomplish autobiography without involving biographies of other people (Henwood et al. 2001). Media makers commonly incorporate the stories of people whom they know and love in order to work through problems, express the self creatively, and experience and enjoy a shared life cycle. Once a person begins to depict or even describe other people, they have entered a zone of representation.

For many years, professional image makers, anthropologists, journalists, and others have struggled with how to represent people in media, and what role subjects should have in a representation’s creation (Gross et al. 1988, 2003; Gubrium and Harper 2013). It has been an especially important question for anthropologists (Lutkehaus and Cool 1999; Ruby 1991), whose goal is to represent other people in words and images to provide insight about the human condition. Given that video is easy to distribute globally, image makers of many different varieties, experiences, and abilities are dealing with these thorny questions, sometimes in full view of other people who have their own contested, tacit, and shifting ideas about representational media.

This chapter explores learning opportunities on YouTube that appeared within the context of negotiating representational ideologies, or ideas about what constitutes appropriate ways to record and share human images. It describes how both kids and adults negotiated digital literacies regarding human representation. In some cases, adults felt very comfortable distributing an array of highly personal images, whereas several kids were more circumspect about how their images should be shared online.

Patricia G. Lange, "Representational Ideologies" in Kids on YouTube: Technical Identities and Digital Literacies, pp. 157-188. © 2014 Left Coast Press, Inc. All rights reserved.
On YouTube and other video sharing sites, video makers are faced with many choices along the representational chain of mediation. They must choose whether and how to record, edit, distribute, or delete particular images, in consideration of their own or others’ wishes. Sometimes, people new to making media have not yet established practical rules. Writing about the challenges of representation in visual anthropology and documentary, Ruby (2000:138) argued that if people had ready-made and glib answers to the question of how people should represent others, they were probably not to be "trusted." In other words, these issues require ongoing negotiation and sensitivities to particular circumstances and individual needs.

In a world where images proliferate, the stakes of making personal media are high. That images remain online with the potential to circulate indefinitely presents problems. People often fear the "nightmare reader" (Marwick and Boyd 2011:125-126) or unintended viewer such as a relative, teacher, or employer who exercises judgments that may negatively impact one’s future. Images may be downloaded and shared in ways that damage personal reputations, as several amateur and professional celebrities have discovered (Associated Press 2007; Fener and George 2005).

This chapter discusses tensions that arose when kids whom I interviewed represented themselves online or participated in other people’s media. The discussion is intended to be a co-productive exercise between the author, readers, video-makers, and viewers in ways that invite personal reflexivity and critical attitudes about video-making practices, especially in terms of interpersonal mediated boundaries and acceptable uses of human images. The goal is not to adjudicate between participants but rather to "conscious" (Kuhn 1995:9) or make visible certain representational ideologies and their moral underpinnings. The vignettes in this chapter may function as "triggers" that arouse emotional feelings about media, and invite readers and media makers to collaborate and discuss appropriate forms of media in their own image-creation and representational contexts (Fisch 1972; Gubrium and Harper 2013). Underlying beliefs may tacitly inform interactions during a mediated moment, but may not be well understood as representational ideologies by media makers, image subjects, and viewers. This chapter aims to facilitate direct and ongoing discussion about how human images are created and distributed in emotionally charged public contexts.

The Phenomenological Roots of Representational Ideologies

The concept of representational ideologies emerges from a tradition of scholarly reflection on how beliefs about communication and media intertwine with behavioral norms and values in a social group. In this context, ideologies are sets of beliefs that motivate action and promote particular socio-cultural hierarchies. Representational ideologies draw from the concept of media ideologies (Gerhshon 2010a), a term that owes its legacy to scholarship on linguistic and semiotic ideologies. Language ideologies "envisage and enact ties of language to identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and to epistemology" (Woolard 1998:3). Irvine (1989:255) characterized language ideology as, "the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests." In other words, ways of speaking have deeply normative, moral associations about what is considered right or wrong for members of particular cultural groups.

Keane (2003:419) introduced the concept of "semiotic ideologies," which involve "basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world." Keane (2003:419) argued that different "ontologies (what is 'natural?') underwrite different sets of possible signs." Semiotic ideologies inform the possible kinds of "agentive subjects and acted-upon objects" that are observed in the world. Drawing on these traditions, Gerhshon (2010b:283) argued that it is important to understand the underlying sets of ideas that people use, both overtly and tacitly, to communicate through a range of media. According to Gerhshon (2010a:3), "media ideologies are a set of beliefs about communicative technologies with which users and designers explain perceived media structure and meaning." Gerhshon investigated how people accomplished publicly mediated forms of ending a romantic relationship. She explored how particular choices (such as breaking up in person or changing one’s relationship status on the social network site of Facebook) affected the feelings and dignity of the person who did not wish to end the relationship. Focusing on media ideologies reveals particular concerns that shape perceptions about socially appropriate uses of media, as well as who has the agency to communicate across them.

Extending this line of thinking, this chapter investigates tacit representational ideologies, which may be defined as sets of beliefs that creators, participants, and viewers use to interpret the ontology, structure, and meaning of human images, including their normative uses, appropriateness, moral basis, and consequences. Whether articulated or not, representational ideologies underlie appropriate interpersonal interactions through media. They contain moral assumptions about media agency, in terms of who has the right to record and share an image.

Producing media is loaded with moral assumptions about what it means to be a mediated person. Adults and kids hold a wide variety of views about appropriate image creation and use. In describing linguistic ideologies, Silverstein (1979:193) argued that they were sets of beliefs that users articulated to rationalize or justify certain linguistic usages. This characterization assumes an ability to communicate ideologies. My study found that people
were not always able to articulate or even know what their representational ideologies might be, especially since many media makers were experimenting with video and had not yet encountered certain problems prior to participating on YouTube or their own websites. It was when human images transgressed moral boundaries that ideological parameters were often revealed and contested.

Speaking with regard to professional image-making, Ruby (2000:141) once noted that morality underpins the production and distribution of any human image. He argued that different phenomenological positions of mediated processes demanded particular moral obligations that should be respected. First, creators have a moral obligation to themselves, to make the personally self-actualizing and authentic media they wish to make. Second, a media creator has a moral obligation to respect the dignity and rights of the people who are represented, described, or analyzed in media. Third, human image representation should also have some benefit to viewers, such as providing education or entertainment. Other obligations might be targeted toward media sponsors or entities that paid for or otherwise facilitated media creation or distribution.

This chapter is concerned with exploring interpersonal obligations and how people respond when they perceive that media makers have failed to honor them. Key questions include: What are people’s ideologies with regard to representing human beings in personally expressive media? How do interactive experiences of making media reveal appropriate representational ideologies? How are representational ideologies contested and resolved? What happens when honoring the moral obligations to one person or entity means ignoring the needs of another? How do mediated interactions teach others about such ideologies? Making media can be challenging, especially when honoring one’s intentions may result in moral conflicts at different points along the experiential chain of mediated moments.

Caught on Video: Having Fun and Playing on YouTube

Scholarly conceptions of play have characterized it as a voluntary activity that is "fun," and occurs within its own limits in time and space. It happens in certain places, and time has a different kind of duration. People become "absorbed" in a kind of "magic circle" of activity that is "never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty" (Huizinga 1949:8). Play can be "enchancing" and "captivating" in ways that lie outside the normal moral duties, tasks, and chores of everyday life. In this sense, having Fun and playing with a camera can present special challenges in that it is difficult for some people to take into account all the ramifications of particular media, when one is absorbed in the activity of creating the media, including attending to its technical parameters and interpersonal focus. Considering an image’s potential future impact is not impossible but often becomes difficult as one engages in fun and play.

Sometimes the experiential moment of fun for one party is not fun for someone else. Videos on YouTube sometimes depict unflattering behavior. For instance, some parents found it amusing to record a child crying or throwing a tantrum. Not all adult media makers agree that this is appropriate public media content. One participant in a study in the United Kingdom (Buckingham et al. 2011:59) said it was improper to video record a child crying, as the image might harm their future reputation. In a number of YouTube videos posted by adults, children are depicted engaging in behavior such as passing gas or picking their noses. Sometimes a mother can be heard saying or placing text on a video in which a child’s nose picking is light-heartedly referred to as “digging for gold.” Those who believe these images are amusing for viewers hold a different representational ideology than those who believe they are visually unpleasant or may harm a video subject’s future reputation. In the eyes of those who see them as disadvantageous, the video maker has violated the ethical obligations to respect video subjects and to please viewers.

Discourses of “realism” in video lend the recording of everyday activities in spontaneous ways. Such discourses have resulted in a far wider depiction of home life than has been reported in prior eras of home movie making in the United States (Chaffin 1987). Scholars have criticized processes of “patterned elimination” (Chafen 1987) in which unrealistic idealizations of home and family are created by eliminating unpleasant images and focusing instead on “compulsive smiles,” that can yield repressive mediated life histories (Citron 1999; Holland 1991; Kuhn 1995; Zimmerman 1995). Holland (1991:2) states that “the children’s party may bring tantrums, but the pictures will show laughter.” Holland (1991:2) argues that, in many home movies of past decades, “however unidry or unsatisfactory the experience,” the picture will show “appropriate emotions.” These criticisms have been especially strong from feminist and Marxist scholars who were concerned with the oppressiveness that patriarchal, family media making could inflict upon mediated subjects, such as kids. In contrast, the videos of many parents with small children on YouTube show a much wider range of family images that are far from ideal and include depictions of highly mundane or even disastrous behavior.

People in my study sometimes became caught up in video play, and did not realize how their video might be interpreted. Later, the video maker might recognize how their recorded behaviors might lead to negative consequences. In interviews, I asked participants if they had ever taken down a video from YouTube. Interviewees such as 18-year-old Crystal (her requested pseudonym) often cited issues of quality and safety as primary reasons for video re-
movels. Crystal, who was introduced in Chapter 3, is a fine arts major in college who enjoys making video blogs and lip-synching videos. Having joined YouTube in December 2005, she was an extremely early adapter of the site. She told me that she typically watched her videos as she edited them, and again after she posted them on YouTube. She explained her decision to take down a few videos:

"It's mostly because I feel like it might be an endanger mode to the public. If someone looks at it, I lived on this address or um if I posted my video of myself dancing a little bit too provocatively, a pervert might like, you know. And I'm worried about stuff like that so I would take those things down. Like this one time I posted a video of myself in a dress and I noticed that it was a little bit too low cut and I had to take it down. It was like in two days I noticed it and I took it down right away."

In this example, Crystal had fun making a dance video. In the phenomenology of the mediated moment of recording, she did not recognize any potential problems. Nor did she see problems when she watched the video during editing and uploading. Upon viewing herself in the video two days later, she removed it, lest it prompt unwanted attention from a "pervert" or someone with inappropriate sexual interest in her. The video took on different meaning during the mediated moments of viewership when it appeared online. In Crystal's representational ideology of herself, it was inappropriate to appear in public dancing in a revealing outfit. The mediated feelings of fun and play that occurred during recording, initial viewing, editing, and distribution were reconsidered during a later moment of viewing, once the video had been posted online within the cultural context of YouTube.

Viewership is a crucial category that should be reconceptualized more finely across different moments of experience. The phenomenology of viewing can be divided into the experiences of self-viewing and public viewing. Self-viewing may further divided into multiple moments, including initial manipulation of the video (one usually has to watch one's footage during editing) as well as self-viewing after the video is posted within a particular context of viewership. After two days, Crystal decided that the activities she engaged in while having video fun might prompt unwanted viewership from others. Crystal displayed a representational ideology in which her intention to express herself and have fun did not outweigh her moral obligation to keep herself safe. Different obligations to the mediated self initially conflicted. One obligation was to express a moment of mediated fun; the other goal involved protecting her safety.

Decisions to remove videos were not straightforward for all participants. As discussed in Chapter 3, Lola and her 16-year-old daughter Ashley strengthened their mother-daughter bond by making videos and learning how to participate on YouTube together. Prior to their interviews, I noticed a video in which Ashley "danced for subscribers." Lola explained that she helped with the music in the video, which she felt was appropriate. Lola said that it helped Ashley express her interest and talent in dancing and that her viewers might enjoy it. Lola's representational ideology attended to their project's obligation to honor Ashley's self-expression and facilitate viewers' enjoyment of her talents.

However, the video's unauthorized reposting on a pornographic website prompted Lola to reconsider the video's distribution status.

Lola: "Well, I didn't — she was fully clothed and she wasn't doing — I don't think any really suggestive moves and she does love to dance. She studies dance. And, yeah, so I thought um it would be good to get subscribers."

But when we first had posted that video up, somehow it got linked to a like a porn site so then I was upset about that. My [other] daughter was really upset. My older daughter. And she's like, "Mom, you gotta take that down. You gotta take the video down."

And I didn't want to take the video down but I did. And then I reposted it a second time but then I disabled the embedding quality so that they couldn't um have it link to any outside web site. Just on that one. The other ones can be embedded.

In considering ethical obligations, Lola struggled with the decision to remove the video. She displays the digital literacy that one can choose to disable embedding functions for future videos. But an additional digital literacy would acknowledge awareness that a video can be re-appropriated even if YouTube's embedding feature is disabled. Many websites enable users to download YouTube videos, allowing the downloader to re-edit and re-post videos without the original video maker's knowledge.

In this case, the rights of the video makers outweighed the obligation to produce media that diverse viewers might enjoy. Lola said that Ashley's sister felt the video should be removed. In an interview, Ashley expressed no particular concern about the video. She said she hoped it would bring additional subscribers. At the time of the research, YouTube subscribers were people who chose to be alerted at no cost when a video maker posted a new video. The idea of "dancing for subscribers," Ashley said, began as a joke. Lola, Ashley, and Ashley's sister expressed different representational ideologies about appropriate YouTube participation for a 16-year-old female. Their attitudes
also reflected an ideological hierarchy in which the video makers' rights outweighed that of the corporate entity of YouTube, which would likely benefit from having videos with attractive girls dancing.

The examples of Crystal, Lola, and Ashley all involve a teenager's or adult's conscious use of female representations in an online context. Notably, their opinions and behavior changed during different mediated moments. In the initial playful moments of mediated recording, certain behavior was coded as acceptable. In contrast, during specific mediated moments of viewership and image-appropriation, media makers reconsidered their behavior. But not all participants have the knowledge, world experience, or agency to reflect on how their image is being used online. Reputations are partially forged not only from one's own personally expressive media, but also from the ways in which one is represented in other people's videos.

When people in my study made media for fun, they did not always consider the ramifications of the media's content, and how a child's images may circulate in ways that kids would not understand. For example, in one video, I noticed a mother recording a scene in her living room. As the camera quickly pans across the room, the viewer also happens to see a boy in his underdraw watching television. The boy's behavior is most likely a fairly typical one that plays out in homes across the United States. The video's content is not a carefully crafted image of repressive smiles, but reflects a discourse of realism in which the casual moments of life are coded as acceptable to capture on camera and to distribute publicly. I queried the mother about this image choice. Even though the camera does not linger on the boy (whom I surmise to be somewhere between 3 and 5 years old), I was concerned about seeing his public depiction in a state of partial undress. She explained her point of view about this topic in an interview with me:

When you first start out, I didn't really think that much of it, you know because they were little. It was kind of like okay, babies walk around naked on the beach. You know, stuff like that. It's not that big of a deal, or in diapers, you know?

Now, I wouldn't do it, um but no one's ever commented on that, really. Well, they might [have], but nothing that's really come up as a negative thing. I'd have to go back and look at the comments and see if there's actually any specific comments about it. Um, so there's nothing really that's flagged me to be like oh, I should take this down.

And he's there so briefly, and there's nothing tagged about it, like there's no tags like "little boy in underwear" or anything that would cause creepy people to search for that and find it in that way.

In this example, the mother explained that when she first started out, she did not think about such images' interpretations or impact. Indeed, the children's very young age at the time of recording situated them in a cultural context that accepts a different standard of public presentation and dress than those of older children or teenagers. In many cultural groups in U.S. culture, very young children routinely appear in public in diapers. Part of the explanation also involves being caught up in a mediated moment of fun in which the mother did not necessarily consider the future impact of a fleeting moment in her video.

This mother believed that the representation of her son had not violated her moral obligation to him, or to her viewers. No viewer called out the video as problematic. She noted that the image went by quickly, and she had not provided tags or keywords that would attract unwanted attention to the image through search techniques. Of course, it is a type of digital literacy to understand that people can access the video in other ways, as happened to Lola and Ashley. If someone downloads the video on an external website, the downloader could then add tags that attracted unwanted attention. Since such a procedure might happen off of YouTube, the video makers may never learn about these undesirable uses of their children's image. Not all "participants" in media understand the ramifications of their involvement. In this case, a very young boy was focused intentionally elsewhere and may not have realized he was being recorded. Even if he knew he was being recorded, at such a young age, he would not likely understand the ramifications of his image circulating online, potentially in perpetuity.

On the one hand, it might be argued that as generations of children grow up "online," in publicly mediated ways, the benchmark of what is considered a normal mediated representation may change for some cultural groups. In the past, teenagers might have had to suffer while a romantic date viewed the baby pictures that a parent proudly trotted out in family photo albums. In the future, a teen's boyfriend or girlfriend may have seen these images online long before prom night. If most people in a particular cohort experience these practices, then people in that cultural group may have similar "embarrassing" baby pictures on the web.

On the other hand, not all socio-cultural groups may embrace these practices as appropriate norms. Children growing up in more publicly mediated or unfortunate ways could be coded by future employers as not fit for particular occupations and activities that would require stricter representational ideologies and standards. Kids who grow up in families that are more protective of their children's images may have socio-economic advantages in comparison to parents who display their children in their underwear, picking their nose, or exhibiting unflattering behavior.
Contemporary discourses about media realism argue that the repressive smiles of past home image making should be replaced by depictions that show life in its untidy and imperfect reality. But these discourses vary with regard to appropriate parameters of realism. It is important to consider the potential consequences for broadcasting casual moments of everyday life. In some cases kids and teens can reflect on their own behavior and decide how their image may be used. Yet, younger kids may not understand those ramifications. Notably, much of the media discussed above were adult-motivated. The tensions between viewers, and within media makers themselves at different points of experience, demonstrate that advanced age does not guarantee that everyone will agree on standards of image appropriateness. Nor do all adults carefully consider the consequences of how their children's video-mediated representations will be used or interpreted.

**Altered States**

Kids on YouTube were sometimes depicted in altered physical states, such as on pain medication or using drugs such as alcohol. In some cases, these depictions were meant to reflect reality; the child really was on medication. In other cases, the depictions were pretend, and were used to comedic effect. Parents in my study disagreed about the appropriateness of publicly depicting kids in altered states for entertainment or commercial benefit.

Cara, a mother of four, maintained a representational ideology in which it was unacceptable to record her child on pain medication. In a video in which her daughter discussed breaking her wrist, some commenters accused her of being “high” on drugs. She had not taken drugs, and Cara said she would never film her children in a “state” like that. Cara's perspective clearly differed from those of other parents on YouTube. In a well-known and widely circulated YouTube video called *David After Dentist*, a young boy is filmed by his father while on pain medication. In this video, seven-year-old David is filmed while in the back seat of a car in the parking lot of a dentist’s office, where he had just had a tooth removed.

In the video description, David’s father, David DeVore (hereafter referred to as DeVore), explained that he took the video to show his wife (who could not accompany them) that their son was fine. He also wanted to reassure David about his recovery. At first DeVore circulated the video to only family and friends. Later, the video was posted publicly on YouTube for convenient sharing, and thus is an example of how a home made video might eventually be seen by millions of people. On his website, DeVore stated, “I chose to make it public thinking no one would think it would be as funny as we did. Shows you what I know!” The practical reality is that sending video files in private ways is still difficult, and YouTube became popular because it facilitated the sharing of higher bandwidth media such as videos. Of course, people might deliberately post funny home footage in the hopes of attracting commercialized attention. According to the family’s *David After Dentist* website, David’s family first wondered if David was being mocked, but elected to leave the video up when they decided that viewers seemed to feel it was “cute” and “funny.”

The choice to show David on medication after a medical procedure represents a dramatic departure from Chalfant (1987) description of home made media in the United States. David is depicted on medication at a moment in life that is not coded as an important milestone or a source of personal progress. David’s speech is slow and his head moves around as if he is dizzy. He asks his father, “Is this real life?” This is a humorous quote given that he was on pain medication and the video is posted to YouTube. This quote has added to the video’s enormous popularity. At one point David begins to lift himself up from his car seat and screams in a rather primal way. He asks about his stitches, states that he feels “fuzzy,” and asks why this is happening to him. His father explains that it is the “medication” (that is affecting him this way). In terms of consent, some viewers may see the video as problematic in that it not only publicly distributes a video containing the image of a child who most likely does not understand the ramifications of this choice, but he is also on medication, an altered state of consciousness that shows him in a vulnerable state.

Posted on January 30, 2009, the video had received more than 130 million views, 21 video responses, and more than 120,000 text comments as of July 2013. It has been parodied in numerous ways. For example, it was spoofed on a popular YouTube channel called *The Annoying Orange* and by Carl Veder (a YouTube character dressed as Darth Vader costume resembling the evil overlord in the film *Star Wars*). It has also been parodied by the teen-aged pop singer Justin Bieber (who himself was reportedly discovered on YouTube). On September 28, 2010, it was referenced by a character on Glee, a U.S. television show about high school show choirs. Upon awakening from a dream sequence in the dentist’s chair, the character of Rachel asks, “Is this real life?” in a widely recognized quotation of the *David After Dentist* video (Donnelly 2010).

The text comments posted to the video include indices of laughter at how funny his behavior is, expressions of empathy as people recalled their own dental experiences, comparisons to its parodies, and remarks about the irony of David asking confusedly “Is this going to be forever?” in a video on YouTube. Although the anesthesia’s effects will wear away, his representation is in a video that is online, and could be circulated indefinitely. On the day that I watched it, the video had a pre-roll advertisement before the video began and an advertisement on the right side of the video from an insurance company.
Over the top of the video was a personalized banner, which indicated the account’s partnership status (meaning that the owner of the account was sharing advertising revenues with YouTube). The video also included information about where to buy t-shirts and stickers related to the video.

The family, who received criticism for this video, has reportedly earned “in the low six figures” from both the video and related merchandising (Horowitz 2010). Devore is quoted in the press as saying, “We said we will make a family adventure out of this and see what happens. Nothing has happened that we felt uncomfortable doing” (Horowitz 2010). Although using kids’ images for profit has been a regular pattern in entertainment industries, platforms such as YouTube enable a wider array of media makers to amass such kid-driven revenue. For a select few, earning six figures on a grass roots video is significant income and may be deeply valuable for a family with children in an uncertain economy. Discourses of realism might argue that such moments are a part of everyday life and are to be acknowledged rather than hidden.

In some cases, kids’ or teens’ images are used to depict them in mock states of altered consciousness, as a kind of joke. But the question becomes, at what age or within what cultural contexts do comedy videos by amateurs or professionals make it difficult to know if a behavior is just a gag or real? What consequences might those videos have, either way? Teenagers are told that pretending to be drunk on one’s social network page, or being “tagged” or identified in pictures in real or faked scenarios of inebriation or other undesirable states could have serious consequences for them. In a real-world example, a student named Stacy Snyder was reportedly denied a teaching certificate in part because of social media imagery she posted (Mayer-Schönberger 2009). Wearing a pirate hat and holding a cup, she appeared in a photograph with the caption, “drunken pirate.” Such images reach an unacceptable limit of playfulness when “nightmare viewers” such as school admissions committees or potential future employers find them and make negative judgments (Marwick and Boyd 2011).

Viewers encountering a video for the first time may interpret it in numerous ways, as reality or fiction depending upon the viewers’ social distance to the video’s subject and creators. Drawing on Meunier’s phenomenology of cinematic identification, Sobchack (1999) argues that works can be interpreted as different genres depending upon a viewer’s prior experience and relationship to the video subject. For example, a potential employer who sees a work of fiction (say, teenagers pretending to be drunk), and who has no knowledge of the video’s context or personal character of those involved, may believe that they are seeing personal documentary. Whether or not the behavior actually happened, they may read into the video a “truth” of the teenager’s situation, which includes a willingness to post real or fictional drunken images of themselves. The same fictional video can be consumed as a funny home movie parody by friends and as a documentary by others.

Popular discourses often stress the fact that kids are not always aware of the ramifications of circulating their images. In fact, not all adults are aware of what will happen when they post a video. In some cases, it is a particular event that brings into awareness unforeseen consequences that occurred when media left the “magic circles” (Hubigins 1949) of recording and initial manipulation. People whom I interviewed found that publicly posting videos could lead to misappropriations, critiques, and judgments about one’s moral decisions in making and distributing media that contained kids’ images. Parents did not always agree that states such as being on medication exhibited appropriate representational ideologies for children. Posting such videos often resulted in comments and debates through which standards, norms, and contingent representational ideologies were explored, sometimes in strongly emotional terms.

**Everyday Media Skirmishes**

People often record videos as a way of interacting with the video’s subjects. The intention is not only to record something for the future; it is about experiencing the present through a camera. In many cases the fact that a moment is being mediated often codes the people or activity as having the status of being worth recording (Holland 1991). Individual mediated moments take on heightened emotion and may become more fun—or more stressful—because someone is recording it.

Videos depict only a small moment in time, and reflect only a part of what it means to record someone’s image. What happens behind the scenes in terms of how participants negotiate a video into being does not always appear in a final video. Viewers are not necessarily made privy to the moments in which people resist or reluctantly participate in the active shaping of media. Sometimes people engage in everyday media skirmishes in which friends or loved ones disagree about the appropriateness of recording or distributing media. One person might wish to record someone, and the subject might express reluctance or outright opposition. Many of us have been annoyed when a cranky relative staunchly refuses to be photographed at a wedding or birthday celebration. Conversely, we may have felt irritated when a predatory family photographer or friend insists on taking our picture even when we do not wish to be photographed.

When image creators and subjects are not in alignment, an argument or media skirmish may ensue in pursuit of a mediated image. How these everyday conflicts are negotiated and resolved often reveals tacit representational
ideologies about who has the right to make and distribute human images, and for what purpose. Disclosing these negotiations on camera becomes one way to enact discourses of realism which acknowledge that making media is not always smooth. However, displaying these negotiations and resistances directly in a video opens media makers up to public judgment and critique when representational ideologies collide.

Feminist studies that critiqued the oppressiveness of patriarchal media making to document material excess often ignored a mediated subject’s participatory role (Sonntag 1977; Zimmerman 1995). In critiquing the oppressiveness of male authorities in home media, such scholarship risks retelling a one-way trajectory of empowerment that does not reflect all media subjects’ participatory experiences. Yet, participants’ responses, protestations, or even challenging looks to the camera are important forms of agency during these mediated moments.

Sometimes people are coaxed into creating an image that is intended to give people joy and contribute to a family’s shared legacy. As a child, I can remember scowling at many a picture reluctantly taken of me. Later, I began helping to shape my mediated image by smiling for pictures that I knew were destined for the family album. People’s response to their own image may change during different mediated moments of recording and viewing, and they may regret not having media that documents their childhood histories.

On the other hand, some people may smile for the camera and participate even though they are inwardly reluctant to be recorded. The video may appear to be fun for all, but actually contain disturbing oppressions and silencing that will not encounter criticism when posted online. For all of our claims to postmodern sophistication at knowing that images are not always what they seem, people often tend to believe what they “see” in home videos and photographs.

When media skirmishes occur, they present learning opportunities for participants to work through representational ideologies during various mediated moments. Many of these issues were thrown into dramatic relief after a video was posted by Michael Verdi, a well-respected and important figure in the first-generation video blogging community. First generation video bloggers were often technically savvy and began working out ways to compress videos and post them to their own websites before YouTube opened to the public. They often embraced discourses of realism and fiercely advocated a democratization of the lens, to encourage personally expressive media that is not controlled by corporate or government entities.

Verdi posted a video entitled “Why Not?” to his personal video blog (michaelverdi.com) on November 25, 2007. The 1 minute and 53 second video depicts Verdi video recording his seemingly reluctant daughters at home.

The video was also posted to YouTube, but received very few views and no contentious feedback on that site. In contrast, the video spurred an argument within his own community of video-blogging peers. His daughter Dylan was 14-years old at the time of the research; her sister Lauren was about 10 years old. To appreciate the video and the commentary that ensued, it is useful to know a bit about the family’s background, including his daughters’ experiences with video blogging and Verdi’s passionate support of media creation as an important form of contemporary literacy.

Verdi requested that I use his real name when discussing his contribution to the research project. He, like many video bloggers on and off of YouTube, believed that media makers should receive proper credit and attribution for interview comments and works that are referenced and discussed in public contexts. Verdi co-authored a book with Ryanne Hodson, called Secrets of Videoblogging: Videoblogging for the Masses (2006). The book is a how-to manual that assists video blogging newcomers. When I interviewed Verdi, he was a creative director for a company that assisted with marketing for companies involved in virtual worlds and social networks. He was also a performance artist and a co-producer of a machinima web series. Machinima is a genre of media in which participants can record actions from 3-D (three-dimensional) computer animations, such as recording characters’ actions in a computer game to create new original stories.

Verdi strongly believed in promoting video blogging so that individuals could have a public voice and develop the skills they needed to distribute their message. Verdi received the Vloggervangelist Award at a special ceremony honoring video bloggers called The Vloggies, which was held in San Francisco in November 2006. A conflation of the words “vlogger” and “evangelist,” the award was bestowed by Podtech, a company that creates branding and social media strategies. The goal of the award was to recognize and honor “a vlogosphere activist who [had] done an extraordinary job promoting the vlogging medium” (N.A. 2006). Verdi was recognized for his “tireless work in helping people build and establish their vlogs” and for establishing NODE101, a network of people who provide informal tutorials at gatherings so that people could learn to video blog and create personally expressive media.

During his interview, Verdi said that everything that comes from Hollywood now looks “gorgeous,” “sounds fantastic” and has “great special effects.” But the really important part of making media came from telling one’s own story and having creative ideas. Many first-generation video bloggers believed that everyone should have the digital literacy skills to make their own media. They believed that human connection and social change were made possible through more personal mediated communication (Lange 2007b). Although Verdi and his daughter Dylan have accounts on YouTube, their mediated
center of gravity was not on that site, but rather on their own video blogs. Many people in the first-generation video blogging community believed that one should have one’s own site, and not be subject to a video hosting site’s social dictates, censorship, or technical limitations, or any commercial influences that might compromise self-expression. In this sense, not having obligations to particular sponsors or patrons is a type of media ideology that privileges media-makers’ intentions over those of third-parties that facilitate media distribution.

After experimenting with her own video blog, Verdi’s daughter Dylan was named the “world’s youngest video blogger” by ABC News in a piece profiling people of the year in 2004 (Vargas 2004). An ABC News crew came to the Verdi home to interview her about her online activities. An 11-year-old at that time, Dylan was quoted as saying that she blogged about things she’d seen or heard of, or “just anything that happened to [her] that day that [she was] thinking.” Getting comments, she said, made her feel “good,” because “somebody else cares what [she had] to say.” Michael posted a video telling the story, which included footage of Dylan watching herself on the ABC News program and seeming excited and pleased to have been profiled so prominently on the leading edge of new media.

Michael told me that shortly after he started video blogging in earnest in 2004, Dylan became curious about his cameras and activities. He suggested that she make a video blog. She had already maintained a text blog for several months. Working in the editing program of iMovie, Michael says he helped Dylan learn how videos were made from clips, and how clips could be rearranged to tell certain stories. In this mentorship narrative, Michael, like other technically oriented parents in the study, helped co-create learning opportunities for his daughter to improve her technical and self-expressive skills.

Michael’s decision to assist his daughters displays a representational ideology in which it is acceptable for girls under the age of 15 to have the ability to create and transmit their own message and human images in a public way. When I interviewed Michael, he stressed that when he was their age, it would have been deeply meaningful to have these technologies and platforms to express himself creatively to a global forum. In contrast to critiques of patriarchal home movie making, Verdi espoused the idea that his daughters and indeed everyone should have the tools and means to make their own media. He taught his daughters to video blog because he wanted them to have their own mediated space in which to express their point of view.

In the first video that Dylan posted to her blog, called Record Player, she discusses receiving an analog record player for Christmas, which is an unusual gift given the availability of other formats and services such as iTunes that distribute music online. Anticipating viewers’ puzzlement, she explains in the video that she had been curious about her father’s record albums and wanted to hear them, so she was happy to have received this gift. In her video, which functions as a tutorial, she listens to punk rock music and teaches the uninitiated how to use a record player by gently placing the needle on the record. Dylan is an archaeological media ambassador bridging old and new media.

Dylan went on to video blog for about two years. Typical topics included discussing her activities on Neopets, an online site on which people can adopt virtual pets and play games to enhance their pet’s attributes. She also video blogged about clothes, her cello, wearing braces, hanging out with her grandmother and her father, and ear hole plugs. Dylan displays a talent for video blogging; she speaks to the camera in a comfortable, natural style. The camera work in her second video feels dynamic, as she holds it close to her face, uses animated expressions, and carries it around the room as she provides commentary about the items within it. By the time of his interview in 2007, Michael told me that she had largely dropped video blogging; her archives on that particular site show her last video posted in July 2006. Even kids growing up in highly mediated environments do not always display an ongoing disposition toward particular media.

Michael said that Dylan principally video blogged for social reasons, and most of the people watching and commenting on her video blog were adults in the video blogging community rather than peers of her own age. Although this was “cool” for her, Michael said, “it wasn’t where her friends were!” Such an observation contradicts the fact that teen cohorts in all social groups are always on the leading edge of technologized activity, with adults lagging behind. Among first-generation video bloggers, parents and adults typically led the way in supporting heavily mediated, everyday lifestyles. Dylan Verdi was evidently not typical of her teen-aged peers; she was Internet-savvy and engaged in video blogging. When Michael started in earnest, he said, many people in the United States still had to dial up to go online, and many people did not know how to retrieve videos online, much less know how to make and upload them.

Verdi’s younger daughter Lauren also launched her own video blog a few months after Dylan. She posted far fewer videos, and her last video was posted about a year after she began. Again, such a pattern disrupts the discourse that all kids’ mediated centers of gravity reveal equal ability and interest in all forms of technology and online participation. Within the same household, Dylan video blogged more than Lauren did. Lauren’s first video, posted on February 6, 2005 primarily concerned discussing and displaying her Brownie vest and badges. The Brownies are part of the Girl Scout organization in the United States, and they accomplish activities such as improving sports and craft skills and fundraising through cookie sales.
thing Dylan.” She rolls her eyes and looks at the camera. The subtitle reads, “She is not amused either.” Michael lingers facing her, and she says in an exasperated tone, “What?” They continue:

Michael: Nothing. I’m not doing anything.
Dylan: You’re being weird and annoying.
Michael: No.
Dylan: Yeah, why are you doing that?
Michael: Why not, Dylan? Look at me! Blow me a kiss! (An audible kiss is heard.) Love you Dylan! (Dylan looks back at her father and then back down.) Love you Dylan! (She once again glances back at her father.)
Dylan: I mean, is this - does this have some sort of purpose to it?
Michael: No purpose at all.
Dylan: Why then, why?
Michael: Because.
Dylan: Because why?
Michael: Because why not? (remaining audio trails off)

One of the final shots depicts Dylan looking at her father in a different light, perhaps almost smiling behind her computer screen.

The video spurred a vigorous discussion, receiving 32 comments (although Verdi eventually closed the comment forum) that represented diverse reactions. Many of the comments were supportive of Verdi and his family and interpreted the video as an instance in which one party wanted to make media of loved ones, and the photographic subject expressed reluctance. Most commenters interpreted these media skirmishes as a part of everyday life between parents and kids. They index one way in which kids start exerting their independence by taking control of their image creation in the home. A few comments were quite negative and felt that recording the girls after she had been asked to stop (in Dylan’s case) was not appropriate and potentially violative of their expectations of privacy within the home.

What is extremely interesting about the video and the responses it garnered is that it showed that even in a community of people who were interested in the liberating and democratic possibilities of heavily mediated lifestyles, people did not always hold the same representational ideologies about what it meant to record human images, especially loved ones. Even after Verdi and his family responded to the negative commentary and explained that the girls were not as upset as some of the commentators had assumed, the explanations and com-
Verdi reacted very negatively to being compared to a "slumlord" and to her suggestion that she would rather have a slumlord for a father rather than someone who recorded her image against her will. This commenter points out that documenting one's experiences online should involve choice. In her view, Verdi took away the girls' "agency" by letting his desires or "whims" overshadow consideration of the potential consequences of having this media forever online.

Audaces emissions, who was a close friend of comments. 0 above, said that the video made him "uneasy" and "sad." He says that he "can only judge based on you what you let me see." Such a comment contains a representational ideology. A commenter has a right to judge the representations of others he sees online, and he has the right to determine whether they contain problems such as failure to respect the mediated subject's wishes, especially in the assumed private spaces of the home. Many readers may feel a right to obligation to speak up about images that seem to violate a person's rights.

On the other hand, many comments were supportive of Verdi and recognized the girls' reluctance as typical for kids who do not wish to be filmed at particular moments. For parents, even small moments of a child's life can take on heartfelt poignancy, and recording a child sends a message that the person and the moment are worth recording and preserving for other people (and themselves) to see. Discourses of so-called realism contradict earlier ideas that it is only more dramatic and progressive moments of the life cycle that are worth recording. Note, whether or not media appear online, even the most personal recordings are often targeted at wider audiences, such as future unknown generations of family members (Holland 1991). In many U.S. cultural groups, media is not necessarily for the mediated, but for other people who have deep feelings or connections to the people depicted.

Media skirmishes occur in text as well. Some commenters read the posted criticisms as violative and defended Verdi. They argued that what happens on camera is not the "whole story" with regard to a single piece of media's ontology, or story of how it came to be. One commenter characterized the video as important because it realistically captured people's media experiences. Here discourses of realism situate the video as revealing some of the more messy or non-ideal moments that past eras of video making were accused of excising from the frame. In response to commenters who expressed concern about the girls having online video blogs at a young age one commenter stated:

COMMENT #22

...I totally understand what you're saying and you make some good points about kids needing a maturity level to make decisions about this kind of thing – and how it can be traumatic for a parent to keep a camera trained on
them all the time (I have friends who underwent that kind of treatment with Super 8 home movies). What I'm responding to here, I think, is what likely happened off-camera - a kind of understanding and permission on the part of the kids to post videos of themselves online, even if on-camera they were resistant. And the resistance I see in the video is more of a grouch, "aw dad, not now!" kind of annoyed attitude, not a retreat or fleeing from the view of the camera. In other words, it does seem to me that this video is a collaboration between father and daughters that captures their relationship (both the creation of the video and the posting of it online), rather than a father exerting power or control over his children's images and privacy.

This commenter astutely observes that resistances are of different types and degrees. In other words, a person who secretly takes pictures shapes a different level of subject agency than a person who pursues someone during a media skirmish at a party. The commenter also offers a phenomenological perspective by stating that mediated moments have different inflection points both on and off camera. It is possible for people to express reluctance during the mediated moment of recording, but later give permission during the mediated moments of editing and distribution. According to this representational ideology, it is possible to separate different moments in the media-making chain of experience, and to recognize that different moments may produce contingent feelings that change one's relationship to the original footage. One may be annoyed during filming, but the event may become funny during editing.

Verdi's immediate family such as his brother, wife, and mother also lent supportive commentary and sometimes expressed shock at the more negative criticisms. Verdi's brother noted that 'resistances' or media skirmishes are typical in everyday family media making, and refraining from taking kids' pictures can also have ramifications when kids grow up without having adequate media from their past to index parental attention and affection. He stated:

**COMMENT #18**

...to all those that have an issue...If your parents had put the camera away every time you showed any resistance at all, how many fewer memories would their be of your childhood? What teenagers/young adult doesn't try to hide [from] the camera from time to time? I for one have never met anyone who was scared for life or had to go therapy, or bad issues to deal with because their parents showed them love and attention and made attempts to capture their existence on film. On the contrary, people have issues when they don't get attention, when they don't know they are the center for their parents' world and when they go into the family albums and as they are thumbing through the pages have to sit there and wonder... "why in the hell are their no pictures of me?"

Being a person in the United States today means having a mediated presence. According to commenter #18, a failure to record family images suggests parental neglect.

Similarly, Verdi's mother (comment #29) noted that she had received similar looks from Michael and his brother when they were growing up. Her comment is interesting because Michael himself went on to enjoy making his own media and living a heavily mediated life style (at least during the time of my research). It is not only the camera shy, then, who sometimes avoid having their picture taken. Even people who have an interest in media at times engage in media skirmishes. In some cases, these skirmishes may have less to do with media per se, and may be more reflective of kids asserting their individuality to their parents as they are growing up. Media skirmishes simply become one way to express this independence.

Michael Verdi's wife Rebecca argued that the negative comments did not consider the context of the family's media making choices and interpersonal relationships. She especially took issue with commenters who had imputed problems from their own mediated pasts onto their interpretation of the Verdi exchange. This comment is interesting because it asserts that one's own phenomenological experience cannot be mapped onto and equated with another person's subjective experience of a particular event. She stated:

**COMMENT #13**

...Some of your comments eluded to the relationship between Dylan, Lauren and their dad. Unfortunately you don't have a clue. The video is not a reflection of a thoughtless, self centered father; his a reflection of father who could choose to post a video about anything else but he chose to post about his daughters. Daughters he has the utmost respect, pride and love for. Michael knows what his [boundaries] are when it comes to video blogging in our household, please don't assume you know what they are. Please don't transfer your own childhood issues or sensationalize our teenagers responses. This video is does not rob anyone of their privacy, its simply two girls who love their dad.

Moving beyond the particulars of the Verdi video, the debate opens up a broader issue about representational judgments. Is it part of one's civic duty to identify and protect people who appear to be "wronged" by particular mediated practices? Does the video touch a nerve that had actually been long debated within a community of media makers who had grappled with con-
trudictory emotions about video blogging? On the one hand, video bloggers often passionately believed that media could have personal and civic value. On the other hand, they often struggled with how to honor their own personal expressivity as well as the needs and integrity of the people whom they recorded.

In the last comment he posted before closing the comment forum, Verdi addresses his critics (some of whom, he points out, do not allow comments on their blogs). Although he admits to sometimes putting up provocative videos, Verdi claims that he had not intended to stir controversy with the video. It was simply a moment in time that he thought "[captured]" something recognizable and "true" about "a father-daughter relationship." To use Ed and Lunsford’s (1984) term, he had "invoked" or imagined an audience of like-minded viewers who would appreciate its truthfulness and authenticity. Nevertheless, his "addressed" audience or those who actually watched the video included both sympathetic and critical viewers, a common risk of public media sharing. Verdi stated (#32b) that he was not trying to be provocative but rather sought "moments that capture something we’d like to remember and, I hope, contain a little bit of truth that others will recognize in their own lives. I think I got a tiny, true piece of a father-daughter relationship here. That’s all I was trying to do. I didn’t make this to start a ‘debate about online identity of minors and the role of parents.’"

In addition, Verdi posted a video in which he and his daughters responded to the critical commentary. In the video, Michael, Lauren, and Dylan sit side-by-side facing the camera and react to the debate. Lauren protectively and supportively touches her father’s left shoulder. They stay close partly to remain in frame. Such bodily positioning also projects an aura of emotional closeness and support.

The video opens with Michael asking the girls what they wish to say. They respond:

Dylan: I think all the comments left are really, really stupid (laughs). You, you guys are seriously digging way way way too into this and you’re act- like you’re treating my dad as if he’s some like creepy pedophile person. As if like, like I had to like beg and plead and be like, he like shook me, and it’s like “No! You’re going on the Internet!” I mean, hello, I had a website, I had a video blog at some point. Obviously, it doesn’t bother me to be on video. I mean I was only like that because I had woken up like 20 minutes earlier and I’m not a morning person.

Lauren: And I just didn’t want to perform my ballet. I didn’t say I didn’t want this on the Internet.

One of the most interesting aspects of this response video is Verdi’s suggestion that the viewers who criticized him did not know what had happened "all in and around and outside of that video." This is a phenomenological assessment that creates a learning opportunity for viewers to understand that their interpretations in their own mediated moment of viewing may not be the same as those of the video’s creators. Speaking within the context of others’ personal websites and blogs, Stern (2008:111-112) noted that text bloggers were often disappointed that people overgeneralized who they were as people on the basis of a mere "snapshot" of themselves provided online. Understanding the moral obligations and ontology of a media’s creation, in Verdi’s view, depended upon knowing what his relationship to his girls was, and what happened in the moments and negotiations that surrounded the video but were not necessarily depicted directly within it.

Dylan also calls up important context in which she argues that she had her own video blog and was not necessarily opposed to viewing online. Dylan grew up in a home in which video blogging was coded as an important digital literacy skill. The idea of teaching girls how to video blog reflects a very different philosophy in comparison to the way scholarship in past media eras portray fathers as wielding cameras, while girls were encouraged to remain media subjects (Zimmerman 1995).

In his interview for my study, which took place just days after the video’s posting, Verdi explained his frustration with some of the commentary, which had principally come from people with whom he had interacted in video blogging circles. Contrary to many first-generation video bloggers and the general population’s fears that participating on YouTube would attract aggressive criticism from unknown persons, the harshest comments appeared on his own website and came from people whom Verdi knew, at least as acquaintances. The criticism appeared because different parties interpreted the moral undertones of the mediated act in very different ways. Such a variety
of interpretations and critical commentary complicates the meaning of terms such as "haters," given that at least some commenters are passionate because they are reacting to a moral issue.

During the interview Verdi said that the girls had seen him working on the video and they had "cracked up" when watching it. His frustration was with the commentary that suggested that he would ignore his children's wishes with regard to putting video up online. Verdi stated:

But there was this underlying assumption that I would - that I would be the person who would put something inappropriate of my kids up on the web, like something that my kids explicitly told me, "Dad, please don't put that on the Internet" and I said, "Ah, screw you. I'm putting it on the Internet." (Patricia chuckles.) Right? What kind of an asshole father would I be if I was doing that? And so the thing that was insulting to me was that these people who, again, I know they haven't watched every single video that I've made or anything but you know, they've known me at least peripherally for like three years now, and they've heard this whole story about Dylan and the whole thing. Uh, uh, two of them were like part of the video blogging list when you know, there was like two dozen active people posting and this was the story that we were talking about, so they've heard this all before. [Again], I've met them all in person, and that they would come to my blog and, and assume that I did this horrible thing against my children's will is just infuriating and insulting to me.

Media subjects/participants have a range of options with regard to accepting or resisting being recorded. They may run from the camera, put their hand over the lens, verbalize resistance, or ignore the media maker. In one video on YouTube, I observed a very young child, perhaps not yet 3-years-old, tell her mother to put down her camera. To say that the media maker "[takes] away their agency" risks washing out the range of available choices and reifying an assumption of unidirectional control. On the other hand, children may not realize the range of available choices, or may feel reluctant to exercise them when directed at a parent, with whom they have a particular relationship. Many parents post media without their children's knowledge or understanding. Moving away from the particulars of the Verdi example, kids in other situations may be scolded or punished for not participating in media (say, on the day that expensive family portraiture is scheduled and children decide to "opt out" behaviorally by playing in mud).

It is interesting to observe how Lauren and Dylan reacted to being recorded and to explore potentially different levels of agency with regard to mediated moments of recording. Looks can yield interpretive messages. In several instances, Michael made requests or issued directives for the girls to execute certain behavior. For instance, he requested that Lauren perform some of her dance for the camera. Lauren declined this request and explained that it was because she did not want the dance to go online. She exercised a particular level of agency in refusing to dance. One could easily imagine a scenario in which she smiled pleasantly and danced even though inwardly she did not wish to dance. Since these images would simply look like kids dancing for dad, they would not likely receive any criticism. They would omit any external indicators of a child's discomfort. People would likely believe what they saw, and would accept the video as appropriate, even though it would arguably be more offensive than a video in which someone is depicted as exercising their right to refrain from performing such a dance.

Lauren exhibited an important digital literacy by establishing the parameters of what she considered to be an appropriate level of the video's distribution. She would not perform the dance if the video was to go on the Internet, a statement that implies that she was aware that the video did have the potential to go online and thus could be seen by many people. She modeled a kind of digital literacy to other children that it is possible to resist media that is being made in a number of ways, through looks (such as eye rolls), verbalizations (saying "no" to dancing), and a refusal to honor a request even if made by a loved one.

Media skirrmishes bring up a host of interesting questions. For example, while viewers might use Verdi's video to recall their own troubled media histories, is it right to assume that his video enacts the same social circumstances? What are the responsibilities of viewers to point out problems when they see them? How severe does a video transgression have to be before people feel the moral obligation to intervene, whether or not their own experiences are similar to those observed in the media? What level of context is necessary to judge any mediated act? Is receiving background on the Verdi family helpful for judging the status of the mediated act? What level of relevance should this background information be accorded when adjudicating media's appropriateness?

Some commenters might argue that no matter what happens during editing, a person's declining to be photographed should always be respected. But what happens if people laugh about it later? Can the mediated moment of recording (when a person requests someone to stop filming) be ethically separated from the mediated moments of editing and distribution? Can a video's moral-ontological status change according to different interpretations along the phenomenological chain of mediation? Also, what does it mean to leave some of life's messiness in play, rather than only depicting cheerful smiles? Does a rejection of realist discourses of media making necessitate a return to rarified patterned eliminations and
forced smiles that would be undetectable as problematic by viewers? Moving forward, it seems clear that video makers, subjects, and viewers should frankly discuss these issues with their own families, friends, and fellow video makers, to understand people's interpersonal boundaries, ethical obligations, and representational ideologies.

The Moral Contradiction to the Contextual Lament

Once something is recorded, subsequent readers or viewers do not have access to the original circumstances of the media's creation for interpretation. Acknowledging the context of an artifact's ethical-ontological foundation may complicate future interpretations. Complications spawned by media's interpretive distance from its creators has long been debated by philosophers from Plato to Derrida. Arguably, writing has an ineluctable quality that is intelligible at some level even if "the moment of its production is irrevocably lost and even if one does not know what its alleged author-intentionally intended to say at the moment he wrote it" (Derrida 1972:9). Plato argued that if writing "is ill-treated or unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to its rescue; it is quite incapable of defending or helping itself" (Plato 1975:97). People interpret media even when they are not privy to the author's intention, but the media itself cannot provide a defense against interpretations that do not align with those of its creators.

Many people will not understand or will simply disagree with a media maker's original intent. Media viewers become an "imagined audience" (Brake 2009; Marwick and Boyd 2011) whom a media maker may not know. "Context collapse" (Marwick and Boyd 2011; Wesch 2009) occurs when multiple audiences intertextually converge on one artifact. In other words, many possible audiences may view and react to the same mediated artifact in vastly different ways. Tensions may arise when interpretations of media creators and viewers are not symmetrical. Viewers may interpret a media maker's recording as morally flawed. As Strangelove (2010:58) points out with regard to YouTube videos, "The lack of context can make it difficult to understand the action in a home video. Innocent behavior can be seen as deviant." Of course, the opposite argument can also be made. Things that look innocent, such as a smiling daughter dancing for daddy (though she really didn't want to), may be problematic.

A common complaint about online interaction is the lack of so-called context. Many scholars have offered their version of what is termed here the "contextual lament," which generally assumes that if adequate context could be recreated, then misunderstandings between a media maker and a viewer would inevitably be resolved. The contextual lament is predicated on the idea that computer-mediated communication lacks many subtle cues such as

wrinkles and nods, and that it is the lack of these and other contextualizing cues that creates misunderstanding. The contextual lament asserts that if people who are interacting online could simply get to know each other, misunderstandings about people's actions would be minimized (Tannen 1998).

Perhaps it can empirically be shown in certain cases that getting to know others, and most especially developing empathy for someone's seemingly exotic mediated philosophies, may truly settle misunderstandings. The problem is that social interaction alone does not guarantee that tensions with social underpinnings will be easily resolved in all cases. Imagine getting to know someone who is deeply racist about hiring practices. Will any amount of understanding the context of the ontology of their beliefs change one's own stance with regard to the appropriateness of such unfortunate behaviors? Getting to know a person who is racist will never prompt acceptance of their morally bereft beliefs and practices.

When people hold deeply different positions on behavioral morality, much more interactive work is needed to achieve agreement or even respectful understanding. Note that comment #31, cited previously in this chapter, suggests that strongly worded criticisms had less to do with the video itself and more to do with being on different sides of an intensely moral debate that revolved around whether children should participate online. Harsh criticisms are often motivated by deeply felt, morally driven emotions and desires to protect parties who may not have full consent as to how media is created and distributed. When morality is at stake, passion and critique often follow—even if the interactants know each other to varying degrees.

The contextual lament exhibits several theoretical paradoxes. The first is, what is meant by "context"? The word is often used in a singular form, as in desiring to know "the context of the situation." Yet, the concept involves multiple layers that may interact or conflict. What counts as appropriate context may change over the course of an interaction as prior moves influence responses.

In addition, people may "see" or draw on levels of context that prove their original, moral assumptions, rather than admitting as evidence levels of context that contradict these assumptions (Gellner 1970 [1962]). Within the context of analyzing anthropological studies of human behavior, Gellner (1970 [1962]:130) stated that, "the amount and kind of context and the way the context itself is interpreted, depends on prior tacit determination concerning the kind of interpretation one wishes to find." This contextual pre-disposition is not limited to anthropologists but to anyone trying to answer the contextual question, "What is going on here?" Gellner's argument can be productively applied to mediated interaction. People who believe that a behavior is legitimate will recognize those contextual factors that validate their original judgment of the act. Aspects of context that contradict the act's validity may be innocently overlooked or willfully ignored.
Finally, even when people do have access to contexts, they may not attend to them. Verdi complained during his interview that his whole video blog provided relevant context to interpret the Because Why Not? video. First-generation video bloggers tend to see the video blog, rather than any single video, as what constitutes one’s “work,” but Verdi understood that most viewers would not likely have watched all of his videos. Yet, even if people actively attend to available context, they may continue to hold asymmetrical moral judgments about behavior and values. What some people read in Dylan’s media skirmish with her dad was a violation of a right to privacy during the moment of recording. For these interpreters, the phenomenologies of Verdi’s or Dylan’s actions before or after the mediated moment of recording did not count as legitimate interpretive evidence. To interpreters who choose to focus on the mediated moment of recording to judge the video, it did not matter that Dylan had a video blog prior to the skirmish or that during editing the family deemed the video acceptable for posting.

Verdi draws on different levels of context to defend his video choices. He introduces the idea that being a parent and understanding how parents in the United States typically interact with their kids through media will be, for some readers, a crucial aspect of context. In his response video, he argues that people who do not have kids do not understand what it means for a parent to make media in the home in general, and in his home in particular. Verdi also mentions that those who criticized him were not privy to what happened “all in and through the video.” He suggests that judgment is not possible even within a particular mediated moment without understanding the many feelings and experiences that surrounded the decision of recording.

Representational ideologies have temporarities that influence how people interpret media. It is not the availability of context that is at issue in this case study, but rather, how and whether people admit as evidence particular levels of context to validate or challenge prior beliefs. What counted as relevant context was often influenced by representational ideologies that people previously held. Posting media online in this way presented a number of learning opportunities. Through these experiences, people might see models for how to handle being mediated. Girls see other girls making requests about video recording in the home. Video makers learn that despite their intentions, posting one’s media online invites an array of interpretive views that may not always map to one’s own. People wishing to protect others may find themselves in text-based media skirmishes with media creators or subjects. The moral contradiction to the contextual lament means that fundamental differences in interpretive morality often drive media interpretations, and no amount of adequate “context” will easily resolve certain passionate, morally laden media skirmishes between video makers, subjects, and viewers.

Playing by the Rules

What can media makers and participants do to handle representational discrepancies? Why do people seem to hold such different representational ideologies? Giddens (1991) argues that people’s risk calculations are elided because of the vast distance between a decision and its impact in time and space. Risks that are remote from daily life, such as how an image might impact a toddler’s college acceptance, may be “too far removed from a person’s own practical involvement for that individual seriously to contemplate them as possibilities” (Giddens 1991:130). Part of the goal of this chapter was to “transcend” (Kuhn, 1995) how present media choices might affect people in the future. Stacy Snyder’s “drunken pirate” incident, described earlier in this chapter, demonstrates how seemingly playful imagery from people’s pasts has reportedly complicated their future job opportunities (Mayer-Schönberger 2009).

Decisions about understanding which media may have negative ramifications become more complicated as more video is taken in the casual spaces of the home. Is the implication of these findings that we will all be reduced to what Marvin and boyd (2011:125-126) call the “lowest-common-denominator” philosophy of online participation? Will we all resort to making media that is so bland that it will not offend the sensibilities of anyone, anywhere, at any time? Are discourses of so-called realism and the quest to avoid stilted family perfection compatible with representational ideologies that express concern over the ramifications of interpersonal media skirmishes? What do the learning opportunities of the case studies in this book yield for future generations of video and media makers?

The ease of recording and distribution engenders serious responsibility on the part of media makers to maintain sensitivity to the people with whom they interact online. One might wonder where the boundaries lie for media makers who advocate heavily mediated lifestyles as a way to secure important digital literacies for themselves and future generations. I raised this question in an interview with Ryanne Hodson and her partner Jay Dedman. They are first-generation bloggers who strongly support the use of video to create personally expressive media. They mentioned that they had very few interpersonal boundaries for making media that contained the other’s image. The only incident that potentially crossed a line was when Jay took a 30-second close up of Ryanne sleeping and posted it online. He called this video “beautiful,” “cool,” and “something you rarely see.” Ryanne said he had not told her he would put it up. Had she been asked in advance, she said, it would not have been a problem. Interactions like these become learning opportunities in which participants recognize potential asymmetrical boundaries with regard to acceptable media-making practices. These and other incidents prompted Ryanne and
Jay to discuss, in an open and sincere way, what was okay to film and what was not. Was it acceptable, for instance, to film Ryanne when she was upset and crying? While some people may feel sensitive about being filmed in this state, Ryanne and others embrace it as part of real life that is worthy of recording. Establishing parameters ahead of time as Ryanne and Jay did helps negotiate ethical obligations between media participants. These types of interactions indicate that it is possible to play by the rules and have fun. Indeed, Huizinga (1949:11) argues that “all play has its rules.”

But what should a media maker do when they do not know people’s interpersonal boundaries? For some video bloggers, it is deemed better to film first and ask questions about distribution later. However, whenever media is taken, there is always a risk that it might find its way to a much wider audience than was intended (Katzmann 2004). Such an observation would suggest that people should think carefully and slow down the mediated moment of recording to consider future ramifications of taking a particular image. One can think of the process as slowing down (Eriksen 2001) the mediated dimension of interpersonal experience as mediated by a camera.

To use another metaphor, one might think of the vast proliferation of images as a “loud” experience, thus “controlling the volume” (Baron 2008:32) is beneficial in order to consider who is being recorded and why. People might consider how their comfortable media “volume” levels may be different from those of other people. Participants on YouTube may aspire to achieve what James (2009:80) calls “good play” or forms of activity that are “meaningful and socially responsible.” This chapter aims to be co-productive in involving readers to reflect on their own mediated, ethical parameters. The goal is also to encourage media makers and participants to be co-productive about establishing acceptable interpersonal video-making practices, and to acknowledge that their own representational ideologies may differ from those of other people.

Many kids are growing up in heavily mediated spaces within the home, and these images are often circulated online. In these mediated moments, kids are offered various modalities of appropriate digital literacies, including image ethics. In some cases, these lifestyles and representational ideologies may be so naturalized that they are not even recognized as things that kids are “learning.” They simply become aspects of one’s embodied, digitized, mediated worldviews and habits (Bourdieu 1977). For many kids, it is through experiencing interpersonal mediated moments that they form tacit representational ideologies while growing up on the Tube.