Political Twittoric: The Rhetorical Use of Twitter by the Obama 2012 Presidential Campaign

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Political Twittoric:

The Rhetorical Use of Twitter by the Obama 2012 Presidential Campaign

by

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Abstract

With the entrance of the digital age, the Presidential campaign has begun accommodating the growing trend of new technologies. A campaign can reach an audience in person, on the radio, through the newspaper, on television, and on the Internet. In 2008, President Barack Obama broke the limitations of campaigning by going social, which he continued in his run for reelection in 2012. Obama tapped into the popular social network of Twitter to run a portion his 2012 campaign. By utilizing this new network, Obama’s campaign accessed the multimodal quality of Twitter to benefit their goal of winning the 2012 election against Mitt Romney. The rhetorical devices that the campaign group employed while working within this network balanced all of Twitter’s available functions. Twitter is a growing social network used daily by more and more individuals and affects the way people communicate with each other. Due to Twitter’s influence on the way individuals communicate, as well as rhetoric at large, this paper argues Obama’s 2012 political campaign built on classical rhetorical tools in their Twitter usage with the aim of winning a second term in the Presidential office.

Keywords: digital rhetoric, social media, Twitter, classical rhetoric, Aristotelian triangle, political rhetoric, Barack Obama, 2012 Presidential election, political campaign
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Introduction

Technology is growing at an extreme rate, which affects many different aspects of everyday lives, such as rhetoric and communication. Writing now takes on the everyday forms of e-mailing, texting, blogging, as well as social networking. The constant connection and communication with the larger world allowed on social networks, like Facebook and Twitter, is common in today’s society. These social networks permit users to incorporate multiple modalities in their feeds. Social networking sites influence communication beyond just the use of words, and due to their popularity, they are used for larger purposes, such as politics.

Facebook and Twitter are multimodal networks that encourage users to communicate through pictures and videos, as well as words. Twitter, however, adds the complication of a 140-character limit in posts or tweets, thereby pushing the user to communicate a full message in a small amount of space. The various modalities available on Twitter in order to communicate a single message are an intriguing aspect of language and rhetoric. President Barack Obama’s 2012 political campaign utilized Twitter’s potential in their continued use of this network from 2008 in order to help win the election against Mitt Romney. The Obama Twitter page used all modalities of writing, pictures, and videos, as well as links to outside sources, to convey the message to other Twitter users to vote for Obama in the 2012 election. While it would not be possible to see how Twitter directly won the election for Obama, this paper argues that various modalities available on Twitter work together to further the message of a written text, building on classical rhetorical tools in order to accomplish a certain goal. Moreover, Obama’s utilization of these modalities could potentially alter the future of Presidential campaigning. Through this research, I intend to investigate the political implications of digital rhetoric, specifically on Twitter, as they are used and could continue to be used in the future. Prior to investigating
Obama’s Twitter campaign, I will establish some aspects of rhetorical theory to see how it applies to Twitter. This investigation will include scholars who examined traditional rhetoric, visual rhetoric, and digital and political rhetoric.

**Rhetorical Theory**

Lloyd F. Bitzer (1968) investigated the context in which rhetorical discourse occurs, which is a useful study to apply to Obama’s Twitter account. A rhetorical situation calls discourse into action, and behind each rhetorical piece, there is a rhetor with a motive, who wants the audience to implement some type of change. “The rhetor alters reality by bringing into existence a discourse of such a character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes mediator of change” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 4). The rhetorical situation operates like the question before the answer (the rhetorical discourse) and is, therefore, a necessary component in any rhetorical discourse. Rhetorical situations ripen to a perfect time for discourse, known as the kairos of an issue, which is when it would be most effective (p. 6).

Bitzer (1968) identified three necessary components that must be identified prior to engaging in discourse, which are exigence, audience, and rhetorical constraints. Exigence is the identification of the problem that needs to be solved through rhetoric (p. 6). A problem is rhetorical when it can be solved through positive modification achieved by discourse (p. 7). Audience is the group of people or mediators of change. A rhetorical audience does not simply hear or read a message, but, rather, they are the ones with the potential to be changed by the discourse. And, lastly, the rhetorical constraints are the beliefs and biases each party (the rhetor and audience) brings to the discourse, thereby affecting its success (p.8). In the 2012 Presidential election, for example, some of the rhetorical constraints include the rhetor’s and audience’s beliefs about Obama, Romney, their respective policies, as well as the state of the country.
Bitzer’s (1968) rhetorical questions are a useful framework for analyzing the campaign’s activity on Twitter. The campaign workers obviously saw a reason for discourse—the approaching date of the election and the need to gain voters by that date. The United States, according to the Obama campaign, needed to avoid potentially voting Romney into office. Obama’s Twitter audience was composed of the United States voting public that had access to this technology, particularly the younger generation (the main consumers of social networking sites). The Obama campaign managers needed to highlight their candidate in such a way that he seemed like right choice for the United States. The campaigners needed to overcome the beliefs and biases of the United States voters that could have led them to vote for Romney—perhaps their opinions on Obama’s last term in office, his policies, Romney’s policies, etc. The rhetorical situation, as laid out by Bitzer, clearly existed in terms of the Obama Twitter account.

Linda Flower and John R. Hayes (1980) built on Bitzer’s (1968) work by identifying four goals of the writer: to affect the reader, create persona/voice, build meaning, and produce text. “A writer in the act of discovery is hard at work searching memory, forming concepts, and forging a new structure of ideas, while at the same time trying to juggle all the constraints imposed by his or her purpose, audience, and language itself” (Flower & Hayes, 1980, p. 21). A writer falls back on stored problem representations (words, phrases, etc.) whenever they come across the same rhetorical situation multiple times (p. 25). Through the act of writing, writers create their persona (how they want to affect the reader) (p. 24), as well as constructing the rhetorical problem (p. 22). Flower and Hayes, like Bitzer, identified the rhetorical situation as part of a larger rhetorical problem and a way for the rhetor to balance her or his purpose, as well as the audience. Furthering Bitzer’s thoughts, Flower and Hayes maintained that
[a]n audience and exigency can jolt a writer into action, but the force which drives composing is the writer’s own set of goals, purposes, or intentions. A major part of defining the rhetorical problem then is representing one’s own goals. As we might predict from the way writers progressively fill in their image of the audience, writers also build a progressive representation of their goals as they write. (p. 27)

As the writer continues to write, they also continue to build the image of the reader and develop their own goals, adding more detail and specifications (p. 30). The rhetorical situation adapts as different issues arise while the rhetor builds their text. Political campaigns follow this line of argument. For example, Obama and Romney had a back and forth in their communications to the public. If Romney made a comment against Obama in his speech, Obama may have countered it in one of his later speeches. In fact, Presidential candidates meet in the debate arena specifically to engage in the type of discourse outlined by Flower and Hayes. Obama’s Twitter account also participates in a great deal of attacking and counter-attacking, especially in their epideictic uses. Obama used his Twitter account to comment on Romney’s policies, speeches, etc., attempting to discredit him as a suitable president for the United States.

William A. Covino and David A. Joliffe’s (1995) investigation of rhetoric also assists in this study of Obama’s Twitter account. As Covino and Joliffe described, the text is seen as potentially active, having the power to change its audience, whether in the form of actions or thinking (or voting for Obama). There are two types of potential activity, however, the intended potential activity and the unintended potential activity. The intended potential activity is the change in the audience the rhetor is aiming for with his text; whereas the unintended potential activity is the change the audience found on their own after their encounter, a change the rhetor did not plan or expect (p. 6). In the case of the Obama 2012 campaign, the rhetors obviously
intended for their text to convince the United States public to vote for Obama; yet, it is plausible that the intended activity failed, and perhaps their text convinced voters to cast their vote for Romney, or another candidate, or not even vote. All of this is a possible outcome of rhetoric.

According to Covino and Joliffe (1995), the rhetor uses the key elements of rhetoric to initiate change in the audience. “The major elements of rhetorical theory are the rhetorical situation, the audience, the pisteis or ‘proofs’ (and their subdivisions), and the five canons of rhetoric: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery” (Covino & Joliffe, 1995, p. 10). Covino and Joliffe described the rhetorical situation Bitzer (1968) laid out as their first major element. The second element they listed was the audience. Prior to the rise in technology, the audience consisted of the people who heard the speaker’s words. As technology grows, however, a text can now be heard or read by whoever chooses to do so—thereby dividing the audience into the immediate audience and the mediated audience. Simply put, the immediate audience was the group of people who saw Obama give his speech first-hand on a stage in front of them; the mediated audience were those who watched from their homes, or on YouTube, or via a link on Twitter, either live or a day, a week, a month later. The most effective text, however, addresses the concerns of both the immediate and mediated audiences (p.12).

The final canon of rhetoric that Covino and Joliffe (1995) described is of most importance to this study. Delivery held more relevance during the classical times, yet it still plays a role today with certain types of texts, such as speeches and plays. Delivery is “the art of using one’s voice and body effectively when speaking” (Covino & Joliffe, 1995, p. 24). Obama’s delivery in a speech, for instance, is one of his greatest strengths and benefitted his goal during the campaign to win votes. Delivery, however, is no longer limited to simply oral rhetoric. Twitter itself is a delivery mechanism in the digital age. The social network does not demonstrate
delivery in the traditional sense, as laid out by Covino and Joliffe; it is actually synonymous with design in this case. The layout of the page on Twitter is all a rhetorical device used by the campaigners to successfully display the page in order to affect the audience.

**Visual Rhetoric**

Many scholars investigated visual rhetoric, such as Anne F. Wysocki and Dennis A. Lynch (2006), who applied Aristotle’s rhetorical triangle to photography (an important communication medium on Twitter). Almost every text requires visual decision-making. A photographer must make a choice about how they want to frame a picture, what they want to emphasize, what colors and focus they want to use, and all of these choices work together to convey the photographer’s meaning. Pictures are visual tools that capture reality, and this way anyone at any time can know exactly what the composer is trying to say without using words. Jeff Rice (2007) also investigated visual media in the digital realm, but outside the traditional concepts of rhetoric. He maintained that the author appropriates visual and verbal rhetoric in order to make meaning within a text. The digital realm, however, is not conducive to traditional print notions of organization, and, therefore, the logic and message of a text must be rearranged outside of traditional rhetoric for the audience to understand the meaning. He also offered alternative canons to account for the ways in which digital technologies have altered communication practices.

Mary E. Hocks (2003), similarly to Rice (2007), explored the change in communication due to technology. She complicated the importance of visual media within the digital realm due to its interactive nature. Multimedia writing blends words and images, as well as author and audience. All writing, including multimedia writing, is hybrid. Visual and print are not binary
Multimedia enables all different elements to work together to create a hybrid form of rhetoric, where the audience and author interact at a deeper level.

Hybridity is especially key in regards to Twitter. On Twitter, hybridity occurs between words and images. Regardless of whether the photograph has words in it or not, all images are accompanied by at least a caption. Communication, in fact, is not limited to only words and pictures, but other media, such as videos and outside links, add to the complication. A link to a video or outside source is also accompanied by a written tweet or caption, and the outside source can also contain a great deal of hybridity on its own page, as well (perhaps more pictures, videos, links, along with words).

Hocks (2003), moreover, described three different terms to explain visual rhetoric within the digital world, two of which pertain to this study. The first was the audience stance. How can the audience participate? What is the ethos of the speaker, and how does that call or not call for audience interaction? Twitter gives the audience an opportunity to be involved in a text. By Obama putting the 2012 campaign on Twitter, he opened the forum up for the audience to communicate, comment, retweet, and connect with the campaign. Twitter lends itself to a high level of audience interaction, such as retweeting, commenting, supporting, or even debating on
the social network in direct reply to someone else’s action on Twitter. The second term that is important for this project is hybridity, which is the way the rhetor combines and constructs the visual and verbal, as well as the author’s and audience’s identity constructions (p. 632). The hybridity of all the elements within a digital text enables hybridity between the author and audience positions. Twitter supports and encourages the hybridity between author and audience; the audience can become the author of any given tweet, picture, video, or link, by retweeting it on her or his own page. There are very few, if any, straight lines on Twitter that divide media or modes of communication; everything intertwines and interacts with everything else.

**Digital Rhetoric...with a Political Twist**

Adam J. Banks (2011) added to rhetorical theory by investigating the Internet’s advantageous nature for communal forums and shared texts. He maintained that the technological age contains even more rhetorical acts than would seem obvious—from inventing and designing to government and budgetary decisions. All of these rhetorical aspects of technology affect the way users interact with it (p. 14). The new generation, according to Banks, deserves immense credit for the relationship between rhetoric and technology since they are the primary users of rhetoric in the digital realm (p. 86).

The newer technology facilitates Banks’s (2011) notion of community writing. Together with the Internet, technology opens the door for various types of individuals to communicate on one forum, resulting in the creation of a community in the digital sphere. Twitter itself is a community, where individuals interact and communicate in their Twitter-verse. According to Banks, digital technologies, such as the Internet and social networking sites, should be utilized not just for individual purposes but for communal ones, as well (p. 108). Banks maintained, however, that any type of community writing, even in academic terms, has “always been about
trying to create some different kind of space—that living room, if you will—where everyone is at home and where we can all be engaged, all be challenged” (p. 45). Furthermore, there are various aspects required to build a community in terms of rhetoric, where everyone feels at home and contributes to a shared text (p. 50).

The digital age, technology, and the Internet, are all ways for individuals to experience the world on a communal forum, with a communal text. The communal gathering is evident in the basic layout of Twitter, particularly in a user’s the ability to retweet a message. Any post or idea written by one person is available to be shared or borrowed by any other Twitter user who finds that post interesting. Twitter is, at its most basic level, a communal forum, where your words are my words, your pictures are my pictures, your links, hashtags, videos are all there for me to use as I wish, and vise versa. Twitter builds a community of users, where everyone is free to share and borrow, and also connect, read and see the thoughts of strangers. Unlike Facebook, Twitter allows users to access and follow any page of any user, regardless of whether the other user consents or not. By initially making a Twitter, users accept the idea of having strangers as followers, to giving and taking from people they have never and may never meet. It is Banks’s (2011) community forum in its most simple sense.

In order to be competent in digital rhetoric and able to handle different online or digital situations, Elizabeth M. Losh (2009) believed that the user needs to understand all the various types of rules that apply to the specific usages of media online (p.48). Losh offered four definitions of digital rhetoric, which the audience might encounter, but for the purposes of this investigation, I will only touch upon the first two:

1. The conventions of new digital genres that are used for everyday discourse, as well as for special occasions, in average people’s lives.
2. Public rhetoric, often in the form of political messages from government institutions, which is represented or recorded through digital technology and disseminated via electronic distributed networks. (p. 47)

The second definition best described the purpose of Obama’s Twitter account—to convey a political message—but it took place on a forum better described by the first definition—an everyday forum used by average people use. Obama tried to convey his message to average people, in their own sphere, in order to better connect and gain the average people votes to win his political goal. He made an everyday, every person’s community partly into a political community by bringing the campaign onto the Twitter network. Making campaign information easy to access on Twitter, and bringing the information to the voters instead of having them go out and find it, potentially gained a larger audience for his campaign and perhaps even more votes.

Losh (2009) claimed that the lines between the writer and the audience are erased on the Internet. She compared the online audience to the audience of a book: “unlike a reader acting appropriately and nondestructively with the pages of a traditional book, digital readers now leave many traces in their online viewing habits,” (Losh, 2009, p. 49). The Internet allows the audience to comment, engage in conversation, and, specifically in Twitter’s case, lets the audience retweet a comment on their own page—literally making them the author of the words they read. Due to the kairos of the 2012 Presidential campaign, any retweets utilized by the Obama account and its followers further blurred the line between audience and author since each tweeter brought forth their own goal in affecting the election through their retweets. Later, I will investigate how Obama quoted Romney on Twitter, yet Obama’s intent with Romney’s exact words was much different than Romney’s original meaning. In the same way, when a user retweets, they bring
their own analysis, their own motives and interpretations into their authorship of the same exact words. While the words remain exactly the same, the context around them changes, thereby changing the meaning. A simple retweet on Twitter is much more than a copy and paste; it quite literally is a re-authorship, where the audience takes on the role of the author.

An especially useful text to refer to in my Twitter investigation is David Sheridan, Jim Ridolfo, and Anthony J. Michel’s *The available means of persuasion: Mapping a theory and pedagogy of multimodal public rhetoric* (2012). Sheridan et al. employed a kairotic approach to public rhetoric and investigated the multimodal potentials behind it (p. 20). As other scholars noted since classical times, there is an ideal moment for rhetoric to occur, when an issue is at its peak for rhetoric to affect it. While each issue has its perfect time for rhetoric, each technology also has a perfect time to be utilized for rhetorical purposes. Each moment is new and holds with it various potentials for the composer to harness (p. 25). Authors use the public sphere “to frame the broader social contexts within which rhetors operate” (Sheridan et al., 2012, p. 12). For example, the liberal bourgeois public sphere is the place where citizens, not state officials, come together to discuss common issues (p. 13). As previously noted, Obama’s presence on Twitter turned a public sphere into a political sphere in some way by using it for political rhetoric on top of its usual purpose of public everyday rhetoric. It is also important to note, however, that by entering the Twitter-verse, Obama also made political rhetoric into public rhetoric (again we see Hocks’s [2003] notion of hybridity) since everyday people could comment and engage in political discourse.

According to Sheridan et al. (2012), since each public sphere is diverse and expresses different cultures and identities, the communication within these spheres should also be diverse and incorporate multiple modes, such as charts and figures (p. 19). Through the advances of
technology, communicating within spheres is much easier. Various media can be used and reproduced at a much faster rate. “Public rhetors potentially(!) have access to powers of production, reproduction, and distribution that only a few years ago were not readily available outside of commercial media” (Sheridan et al., 2012, p. 32). Twitter epitomizes reproduction and distribution through retweets, hashtags, etc. and are prime examples of Sheridan et al.’s idea. Twitter, moreover, is not limited to only users, but is available to the Internet, at large. If an Internet user, who didn’t have a Twitter account, decided to visit Obama’s Twitter page, they would have full access to his feed, thereby multiplying the powers laid out by Sheridan et al.

Sheridan et al. (2012) argued that in order for digital rhetoric to be effective, it must successfully balance the circulatory nature of an enhanced version of Aristotle’s triangle, which consists of the rhetor, mode, media, exigency, audience, and genre. This balancing act also includes production, reproduction, and distribution because “composers’ decisions anticipate future considerations of distribution. Processes of circulation inform both the material and the symbolic considerations of composing. The moment of circulation inhabits the moment of composition,” (Sheridan et al., 2012, p. 63). Twitter is the perfect example of redistribution in action since each tweet has the potential of reaching multiple audiences through the initial audience’s interaction. All of the audience’s followers, and the audience’s audience’s followers and so on, could possibly see each tweet posted by Obama if anyone decided to retweet it. This is the simple notion of redistribution on Twitter. Even more complex is that the audience (and potential retweeters) can include those who aren’t even following Obama officially, and then there are hashtags (anyone can see anything that was tagged with a certain subject). All of these Twitter users can then retweet any post they see on the Obama page. Each post potentially has an unimaginable number of readers or viewers, and this is something the campaign managers could
have considered while composing a tweet (and the reason they may have decided to tweet in the first place for the election). Yet, as I previously mentioned, different contexts can change the meaning of a tweet, which is what Bitzer (1968) referred to as rhetorical constraints. By the audience bringing in their own beliefs and biases when they retweet Obama’s tweet, image, etc., they could completely alter the meaning the campaign worker initially composed with and, thereby, the influence it had on the audience.

According to Sheridan et al. (2012), this all means that rhetors have a seven-fold job to accomplish. They must commit to a mode/medium; get the message to their audience; balance the enhanced triangle; take care of all material concerns (cameras, USBs, money, containers, etc.); examine cultural structures; anticipate the nature of circulation; and prepare for things to go wrong (p. 73). Rhetors must think about what is necessary to keep their composition circulating through the public, which is something made easier through certain kinds of media (i.e. YouTube).

We’re increasingly posting, publishing, and circulating our compositions in media conducive to composing for recomposition. While the printed word encouraged the illusion of a fixed security, the realities of digital publishing radically undermine any sense of fixity. In a digital context, compositions fluidly emerge from earlier compositions and are recomposed into subsequent compositions. (Sheridan et al., 2012, p. 96)

The fluidity of new media is more conducive to the redistribution aspect of rhetoric. A rhetor’s message needs to get to as many people as possible—magazines, for example, are limited by how many are printed and where they are sold; an online magazine, on the other hand, is a URL available to anyone who has an Internet connection on their computer, phone or other device (p.
This shift in media, particularly in terms of Twitter and Obama, allowed his message to reach a wider audience, since any device had access to his campaign through numerous outlets (not just Twitter). The Internet and Twitter are not exclusive, their only limitation is Internet connection; other than that, it has clear and full access, which greatly increases the audience for online rhetoric.

Media and the Internet, according to Jason Palmeri (2012), can also help meet the traditional goals of a written text (p. 110) by enhancing the message the composer is trying to convey (p. 96). Juxtaposing auditory, visual, or cinematic compositions with a written text is a powerful and inventive strategy to employ. Within each of these modes, there is an element of selecting and arranging components in the most effective way; by applying these modes together, the writer can achieve an even more successful piece (p. 101). Twitter offers the usage of all alphabetic, visual, and cinematic texts in order to convey a message. Twitter not only increased the audience for all different kinds of campaign media by putting it on one site, but everything worked together to support the overall meaning behind any single piece. If a single tweet conveyed a particular call for action (which I will discuss later in more detail), the additional media could further enable the user to perform that action.

Furthering the notion of using media for rhetorical purposes, Abby M. Dubisar and Jason Palmeri (2010) maintained that the current era is the age of YouTube, where individuals compose remixes by combining clips and culture to make new statements and parody (p. 77). Remixes can portray or call for citizen action, as well as enable the younger generation to engage in public civic discourse (p. 78). Building on Dubisar and Palmeri’s idea, Collin G. Brook (2009) maintained that digital media users are more responsive and interactive when they feel comfortable in that realm. Dubisar and Palmeri with Brook provided an interesting notion to
apply to Obama’s Twitter account. According to Dubisar and Palmeri, the younger generation is the primary consumer of digital texts and social networking sites (p. 80); these consumers were most likely the audience members of Obama’s 2012 campaign. By employing the technologies this particular audience felt more comfortable with, Obama connected with the younger generation in their own forum to gain their vote. Since the voting age in the United States is 18, many teens and young adults could have altered the 2012 election. Obama’s aim with his Twitter account could have been to gain the youth vote in the United States.

Sandor Vegh (2003) can also contribute to the study of Obama’s Twitter account, since he maintained that political activism uses the Internet to achieve traditional goals, either by internet-enhanced or internet-based methods (p. 71). Online activism falls into three categories: awareness/advocacy; organization/mobilization; action/reaction. Awareness/advocacy includes uses of the Internet to give the public access to information, where the Internet can serve as an alternative source of information or news (72). The main purpose of this category is to lead to organization and mobilization (p. 73). Organization/mobilization, then, can work in three ways: a call for offline action; a call for action that normally happens offline but can take place online (p. 74); or a call for online action. Action/reaction is the last step, where the Internet is used in a more proactive and aggressive way (p. 75). The Internet is a battlefield, according to Vegh, where people can expect more activism to occur than in any other arena of civic discourse (p. 84). Obama’s 2012 Twitter campaign used the Internet in order to promote a political action from its users. The Obama team called for a great deal of online action (such as donating, registering, retweeting, watching a video, etc.), yet the actions that would have the strongest influence (such as volunteering for the campaign, going out to the polls to vote, joining in various activities or groups, etc.) were offline actions. The campaign didn’t seem to put more
weight on either online or offline actions; it was clear that the campaigners welcomed and encouraged any type of action that supported their goal.

**Method**

The data for this qualitative study was collected from Barack Obama's Twitter feed. Screenshots were taken of every tweet and retweet made by the Obama campaign team from 1 September 2012 to 30 September 2012. Screenshots were also taken of every picture (including accompanying comments), video and link to outside sources posted on the Twitter page between 1 September 2012 and 30 September 2012. These images were saved in separate folders according to category (tweets, pictures and comments, links). Each tweet, picture, and link was then coded into three categories: epideictic (praise for Obama/blame for Romney); call to follow the Obama campaign through videos, speeches, articles, etc.; call to perform an action (Figure 1).

Each of these three categories was analyzed separately in the same way to see how each modality (written, visual, etc.) worked to further the message of that particular group—either that Obama is better than Romney (epideictic); users should follow the political race; or users should donate, volunteer, etc. to help Obama win. The categories were determined based on the collected data. Tweets and retweets were analyzed in terms of their wording, phrases, etc. and

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Method of Communication</th>
<th>Epideictic</th>
<th>Call to Follow</th>
<th>Call to Action</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>172</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>528</td>
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<td>Retweets</td>
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<td>76</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>236</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pictures</td>
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<td>Links</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>906</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1. Obama's Twitter Account. This figure shows the data results from the Obama Twitter account monitored from 1 September 2012 to 30 September 2012.*
the strategies that were used. Pictures were evaluated in terms of their layout, emphasis, message, etc. to investigate the strategies used to convey meaning. Links to outside websites and videos were assessed in a similar manner, analyzing the rhetorical devices and benefits of bringing in an outside source.

Since screenshots are included throughout this paper, I will provide the rationale for the legal use of these images. According to Copyright and Fair Use laws, reproducing material for the purposes of “criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, or research” (U.S. Copyright, 2012) is considered Fair Use. The law goes to list four possible ways for Fair Use to apply, and this investigation falls under two of those:

1. The purpose and character of the use, including whether such use is of commercial nature or is for nonprofit educational purposes

2. The amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole (U.S. Copyright, 2012)

This thesis is for non-commercial purposes; the sole intention is for scholarship, which falls under Fair Use. In addition, only a small portion of the screenshots collected from 1 September 2012 to 30 September 2012 are used throughout this research piece. Screen captures, moreover, have become commonplace in rhetoric and composition scholarship (e.g. Arola, 2010; Blair, Gajjala, & Tulley, 2008; Dadas, 2011; Grabill, 2007; McCaughey & Ayers, 2003; Nakamura, 2007) and were a necessary component of these research projects. Screenshots are an important aspect of rhetorical studies and contribute greatly to the scholarship in this field. The screenshots used in this paper are clearly Fair Use, as laid out in US Code 17, Section 107.
Because He’s Just Plain Better:

Obama’s Epideictic Use of Twitter

As previously mentioned, Obama’s Twitter uses fell under three categories; the most utilized of these was epideictic (385 total in all forms of communication allowed on Twitter). With the election a mere matter of weeks away, Obama’s campaign managers used the Twitter account to praise the President. While this action appears harmless enough, the Obama campaign seemed to buy into the political campaign tactic of looking *better* than the other guy. In their attempt to win votes, the campaign experts, who were operating the Twitter site, used the network not only to promote their candidate, but also to disqualify Romney as a suitable future president for the United States. The battle for the presidency, moreover, stretched out onto multiple types of media (television, radio, newspapers, etc.), just like other elections. Thanks to Twitter, however, the campaign was able to continue the fight on this social network and also connect the audience to that other media, some of which also admired Obama and faulted Romney. The Obama campaign team used every outlet at their disposal to publicize that their candidate was just plain better.

The Obama campaign workers who operated the Twitter account praised Obama and blamed Romney in the 140-character limit. One of the first tweets on Obama’s Twitter account from 1 September 2012 was meant to discourage the United States public from voting for

![Barack Obama](https://twitter.com/BarackObama)

**Figure 2.** Obama’s tweet blaming Romney. This figure shows the Obama campaign’s use of epideictic tweets to fault Romney in order to gain votes for their own candidate. From Obama, B. [BarackObama]. (2012, September 1b). POTUS: “They have tried to sell us these tired, trickle-down, you’re-on-your-own policies before. They did not work. They’ve never worked.” [Tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/BarackObama
POLITICAL TWITTERIC: THE RHETORICAL USE OF TWITTER BY THE OBAMA 2012 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

Romney by showing his faults in 139 characters (Figure 2). This tweet was only one of many messages written with this intention. The tweet read “POTUS: ‘They have tried to sell us these tired, trickle down, you’re-on-your-own policies before. They did not work. They’ve never worked,’” (Obama, 2012, September 1). If a tweet began with “POTUS,” Obama supposedly wrote it, and he subtly said a great deal more in this tweet than it suggested at first glance.

The tweet, read simply at the surface level, made a few comments about Romney’s policies and how they are failures. With a closer look, however, there was quite a bit more going on that could have affected the audience. The campaign workers posted a quote, but this quote tried to build a type of camaraderie between Obama and the United States public. By using words such as “us” and “they,” Obama created two very distinct sides, with him on the same side as the United States public, the voters, “us.” Romney, of course, belonged to the “they” in this situation, and, according to Obama’s words, he allegedly wanted to repeat a failed history.

Through this quote, it is evident that Obama blamed Romney for attempting to repeat unsuccessful history and sell it to the greater United States public. By establishing the two sides of the “us” versus “them,” Obama affected his audience (both those who heard the initial speech and those reading the quoted tweet) through his epideictic selection of words and appeal to pathos. Obama blamed Romney for what the history of Republican leaders did to Obama and the United States.

Of all the potential tweets on Obama’s Twitter account that blamed Romney, I chose this tweet because of what immediately followed it. In the post right after Obama’s epideictic tweet faulting Romney’s policies, he tweeted an epideictic message praising his own policies (Figure 3). This next tweet was a quote of 133 characters and read “POTUS: ‘I will offer you what I believe is a path that grows this economy, creates more good jobs, and strengthens the middle
Figure 3. Obama’s tweet praising himself. In this figure, Obama’s campaigniers posted a tweet to praise their own candidate. From Obama, B. [BarackObama]. (2012, September 1a). POTUS: “I will offer you what I believe is a path that grows this economy, creates more good jobs, and strengthens the middle class.” [Tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/BarackObama

class,’” (Obama, 2012, September 1a). These two tweets were nicely juxtaposed. Right after blaming Romney for selling failed policies to the public, this tweet praised Obama by displaying his policies that would strengthen the public. In all his subtleties in the previous message, that quote never discussed any specifics of Romney’s policies or why they were failures; yet, this tweet did go into some specifics of Obama’s policies. Again, the campaign workers highlighted certain aspects of the language for their intended audience, which was the middle class. The majority of United States falls under this umbrella, making them the majority of the voters. This quote emphasized exactly what the middle class wanted to hear—more jobs. By juxtaposing Obama’s promise to make the middle class stronger and increase employment with Romney’s historically failed policies, the POTUS used the epideictic technique to gain as many voters as possible through tweets.

There’s more that needs to be taken into account in these tweets instead of simply the original composition. Twitter, as discussed earlier, lends itself to quite a few different types of redistribution techniques (Sheridan et al., 2012). These two epideictic messages depict Twitter’s redistribution outlets since they were quotes. They were initially composed and delivered in a speech given by Obama to a physical audience and a live television audience. Through television, his potential audience greatly multiplied from those limited few that sat on seats in front of him. The potential audience grew even greater when the limitation of time was taken off;
through the Internet, audience members didn’t have to watch the speech live, they could come back to it at any time on any day through sites like YouTube. Through Twitter, it is clear that not only can the speech be seen and heard again, but also parts of the speech can be read again. The Obama tweeters emphasized certain areas of the speech, which they thought would have the most influence on the audience, and by so doing, they increased the redistribution of the initial message delivered in the live speech through Twitter. Even if the users heard the speech through any of the means available to them (live, television, the Internet), by redistributing and repeating parts of the message for them to read again, the composers could further affect the audience, as well. These tweets also lent themselves to more redistribution since any user could retweet them, and they would make sense on that user’s page. The messages were not part of a larger message that could only be understood if all the tweets were together—they were stand-alone tweets. The tweeters anticipated further distribution and circulation in their composing of these tweets (Sheridan et al., 2012).

The Obama tweeters also used pictures in an epideictic manner to gain votes throughout their campaigning on Twitter. One of the photos posted on the Twitter site with the intention of

Figure 4. “Romney’s Responsibility Map.” This image shows how the Obama team used visual rhetoric to discourage the American public from voting him into office. From Obama, B. [BarackObama]. (2012, September 18g). We can’t afford a President who says “my job is not to worry about” 47% of the American people: pic.twitter.com/q8oZjCHs [Picture]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/BarackObama
discouraging the United States from voting Romney into office was captioned with a quote from him (Figure 4), reading “We can’t afford a President who says ‘my job is not to worry about’ 47% of the American people,” (Obama, 2012, September 18g). The picture displayed a map titled “Romney’s Responsibility Map” with instructions to “Cut out the 47% of the country that doesn’t matter,” (Obama, 2012, September 18g). The states in the map were divided by a dotted line with a pair of scissors on the side, making “cutting out 47% of Americans” a very visual act rather than just an idea someone said in a few words. This image was exactly the hybrid text Hocks (2003) discussed in her piece, where words and images worked together to drive a message home. Without the caption, title, and instructions, the image would hold little value; yet with them, the audience was able to interact more with the piece. This interaction was made more powerful through the instructions attached to the image telling the audience to cut out 47% of Americans, begging the questions, where to start and what to cut?

There is still one more type of epideictic image left to investigate from Obama’s Twitter account. In an image (Figure 5) meant to praise the President, the Obama team displayed another hybrid text (Hocks, 2003). The caption on this image was “Stand with the candidate who is fighting for all Americans,” (Obama, 2012, September 18e). The wording of “the candidate” in this composition is especially important; had the composers used the word “a,” it would have implied one of multiple candidates fighting for the United States. With the use of “the,” however, the writers implied that there was only one candidate taking on this fight. The image displayed a picture of Obama in blue, with the text “We leave no one behind; we don’t turn back; we pull each other up,” (Obama, 2012, September 18e). As Wysocki and Lynch (2006) described in their piece, the interplay of words an images can take place in a variety of ways; one of those ways is when the picture explained the words. In this image posted by the Obama team, the “we” is not
defined by the words alone, making the picture of Obama necessary to understand the text.

The visual decisions of this piece, as well, worked towards furthering the message. Obama was pictured in a close-up (so the viewer only looked at Obama, there was nothing else in the image, no one else, no other “stuff”) and with a blue tint (a calming, as well as patriotic, color). His expression was also fierce, strong, and unapologetic—a man who stands firm in his beliefs. And, of course, those beliefs were written upon the image. Each line of text was white, which draws the reader’s attention more than black text on a color background. Each line of font was different, yet each one was capitalized and looked visually solid and strong (like the image of Obama), demanding the reader’s attention. The image was polished, professional, neat, and portrayed a strong and motivating message to the audience. This image most obviously used the classical appeals of ethos, pathos, and logos in order to affect the audience (Wysocki & Lynch, 2006).

Moreover, the viewer has an outlet on Twitter on which to further their interaction with a posted image. It is necessary when looking at any image on Twitter to also take a look at the
comments section that accompanies it. The hybridity of a visual text enables or furthers the hybridity between author and audience (Brook, 2009; Hocks, 2003; Losh, 2009; Palmeri & Dubisar, 2010). This is even more present on Twitter through the comments section since the viewer becomes the author of their own comments in response to an image. The comments left in response these two images posted by Obama were also epideictic in nature, but the forum opened up to include different opinions, enabling individuals to blame Obama and praise Romney (the opposite of what Obama aimed for in the Twitter account). Users were able to directly respond to each other by simply writing “@” and then the other individual’s tag, so that everyone knew that this comment was directly intended as a response to that other user.

The comments users wrote in response to “Romney’s Responsibility Map” (Figure 4) contained a whole array of opinions, those for Obama and those against him (Figure 6). The first comment posted directly to Obama (@BarackObama), made by Erik, calls to attention the largest...
flaw in the image the Obama campaigners posted—they omitted the main part of Romney’s quote. Romney’s words ended at “about;” the Obama team filled in the rest of the quote with their own interpretation of Romney’s meaning. While this could be attributed to the 140-character limit, the Obama team could have kept the section of Romney’s quote that held the main point of the quote, rather than just the lead in to it. By cutting out Romney’s main message, the Obama team was able to make their interpretation the main meaning. Erik’s comment, “Romney was saying he can’t do anything to sway the voters committed to supporting you,” (Obama, 2012, September 18f), drew attention to this flaw in the quote. Randall and Charles then continued on to praise Obama and directly respond to Erik (@Erik), arguing against him, yet the Obama team never responded.

A controversial comments section (Figure 7) also accompanied the image Obama’s Twitter account posted to praise their candidate (Figure 5). Users who supported Obama (@At) and those who blamed Obama (@dvcj) all took part in this conversation on Twitter. Mic actually argued with several people whose comments were not visible in this image; yet by tagging them, he was able to communicate his argument on Twitter and thereby increase his audience. Mic commented on Obama’s action, or lack thereof, in Libya, which was something the image did not specifically portray. Mic tried, however, to prove the meaning of the image as false (Obama, 2012, September 18d).

The actual content of the debates is of little importance in this study, but the fact that users did debate is key, especially since the Internet, in general, has been critiqued for a lack of debate. Banks’s (2011) idea of community writing is clearly evident in these comment sections. These individuals came from different backgrounds, political associations, perhaps even different parts of the country (or even world); yet they were able to come together on Twitter and
communicate with each other over a common topic. A social site was used for a communal purpose, the future of the United States. These individuals from various backgrounds were working in a multimodal forum, which Sheridan et al. (2012) call for in their text. Because of the diverse background of the viewers, a diverse and interactive multimodal site was necessary to engage them. Twitter, moreover, enables users from of various communities to become authors in their own right by engaging in a discussion on the same page that they were initially viewers. Twitter, as is apparent, is continuously blurring the once simple lines that stood between image and words, and author and audience (Brook, 2009; Hocks, 2003; Losh, 2009; Palmeri & Dubisar, 2010).
Give Us Your Attention:

Obama’s Twitter Request to Follow the Campaign

The campaign workers used Twitter in more ways than just giving information to users on why to vote for Obama or why not to vote for Romney. Through this social network, the campaign tweeters publicized upcoming events, speeches, articles, etc., while also providing links to these sources. In this way, the Obama campaign furthered their message by taking it outside of Twitter and, thereby, transferred their followers from Twitter to their followers of the whole campaign. Obama basically was able to use Twitter as a call to follow the campaign through all the forms of media where it was available.

A significant part of any Presidential campaign is the support from the candidate’s family. Michelle Obama, President Obama’s wife, made meaningful contributions to her husband’s drive to stay in office, as many First Ladies have done throughout history. The First Lady is an important part of the campaign for any President; people want to see that the person who knows the candidate best and is the closest to him also supports him, and they also want to see what kind of First Lady she is or will be. Her role in the campaign can help gain more votes for the candidate. The campaign workers used Twitter not only to gain attention for Obama’s campaign trail and speeches, but also the speeches of those supporting him, like Michelle Obama. In Obama’s tweet (Figure 8), the campaign workers posted a message reading “Watch live: First Lady @MichelleObama speaks at #DNC2012 about the values that guide the

![Barack Obama](https://twitter.com/BarackObama)

Watch live: First Lady @MichelleObama speaks at #DNC2012 about the values that guide the President: OFA.BO/Uqwrceg

**Figure 8.** Watch Michelle Obama. This figure shows the Obama team’s use of Twitter to gain more viewers for Michelle Obama’s speech. From Obama, B. [BarackObama]. (2012, September 4b). Watch live: First Lady @MichelleObama speaks at #DNC2012 about the values that guide the President: OFA.BO/Uqwrceg [Tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/BarackObama
There was a great deal going on in this tweet as far as publicity and communal forums—Michelle Obama’s name was tagged in order to take the audience to her Twitter page; #DNC2012 was a hashtag that, by clicking it, would take the user to all tweets made by all users with the hashtag on this topic (another example of Banks’s [2011] community writing); and, lastly, there was a link to the actual live speech. The link to the speech also showcased Sheridan et al.’s (2012) redistribution theory at work. The Obama campaigners employed the enhanced Aristotelian triangle by taking every means of technology into consideration when planning the distribution and redistribution of Michelle Obama’s speech.

In this tweet (Figure 8), the campaigners used the written word and everything Twitter offered in that mode. The campaign tweeters further applied the enhanced triangle (Sheridan et al., 2012) by employing more than just that the written word. A few posts later, the campaign workers posted a picture captioned “Michelle’s biggest fans were watching from home,” (Obama, 2012, September 4a). This image (Figure 9) showed President Obama and his two daughters watching Michelle Obama’s speech.

![Michelle’s biggest fans were watching from home: pic.twitter.com/nOYmACPG](https://twitter.com/BarackObama)  
*Figure 9. “Michelle’s Biggest Fans.” This image shows Obama and his two daughters watching Michelle Obama’s speech. From Obama, B. [BarackObama]. (2012, September 4a). Michelle’s biggest fans were watching from home: pic.twitter.com/nOYmACPG [Picture]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/BarackObama*
daughters sitting together on a couch, supposedly watching Michelle Obama give her speech. With all these different media and modes at work together (the speech, the Internet, words and photographs on Twitter, and many more), the image inspired positive responses from the audience on Twitter, which were all pro-Obama. The campaigners balanced the various technologies and genres in order to make them work together to gain attention for the campaign. Although this study does not have numbers of how many people viewed the speech or what made them view it, what is important to note is that the campaigners successfully publicized this event through various different media, as seen through the number of retweets and comments.

There is also one more aspect of redistribution (Sheridan et al., 2012) that Twitter builds on which still needs to be covered—the ability to “retweet.” As previously noted, retweeting is when a user reposts someone else’s tweet on their own page. Retweets further the notion highlighted by multiple scholars where the line between author and audience becomes blurred (Brook, 2009; Hocks, 2003; Losh, 2009; Palmeri & Dubisar, 2010)—by retweeting someone else’s post that you initially read, the audience becomes the author that other users can also then read. This phenomenon of audience becoming author challenges the traditional notions of authorship as seen through Aristotle’s triangle. The campaigners also used retweeting on Twitter.

Figure 10. Obama and the Late Show. This figure shows a retweet and sneak preview posted on the Obama Twitter account in order to gain a larger audience for the President’s guest appearance on the Late Show. From Obama, B. [BarackObama]. (2012, September 18b). A sneak preview of the President’s visit to the @Late_Show, airing tonight at 11:35pm ET: OFA.BO/eMAzEJ [Tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/BarackObama
to gain more followers (although, the retweets were in no way limited to this category in their usage). The Obama team retweeted one of the Forward Twitter account’s tweet on 18 September 2012, which promoted Obama’s guest appearance on the Late Show that evening; directly after, the Obama team tweeted with the same promotion, with a link to a sneak preview of that interview (Figure 10). Sheridan et al.’s (2012) observation of the fluidity of a text is clearly in action here: “we’re increasingly posting, publishing, and circulating our compositions in media conducive to composing for recomposition” (p. 96). The original message, retweeted from the Forward account, was recomposed and redistributed on the Obama site, with the add-in of a sneak preview, another form of media. The Obama team complicated the original message by adding a video with their own tweet to compliment and further the message to watch Obama on the Late Show (Obama, 2012, September 18b). Again, the Obama team balanced the digital Aristotelian triangle proposed by Sheridan et al.

One of the crucial aspects to note when observing these tweets is the way the Obama campaign directed their users to sites outside of Twitter. Twitter lends itself to connecting with outside sources. The campaign connected their users to videos and articles about the campaign throughout September 2012. One of these outside sources was a video that offered more than just a view of the convention in Charlotte, South Carolina that many people watched on television or online (Figure 11). This video gave a behind the scenes look at the Obama family backstage while they were at the convention; even if the users who clicked this link on Twitter had, in fact, watched the convention already, they would gain something from this video, as well. This video did not limit its audience. Through technology, a speech is no longer just a speech, where the President comes on stage and once he leaves, it is over. The production of videos is not a new concept, yet Twitter complicates it since these videos can now be shared, posted, retweeted,
Three days in Charlotte

Whether you were at last week's convention or following along from home, here's something you haven't seen. Go backstage with President Obama and the First Lady, and catch a behind-the-scenes peek at some of the action in Charlotte.

Figure 11. Watch some more Obama. This image shows an outside link posted on Twitter that leads the user to a behind the scenes view of the convention in Charlotte, South Carolina. From Obama, B. [BarackObama] (2012, September 1c). Three days in Charlotte [Video]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/BarackObama

hashtagged, and circulated on a much wider scale. Through videos like this, the entire event of the President on and off stage, with his wife, with his family, etc., all became available to the public (Obama, 2012, September 1c). Through media, such as Twitter, these videos were distributed and redistributed (Sheridan et al., 2012) over and over until the candidate, Obama, gained enough attention and enough votes.

The last and strongest example of a call to follow by the Obama campaign was a link that led the user to an outside source known as the Obama Dashboard (Figure 12). This site pictured a computer with an image of the dashboard on it and a message to the left, saying in large, blue font “[y]our window into the campaign” (Obama, 2012, September 2). Underneath this was information on what exactly this “window” entailed; “[o]n Dashboard, you’ll get the latest campaign news. You can join in the national conversation with campaign leadership and local supporters alike to see exactly what’s going on in your state,” (Obama, 2012, September 2), which was followed by a green button to “get started.” Twitter connected the user to everything
Your window into the campaign

On Dashboard, you'll get the latest campaign news. You can join in the national conversation with campaign leadership and local supporters alike to see exactly what's going on in your state.

Figure 12. Even more campaign information. This figure shows a screenshot of an outside link posted on Twitter for the user to connect to even more information on Obama and the campaign. From Obama, B. [BarackObama]. (2012, September 2). Your window into the campaign [Link]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/BarackObama

they needed to stay informed on Obama's campaign trail. Through this link, the campaigners were basically publicizing their publicity website. Both Twitter and this Dashboard were digital communities described by Banks (2011), but the difference was this Dashboard focused solely on the campaign (whereas Twitter has many different users with many different intentions). By connecting with users on Twitter, however, the Obama campaign potentially gained more users to join this digital Dashboard discourse community. For example, John Smith (a fictitious Twitter user) may not be very political but is social on his Twitter account; out of sheer curiosity, he stumbles on to the Obama page and follows their link to this Dashboard. Twitter enabled the campaign to gain more interest and gave access to sites with more information on Obama that everyday people did not have time to constantly search for on their own. The Obama campaign took this information to the American public on their own forum, an example of convergence culture as laid out by Henry Jenkins (2006).
Now, Do Something For Me:

Obama’s Call to Action Through Twitter

The final way Obama used Twitter for his campaign was to call on voters to produce some action that supported his candidacy and helped him win the election. The type of actions Obama called upon ranged from asking his followers to retweet a post to purchase Obama 2012 paraphernalia to volunteer or donate money or, finally, to commit or even register to vote. Through messages like these, Obama’s Twitter account exemplified two notions of political rhetoric online that Vegh (2003) described in his article, which are action/reaction in order to lead to organization/mobilization. The Obama campaign used the Twitter account quite aggressively to its fullest potential in multiple ways, as we have already seen; however, in this category, this persistent use of Twitter was intended to cause an action either online or offline. Moreover, if even one user performed any of the actions Obama requested on Twitter, they took the campaign one tiny step forward—and it is these tiny steps that eventually win the election for a candidate.

One of these tiny steps was the donation of money from the United States public. A main component of raising money for any type of organization or cause is giving donors access to that cause to make their donation. Many voters did not have this opportunity to contribute to the campaign presented to them in their everyday lives (such as on their way to work or while out to dinner), nor were many people going to go out of their way to find a place to hand over their money. Through Twitter, the Obama campaign brought the convenience of donating to the campaign into the everyday lives of their followers, much like other media platforms, such as websites, that also encourage user activity. Moreover, in their tweets, the Obama campaign did not ask for an amount that would “break the bank;” they continuously asked for $5 (Figure 13)—
a relatively small amount in the average person’s life. The wording of this tweet was also constructed in a way to highlight specific aspects of the language to connect with the special interest group (Covino & Joliffe, 1995). “Pitch in $5 if you support the candidate in this race who’s fighting for all Americans—President Obama” (Obama, 2012, September 17b). By phrasing the tweet in this way, the United States public might have felt as if they were donating money to their own cause instead of just Obama’s reelection; they would be putting the only man (indirectly stated by the use of “the candidate”—again, note the campaigners’ use of “the” as opposed to “a”) back in office who actually worked towards a better future for each individual. With him in office, this tweet implied that every donor would have a better life and future, just like the rest of the United States. So, why wouldn’t you want him in office? Why wouldn’t you do everything you could to keep him in office? Why wouldn’t you part with a measly $5 in order to help guarantee your future and the future of your children? And this meaning was communicated through a tweet of 102 characters.

A key part of this tweet (Figure 13) was the link found at the end of it. The Obama team provided a link leading the user outside of Twitter to the donation website (Figure 14). On this page, the user was initially led to the first of four steps to donate money, which was to select the amount to donate. While the tweet started the donations at $5, the link started the donations at $15; however, there was an option for “other amount.” This site furthered the message of the
Figure 14. "Help Build This Campaign." This figure shows a screenshot of the outside link posted on Obama’s Twitter account where users would donate money to the campaign. From Obama, B. [BarackObama]. (2012, September 17a). Help build this campaign [Link]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/BarackObama

tweet with an image of Obama underneath the words “Stand with me, work with me, let’s finish what we’ve started” (Obama, 2012, September 17a). Again, these words reinforced the idea that the United States was working together to build a better future for themselves and future generations. The image of Obama looked strong, stoic, and proud, with his head held high. He looked the part of a leader. The words in the image emphasized to the audience that they are the back up, the support this leader needed to continue his fight for the United States. This site was immensely multimodal with audience interaction, words, images, and layout all taken into account; however, for the purposes of this study, this site is important because it was found on Twitter. The Obama Twitter account used its multimodality to lead to other sites that implemented even more modalities in order to encourage actions from the audience’s part.

Another form of action the Twitter account called for was for users to either commit or register to vote. This was an important call to action since the whole point of the Twitter account and the campaign as a whole was to gain votes and keep Obama in office. Obama’s Twitter
account kept a countdown running until the election date, and as the days progressed, the
campaign managers kept repeating tweets or links in order to increase action from their users.
One of these tweets (Figure 15) read “49 days until Election Day—if you’re not registered yet,
start here,” (Obama, 2012, September 18a) which was followed by a link to the site to register.
This link (Figure 16) was used in the same way as the other links that led the user off Twitter in
order to further Obama’s chances to win the election (Obama, 2012, September 18c). With the
advancement of technology, we see a normally offline action taking place online, and the Obama
Twitter campaigners used the network to encourage this action in their followers—Vegh’s
(2003) notion of organization/mobilization. The actual use of Twitter by the campaigners, as
previously discussed, was extremely aggressive and proactive in nature. The everyday
countdown with the multiple connections to registering to vote (as well as other links) was a
constant demand from the Obama campaigners, pushing users to vote. This was by far the most
insistent and imperative way that the campaign used Twitter, since it was directly acknowledging
the rhetorical situation and confronting it (Bitzer, 1968). Obama created all these various
multimodal forms of communication in order to win his second term, and the best way to do that
was to have more of the United States public, who take the time out of their day to check his
Twitter account, register and commit to vote. By giving this formerly offline action an online
presence, especially on a community forum like Twitter (Banks, 2011), Obama increased his
chances to win, while also balancing production, reproduction, distribution, genre, technology,
POLITICAL TWITTORIC: THE RHETORICAL USE OF TWITTER BY THE OBAMA 2012 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

Figure 16. More voters for the 2012 election. This figure shows a screenshot of the outside link posted on Obama’s Twitter account where users could register to vote in the 2012 election. From Obama, B. [BarackObama]. (2012, September 18c). Register to vote [Link]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/BarackObama

linguistics, ethos, pathos, and logos (Sheridan et al., 2012). Obama’s uses of Twitter contained this balancing act in all three categories (epideictic, call to follow, and call to action), and each category worked together to bring the election to its final point, the voting poll (Figure 16).

Conclusion

As new technologies have been introduced, the Presidential campaign has become multimodal and digital. The 2012 Presidential campaign continued Obama’s 2008 campaign style by going social. President Barack Obama continued to tap into the popular social network of Twitter to run a portion of his 2012 campaign. By utilizing this new network, Obama’s campaign was able to access the multimodality of Twitter and use it to benefit their goal to win the 2012 election against Mitt Romney. The rhetorical devices that the campaign group employed while working within this network balanced all of Twitter’s functions that were at their disposal. Twitter is a growing social network, used daily by more and more individuals, which affects the way people communicate with each other. Since Twitter is influencing the way individuals communicate, as well as rhetoric at large, it could potentially alter how Presidential
POLITICAL TWITTORIC: THE RHETORICAL USE OF TWITTER BY THE OBAMA 2012 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

elections are run in the future. Obama successfully used all of Twitter’s resources in his 2012 campaign, which was the second time he won while using Twitter during an election. Whether Twitter won the election for him is a question that, unfortunately, cannot be answered, but what can be rightfully assumed is that Twitter did have the potential to make a sizable effect on the President’s reelection. Twitter cannot be disregarded as a potential asset to the campaign since its effects will never fully be known (it would be impossible to find out who voted for Obama due to privacy laws, and for that reason, we can never know if Twitter influenced their vote at all). For this reason, future candidates cannot rule out Twitter as a viable form of campaigning—in both of the campaigns where Obama utilized this social network, he won the election.

Another very important aspect of Twitter that can help future candidates is accessibility. Through Twitter, the campaign is accessible to a wider public in *their own forum* (Banks, 2011), while, also, the public is accessible to the campaign. A candidate can utilize language, photographs/images, videos, etc. in order to convince the audience to vote a certain way; a candidate can gain more attention; or a candidate could call for an action. Twitter is an open forum with an increasing amount of users. The political implications of Obama’s Twitter campaign can alter the way campaigns are run in the future since we have yet to see a downside to Obama’s uses of this social network.

The implications of the Obama campaign on Twitter are not limited to politics, however; the campaign has rhetorical implications, as well. The literature focused around the interaction between written, visual and video and how these three work together in order to further the intentions of classical rhetoric. It is also clear how all of this played out in Obama’s Twitter account and was used successfully due to Twitter’s flexibility in terms of communication in various modalities. There are a few added complications that the literature has yet to investigate,
which Twitter also offers in terms of furthering and complimenting communication. The two areas that this investigation most built on was the use of the character limit and links to outside sources. This character limit pushes the user to get to the point fast and in a clear manner (an important aspect for those composing with retweets and redistribution in mind [Sheridan et al., 2012]), while outside links also build on classical rhetoric—using the same goals but adding in various adjustments. Both of these aspects (the character limit and ever complicated situation of outside sources) need to be assessed in terms of Sheridan et al.’s (2012) enhanced Aristotelian triangle.

I believe these aspects of Twitter fit into the enhanced triangle, but their implications have not been discussed. The character limit (again, an example of Bitzer’s [1968] rhetorical constraints) and links to outside sources fall under the genre of Twitter composition—but the job of the composer is made more difficult through these two add-ins. Especially through technology, rhetoric needs to include other modes of communication, but there are very few technologies that limit the word count. Which means, the rhetor must learn to be concise and meaningful in this genre. Images and other media can also help further a message, making multimodality an essential aspect in Twitter compositions to overcome the character limit.

Twitter’s implication for rhetoric is that as technology advances, individuals may be relying on multiple modes of communications at one time. Incorporating other links, moreover, adds more genres to the Twitter genre (since the genre of the outside source needs to be taken into account and balanced, as well). For example, while calling the public to register, if the Obama team had linked users to an article about the importance of voting in their tweet (Figure 16), it perhaps would have less affected the audience or the campaign. By complimenting a tweet with an interactive link that performed the action, however, they probably made a more lasting influence.
Composers must learn to balance the genre of both their own compositions on Twitter and that of the outside link. As Sheridan et al. suggested, all this incorporates and builds on classical rhetoric.

While this research focused solely on the Obama 2012 campaign on Twitter, more research needs to be conducted in order to make an exhaustive conclusion in terms of either political or rhetorical implications. In order to make a thorough judgment on the future of campaigns, other candidates and other social networks need to be taken into account and studied. Moreover, more research can also be conducted solely on Twitter by performing an exhaustive study delving into hashtags, individual accounts, professional and company accounts, and various individual, organizational and professional uses of the social network. Twitter is a new and popular network that is a part of rhetoric and communication and can influence the field in multiple ways, making it an exciting new area to investigate.
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