TWEETING IS EASY, RHETORIC'S HARDER:

A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC POLITICAL DISCOURSE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty in Communication and Leadership Studies

School of Professional Studies

Gonzaga University

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Under the Supervision of Dr. John S. Caputo

Under the Mentorship of Dr. Joshua Misner

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Communication and Leadership Studies

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By

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December 2017

ProQuest Number: 10687269

ProQuest 10687269
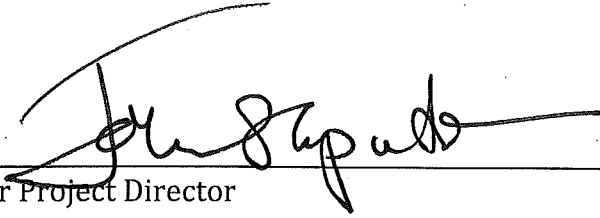
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ABSTRACT

Growing polarization of political discourse in America has resulted in a populace and representatives that are ineffective in persuasive rhetoric and are in many cases at an impasse. With more politicians—and more Americans in general—using computer mediated social media to discuss politics, these media are no doubt having an effect on the way we conduct our political discourse. This study is an examination of the interactions related to four different posts on the social media Twitter and Facebook. The study includes a rhetorical analysis to determine how social media users engage in persuasive rhetoric according to Aristotle. The ensuing analysis demonstrates how social media have affected users as technological determinism suggests, and discusses behavioral markers and indicators. This analysis increases understanding of persuasive rhetoric and the effect of computer mediated social media.

Keywords: politics, rhetoric, social media, Facebook, Twitter, computer-mediated communication, Aristotle, technological determinism, rhetorical analysis

ACKOWLEDGEMENTS

This study would have been impossible to complete without the aid, expertise, and support of a great deal of support from a number of individuals. I am especially indebted to my thesis mentor, Dr. Josh Misner, and thesis professor, Dr. John S. Caputo, both of Gonzaga University. Dr. Misner was quick to offer correction where needed, direction where desired, and complimentary words where earned. Also, in each draft, Dr. Caputo offered critical feedback and asked questions that helped to expand the study, guiding in the formation of the paper as well.

I would also like to acknowledge a few professors who have been instrumental in my journey at Gonzaga, and give thanks: For opening me to the idea of teaching, Dr. Carolyn Cunningham. For planting the seed of rhetoric, Dr. Mike Hazel. For opening to me the idea of doctoral work, Dr. John Horsman. Thank you all.

Also, I must express my profound gratitude to Vika Aronson without whom, this study would be at worst incomplete, and at best dispassionate. Thank you Vika for abiding my unreasonable obsessions with Hamilton, social media, and politics and for asking the extremely hard questions that make me press on.

Finally, I must thank my family, friends, and loved ones for their unfailing support and encouragement. I wish to thank my mother Pinkie, and grandparents, Grace and Joe for their love, guidance, and support in every endeavor great and small. Special thanks also to my brother and sister, Joshua and Jie; my friends, Luis and Josiah, and the countless others who have contributed to this endeavor.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

There was a time when the most taboo of conversation subjects in which to engage were religion and politics. Attending a dinner party with friends or a holiday event with family, guests would ensure engagement in polite conversation and endure the hours talking about innocuous subjects like the weather and school or uncontroversial subjects like sports and recent vacations. Politics however, has become a specter, a shadow darkening the doorway of every gathering. "Have you seen the President's latest tweet?" "This article about Congress came up on my newsfeed the other day…"

We cannot but talk about politics in a plurality of social settings today. No matter if an individual identifies as a Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, Independent, or non-Partisan, the topic of politics often invites a comment from every individual, informed or not. The social clubs of today—the places where we most often gather—are not physical buildings where activities and events are planned, instead they are websites where we scroll, comment, and RSVP for real-world events. These computer-mediated social media are virtual community centers reflective of the current events of our day. On these media can be seen the conversations du jour, the things everyone is talking about, from viral videos, to news stories; personal happenings, to seasonal recipes. Since the unusual campaign and election cycle of 2016, the topic of politics has been everyone's business, nowhere more visibly so than via social media. More and more, political discourse is happening via and being shaped by social media.

Importance of the Study and Statement of the Problem

Even before this past election cycle, politicians like former United States President Barack Obama changed how internet users engage in politics. In the 2008 election President Obama and his team integrated Web2.0 tools like social media, engaging 3.1 million financial contributors and mobilizing 5 million volunteers (Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011).

Similarly, current U.S. President Donald Trump utilizes social media, to communicate his agenda. In a press briefing, now-former Press Secretary Spicer (2017) said that Trump's use of social media gives him an opportunity to speak directly to the American people. Additionally, Trump has largely changed the way we talk about politics; from the words used, to the tools used.

Today, larger numbers of Americans are using social media to reach out to politicians (Pew Research Center, 2015). Also, because of Trump's consistent use of Twitter, there is now a legitimate possibility that individuals of any age, education level, or political stripe may send a tweet directly to the President of the United States and they may be read, retweeted, or ranted on by the leader of the free world. Additionally, any citizen may reach out to most elected officials on social media and have an expectation of influence.

Because of the growing integration of social media and politics, the way we use social media and the way we talk about politics becomes of great importance; the way each individual uses social media could influence real-world decision-makers. If then, users are unaware of how to persuade toward a point—regardless of the medium—or if

users are unaware of how to use these media shape their arguments, political discourse

can become increasingly prevalent at the same rate it becomes increasingly misguided.

Definitions of Terms Used

The following terms and definitions may aid readers in understanding the content

of this study:

Comment: On Facebook (Social Media), when a user creates an original post,

other users may write an initial response to the post. This initial response is called a

comment.

Post: On Facebook (Social Media), any user may create original content for self-

publishing on their own public or private Facebook Profile. This original content is called

a post.

Public: Public-facing or accessible by the general public; as opposed to private, in

which special permissions are needed.

Political Discourse: Discussion or dialogue associated with the governance of a

nation; inclusive of policy, politicians, current events, political parties etc.

Reply: On Facebook (Social Media), the response of any user directly to an initial

comment on a post.

On Twitter (Social Media), the initial response of a user to an original

tweet (replies on Twitter may also stand as Tweets).

Tweet: On Twitter (Social Media), a posting made on the social media website,

Twitter.

User: An individual using a personal social media account (e.g., Facebook user,

Twitter user, etc.)

Organization of Remaining Chapters

This thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter Two provides an examination of past and current literature addressing political discourse, social media, technological determinism, and rhetoric. These topics are relevant to understanding the effect of social media on public political discourse and provide a theoretical basis for the study. Chapter Three includes a discussion of the scope of the study as well as a detailed description of the method used and some ethical considerations. With the method established, Chapter Four becomes a comprehensive recap and presentation of the study's findings, including a discussion of any patterns and themes arising in the study. Finally, Chapter Five presents limitations of this study and recommendations for future study before ending with brief conclusions.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Philosophical Assumptions

Public Political Discourse in History

Often, when the subject of public political discourse arises, images of Greek philosophers in togas begin to form. Particularly in the context of Western—and more specifically, American—republican governing systems which are influenced by the classical Greek and Roman republic (Broschart, 2013). In Ancient Greece, political philosophy, as developed through public political discourse was in essence—and as far as is recognizable—invented by thinkers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (Lane, 2017). Further according to Lane, "the space of the political was the space of participation in speech and decision concerning public affairs and actions" (p. 5)

From this conceptualization of public political discourse, the nature of this dialogue as face-to-face communication is apparent. While television in particular has affected how candidates engage in political messaging in many ways, public political discourse remains in the domain of face-to-face communication (Huebner, 2012). According to Dover (2006) television was a medium that allowed officials and those engaging in public political discourse to speak directly to millions face-to-face. American politics and public political discourse often comes down to a politician or representative making a personal plea, that is, in the form of face-to-face debate, speeches, discussions etc. The only degree to which media such as radio and television have affected this discourse is that it has been amplified by those media.

Throughout human history, however other media—independent from a reliance on face-to-face communication—have become the domain of such discourse. Books,

pamphlets, and articles became the primary domain of public political discourse in colonial and post-revolutionary America. Postman (1992) explicitly wrote of the media involved in public political discourse stating,

> "America was the first nation ever to be argued into existence in print. Paine's *Common Sense* and *The Rights of Man*, Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, and the *Federalist Papers* were written and printed efforts to make the American experiment appear reasonable to the people" (p. 66).

Even according to Alexander Hamilton himself in the introduction to the Federalist papers, the publication of such was intended as an entry into public political discourse. He wrote, "My arguments will be open to all, and may be judged of by all" (Hamilton, 1787, p. 1). Miranda (2017) added of Hamilton, that his writings and published works were the driving force behind the foundation of the politically run financial systems of America.

Social Media and Political Discourse

Contemporary public political discourse has begun taking place, similarly, via written media. As opposed to published public written work political discourse has become prevalent in the virtual world of social media. As recently as summer 2017, every sitting U.S. Senator maintained an active Twitter account, and a majority additionally maintained a staff or campaign account as well (McGuinness, 2017). According to Pew Research Center (2016), of the users surveyed, around a quarter of Facebook and Twitter users (25% and 24% respectively) report that "a lot" of the posts that they see on social media are related to politics. During the time of this poll, statistics show that there were 319 million Twitter users and more than 1.8 billion Facebook users (Statista, 2017) .

From this data, what can be seen is that there is no shortage of public political discourse, but if the content and structure of this public political discourse conducted via computer mediated social media is examined, a stark difference between it, and discourse previously conducted via print media can be seen. Political communication had remained largely in the hands of politicians and media pundits until the advent of social media where larger swaths of the population was enabled in participating in political dialogue (Demata, 2016).

Public political discourse of print media for instance was not addressed personally, but rather addressed to the public. Once again using the Federalist papers for example, the general introduction was adressed "to the people of the state of New York" (Hamilton, 1787, p. 1). Hamilton stated the intent of the papers—written by himself James Madison and John Jay—by saying, "I shall endeavor to give a satisfactory answer to all the objections which shall have made their appearance, that may seem to have any claim to your attention" (p.6).

The discourse was based on policy not people, public political discourse via social media, however tends to be explicitly personal. Dockray (2015) noted that the arguments had via computer mediated social media lead to character assassinations instead of common understanding of an argument. The tendency is to imply, 'Well if you're saying *this* about *this thing*, then you probably also would or would not value *that thing*.' Rather than focusing on policies, discourse on socal media tends to focus on people. Gardner (2012), noted that due to computer-mediated communication technologies, individuals often say things online that they wouldn't say in person.

Discourse and Dialogue

Public political discourse is in very essence meant to be a dialogue. Baxter (2006) makes the point that every individual piece of dialogue ought to be a response to previous utterances. Instead however on social media, users tend to view dialogue as a response to potential utterances. As versus addressing what an individual says, what is addressed is potential other utterances. By the same token, Baxter continues that communication as dialogue is in very essence, unique.

In quoting Bakhtin (1986) Baxter noted that dialogue "always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable" (p.118-119; Baxter, 2006 p. 105). That concept is at odds with a vast majority of social media posts. Social media is littered with retweets and shared posts, perhaps at times with an added anecdote, but still wholly un-original and not unique.

Dialogue can also be anicipatory however, insofar as each individual "utterance" is crafted and even oriented toward a future response (Baxter, 2006). In other words, an individual might craft their argument to include a refutation to a potential rebuttal. This is often included as foundational to formation of a rhetorical argument, but is rarely accomplished via social media.

Demata (2016) stated this of the way Facebook users interact with political content in the comments written on Facebook walls: "Users may express admiration and support, or opposition and sometimes even hatred, for the page owner, but politically constructive debate does not seem to take place very often" (p. 86).

Further, social media posts and comments are inherently meant to *be seen* as versus to *open* dialogue. When a user levies a claim attacking someones character, they

do not do so in a bubble, but do so in order to get likes or agreement from others. Rice (2009) questioned if users would be so eager to post updates or comments if they thought no one would read them, and as his queston applies to leveling trite platitudes against indivudual's characters, the point may be demonstrated that users are often making comments to be seen instead of creating rhetorical arguments as done in public political discourse of print media.

Theoretical Basis

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Technological Determinism Theory

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Demata (2016) referenced a shift where political discourse can be engaged by the common man, and while this shift allows user-generated content and does not rely on establishment media and politicians, it also affects how individuals talk to each other about politics. Technological determinism insists that we as a culture shape our tools, and then those tools that we shaped, in turn, shape our culture; tools in this context as interchangable with media (Griffin, A first look at communication theory, 2003). Postman (1992) furthered the idea of technological determinism by warning that each new media technology carries in itself an ideology which is thrust upon it's users. So then, instead of using the tools, the users are used by the tools.

If this is true of social media, a culture would be developed in which tools that encourage brevity are created, which in turn creates a culture that rewards brevity and eschews in-depth discourse. In addition perhaps the culture might create tools that encourage superficial aesthetics, thus creating a culture that embraces that which is aesthetically pleasing instead of that which is effectual rhetorical argument. Griffin (2003), named politics and friendship as things explicitly that cannot remain unaffected

by communication technology, and indeed computer-mediated social media necessarily has an effect on public political discourse. Hipps (2009) noted that "digital text and the prined book require very different energies and create separate muscles in the mind" (p. 144). A recognition that acknowledges that the way that individuals within a culture think is shaped by their tools. Along these same lines, Drago (2015) found a link between rapid expansion of technology and a negative effect on face-to-face communication, further confirming the theory put forth by Postman that our media have a profound effect on more than just our thoughts, but our personal actions.

Public Rhetoric

Aristotelian rhetoric was rooted in persuasion based on three kinds of proof: logical (logos), ethical (ethos), and emotional (pathos). (Griffin, A first look at communication theory, 2003, p. 304). An effectual rhetorical argument is one that embodies all three principles set forth by Aristotle. First, the argument makes logical sense. It must follow a logical progression perhaps through conditional statements or syllogism. Second the source must be ethical, or credible, and credibility has a host of factors, including: believability, accuracy, fairness, depth, trustworthiness, bias, completeness, and reliability. (Johnson & Kaye, 2014) Finally, a rhetorical argument must strike an emotional chord. That is, the argument should be relatable, it must strike the public hearing—or reading—it as ideologically sound and beneficial to society.

Political discourse on social media may at times appeal to one or two of these proofs, but rarely does it include all three as an effectual rhetorical argument must. Political discourse as it is becoming today is less substantial and does not follow a train of logic, but is rather emotionally charged mush (Noise, 2015). Furthermore, the internet

enables this non-linear flow by presenting a "vast mosaic of hyperlinks with no fundamental beginning, middle or end" (Hipps, 2009, p. 145).

Rationale of the Study

The literature review offers a look at political rhetorical arguments using social media as a platform. There is still however much to be learned about the formation of rhetorical arguments and how this is shaped by social media. Aristotle defined rhetoric as the ability "to see all available means of persuasion" in every speaking situation. (Griffin, 1994, p. 349) The climate of political discourse via social media however is not one that encourages or focuses on persuasion in the traditional rhetorical sense.

Social media political discourse is often polarized; individuals clinging to one side of the political aisle or the other with little regard for moderation. Aristotle warned against extremes such as these and recommended the golden mean; the golden mean here meaning middle way communication practices. Aristotle made this application to ethics and in its larger application to rhetoric, the method would follow the intermediate path.

The call of Aristotle toward moderation and rhetoric is at the heart of the purpose and rationale of this review. While political discourse today masquerades as rhetoric, the practice is often far too polarized to be considered moderate. There are plenty of emotive appeals that strike visceral chords of readers, but there is little in the way of Aristotelian rhetorical arguments. If and since public political discourse has a history that embraces this moderation as a path forward and the same is less adhered to, an interest in the progression of society necessitates the examination of how this has changed and—as applicable—why, with a focus on the media used, and using the populous.

Research Questions

To further investigate the effects of computer-mediated social media on public

political discourse and formation of effectual rhetorical arguments, this rhetorical

criticism asks the following questions:

RQ1: How has computer-mediated social media affected the formation of
rhetorical persuasive arguments as related to political discourse?

RQ2: Does political discourse as engaged in via social media focus on persuasion
toward (or away from) policies or people?

RQ3: Will public political discourse sacrifice logical progression of ideas for
brevity?

RQ4: Do social media political arguments include more than two out of three of
Aristotles public rhetoric proofs?

Chapter Three: Scope and Methodology

Scope of the Study

This study will examine public political discourse as conducted through social media. Included in this study will be several posts and the subsequent comments or replies and will be discussed in detail in the methodology section. In the interest of respect of privacy, the posts and comments included in this study will only span those of individuals and organizations that allow their social media profiles and posts to remain "public," and "private" posts will remain excluded. The reason for this is that individuals with profiles and posts set to private may have a reasonable expectation that the information posted through their account may remain within the circle(s) of their friends. This study is designed to capture public-facing dialogue related to political discourse.

The breadth of this work is narrow and maintains a focus on two specific social media: Twitter and Facebook. The purpose of such breadth is to avoid social media on which political discourse is rare or absent. For instance, image-based social media like Instagram, Pinterest, and Snapchat, tend to contain less instances of public political discourse and thus are unable to be examined in a rhetorical criticism. Furthermore, the discourse that occurs via social media like Snapchat are not public facing as the responses to original posts remain private between the responder and original subject. Given the crowd-sourced nature and interactivity of media like YouTube, such media could be included in similar studies but is excluded from this one because it is used primarily for entertainment and not as a social medium.

Methodology of the Study

Design and Choice of Methods

The study will employ a qualitative approach to attempt providing a response to the research questions laid out above. Qualitative research begins with loosely formulated questions and then begins to make observations (Neuman, 2011). A qualitative approach will be employed for this study because qualitative research concerns itself with the why and how of decision-making, which is the best way to understand the effect of social media on public political discourse (Alasuutari, 2010). The study will demonstrate how users engage in discourse online, which is more sufficiently measured by observation of behavior.

More specifically, the qualitative approach here utilized will be rhetorical criticism. Rhetorical criticism analyzes the role of words as symbolic artifacts used for communication among people (Paynton & Hahn, 2017). The purpose of such an analysis is to better understand human relations and, potentially, offer new ways of looking at how we communicate and "help us to better govern our interactions with others" (Kuypers, 2009, p. 13) For each research question a different social media post will be examined in order to demonstrate the breadth of the effect of computer mediated social media on public political discourse.

Data Collection

Twitter will only be used to render a response to research question two as gathering a response to questions one, three, and four—with a limit of 140 characters (and in some cases 280)—would deliver, by and large, inconclusive answers. For instance question three, regarding brevity would be largely skewed as all posts and

comments are relatively brief. Though as of this writing it is not unusual for Twitter users
to create a thread that builds an argument or tells a story over a series of tweets, when
engaging in political discourse, ideas are typically exchanged one tweet—or a few
tweets—at a time. For questions one, three, and four, the study will examine posts and
comments from Facebook.

Also, to represent different ends of the political spectrum, as described below, the
profiles and accounts for left-leaning and right-leaning media will be represented, as will
be public-facing individuals and organizations. In order of research question, the
rhetorical criticism will be conducted as follows.

The post chosen for research question one will come from Facebook and will be
from *Fox News*. According to a study conducted by Pew Research Center (2012), Fox
News can be classified as a right-leaning news organization. To respond to the question,
the post and subsequent comments must be unlimited in nature to observe whether or not
users are engaging in the formation of rhetorical persuasive arguments. The study will
examine the first 200 comments (of more than 2,300 total) for the designated post and
will examine the first 20 replies to each of those 200 comments to examine whether
commenters are forming rhetorical persuasive arguments. The post from Fox News will
ask users to respond to a statement made by (as of this writing) current Speaker of the
House Paul Ryan; the original post is requesting engagement in public political discourse.

The post chosen for research question two will come from Twitter and will be
from *CNN*. According to the same Pew Research Center (2012) study, CNN may be
categorized as leaning left, though less so than other organizations. To respond to the
question, the post and subsequent comments will be limited in nature and will categorize

tweets in response as persuasive toward or away from: person(s), policy(ies), or neutral/indiscernible. Responses that must be classified as toward or away from the categories of person(s) or policy(ies) may also include organizations or groups. In each case, context must be included to determine in which category the comment should be placed. For example, should a post be about an organization or group like *CNN* itself, this will be classified as persons if the post does not explicitly call out policies with which it agrees or takes issue. The study will examine the first 100 comments (of 236 total) for the designated post and will examine the first 5 replies to each of those 100 comments to examine whether commenters are persuading toward or away from persons or policies. The post from CNN will introduce a debate between two Senators from the Democratic and Republican caucuses within the Senate on the subject of tax reform.

The post chosen for research question three will come from Facebook and will be from non-profit cooperative organization *Associated Press*. To respond to the question, the post and subsequent comments must be unlimited in nature in order to observe whether or not brevity is embraced in the pursuit of persuasion as opposed to logical progressive arguments. The study will examine the first 75 comments (of 134 total) for the designated post and will examine all replies to each of those 75 comments to examine whether commenters are arguing with a logical progression regardless of brevity. The post from Associated Press will be regarding a possible alliance between the current Republican President and Congressional Democrats.

The post chosen for research question four will come from Facebook and will be from the public profile page of international public figure Michael Frost. To respond to the question, the post and subsequent comments must be unlimited in nature in order to

observe whether or not more than two of Aristotle's three rhetorical proofs are present. The study will examine the first 70 comments (of 92 total) for the designated post and will examine all replies to each of those 70 comments to examine how commenters are employing the rhetorical proofs. The post from Michael Frost will be on the subject of bearing arms and its relationship to evangelical voters.

Data Analysis

Following typical qualitative research data analysis, examination of social media posts as listed above will search for patterns of behavior (Alasuutari, 2010). The goal of the analysis will be to determine how individuals engage in public political discourse via computer-mediated social media and how this engagement reflects on the research questions above.

The researcher will employ a priori coding technique to apply the theoretical rhetorical framework discussed above an laid out by Aristotle to the data collected from social media. In addition, a general grounded coding will also be employed to assess whether or not the emergence of the theme of technological determinisam is present. Particularly with research questions two and three. Though the study itself is qualitative, some quanittative data analysis methods may be employed to determine the consistency and appearance or patterns. For instance, results of research question two may be determined by numerical representation of instances of persuasion toward (or away from) policies, people, respectively.

Ethical Considerations

In respect of the privacy of social media users, the study will use only public comments and will not divulge the name(s) of any users.

Chapter Four: The Study

Introduction to the Study

This study finds roots in Aristotelian rhetorical persuasion. As such, proper

rhetorical persuasion must first be established before the presentation and analysis of data

and findings. Aristotle wrote, "There are, then, these three means of effecting

persuasion…to reason logically, to understand human character and goodness in their

various forms, [and] to understand the emotions" (Aristotle, 1984, p. 25) Those studying

and employing rhetorical analysis make reference to the persuasive appeals by their

original Greek words, logos (or logical appeal), ethos (ethical appeal), and pathos

(emotional appeal). In a persuasive argument, the three appeals should work together to

communicate an effective argument (Barrett, et al., 2013). This serves as a basis for the

analysis of research questions one and four in particular as noted in chaper three—that is,

to determine if these persuasive appeals present and how they are represented. Rhetorical

persuasion thus serves to bookend the study.

Research questions two and three, as listed in chapter three, are concerned with

how the content—as opposed to form or delivery—is affected by the media. These

questions will serve to address the presence of rhetorical persuasion, but will also serve to

analyze whether or not the content is shaped by the media as Postman's technological

determinism would suggest. While questions one and four focus on the presence of

Aristotle's persuasive appeals, questions two and three instead focus on if and/or how

users maintain any consistent logical progression—as speech and print would demand—

while using social media. That is, how are the media affecting the content delivered and

omitted from the argument?

Results of the Study

Research Question 1: How has computer-mediated social media affected the formation of rhetorical persuasive arguments as related to political discourse?

The Facebook post asked users to respond to a specific quote from Speaker of the House Representative Paul Ryan. The quote was, "Identity politics has gotten out of control in our country." The first comment was within one minute of the original post; it was a one-sentence response that built no argument only offering a claim about Speaker Ryan without any evidence. The first reply to that comment was an attempt to persuade readers to buy a "Pro-America Pro-Trump graphic novel" and marginally responded to the original post; it was likely targeted spam.

Subsequent replies made little reference to Rep. Ryan's original statement, but a conversation regarding Ryan's loyalty to the Republican Party platform did ensue. Most users stated their opinion and cited general evidence (i.e. Ryan's voting record, etc.) but did not supply any hard sources. The general pattern observed within the replies is that an individual cites a belief, several subsequent individuals cite a contradictory belief and little conversational development occurs following.

Comment two was an appeal that had a persuasive stance; it used language like "people should," as if trying to convince its intended audience. The first reply to that comment was simply, "No, no they shouldn't;" the same user went on in another reply to disagree but make a similar point.

Some users showed some self-awareness about the lack of formation of persuasive arguments. One user said, "You call me a liberal sheep, I call you conservative sheep…can we all come up with something new to say?" The comment

however was met with only two replies: (1) "That's what you're concerned about? Names? Get a clue. (2) "Yes, you suck."

Implicit points were observed in the comments and subsequent replies, for instance one user wrote in response to the original post, "Doesn't help when every other media news post is divisive…I'm looking at you Fox News and CNN." Posts with implicit persuasive arguments stop short of making a call to action statement to media (for example, "Stop being so divisive and start reporting facts") or to consumers (for example, "Stop watching divisive news and consume independent media.")

The 15th comment to the original post responded directly to the original post and included the persuasive statement, "We should all be for these things and it only makes our country stronger." The 39th comment was the first instance observed where the user formulated a formal persuasive argument. This persuasive argument contained a strong opener, offered argument, addressed counter arguments, and contained a call to action; all elements of a persuasive argument (How to write a persuasive speech, 2007). The comment (Fig. 1) opened in all caps saying "THIS MUST STOP," went on to offer an argument "…shouldn't be politicized…" addressed potential counter arguments, "Everyone is wrong…from the President…[to] the media" and concluded with the call to action of "stop and pray."

(Fig. 1)

The next comment to exhibit intentional demonstration of the elements of a

persuasive argument was the 108th comment (Fig. 2). The comment opened by offering a

clear and strong opener before making the argument that the GOP could be in danger if

party members are fractured into factions. The comment then addressed the potential

counter argument that Trump is a conservative uniting the party, and also called "those

that have been silent" to action.

(Fig. 2)

Throughout the course of comment review, users were observed moving from one topic to another rapidly without concluding or providing a reasonable transition between topics. For instance, a conversation about the constitution was briefly about the separation of church and state according to the constitution but became about if and how the different sides of the political spectrum measure up to a given individuals perspective on Christianity. The arguments are not persuasive or built on the three appeals but rather opinions that do not address counter-arguments, offer evidence, or contain a call to action.

The overall results of observation of the comments and subsequent replies to this post demonstrated that users mostly responded with a visceral reaction to one of the following: other users, the topic in general, or the person referenced in the original post (in this case Speaker of the House, Rep. Paul Ryan). Themes that emerged included users insisting that Rep. Ryan is a "RINO" (Republican In Name Only), claiming that Democrats are about identity politics and are ruining America, and the idea that politics overall were out of control. These claims were rarely backed up with evidence and only on occasion contained the appeals of ethos and logos.

Research Question 2: Does political discourse as engaged in via social media focus on persuasion toward (or away from) policies or people?

The tweet (Fig. 3) prepared users for interaction with the CNN account during a debate between liberal Senator Bernie Sanders and conservative Senator Ted Cruz. The tweet could be interpreted as from the perspective of either debate moderator (Dana Bash or Jake Tapper) or from the news organization itself (CNN).

(Fig. 3)

To most efficiently demonstrate the results of the findings for this question, see

Table 1. Replies and sub-replies to the original tweet were interpreted and cataloged into

only one of three separate categories: People (those in which it was determined the tweet

is persuading toward or away from a person or group), Policies (those in which it was

determined the tweet is persuading toward or away from a policy or idea), and

Neutral/Indiscernible (those in which it was determined the tweet is not persuading

toward or away from anything or persuasion was indeterminable).

	People	Policies	Neutral/Indiscernible
Replies	72	12	16
Sub-replies	21	2	6

(Table 1)

An overwhelming majority of tweets replying to the original tweet were identified

as referencing people instead of ideas. Examples of tweets cataloged in each respective

section can be found in Fig. 4.

(Fig. 4)

An additional finding here was users' demonstration of sarcastic comments. Users

responded in many cases to the original tweet with a sardonic tone that employed the use

of irony that appeared to be an attempt to mock the CNN tweet.

Research Question 3: Will public political discourse sacrifice logical progression of
ideas for brevity?

The Facebook post linked to an article about President Trump and his reported

attempt to work with Congressional Democrats (Thomas, 2017). The post reiterated the

headline and contained a typographical error causing a grammatical misinterpretation.

The first comment pointed out the typo noting "'President wants democrats can help'?

Really, AP?" The second comment (Fig. 5) demonstrated both brevity and a logical

progression, building on the original statement "Medicare for all…" adding that America

should follow "the rest of the civilized world," and concluding that Congress needs to

address the needs of Americans. In addition to this logical progression, in subsequent

comments (also appearing in Fig. 5) users responses tended to be brief, but continued to

follow a logical progression with few non-sequiturs.

(Fig. 5)
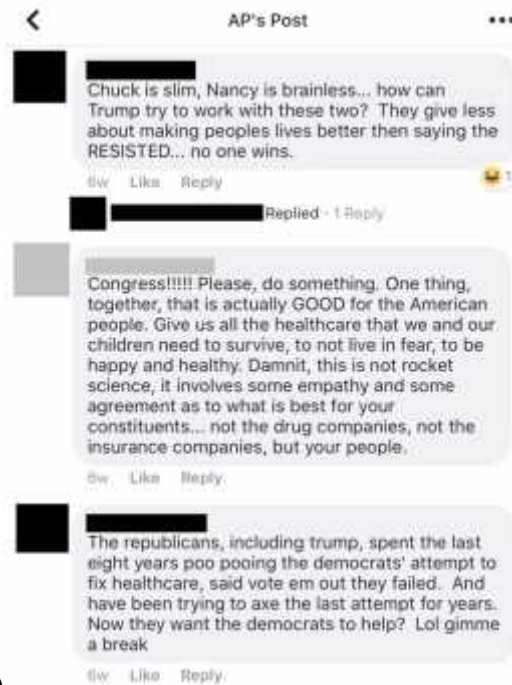
(Fig. 6)

The comments were sometimes brief with most users writing less than one paragraph. Most of the replies tended to address content and progress the conversation within logical reason. Also, users responding to this post tended to post also embrace logical progression within the one-off comments in response to the original post (e.g. Comment denoted with gray in Fig. 6). In addition, in response to the original AP post, users responded in many with a sardonic tone that employed the use of irony appearing as an attempt to mock the post.

Research Question 4: Do social media political arguments include more than two out of three of Aristotles public rhetoric proofs?

The Facebook post linked to an article written by public figure and Australian Pastor Michael Frost. The post reiterated the headline of the article posted to Frost's website and offered the opinion of the author (Frost, 2017). The responses for this post were cataloged in two ways. First, each comment was interpreted to determine which of the three persuasive appeals were used; comments were cataloged in one, two, or three categories: Ethos, Pathos, and/or Logos. Second, each comment was cataloged in only one of the following eight categories dependent on the interpretation determined: (1) only ethos, (2) only pathos, (3) only logos, (4) ethos & pathos, (5) ethos & logos, (6) pathos & logos, (7) ethos, logos, & pathos, or (8) not-applicable. The results can be found in the Tables 2 and 3 below.

Ethos	Pathos	Logos
21	37	47

(Table 2)

1.	**Only Ethos**	2
2.	**Only Pathos**	7
3.	**Only Logos**	14
4.	**Ethos & Pathos**	5
5.	**Ethos & Logos**	7
6.	**Logos & Pathos**	17
7.	**Ethos, Pathos, & Logos**	7
8.	**Not-Applicable**	3

(Table 3)

Though the methodology of this study was to look at the first 70 comments to this post, closer inspection of the post showed that there were far less comments and far more replies on several comments. The result of this fact was that all comments and replies were observed. Not all of the comments and replies however were cataloged. This is

because during the study, one of the comments and subsequent replies was a conversation about the use of the term schizophrenia in the headline. Some of these comments were included as contextually, the conversation could be interpreted to have been about the political connotations of mental health issues and users were engaged in attempting to persuade the author to change the word. This particular conversation was considered side-tracked and eventually became about the semantics of the term and was no longer considered useful for this study. So, the total number of comments and replies became 62.

The observation found that logos was interpreted as present 47 times in the 62 (76%), pathos was interpreted as present 37 times (60%), and ethos was interpreted as present 21 times (34%). Additionally, overall most comments could be cataloged in category six: Logos & Pathos with category three—Only Logos—a close second. Categories two, five, and seven ('only pathos,' 'ethos & logos,' and 'ethos, logos, & pathos' respectively) were each tied for the number of comments cataloged therein. One thread of continual comments with an on-going contingent feedback loop between users demonstrated the establishment of ethos in one comment and the subsequent establishment of both pathos and logos in separate replies later in the thread.

Discussion of the Results

With data collected and results presented, the data must be analyzed to determine answers to each of the proposed research questions. Discussion related to the data will give a qualitative representation of responses to each research question. The discussion will serve to demonstrate how users are employing social media in the practice of public political discourse.

Research Question 1

Comments and replies to this post show that user often attempt to make a persuasive point but do not cite the entire argument in one comment, but instead sometimes continue the conversation in subsequent replies. However users are inconsistent in practice of continuing conversations. Many users can be observed stating personal opinions featuring no call to action and few are remaining engaged to continue conversations but instead drop a statement and walk away (so to speak). Aristotelian persuasive argument should include within the conclusion, a call to action (Excelsior College Online Writing Lab, 2017). Many of the comments and replies observed contain no such call to support or do this or that, but instead can reasonably be reduced to name-calling and emotionally charged visceral reactions.

The above data demonstrates that social media as a tool does not expressly enable users to form a rhetorical persuasive argument but the ability to form sub threads in the form of replies can make such formation possible. In the case of this post, users were affected by the leisure of social media in a way that is atypical of speech and more formal print media. Social media enables a user to maintain a lack of urgency about communicating full ideas and arguments as the users may always choose to return to the post to clarify and/or expound on previous statements. While some users do indeed return, other users abandon the thread and leave comments unclear and superficial.

Research Question 2

The medium of Twitter is useful to determine how users employ social media because the character limit encourages users to boil down statements to their basic elements. That is, on Twitter, users say what they really want to say, and the data shows

users talking about people instead of ideas, regardless of the fact they are given the opportunity to talk about either.

The brevity of Twitter and it's billing as a microblog may encourage users to engage in conversation about people as the tool itself is fairly individual-centric in that focus is on the user. Twitter directs replies using the username of each individual user and the physical interface separates each tweet by lines so each user occupies their own special real estate even in the virtual world. This individual-centric interface and medium encourages users to—in turn—focus on individuals. Because of this focus on individuals, persuasive discourse using the medium tends to follow suit. Political discourse tends to focus on persuasion toward (or away from) people. In addition, sarcasm was observed as a common theme emerging in many tweets.

Research Question 3

While Twitter encourages brevity and has resulted in users across social media embracing brevity when possible, the medium of Facebook and its lack of character limits enable users to be both clear and concise. Posts, comments, and replies on Facebook are sometimes brief but also contain a logical progression. Not unlike research question two, users make sarcastic comments as a defense mechanism or as a veritable exclamation point. This was an unexpected finding in both research questions.

The above data demonstrates that social media as a tool does not disable users from employing a logical progression, whether or not the user embraces brevity and in fact media like Facebook make such progression possible. In the case of this post, users embraced logical progression within comments and across threads of replies.

Research Question 4

Users include more than two of Aristotle's persuasive appeals only 7 out of 62 times (11% of comments/replies). This data demonstrates that when users employ social media as a tool for engaging in public political discourse, they do not use all three of Aristotle's appeals but instead include only one or two of them. In the comments and replies to this post, users embrace logos the most and include a logic based argument. Secondarily, users include an emotional appeal and include pathos. Far less frequently, however do users include ethos and establish credibility as a source or moral authority.

Chapter Five: Summaries and Conclusions

Limitations of the Study

While geographic location is often a limitation of some studies, because of the proliferation of internet usage, location of the study does not prove a limitation, as there is reasonable representation of internet users (Pew Research Center, 2015). There are, however three specific limitations of this study. First, the study focused on four of many political posts and tweets during a specific period of time. Though the data stands as a reasonable qualitative indicator on how individuals use social media, the American political climate of the moment certainly shapes that data. Also, the current polarization of American politics may affect the data; that is, perhaps if the study were conducted 2-4 years prior or later, different results would be found.

Second, because this study focused on public-facing political discourse conducted via social media, there may well be further affects that remain as of now unknown. For instance, this study focused on social media pages belonging to public figures and organizations, but individuals may conduct themselves differently on private pages, in groups and on personal pages with friends or more familiar individuals. Although, the findings of this qualitative study reasonably extend to other types of social media pages and accounts.

Finally, while the study focuses on the effects of social media on public political discourse, the findings are limited to interactions on social media. That is, there may be effects on print and speech discourse due to social media, but this study does not expressly extend far enough to make such a conclusion.

Further study or Recommendations

For further study on the effects of social media on political discourses, future researchers may take political identity/allegiance into consideration. Even within this study, if one of the research questions had been applied to a post or tweet from another research question, different results could occur. Additionally, cross-referencing similar questions across liberal, conservative, or independent individuals may have further interesting results.

Furthermore, other researchers may choose to focus on more nominally private political discourse. For instance, by examining political posts or tweets on personal accounts that are set to public with robust conversations where other users' profile pages are set to public. Also, future researchers may do well to address how this study might apply to print media and speech as the principles of rhetoric and persuasion would still apply; results for further study could mirror these but they may also provide stark contrast. Supplemental study could also benefit from performing a rhetorical analysis on specific spoken discourse as well. Similarly, a comparative study or analysis examining specific speeches or debates across a specified political timeline would likely expand upon the results and findings of this study.

Finally, while this study found benefits in focusing on Twitter and Facebook as social media subjects, further study may focus on other media like Reddit, YouTube— particularly the comments section—and Tumblr, as well as visual social media like Snapchat, Instagram, or Twitch. While these media may contain political content in a format not based around networking and discourse, further understanding could be provided.

Conclusions

Far more individuals engage in public political discourse on social media today than in public arenas in the days of Greek philosophers of ancient city-states. Social media have removed barriers that may have existed between the common man and contribution to the larger political narrative. Jane and Joe Everyman are as free to provide commentary based on their experiences within the political climate as were pundits, professors, and politicians in days gone by.

Due to the access individuals now have to public political discourse, individuals of most any demographic may contribute to the political narrative through social media. That political narrative, however, is fast-becoming a hodge-podge of different ideas, and opinions with varying degrees of accuracy, and what's more varying degrees of purpose. While writers like Alexander Hamilton, had purpose—to persuade the masses—and did well to cite historical occurrences and philosophies, contributors to today's political dialogue by and large share opinions, personal anecdotes and visceral reactions based on other individuals.

The tools we use to engage in political discourse have indeed affected the way we do so; as Postman suggested, the tools are shaping us. We are not powerless, however; the tools of various social media may be used in a way that allows individuals to be purposeful and persuasive in practice. Brevity is—it seems—a necessary product of social media; users respond to and participate in shorter exchanges, but Aristotelian rhetoric: logos, ethos, and pathos, have no minimum required number of words or ideas, and, in turn, cannot be deterred by any character limits. It is we, the users that must continue to employ them.

In Miranda's (2017) *Hamilton: An American Musical,* the character of George Washington warns Hamilton—after the Treasury Secretary lost his temper in a Cabinet meeting—saying, "Winning was easy, young man. Governing's harder." If the fictionalized father of our country could see the state of political discourse today, there is little doubt that he would turn to the masses of social media users and admonish us with a similar witty retort, "Tweeting is easy, young man. Rhetoric's harder."

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APPENDIX

For reference, below is a list of direct links and screen captures for the original Facebook

and Twitter posts used for each Research Question.

Research Question 1: https://www.facebook.com/FoxNews/posts/10156168180791336

Research Question 2: https://twitter.com/cnn/status/920803793163321344

Research Question 3: https://www.facebook.com/APNews/posts/10155006705901623

Research Question 4: https://www.facebook.com/michaelfrost6/posts/10155181211581731