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# Twitter Rhetoric: From Kinetic to Potential

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Twitter Rhetoric: From Kinetic to Potential

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Twitter Rhetoric: From Kinetic to Potential

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Everyone can agree that microblogging service Twitter makes a terrible first impression. Many will agree that this impression is an accurate assessment of many microblogging media, especially considering the narcissistic and egotistical bent that so often dominates the genre. Rhetoricians are justifiably skeptical of microblogging, especially of its rhetorical value (or lack thereof). While many rhetorical scholars have contributed to the field of digital rhetoric, the field of microblogging rhetoric is still undefined. This article examines a new kind of rhetoric exhibited by Twitter, attempting to both start the discussion about Twitter rhetoric and enter the ongoing discussion about theories of rhetoric.

As Aristotelian proofs of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* provide the foundation for modern understanding of traditional rhetoric, they will also provide the framework for this analysis of Twitter's iteration of "potential" rhetoric.

Keywords: digital rhetoric, Aristotelian proofs, Twitter, persuasion, new media

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Iranian protestors took to the streets in June 2009 after alleged ballot fraud and vote rigging resulted in the “reelection” of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Millions of protestors organized, marched, and protested for weeks, and yet the revolution was definitely not televised. The Iranian government expelled traditional media from the country as soon as the protests started, ostensibly fearing international attention. Unfortunately for Ahmadinejad and his radical administration, the protests in his country did indeed get international attention, but not from any traditional source. Internet phenomenon and microblogging service “Twitter,” not yet two years old, became the medium of choice for protest leaders and participants. Twitter served as a loud rhetorical response to the regime’s heavy-handed tactics, broadcasting live play-by-play accounts of the protests in a way no other service could. On June 21, for example, Iranian Twitterer @persiankiwi urged fellow rioters to be passive: “If you catch militia – do not use violence do not kill him – treat him as your brother” (@persiankiwi) and June 24, the same user reported a particularly brutal crackdown on the rioters: “saw 7/8 militia beating one woman with baton on ground - she had no defense nothing” (@persiankiwi). The almost universal access to Twitter—anyone with a cell phone could post tweets—allowed for a wide range of media exposure, with Twitterers inside Iran posting links to pictures, protest hub Websites, and videos (the most famous of which depicted the horrific footage of the murder of Neda, an innocent Iranian student). Twitter users all across the world reacted with inspiring support, rallying around Iranians in an effort to help them in any way they could to counteract the abuse by Ahmadinejad and his supporters.

There is no doubt that Twitter played an important role in the protests themselves, but much of the preparation for this influence came before the election even started. Many Iranians involved in the protests had loyal Twitter followings long before the protests (Nasr). These tech-savvy Iranians tweeted about politics and current events, but also their lives, jobs, and habits. They were like so many other microbloggers on Twitter, broadcasting a mix of seemingly meaningless

commentary, links, and thoughts. They all worked to build their Twitter network, but none of them could have foreseen how powerful their networks would end up being by the end of June 2009.

These Twitterers highlight a rhetorical approach different than traditional strategic rhetoric, an approach focused more on networking than persuasion, more on making friends than making points. Twitter rhetoric is not entirely new—its contingent elements of instantaneous and network-focused communication existed separately in a number of forms. Twitter rhetoric, however, is unique in that it combines the two on a larger scale than has ever been possible. In this article I argue that microblogging is the medium most conducive to this new kind of rhetoric.

I will compare this kind of rhetoric to electricity. Traditional rhetoric is akin to focused electrical transmission: one-time strategic transfer of energy in a particular moment. I will refer to this kind of purposeful transfer as “kinetic.” The new kind of rhetoric, on the other hand, is more comparable to preparation for a future transfer of electricity through the construction of an electrical power grid, which I will refer to as “potential” rhetoric. The power lines are set up and ready to go—sometimes only using a small percentage of the carrying capacity of the lines—so that when something remarkable comes along the grid is ready to facilitate transmission to the entire network. This new focus is less on the energy transmitted *now* and more on the potential for *future* transmission.

Kinetic persuasion is the focus of traditional—or, as Burke calls it in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, “old”—rhetoric (85), the kind where a single rhetor marshals the available means of persuasion, stands up in front of an audience, and works to change minds *the moment* his argument is heard. In energy terms, traditional rhetoric is comparable to sending a great deal of electricity to a specific location with the hopes of making the desired change with the surge.

Microblogging in general, and Twitter in particular, can work in “old” rhetorical ways, as exhibited in the days of Iranian protests, but often works in the realm of Kenneth Burke’s “new”

rhetoric—the kind focused on what he terms “identification” (*Rhetoric of Motives* 19). Burke describes identification as the form that makes the audience want to be associated with a given rhetor, institution, feeling, or movement. Identification is an inherently reflexive element, causing the audience to make connections between the outside element and themselves: “Ordinarily,” Burke writes, “such identifications involve simple cases of self-love whereby one admires oneself roundabout by identifying oneself with some group which one praises, whereupon one’s own shares in the assets of the corporation appreciate proportionately” (“Responsibilities” 37). Identification, then, is a very personal shift in attitude, the kind of shift poetry focuses on. It is the kind of persuasion that gets individuals interested enough that they become invested in the process, “as when people earnestly yearn to identify themselves with some group or other. Here they are not necessarily being acted upon by a conscious external agent, but may be acting upon themselves to this end” (*Rhetoric of Motives* 63). An individual can “act upon themselves” to move toward identification after coming in contact with a variety of forms: a moving political speech or a moving painting, a well-written advertisement or a masterful poem.

The lead up to the Iran situation proves that Twitter is a cutting edge example of this “new” rhetoric of identification that Burke described, but it goes much further. The powerful rhetorical action in Iran was made possible by the power grid of relationships built up by the Iranian Twitterers long before the moment of identification during the protests. These Iranians’ protest tweeting was powerful proportional to the seemingly meaningless tweeting the participants had engaged in before the riots. In other words, the surge of kinetic persuasion from influential Iranian tweeters in the days of the riots was made possible because the powerful network they built up beforehand was already strong enough to facilitate such a transfer of persuasive energy. This kind of persuasion, the focus of microblogging, is unprecedented in its scope and focus.

Twitter’s potential rhetoric is significantly different than previous forms of potential rhetoric.



Potential persuasion has always been a part of rhetoric, with Aristotle's *topoi* and Cicero's commonplace books both focused on inventing arguments that could potentially be used in future persuasion. Here, kinetic rhetoricians strategically searched for the available means of persuasion and stored them up, in a kind of rhetorical Duracell battery, for use in future arguments. Microblogging rhetoric is significantly different than traditional potential persuasion—so much so that potential rhetoric becomes the main focus. Twitter is more about publicly accumulating the potential for future rhetorical efficacy than privately storing that energy away. In other words, some try to get their tweets heard above the noise, but the noise itself is actually what matters. The meaningless noise a rhetor creates over time (potential rhetoric) is the very thing that will help make future tweets effective in the future.

Iranian elections are a good example of the importance of the everyday noise of Twitter. People weren't saving up arguments/evidence for when the time is right. They were instead building up potential rhetoric—through *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*—so when the time was right their power grid was already established. My paper will focus on these three core proofs of rhetoric. I will discuss how the medium of microblogging has introduced a new focus on the potential of these proofs for persuasion. I will first introduce Twitter as a new medium and explain ways that microblogging rhetoric makes possible a new application of our traditional views of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

## **The New Medium**

Microblogging is a new development in the history of rhetorical communication, but real-time communication, in and of itself, is by no means a new invention. In addition to the obvious medium of speech, instantaneous communication was possible before the Internet through various tools. The telegraph brought instant communication to the world—now instead of waiting days or weeks for a letter to reach an intended audience, potential rhetors were able to get their message anywhere in the world in a matter of

minutes. McLuhan's "global village" was just getting started. The telephone was another major step forward in the realm of instantaneous communication—wait time was essentially reduced to nothing, and people were able to communicate with one other person anywhere in the world. Eventually, with conference calls and speakerphones, potential audiences increased greatly.

The Internet was another important step forward in the quest for accessible and flexible instant communication, one that is modifying the "global village" into a "global real-time village." Online instant communication took the strengths of the telephone—real-time audio communication, flexible audiences—and the strengths of the telegraph—instantaneous written communication, far-flung audiences—and built upon them. With the early Internet discussion boards, audiences jumped from however many people you could add into your conference call or group around your speaker phone to however many people had access to the Internet and the right Web address. An individual could post a comment on a discussion board and hear back from hundreds of other individuals, from all over the world, in the amount of time it would take to make a telephone call.

By the end of 2007 the term "microblogging" had become the next stage of real-time communication. Microblogging refers to the practice of making small posts, often called "status updates," on any one of the current services offering microblogging capabilities. Microblogging has significantly built upon the Internet's accessibility, range, and ease of use—microblogs are arguably some of the simplest tools for Internet communication, while still being accessible and reaching a large number of people. The two most prominent sites for microblogging are Facebook's status update and Twitter, with other, smaller services such as Yammer, Friendfeed, and Google Buzz offering variations on the theme. These microblogs first prompted participation by asking, "what are you doing?" but have since morphed into a what digital journalist Jay Rosen refers to as "mindcasting" ("Defining"), or the habit of sharing thoughts, links, and information.

Microblogging has expanded the realm of real-time communication by taking advantage of the medium of the Internet. Twitter, for example, is as accessible as the Internet (which is becoming more and

more accessible by the day as mobile phone carriers incorporate Internet access into their service plans), with a broadcast size as big as the Internet—there are virtually no limitations on Twitter, whose audience is anyone with access to the Internet. Microblogging takes these strengths and adds to them the incredible simplicity inherent in the medium—indeed, one of the biggest critiques of Twitter is the superficiality imposed by the strict 140-character maximum. At the same time, Twitter does not completely preclude the possibility of extended argument. As one Twitter commentator pointed out, “it’s just as easy to use Twitter to spread the word about a brilliant 10,000-word *New Yorker* article as it is to spread the word about your Lucky Charms habit” (Johnson). Because of (or possibly despite) this ability to use Twitter for serious communication as well as the frivolous, people have latched onto the idea of microblogging, most wholeheartedly on the Website Twitter.

Twitter leads the medium of microblogging as its most widely used and influential representative. Twitter was started in late 2006 by two Internet entrepreneurs who, by 2009, had been catapulted into Time’s list of 100 most influential “Builders and Titans.” Twitter’s rise to stardom started out slowly and gradually gained momentum, getting a big boost from its innovative use for collaboration and commentary at the 2007 SXSW academic conference (Douglas). By late 2008, Twitter was expanding exponentially, with the number of users doubling many times in a period of just a few months (Enterprise). While the amazing growth started to taper off a bit in late 2009, Twitter has solidified itself as a major player in the realms of social media, digital persuasion, and the real-time Web. Twitter has made its way into politics, first and most prominently with candidate/President Obama, and now with many local, state, and national politicians. Twitter has proven an influential customer service tool and a social networking powerhouse.

Before discussing microblogging’s rhetorical power in terms of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*, I must first address one of the most prominent critiques of Twitter: that it takes the element of depth out of writing. Critics of Twitter often wonder what sort of meaning can be squished into a mere 140 characters of text—what great work of authorial genius would survive if condensed into a mere 20 words? One theory, written

quite a few years before “microblogging” was a compound word, offers an explanation as to how such condensed prose could still have rhetorical power and scholarly salience. Composition theorist Peter Elbow made a compelling argument that writers would benefit from writing more like they speak.

Elbow argues that attributes of speech should be incorporated more into writing (290-98). Many of the characteristics applauded by Elbow are found quite readily in many microblogging media. Elbow argues that while we should devote more time to writing that exhibits these characteristics, we should by no means abandon traditional composition. Elbow’s disclaimer is pertinent to my argument as well—while I discuss the merits and rhetorical implications of microblogging, I do not suggest we neglect traditional, fully-developed expository writing. I echo Barbara Warnick’s explanation in *Rhetoric Online* that online persuasion is not superior to the traditional variety (27).

Traditional rhetoricians have good reason to view Twitter negatively: first, a lot of tweets are indeed banal and autobiographical narcissism. Many people use Twitter as a me-megaphone, a way to make sure everyone knows their successes and failures so that others can be impressed or sympathetic. Even when people aren’t deliberately narcissistic, the very premise of Twitter (you want to know my opinion so often that I need to give it to you in regular short bursts) seems self-centered. This perception, while based on the large portion of tweets that are solely self-centered, ignores the power of potential rhetoric. Twitter is frustrating to people who have a more oratorical view of rhetoric—“how do I get my arguments above the chatter?” they wonder. The idea of potential rhetoric introduces the perspective that the chatter itself is meaningful, that potential rhetoricians tend to engage more in the art of small talk than the art of argumentation.

Microblogging is not solely chatter-based, however. There is a significant amount of kinetic rhetoric going on: featuring discussions regarding everything from politics to business to charity to activism. Twitter provides rhetors with many opportunities to craft kinetic arguments. This kind of

kinetic persuasion demonstrates the flexibility provided by Twitter—rhetors can craft kinetic arguments as the Obama campaign did during the 2008 campaign for president, and rhetors can craft potentially persuasive arguments whose power comes from the seemingly meaningless (and yet network-creating) babble that characterizes Twitter. For example, see Than’s discussion of CNN and Ashton Kutcher teaming up to raise money for malaria nets, and Holmes’ description of an anti-Amazon revolt to get certain books reinstated into the site’s system, both examples of the power wielded by Twitterers who built powerful networks (Than; Holmes).

Twitter is a new and cutting edge medium that must be examined carefully and critically. This medium, as with all media, is full of weaknesses and shortcomings. At the same time, we must take care not to throw the rhetorical baby out with the critical bathwater. Indeed, as rhetoricians Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff have pointed out, new media are often somewhat unfairly criticized:

We generally tend to connect the older medium to rationality and to successful communication exclusively; we tend to describe the new one as less rational and much less likely to succeed in communicating ideals. What is often true in such discussions is that we make an unfair comparison: we judge the new medium according to its ability to communicate the type of ideas for which the older one had been designed, and it is no surprise that it fails in that regard. Moreover, we tend to identify the ideas suited to the old medium and the manner in which that medium communicates them with what is rational. Accordingly, even if the new medium is sometimes judged to be successful in communicating its own ideas by its own methods, we are tempted to consider these ideas at best as inferior to the former, at worst as irrational and harmful. (xxxvi)

I hope to achieve the elusive medium between blindly embracing the new medium and blithely

disregarding it. I contend that Twitter update our understanding of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*—terms central to our current understanding of rhetoric, and terms that I will now discuss in more depth.

### Potential Logos

The term *logos* has been debated for centuries. I do not have space in this article to recapitulate the full discussion about the term, only to introduce a basic and functional definition to be used as foundation for further inquiry: “In Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, Logos is an element of persuasion, which is discovered or worked up, an artistic means of influencing an audience—persuasion based on ‘truth or apparent truth’” (*Encyclopedia of Rhetoric* 458). Aristotelian *logos*, then, is a logical element of rhetoric based on truth and tasked with persuasion. Aristotle specified common topics (*topoi*) and enthymemes as common uses of *logos* (*Encyclopedia of Rhetoric* 459). These mini-arguments are small pieces meant to invoke the larger whole of complete arguments. The focus of Aristotelian *logos* is preparation of examples, statistics, and figures for a moment of kinetic rhetoric—a well-prepared rhetor wielding a logical argument that is applicable to the current situation.

The focus on kinetic *logos* in traditional rhetoric is shifted to potential *logos* in microblogging. Twitter’s *logos* can be described in economic terms: some of these pithy microblog blips, especially as transmitted on Twitter, are emerging as primary brokers in what rhetorician Richard Lanham calls “the economy of attention” (Lanham 6), the driving force behind the persuasive presentation of truth. Kinetic *logos* is focused on immediate rhetorical transactions: a rhetor provides good reasons and arguments and gets altered actions or beliefs in return. Potential *logos* is focused more on forging rhetorical connections and earning their attention, on convincing audience members to allow new power lines connecting them with the rhetor. The new focus can be seen in five of Twitter’s defining characteristics, all of which demonstrate characteristics of Aristotle’s *logos* insofar as they focus on working to persuade an audience to consider an argument (read this) or invitation (follow

my Tweets). These characteristics help shape the logical power of tweets, power that is different from traditional enthymematic or syllogistic *logos*. Twitter logic can be termed *logos* only to the extent it makes an argument that particular tweets deserve the audience's attention. I will briefly introduce each of the five characteristics and discuss how they work to persuade an audience to pay attention to an argument. The five characteristics are referrals, memes, hashtags, @ replies, and keywords.

**Referrals: digital road signs.** One of the most useful resources made available through Twitter is the network of digital referrals it produces. Twitter does more than simply add to the information of the Internet—it serves as a virtual filter, a series of direction-giving suggestions to channel attention toward the most relevant information. On the surface, Twitter seems to be the quintessence of too much information: according to one researcher, by October 2009 Twitter was receiving 26 million tweets *per day* (Signorini). Lanham seems almost prophetic in this area: in 2006 he predicted, “[t]he ability to prioritize information, to focus and reflect on it, and to exclude extraneous data, will be at least as important as acquiring it” (216). Twitter is stepping up to the challenge—cofounder Evan Williams defines Twitter’s goal as “helping you discover the information that matters most to you as quickly as possible” (“Why Retweet Works”). The focus shifts from kinetic argumentation to organizing information—a more potentially persuasive venture. This information organization is based on trust: digital road signs are followed only when they are connected with reputable and useful arguments. Only those who most trust that particular rhetor, those who have followed her road signs before and have found useful information, will consider allowing themselves to be added to that rhetor’s network. This consideration represents the potential for future rhetorical influence—Twitter *logos* is more about persuasion to membership in a network than about crafting kinetic logical arguments.

It is important to note that Twitter is not just a service for prioritizing *Twitter* information, but

for organizing the information of the Internet *as a whole*. This comes from what venture capitalist and Twitter expert Fred Wilson calls “the power of the passed link” (Schonfeld). Using Twitter’s powerful system of digital road signs, savvy Twitterers are able to discover and propagate influential and interesting memes by passing links, using others’ suggestions as a resource to navigate the information highway. This system is an example of Barbara Warnick’s claim that “electronic media content has become rife with intertextuality” (93). Warnick uses the hyperlink, one of the most intertextual elements found on Twitter, as an example of digital intertextuality (94). The hyperlink allows memes to begin on a blog or Website (Warnick’s digital intertextuality) and then spread to, and through, Twitter. Rhetors build up persuasive energy based on the kind of links they pass. If a rhetor repeatedly links out to shoddy arguments or resources, their potential rhetorical energy will decrease: their network of power lines will lose connecting nodes and therefore will lose reach and coverage. On the other hand, if a rhetor regularly passes on links that prove very useful to his or her audience, that rhetor will strengthen and expand his or her network of power lines, eventually forming a powerful grid robust enough to transmit significant energy.

Shifting for a moment to the audience’s perspective, this is where “following” the right people on Twitter turns out to be invaluable (and where building up potential Twitter *logos* is equally as invaluable—the more persuasive a rhetor is, the larger that rhetor’s network will be). If an individual is particularly interested in politics, for example, she will follow individuals who tweet about politics, often those in her region. Eventually, she will learn who are the most influential and the most well-connected, and add to or subtract from the group of people she follows. In a short amount of time, that network of followers could become more helpful to her than the local paper or the blogosphere, precisely because they will pass on their own experiences *as well as* useful links to politically relevant information from all over the Web. These passed links, along with individuals’ commentary and personal experiences, combine to give the Twitter reader a very powerful supplement to traditional



means of getting information. Twitter doesn't always supplant traditional media; it supplements them through the referral system of passed links. Therefore, the most successful potential rhetors will eventually have built up quite a store of potential rhetoric through consistently passing useful links, so that when something big happens they will simply send a wave of energy through their existing power grid to get a large reaction.

**Memes: harnessing the power of the network.** One indication of how big a splash a Twitter post makes is the degree to which it is passed on. When a given tweet or collection of tweets is selected by the Internet's invisible hand it becomes Seth Godin's "ideaviruses" or Richard Dawkin's "meme." Both of these terms describe an element of culture that self-propagates and self-advertises—in essence, memes represent the peak of digital persuasion. The rhetor-creator of such an artifact has effectively leveraged her potential persuasiveness—her network—to get people to encounter an artifact of kinetic persuasion. The most persuasive of tweets attract attention to themselves. Each of the below-mentioned Twitter elements allows tweets to be more readily available for such attention.

**Hashtags: tapping into existing networks.** Twitter's minimalist approach includes a simple, yet very important, function called the *hashtag*. Hashtags are keywords preceded by a pound sign, alerting the Twitterverse of a tweet on a particular subject. For example, in June 2009, Twitterers who posted tweets dealing with the Iranian protests used the hashtag #iranelection, which tagged the tweets and made it easier for people to follow the live updates. Hashtags rhetorically mark individual tweets, creating an organized and searchable collection and making it easier for the invisible hand of the digital marketplace of ideas to select the most attractive and persuasive attention-getters. The hashtag is also an element that strengthens the meme-producing capacities of Twitter. When a hashtag is intelligently used, it increases the potential persuasive energy by sending the tweet to everyone interested in that particular subject.

The hashtag is not entirely new to the digital rhetorical landscape. The idea of “tagging” bits of information, on blogs or mainstream Web pages, has been around for years as a way to increase the potential persuasive nature of a bit of online information. Twitter simply builds on that principle, giving these tags more accessibility and timeliness. This new digital kairos is not lost on academics—Twitter has become quite popular at scholarly conferences across the nation (CCCC, MLA, SXSWi, etc.), serving as a real-time note aggregator, an informal question-and-answer service, and a way to make a name for oneself, all at the same time.

This focus on tagging arguments is also not new to rhetoric. Rhetors have been collecting and categorizing arguments ever since Cicero’s “commonplace books”: collections of commonplaces and common topics that could be used in future arguments. Twitter allows such collections to be available to everyone, shifting the focus from kinetic rhetoric (rhetors privately storing arguments for future deployment) to potential rhetoric (rhetors strengthening their networks by sharing thought processes and arguments-in-the-making with their networks).

**@Replies: Twitter’s citation system.** Twitter also offers a tagging function based on “@replies” which allows an individual user to tag another user in a particular tweet. Using this feature, rhetors can credit individual users for an idea, continue a discussion (by tagging others in a new tweet), or recommend/endorse individuals’ ideas. This feature drives a great deal of the logical power of Twitter, and provides an interesting metric (how many times a rhetor is mentioned with an @reply) for potential rhetorical efficacy. Future studies might examine the rhetorical power of Twitter artifacts using this metric.

One example of this ability to tag individuals is something called the “retweet.” When a tweet is retweeted, it is endorsed by a reader and sent on to that reader’s followers, with the original author given credit with an @reply. In this way, individuals gain more potential for influence—the more a rhetor is retweeted, the more her name will get out into the Twittersphere, and the quicker her

power grid network will grow.

@replies make up the citation system of Twitter. Persuasive tweets are retweeted, with the original author's name as part of the tweet, and the original author gets the credit. This follows the pattern that many digital memes use—authors get credit for the creation of their most useful ideas. @replies serve as the digital signature on the bottom of successful memes, directing attention back to the original author. This system brings to real-time the academic practice of citing sources and engaging in a conversation—another iteration of the power of potential rhetoric. Rather than creating an argument in the here-and-now, this practice turns attention to other arguments, simultaneously contributing a full-fledged argument to the discussion and building personal credibility and potential rhetorical energy. This Twitter tool increases the possibility of creating and carrying on conversations in the future rather than just arguing into space. For example, starting in 2009, a group of educators began meeting on Twitter every Tuesday afternoon to discuss education practices. The group quickly grew, eventually engaging hundreds of participants every week (Terrell). Some say that Twitter is the ultimate narcissistic venture, and it can be. But it can also be an intelligent back-and-forth discussion, often quite scholarly in nature, among individuals who care about the same issues.

**Keywords: Twitter commonplaces.** In his article “Rhetoric and its Situations,” Scott Consigny merged the study of commonplaces, or “topics,” and the study of the rhetorical situation. He argues that topics give the rhetor the ability to both influence situations, as Bitzer argues, and adapt to situations, as Vatz argues (Consigny 185). Commonplaces on Twitter follow the same principles and give rhetors the same potential rhetorical influence, but take on new import when coupled with Twitter's real-time kairos. The oft-tweeted phrase “goodnight” is an example of this power: the word “goodnight” trends in the top ten most-tweeted words on a regular basis, beginning around 9pm ET. Many observers of the Twittersphere might scoff at such childish tweeting: not

only is this seemingly pointless, but millions engage in this pointlessness. But this is precisely what makes this Twitter commonplace so compelling. Some Twitterers, indeed, are simply wishing the Twittersphere sweet dreams, but there is more to it than that. All Twitterers, whether conscious of the fact or not, are tapping into an authentic Twitter commonplace and are, therefore, building up potential persuasive power. This keyword represents more than just “sweet dreams”; it represents any number of the many possible arguments: the Twittersphere is a place where people care about what other people are saying; Twitterers feel connected enough to their “followers” that they are willing to wish them goodnight; that the Twittersphere is united, and that it’s okay to do what millions of other Twitterers are doing. In other words, “goodnight” is a genuine Twitter commonplace. We might disagree with the arguments presented or implied, but they are still calling forth rhetorical arguments that provide these rhetors the opportunity to build up persuasive potential within a community.

With both kinds of keywords in play—those created on Twitter and those simply repeated on Twitter—rhetoricians on Twitter have profound rhetorical possibilities. Twitter’s intense focus on networking and relationship forming means that many Twitterers are always on the lookout for other Twitterers who share similar interests, causes, beliefs, or habits—other Twitterers who have built up the right kind of potential rhetoric. One way to sort and sift through the millions of Twitterers to find this crowd is to search for keyword usage. If a Twitterer is interested in rhetoric, for example, a simple Twitter search for the word “rhetoric” will bring up every instance anyone, anywhere, tweets the word (the search results will then need to be filtered for context and meaning, as people will employ keywords with different intended meanings). If a Twitterer is interested in joining a Twitter discourse community, that Twitterer will determine what keywords the community will likely use. The Twitterer will then do two things: first, the Twitterer will search for those keywords in order to locate individuals with similar interests, and second, the Twitterer will begin to

use those keywords in their personal tweets. Eventually, as a Twitterer becomes immersed in the discourse of a community and builds up enough potential persuasive energy, the community accepts the new member (through discussion, retweeting, following, etc.).

Keywords and commonplaces play a more profound role in the rhetoric of the Twittersphere than they do in traditional rhetoric as they help individual rhetors build up rhetorical energy. Commonplaces on Twitter are searchable by the entire world. Anyone, anywhere, who is interested in “rhetoric” can find a rhetorician if that rhetorician simply uses the word “rhetoric” in enough tweets. Similarly, networks of people with similar interests are able to find, and follow, each other based on keyword searches. Finally, Twitterers are able to post about current events, issues, and problems *as they are happening*, meaning that widely-used keywords will rise to the top of the “top trending items,” having significant impact on publicity and viewership of the associated argument, problem, or issue, and, therefore, building up significant potential persuasive power for the user.

While traditional logical arguments can be found in abundance all over the microblogosphere, a new focus on potential persuasion has sprouted in part from a kind of *logos* that builds up rhetorical power for future use. These networks of *logos* go far beyond facts, figures, stories, and examples, and instead create a power grid that give rhetors connections and relationships that greatly increase their opportunities for future kinetic rhetoric.

### **Potential Ethos**

While *ethos* can be defined quite simply as “the character of the speaker,” rhetoricians have long disagreed over the details and implications of that definition. The debate largely stems from the source of an individual’s character and credibility. Aristotle argued that they come from a speech artifact itself. Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian all held that *ethos* is formed based on the person’s character. Lysias combined the two theories: a rhetor should build up credibility by including

information about character in the artifact (Baumlin). *Ethos*, then, is either based on the speech or artifact at hand (invented), based on the past deeds of the person (situated), or some combination of the two. Kenneth Burke complicated the issue with his concept of identification: “you persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language . . . *identifying* your ways with his” (Burke 55). In other words, we gain credibility, in Burke’s eyes, by identifying ourselves with our audience—something that could either be done through situated or invented *ethos*, but most likely through a combination of the two.

Barbara Warnick discusses the importance of online credibility in her book *Rhetoric Online* by incorporating another theory: the Stephen Toulmin’s field-dependent model of credibility. In this model, readers determine credibility according to the context, or field, housing the given argument. Warnick gives the examples of the field of law, where arguments “rely on evidence introduced in the case, probable reasoning, and relevance to precedent,” and the example of the field of medicine, where arguments “rely on patient symptoms, research protocols, prior clinical trials or treatment outcomes, and scientific findings” (49). In this sense, digital *ethos* could come from “the procedures, content quality and usefulness, functionality, and values and norms important in the field in which the online site operates” (49). Twitter indeed gains some of its credibility from the field in which it operates. This field is defined by sparseness, sincerity, freedom (reports about breakfast and parliamentary debates occur side-by-side), openness, and contact with a social network of Twitter rhetors. In fact, the most influential and important Twitterers understand that the key to success is giving more than receiving. For example, the O’Reilly Media group, an influential social media consortium, suggests as much in their Twitter instruction manual, *The Twitter Book*:

The secret of social media is that it’s not about you, your product or your story. It’s about how you can add value to the communities that happen to include you. If you want to make a positive impact, forget about what you can get out of social media and

start thinking about what you can contribute. Funnily enough, the more value you create for the community, the more value it creates for you. (O'Reilly 101)

Finding Twitterers who post useful information requires that the reader be well enough versed with Twitter to navigate the Twittersphere, a skill that some Twitter skeptics likely don't have. Indeed, part of the draw of Twitter comes from becoming immersed.

Due to its sparse setting, Twitter *ethos* cannot rely on the visual cues of traditional Websites. With so little textual space to work with, Twitterers must be careful to be credible in the eyes of fellow Twitterers so as to maintain or increase their network. Credibility is of utmost importance to microblog users, as the number of people who follow their updates is directly related to their credibility and believability: if rhetors post nonsense or lies, many people will stop subscribing to their microblog stream. Twitter does indeed have significant elements of the kind of *ethos* valuable in kinetic argumentation, but it also features a new focus on the *ethos* that plays an important role in potential rhetoric.

**Twitter *ethos*.** Some Twitterers are credible on Twitter because they are popular on the court (Shaq), on the radio (John Mayer), on the airwaves (Larry King), or on the big screen (Ashton Kutcher). These Twitterers supplement their already existing credibility with their Twitter *ethos*, enhancing what they already had—a classic example of kinetic ethos in action. Rhetors use Twitter to transmit this new information along their already-existing network, treating Twitter just like any other broadcast medium, and marshaling it for their own kinetic persuasive goals. For example, movie star Ashton Kutcher, an unofficial Twitter spokesman, has been able to bolster his already significant name-recognition to turn himself into somewhat of a social media maven. Microblogging is a medium that alters the already-existing credibility of celebrities, known for their well-knownness, by allowing us to *get to know* them as well to *know of* them.

**Potential Twitter *ethos*—“twethos.”** Other Twitterers, however, earn “tweet cred” based

solely on their Twitter prowess, usually tied to a cornering of a niche market of interest. Whereas the previous group gains followers because they are popular (they have a network), this group gains popularity (a network) as they gain followers—they invent their own *ethos* as a direct result of the content of their tweets. For example, Twitterer @Oxfordgirl now has thousands of followers from all over the world. This user gained credibility based on her tweets regarding the Iran election fiasco mentioned above. Because of @Oxfordgirl's accurate, timely, and pertinent tweets, which were retweeted quite frequently, @Oxfordgirl has *become* a very credible source for everything dealing with the Iran election. Similarly, @anamarietox, a political Twitterer based on Washington, D.C., has gained an enormous following (over 1,400,000 on Twitter), and therefore an enormous amount of rhetorical power, due to her tweets from the Hill. Both of these online Horatio Algiers have successfully built a Twitter following based on their powerful potential rhetoric. They took what they had—knowledge, the right location at the right time, and a small following—and with it gained significant potential persuasive power. Now, if they call for action on any subject, they will have many in their audience ready and willing to participate. In future research, it will be interesting to examine the half-life of such credibility. I imagine that this kind of *twethos* is, to some degree, short lived: a Twitter rhetor is only as good as his most recent tweets.

This immediacy and self-created *ethos* represents the shift from kinetic, now-centric rhetoric to potential, network-centric rhetoric. Some rhetors, like Obama and Kutcher, are nothing more than Ciceros with a smartphone. These rhetors take advantage of Twitter as a broadcast medium—sending out announcements, making arguments, and crafting messages that are all kinetic in nature. Other rhetors, like @Oxfordgirl and @anamarietox, have built up a large niche network—an audience that trusts their opinions and perspectives. This audience will be much more likely to retweet, quote, forward, and repeat arguments and ideas linked to or made by these rhetors.



## Potential Pathos

As rhetors work to increase their network of potential persuasive energy, they cannot discount appeals to emotion, whatever shape they might take. *Pathos*, a core component of contemporary rhetorical theory, does not mean the same thing to every rhetorical scholar. The definition is fluid and dynamic, sometimes leading to respect of *pathos*, other times leading to derision. For my purposes, I will use the definition put forth by rhetorician Lawrence Green in *The Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*: “In outline, *pathos* is an appeal based on *passion* or *emotion* (the two words are drawn from the Greek and Roman traditions, respectively, and often are used interchangeably). Of the three appeals of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*, it is the latter that impels an audience to act” (555). According to this definition, *pathos* is a powerful appeal based on emotions raised in a particular audience by a skillful rhetor.

*Pathos* is often wielded kinetically in microblogging media. For example, Twitter is home to the same kind of passionate arguments used in other broadcast media: yelling, partisan bickering, sappy stories, appeals to patriotism, etc. A search of the hashtag #tcot or #tlot (top conservatives/liberals on Twitter) will reveal current examples of this kind of kinetic *pathos*—arguments meaning to elicit emotion right now.

Rhetors on Twitter also wield the power of the example in order to kinetically stir up emotions. This is done in words, but also and more powerfully through pictures. A number of services exist that allow Twitter rhetors to post pictures to their activity stream. While some pictures have little to do with persuasion, some pictures make use of the traditional *paradigmata*, examples in ongoing arguments. A particularly moving instance of this took place in the Iranian protests, as Twitter rhetors posted images of Neda’s brutal murder.

While Twitter is home to kinetic appeals of *pathos*, another important element of microblogging rhetoric comes with “phatic communication,” a concept first described in the 1920s

by Bronislaw Malinowski and expounded upon by linguist Roman Jakobson in the 1960s. Also called “ambient awareness” by technology writer Clive Thompson (Johnson 1), this is the type of communication that exists to perform social roles rather than to transmit information. An example of phatic communication is the casual question “how are you doing?”: the questioner does not really want to hear an information-packed response, but asks in order to maintain the friendship and initiate communication. Other examples of phatic communication would be “How was your weekend?” “How about that game last night?” “What are you up to these days?” or “Do you have any big plans for the holidays?” As soon as the conversation moves toward more information-based queries (“What are you researching?” “Did you see that debate last night?” “Are you coming to my party this week?”), the communication has left the realm of the phatic.

Twitter is an ideal medium for phatic communication—in fact, one of the biggest criticisms of Twitter (“I don’t *care* what you had for lunch, or what color your new fridge is, or what you think about last night’s TV show”) deals with the abundance of tweets that are phatic. Much of everyday communication, according to Jakobson, includes some element of the phatic function of language. While Twitter publicizes such communication more broadly, it is still following the general rules of phatic communication. Some tweets, like the “goodnight” commonplace discussed above, seem to have no bearing on any particular rhetorical situation, but they are in fact playing key roles in the very communication that can profoundly influence rhetorical situations by building up stores of potential rhetoric.

This combination of phatic and information-based communication means that rhetors are able to share their lives in a way previously impossible, building up a great deal of potential rhetorical energy over time. One information science expert explains that these microblogging experiences are quite powerful in the aggregate: “Merely looking at a stranger’s Twitter or Facebook feed isn’t interesting, because it seems like blather. Follow it for a day, though, and it begins to feel like a short

story; follow it for a month, and it's a novel" (Thompson). These tweets, over time, become an epistolary novel of sorts. Microblogging rhetors are primarily in the business of building up a network of emotional connections and potential persuasive energy. Thompson, in the same *New York Times* article, comments on this phenomenon:

This is the paradox of ambient awareness. Each little update — each individual bit of social information — is insignificant on its own, even supremely mundane. But taken together, over time, the little snippets coalesce into a surprisingly sophisticated portrait of your friends' and family members' lives, like thousands of dots making a pointillist painting. This was never before possible, because in the real world, no friend would bother to call you up and detail the sandwiches she was eating. The ambient information becomes like “a type of E.S.P.,” . . . an invisible dimension floating over everyday life.

(Thompson)

These relationships also give rhetors a significant power of potential that previously was very difficult to cultivate. Kenneth Burke's definition of rhetoric hinged on the idea of identification, exactly the sort of persuasion made possible with Twitter (oh wow—he likes the same breakfast cereal I do . . .). The potential rhetorical power of phatic communication keeps the channels of communication open so that when something significant happens, and substantive communication is needed, the channels are already established. These channels are created through phatic communication as rhetors build up their power grid of regular contacts. When something important happens, rhetors send a current through the already-established web, and suddenly move from phatic to more substantive communication, from potential to kinetic rhetoric. This phatic web makes substantive-laden communication more meaningful: without the web there, the content lacks context. Twitter is only one of many providers of this phatic context, but it is definitely one of the most timely, accessible, and wide reaching.

## Conclusion

This new immediate online communication has pushed rhetorical influence from the present (a speech going on right now) to the future (a link pointing to an extended argument you will read later). Potential rhetors are always building up to some distant unknown and unforeseeable future event totally outside the life cycle of an issue. This lack of affiliation with a rhetorical life cycle is important, as rhetors can't necessarily predict how their rhetorical storehouses will influence people. A prime example of this unpredictability is the situation in Iran, where the life cycle of the issue was altered, but not in the way the protestors would have liked. While Iran is still under the rule of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, protestors' tweets brought to light a revolution that would have otherwise occurred in the dark. These protestors alerted the entire world to the reality that a significant anti-Ahmadinejad Iranian population exists. While the Iranian protestors would have liked their tweets to topple the regime, those tweets did have an important effect. Potential rhetoric, then, is not strategic in the same way kinetic rhetoric is. Potential rhetoric is not even entirely controllable, as rhetors can never be sure exactly how their audiences will react to their posts—they can never be sure in which direction their network will expand after a particular posting.

This new focus on potential rhetoric raises some key questions that should be answered in future research. For example, how does this rhetoric of potential energy change our understanding of other foundational rhetorical principles such as the rhetorical situation? *Kairos*? Decorum? Audience awareness? Dialectic? How does this rhetoric of potential energy change our understanding of traditional types/genres of rhetoric—judicial, deliberative, and epideictic? What can potential persuasion teach us about political rhetoric, social movement rhetoric, demagoguery, public sphere discourse, religious rhetoric, advertising, or marketing? Are there other media that allow such a focus on potential rhetoric? Are there any modes of communication that allow solely for one or the other kind of rhetoric? Which type of rhetorical energy is more powerful overall?

How can these different types of energy even be measured?

In conclusion, the new focus on potential rhetoric marks a significant departure from our traditional focus on kinetic rhetoric. The new focus placed on potential rhetoric by microblogging has the potential to help our rhetorical theory move into the digital age by providing rhetorical roadmap for rhetors to engage in persuasion, both potential and kinetic, in a way previously uncharted.

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