In “The Online Comment: A Case Study of Reader-Journalist-Editor Interactions” (YSW v.10), Olivia Weitz examines the relationship between readers’ comments and accountability in instances of online journalism. She argues that “different constituencies in the commenting process embody different perceptions of the purpose of the comment” and uses her study to show that, although journalists feel that reader responses on comment boards impel them to include better sourcing and information, readers typically do not direct their comments toward the journalist. This indicates that readers do not hold the journalists to the same level of accountability that the journalists are holding themselves. Rather, readers address the editors or the news organizations with their concerns and look to them for resolutions (82-83).

In her article, Weitz conducts a case study exploring how online comments are employed by those who respond to articles and by those that are the targets of the responses. Weitz examines a New York Times article and its subsequent comments, edits, and follow-up pieces. One issue that Weitz attempts to understand through her study is the “disparate perceptions” that exist surrounding the function of the online comment (81). After demonstrating that readers almost always address their comments to editors and/or institutions, she questions why this is the case and suggests a need for more studies to explore this phenomenon (88). I hypothesize that the answer lies not necessarily with the readers’ perception of the comment board but with the readers’ perception of the journalists. The voice of the journalist in Weitz’s case study is forced to change based on concerns from readers and the production authority under which he works. I argue that the changes give the appearance of a lack of control and power on the part of journalists as they are subjected to the desires of those who interact with their original texts. In her article “The Speaker Respoken: Material Rhetoric as Feminist Methodology,” feminist rhetorician Vicki Burton illustrates how texts change with each re-publication and the effect that these changes have on the original author’s voice. Using Burton’s methodology, which was originally intended to assist feminist scholars in recovering and contextualizing women’s writings, the reasoning behind the “disparate perceptions” surrounding the comment boards becomes clearer.

In her work, Burton describes how using material rhetoric is an effective methodology for scholars studying texts that have been altered over time. By tracing the changes made to an original version of a text, it is possible for readers to understand the forces that acted on the text and altered its intended meaning. Burton’s methodology allows the reader “to penetrate and examine the layers of rhetorical accretion, reading each one closely not only for the nature of its own rhetoric but also for how it colors the ethos of the core text” (149). Burton explains that when referring to
accretion she is describing the “process of layering additional texts over and around the original text” (148). Accretion comes in many forms; whether it be a decision to add a note from the editor or handwritten notes in the margins of a printed text, the alterations and additions affect the original text (150-51). Burton instructs readers to pay attention to “production and distribution” and “publishing decisions” as these decisions also add to the way a text is understood (147). These decisions as well as the decisions to accrete new texts to the original are “the result of human agency.” With each change made to the original text, “the speaker of the core text is respoken. Respeaking can be a way for the production authority to modify the ethos of the original speaker or call into question something in her text… Institutions desire to control texts, provide boundaries, manage the way texts are understood by readers” and altering an original text makes it possible to do this (148-49).

Burton asserts that, when speakers submit their words for the public to hear or read, the speaker is not necessarily the highest authority of their own words; rather the true authority lies with whomever controls the words as “voices are managed and silenced by the ways a production authority uses their discourse and the forms and forums in which it is published” (146). In her case study, Weitz follows a saga beginning with the publication of a breaking news article that relied on anonymous sources for its information written by New York Times journalist Richard Pérez-Peña (81). Responding to readers’ comments, Pérez-Peña wrote three additional articles and appended his original piece (Weitz 84, 86). The additions and alterations work together to change Pérez-Peña’s original message and intent, and in doing this Pérez-Peña appears unable to control his own words when he publishes them under the umbrella of the New York Times. He is subject to the rules and whims of the production authority, in this case the Times and its editorial staff. Furthermore, as Weitz’s study shows, the journalist also must answer to the public, as Pérez-Peña made clear by publishing follow-up articles that directly addressed reader comments (86).

Another interesting detail from Weitz’s article is how readers’ voices make it to the Times’ comment board. Comments are “screened before they are posted” and only make it through the screening if they are “articulate, well-informed remarks that are relevant to the article” posted by a registered user who has provided their full name and location (Weitz 84). While the screening process is intended to “create a space where readers can exchange intelligent and informed commentary that enhances the quality of [the Times’] news and information,” it is a space as defined and designated by the New York Times and is, therefore, not truly a public space for commenting (Weitz 84). This adds another layer of silencing from the production authority that is the New York Times. Only those readers deemed acceptable by the Times’ standards can be heard, and, as a result, Pérez-Peña can only respond to the readers whose comments he is given access to.

Weitz states, “Accountability is not necessarily greater between reader and journalist in an online environment with commenting capabilities, at least from the reader’s perspective; rather, it is intertwined between journalist, editor, and the institution in complex ways” (86). By considering the situation of Pérez-Peña and his message using Burton’s material rhetoric methodology, it becomes
clear that accountability and authority does not lie with him due to institutional constraints and the ability of others to force his words to be respoken. When journalists are given the freedom to wield their words without the influence of others, comments can rightfully be directed to them. Until then, commenters may as well continue addressing their concerns with reporting to editors and institutions.

Works Cited