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RHETORICAL "SLACKTIVISM": ACTIVISM IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Introduction

During the summer of 2014, Facebook pages across the country were littered with

20-second videos of social media users dumping buckets of ice-cold water on their heads.

That summer, over 17 million Ice Bucket Challenge videos surfaced on Facebook in an

effort to promote awareness and raise donations for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS),

also known as Lou Gehrig's disease (Chowdhry). What came to be known as the "ALS

Ice Bucket Challenge" was a phenomenon that appealed to social media users across

generations and geographic locations: it was fun, it was refreshing, and—perhaps most

importantly— it was for a good cause. The "rules" for this viral phenomenon were as

follows: within 24 hours of being issued the challenge, the participants must record a

video of themselves verbally accepting the challenge, and then, they must pour a bucket

of ice-cold water upon their heads. In some versions of the Ice Bucket Challenge,

participants wouldto donate $10 to the ALS Association if they chose to pour the ice

water over their heads *or* participants could donate $100 to the cause if they did *not*

accept the challenge. According to the ALS Association, over three million Americans

donated a total of $115 million dollars through their participation in the challenge and

through the donations that resulted from this involvement. In many versions of the

challenge, however, participants were given the choice to either donate $10 to the ALS

Association *or* dump a bucket of ice-cold water on their heads in lieu of any donation at

all. In some cases, videos (many of them viral videos featuring celebrities, politicians,

and other recognizable social figures), failed to even mention a charity or organization

that the challenge was supposed to help; participants simply enjoyed a refreshing shower

of ice-cold water and passed the low-risk challenge onto their friends and family members. While, certainly, the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge raised a significant amount of money for a worthwhile cause, several critics voiced concern regarding the viral phenomenon. Arielle Pardes, a writer for *Vice*, is quoted as having said, "There are a lot of things wrong with the Ice Bucket Challenge, but the most annoying is that it's basically narcissism masked as altruism" (qtd. in Steel). Many social media users echoed Pardes's sentiments, pointing the finger specifically at those who chose to upload videos and not donate. She calls this lack of active participation, "slacktivism," combining the terms *slacker* and *activism* to form a label for those whose passive participation in a movement involves little more than clicking, forwarding, liking, and sharing.

In the 21st century, it is impossible to deny that viral phenomena such as the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge are, for the most part, simple acts to improve the world; through such acts, social media users are made more aware of worthwhile causes, money is raised for these causes, and it seems that—now more than ever—it is possible to call oneself an "activist" without ever having to leave one's home. The problem with *exclusively* using social media as a vehicle for showing one's investment in a cause is that the rhetoric used by social media users is altered through the format of websites such as Twitter and Facebook. By rhetoric, I am referring to the act of using language and other symbolic systems to persuade an audience to do, think, or believe a certain way. My understanding of this term comes from Aristotle, who defines rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion"[1] (6). Here, Aristotle means that rhetoric is the combination of message, speaker, and audience working together to create

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[1] This definition comes from W. Rhys Roberts's 2010 translation of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*.

persuasive discourse. Much like the "telephone" game many of us played as children, each speaker adapts the original story, message, or event as it is passed on to the next person. When the message is passed from one person to the next, it changes, if only slightly. The major difference between social media rhetoric and the games we played as children is that our "telephone" messages were unlikely to extend beyond the handful of friends with which we played; most social media users, however, have hundreds—if not thousands—of audience members, in the form of friends and followers, to be influenced by the message and its delivery. Often, social media users either relay biased, false information, or they are selective about their rhetoric, only choosing to highlight one side of a complex issue or event in their posts. The trouble with differentiating fact from fiction is that activist rhetoric itself has become increasingly difficult to identify and define.

Walton Douglas, author of *Media Argumentation: Dialectic, Persuasion, and Rhetoric,* points out that the term "activism" is challenging to pin down. He writes, "Obvious as the term may sound, it has been variously deployed in the aftermath of the many social and political upheavals across the globe since the 19th century" (24). All too often, the words "activism" and "advocacy" are used interchangeably, when really, their meanings are quite different. For the purpose of my analysis, the word "activism" will be used to mean active involvement or participation in a movement with the purpose of promoting positive change. Signing petitions, organizing sit-ins, and even raising money for causes may be considered "activism," for, just as the root of the word implies, "activism" requires taking some sort of action toward a change. "Advocacy," then, should be understood to mean showing support for a cause. Certainly, advocacy has its

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benefits; Facebook alone has over 600 million users (Gonzales, Vodica, & White 20), and if a significant percentage of those users unite toward a common goal, on-the-ground activism may, indeed, occur. The underlying issue with this widespread advocacy, however, is not the fact that millions of social media users are showing support for particular causes; instead, the problem arises when advocacy is mistaken for—or wholly replaces—activism. On social media, the blurred distinction between advocacy and activism often occurs because of the skewed rhetoric used on social media platforms. In this analysis, rhetoric should be understood to mean an act of persuasion, involving the rhetor[2] (here, the social media user), the content of the social media post, and the audience to whom the message is intended to appeal. In order for rhetoric to be effective, these three elements—audience, rhetor, and message—must be balanced in order for the rhetoric to be considered effective.

In this essay, I explore the value of social media activism and the often-skewed activist rhetoric used on the social media platforms Facebook and Twitter. Using rhetorician Wayne C. Booth's analysis of the rhetorical stance, I argue that social media activism relies too heavily on the audience's perception of the rhetor, thereby neglecting the importance of the message itself. My analysis will be presented in three parts: First, I will argue that social media activism alone cannot enact widespread positive change due to the rhetorical corruptions present in the self-representative posts shared on social media. Second, I argue that this speaker-centered rhetoric often takes the form of two problematic polarizations: that the speaker attempts to identify with the victim of the situation (and unintentionally makes generalizations about a person or group), and that

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[2] I will be using the terms rhetor, speaker, and user interchangeably in this essay.

the speaker alienates the "other"—the marginalized person or group—resulting in even further disunity. Third, I argue that, while there have been instances of positive change resulting from social media activism, due to the rhetorical corruptions that impede the meaning of the content of social media messages, activists cannot rely entirely on the rhetoric of social media to spark on-the-ground activism. Instead, I argue that the rhetoric of social media can work in conjunction with on-the-ground activism in order to promote the visibility of movements, to assist in choreographing demonstrations, and to provide a sense of unity to participants. Rhetors, when using social media, must be aware of the rhetorical corruptions inherent to the medium, and thus, should aim for intentionality when composing their posts on Facebook and Twitter.

I will first describe, in the form of a literature review, the major critical sources that I will use on the subject of social media activism, and then I will introduce my methodology for my argument, which is centered upon two theorists' works about effective rhetorical and media messages. These two critical pieces, Wayne C. Booth's "The Rhetorical Stance" and Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* will serve as the theoretical foundations for my analysis of social media rhetoric. I will also use analyses by sociolinguist Noam Chomsky and author Malcolm Gladwell to contextualize the framework of rhetoric within the social media sphere. Next, I will delve into three separate rhetorical analyses to support my argument regarding the corrupted rhetoric used on social media that leads to a lack of clarity surrounding the messages projected on Twitter and Facebook. First, I will explore the recent phenomenon of Facebook users changing their profile pictures to show involvement in a cause, and how this is an example of visual rhetoric being used to promote self-representation, thus

resulting in advocacy being misconstrued as activism. Second, I will analyze the #blacklivesmatter campaign and the problematic polarizations that exist when social media users over-identify with one "side" of a movement due to the misrepresented identifications that rhetors often make when communicating via social media. Finally, I will discuss the 2011 protest movement, Occupy Wall Street, in order to illustrate how social media rhetoric, when used effectively, may lead to on-the-ground activism.

Literature Review

Most recent scholarship on social media activism tends to revolve around the impact of the medium on the overall scheme of human connectivity. Since both Facebook and Twitter have only been in use for the past decade, the works that analyze these platforms' effects on social engagement reflect upon and analyze the current trends within the social media sphere. Because social media is so new, there is an abundance of recent scholarship on the topic of social media activism; here, I review three scholars' works that directly inform my own argument regarding the role of activist rhetoric on social media sites: Nancy Thumim's book *Self-Representation and Digital Culture,* Jose Van Dijck's text *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media,* and Paulo Gerbaudo's book, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism.* These three works provide separate angles on the topic of social media activist rhetoric, and in this literature review, I will explain the role of each text and how it contributes to this essay's argument.

Nancy Thumim, in her book *Self-Representation and Digital Culture*, argues that while social networking is the commonly stated reason for participation online, self-

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representation is an often invisible, underlying force behind such participation (137).

While many assume that social media is a tool for *socializing*, Thumim argues that users

need to be aware of the currents of self-representation that are imbued in the very nature

of social media. Because of the individualized nature of social media platforms such as

Twitter and Facebook, Thumim points out, the content of social media posts are often

individualistic expressions that lead to confusion regarding the content of the messages

themselves (141). The idea that social media users engage in online communication to

"tell their own story" provides a backdrop for Thumim's analysis of self-representation,

and she argues that, "Social networking requires a critical approach to content creation…

participation in social networking entails both the production of one's own self-

representation and the acceptance that one may be represented by others" (149).

Thumim's notion of self-representation is an integral part of my argument regarding the

emphasis placed on the rhetor's *ethos* on social media. In my analysis of visual rhetoric, I

argue that self-representation on Facebook and Twitter obscures the rhetorical messages

for the sake of users projecting specifics image of themselves as they wish to be seen by

their friends and followers.

Jose Van Dijck, in his book *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of

Social Media,* analyzes the role that social media plays in defining the daily lives of those

living in the 21st century. Drawing on the history of social media, Van Dijck provides an

in-depth look at the cultural effects of social media platforms and how the rapidly

changing format of information technology has changed the cultural perspectives of users

across the globe. Van Dijck describes social media platforms as "online facilitators of

human networks—webs of people that promote connectedness as a social value" (12).

This idea of "human networks" drives Van Dijck's analysis, and as he examines the role

and value of major social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, he

points out that there are some major "content issues" with these platforms, being that the

messages relayed on social media are "less finished" than the content one might

encounter through mass media channels, such as television news, newspapers, and

verified online sources (35). This emphasis on the personal nature of social media is at

the heart of Van Dijck's study, and he points out that that both tweets and Facebook posts

convey highly affective content; social media posts—rather than relaying strictly factual

information—often take the form of "gut-fired opinion and spontaneous reactions" (77).

In some cases, Van Dijck argues, social media messages are effective since the format of

these platforms allows users to relay "a personal message [within] a customized online

social environment" (77). Van Dijck devotes much of his study to the role of the

construction and reception of social media messages, arguing that the platform shapes the

content of the post. Although the content of social media posts is often composed as a

result of the individual author's values and beliefs, Van Dijck argues that these rhetorical

messages are authenticated by the nature of the platform itself rather than the author of

the post. Van Dijck's analysis of the individualized nature of social media plays a crucial

role in my argument, particularly in my close analysis of how the rhetoric of social media

overemphasizes the role of the rhetor. Because of this overemphasis on the *ethos* of the

speaker, the rhetoric employed on Facebook and Twitter often contains skewed or

incomplete messages, which negatively affects the possibility of social media rhetoric

leading to on-the-ground activism.

Paulo Gerbaudo's book, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism,* analyzes the role of social media in the development of new forms of protest across the globe. Utilizing real-world examples of protests that surfaced as a direct result of social media engagement, including the Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movement, Gerbaudo argues that activism in the 21st century re-appropriates the historical concept of social movements; social media, he argues, creates a new "means of organization" and "means of mobilization" in creating on-the-ground activism (3). Gerbaudo draws connections between the protest movements of the mid-20th century and those of the 21st century, pointing out that social media "can be seen as the contemporary equivalent of what the newspaper, the leaflet or direct mail were for the labour movement" (4). Social media, he argues, provides a means by which people can come together toward collective action. While advocating for the use of social media in what he terms the "choreography" of protest, Gerbaudo is careful to indicate that, "Social media must be understood as complimenting existing forms of face-to-face gatherings (rather than substituting for them)" (13). Gerbaudo's close analysis of the role social media played in the 2011 activist movement Occupy Wall Street provides integral background information for my analysis of the ways in which social media can lead to on-the-ground activism when all parts of the rhetorical stance are in balance.

Methodology

Theoretical Foundations

In order to frame the methodology I will use for my analysis of social media rhetoric, I will first explain the theories that I use as focal points for my essay. Here, I

will be exploring two works to foreground my rhetorical analyses of social media

activism: Wayne C. Booth's "The Rhetorical Stance" and Marshall McLuhan's

Understanding Media: The Extension of Man.

In "The Rhetorical Stance," rhetorician Wayne C. Booth identifies the key to

effective communication as what he terms "the rhetorical stance," which he defines as, "a

stance which depends on discovering and maintaining in any writing situation a proper

balance among the three elements that are at work in any communicative effort: the

available argument about the subject itself, the interests and peculiarities of the audience,

and the voice, the implied character, of the speaker" (141). Booth further identifies three

corruptions or "unbalanced stances," which skew the rhetoric and result in what he refers

to as "perversions of rhetoric" (145): the "advertiser's stance (overemphasis on the

audience), the entertainer's stance (preoccupation with the speaker's projected image),

and the pedant's stance (too much focus on the topic itself). Often, the rhetoric employed

on social media platforms is corrupted by the entertainer's stance, which Booth writes,

"comes from *under*valuing the subject and *over*valuing pure effect: how to win friends

and influence people" (143). In this "corruption," speakers ignore or underplay the

content of the message itself in an effort to establish images of themselves as the rhetors

and gain rapport with their audiences.

Within this analysis of the imbalances present in the rhetoric used on social media

sites, it is necessary to acknowledge the importance and uniqueness of the medium itself,

particularly since it is the medium—or mode of communication—that sets social media

rhetoric apart from other means of discourse. Marshall McLuhan's 1964 book,

Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, outlines the importance of any mode of

communication in the effectiveness of a rhetorical message, stating, "In a culture like

ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is

sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the

medium is the message (emphasis added)" (19). McLuhan, writing decades before the

advent of social media, provides a predictive lens of media examination through which

my analysis of social media rhetoric will take place. Arguing that the medium "shapes

and controls the scale and form of human association and action," McLuhan argues that,

often, the medium itself blinds audiences from the content of the message itself (20),

echoing Booth's discussion of the rhetorical stance.

The State of Social Media "Activism"

In order to employ the theoretical frameworks of both Booth and McLuhan to my

argument regarding the effectiveness of social media rhetoric toward inciting activism, it

is imperative that I first contextualize the state of social media "activism" as it currently

stands. Sociolinguist Noam Chomsky and author Malcolm Gladwell have both been

outspoken about their skepticism regarding the relationship between media and social

movements; in this section, I will explain how both Chomsky and Gladwell's works

contribute to the current scholarship on the subject of social media activism.

 In the book *Media Control*, Noam Chomsky writes, "Over the last ten years,

every year or two, some major monster is constructed that we have to defend ourselves

against" (43). Certainly, with the ever-increasing popularity of social media platforms

such as Facebook and Twitter, these "monsters" are appearing (and subsequently

disappearing) with often-startling rapidity. With social media platforms allowing users to

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share their fears about the most recent outbreak of Ebola, their opinions regarding the dangers of police brutality, or their take on the most recent presidential debate, many social media users have taken to their platforms of choice to share their views, and they label these posts "activism." In the digital age, though, this "activism" presents itself as a low-risk, high-visibility endeavor in which individuals can publicly acknowledge their passive involvement in a cause, even if that involvement is restricted to simply sharing a politically-inclined Facebook post or re-tweeting a variably factual message regarding a recent human rights violation. While access to digital media has changed the *format* of activist discourse for a good part of the world, the effectiveness of the rhetoric behind such "activism" is questionable.

It is impossible to deny that, particularly in the past decade, social media has changed the flow of information, and I argue that there has been change beyond the way in which information is conveyed. Because the format of media messages has shifted so dramatically in recent years, placing the average Facebook or Twitter user in the driver's seat of the vehicle that conveys the content, the importance of the message itself often becomes lost amidst the bells and whistles of these social media platforms. Alongside re-tweeted news stories about the recent bombings in Brussels are 45-second videos showing how to make stuffed pepper roll-ups for the whole family. Despite the common understanding that social media posts are not verified news sources, even American presidential hopefuls are not immune to the effects of social media rhetoric. Recently, a man was arrested for rushing the stage at a Donald Trump rally in Ohio. Following this event, Donald Trump tweeted, "'[Secret Service] did an excellent job stopping the maniac running to the stage. He has ties to ISIS. Should be in jail!'" (qtd. in Shapiro).

Later, upon discovering that the protestor did *not* have ties to the terrorist group ISIS, Trump commented to a news source, "'All I know is what's on the internet'" (qtd. in Shapiro).

This phrase, unfortunately, seems to be becoming America's rallying cry in an age of social and political unrest: "all I know is what's on the internet." Social media users are becoming increasingly immune to the warnings of "don't believe everything you read online," since it seems that every day, more and more politicians, public figures, and major news outlets are taking to the pages of Facebook and Twitter to convey "facts" that have not been verified, stances that are unjustified, and opinions that are based solely on the formulated opinions of others. Sources of information that we, as consumers of media, have been trained to trust (such as presidential candidates) are becoming muddled by the skewed rhetorical situation that exists on social media. Particularly when discussing the rhetoric of activism on social media, it becomes so important for media consumers to separate fact from fiction, but the trouble arises when these "facts" become clouded by the speaker's preoccupation with his or her own image. Because the nature of social media is highly individualized, with each user having a personal profile and thus a personal image to convey and uphold, social media rhetoric is often corrupted by the emphasis the rhetor places upon his or her projected sense of self.

Malcolm Gladwell, an author and analyst who has been outspoken in his skepticism toward social media activism, argues in a 2010 *New Yorker* piece that social change is brought about by "high-risk meaningful activism" as opposed to the advocacy that is common on social media platforms. In this article, Gladwell discusses the activist movements of the 1950s and 1960s, and he compares those movements to the low-risk

social media activism of the 21st century. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, Gladwell argues, "are built around weak ties," but even he admits that sometimes those "weak ties" are effective in producing results. Gladwell recalls the story of a young American man named Sameer Bhatia who was diagnosed with leukemia and was in need of a bone marrow transplant. Bhatia's friends and relatives took to social media, and soon enough, nearly twenty-five thousand new people had registered for the bone marrow database, and Bhatia found a match (Gladwell). Despite the success of this campaign, Gladwell insists that the reason so many people signed up was because the campaign did not ask too much. Those twenty-five thousand "do-gooders" did not put themselves at personal or financial risk to add their names to the bone marrow database; they sent in a cheek swab, and they patted themselves on the back. Gladwell points out that, "[This type of engagement] doesn't require that you confront socially entrenched norms and practices. In fact, it's the kind of commitment that will bring only social acknowledgment and praise." But is that such a negative outcome? Bhatia did, after all, receive the transplant that he so desperately needed. Gladwell is careful about not completely discrediting the activism that does occasionally result from social media, pointing out that sites like Facebook and Twitter are sometimes successful at increasing participation in. He writes, "Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice" (Gladwell). This idea that social media often leads to "slacktivism" as opposed to on-the-ground activism is, I will argue, due to the fact that social media users are often motivated by projecting an image of themselves rather than being motivated to enact real change.

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Chomsky, too, discusses the power of citizens organizing for the common good,

stating, "Organization has its effects. It means that you discover that you're not alone"

(40). Indeed, on social media, the visibility of organizing for a common goal is

heightened, and as seen with Bhatia's bone marrow transplant, the increased visibility

that Facebook and Twitter offer has proven effective for some causes. It is impossible to

deny that there are moments of social media advocacy—"sweet spots," if you will—that

do result in positive social change. "Invisible Children," the organization behind the

explosively viral "Kony 2012" video reports that a recent "click campaign" prompted the

U.S. state department to issue a $5 million dollar reward for the arrest of Joseph Kony,

the alleged leader of a guerilla group accused of abducting and recruiting child soldiers in

Africa (Results). In 2013, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) launched what they

called the "HRC Logo Meme," encouraging Facebook users to adopt a red equal sign as

their Facebook profile photo to show their support of same-sex marriage. The HRC

reported "a 120 percent increase in profile photo updates… when compared to the

previous Tuesday, which kicked off around the time we began urging followers to change

their photos" (McCarthy). So, in short, millions of people changed their profile pictures

in a show of solidarity—but can this be called *activism*? Gladwell would say absolutely

not, and I agree with him.

This adoption of the HRC logo as one's profile picture is a textbook example of

advocacy masquerading as activism. Certainly, changing one's profile picture in an effort

to show support for a cause is not doing any harm; in fact, I argue that people should

advocate for the causes they support on social media. I am, however, claiming that the

harm comes when social media users' understanding of activism collapses into low-risk

displays of advocacy. The challenge of separating these ideas is that there is an action involved with changing one's profile picture on Facebook; although it takes but a minute to complete that action, steps have been taken toward a cause that promotes positive change, and that seems to fall under my definition for activism. But, as I will be arguing in this essay, the decision to change one's profile picture is doing less for the movement itself than it is doing for the poster's sense of self-representation. The danger of these skewed rhetorical messages is that, with so much value placed on the speaker's image (or projected image), the original message is lost amidst the poster's preoccupation with his or her self-representation.

Rhetorical Analysis

The Rhetoric of Self-Representation

In this section, I will analyze the rhetorical corruptions often used on social media, namely the "entertainer's stance," as it relates to the visual rhetoric Facebook users employ. I argue here that Facebook users' use of visual rhetoric, in the form of applying "filters" to their profile photos, cannot be considered activism due to the self-representative nature of the rhetoric. Since the rhetor's focus in these instances is on the projected image of himself, the "activist" messages behind such filter applications is minimized—or even lost—due to the skewed rhetorical stance.

Booth's analysis of the rhetorical stance lends itself to a critical discussion regarding the role of *ethos* (the speaker's representation of himself), and I argue that it is the overemphasis of self-representation on social media platforms that skews the rhetorical effectiveness of much of the activist rhetoric on Facebook and Twitter. Nancy

Thumim's book *Self-Representation and Digital Culture* addresses the nature of self-representation by users on Twitter and Facebook. Specifically speaking to what individuals post on Facebook, Thumim argues that people are active participants in their own self-representations on social media, and that "Once self-representations are being constructed, struggles over meaning ensue" (141). On Facebook, Thumim proposes, it is impossible to avoid these individual constructions of self; due to the individualized nature of Facebook (with each user having "ownership" over his or her page and the freedom to customize settings and posts in order to project images of oneself), the rhetoric generated on this social media platform is positioned in a way that immediately connects the message to the user who posts it (141). It is often assumed that Facebook is a tool for socializing, and yet, users have no choice but to create (perhaps unconscious) representations of themselves as a means of engaging with others (153). Thumim cites a study done by Burgess and Green, which states, "'It is this social networking function that is most noticeably absent from mainstream media accounts of amateur and everyday content creation […] Amateurs are represented as individualistic, self-expressive producers who are mainly interested in 'broadcasting themselves,' rather than engaging in textual productivity as a means to participation in social networks'" (qtd. in Thumim 136-7). This notion of "broadcasting oneself" echoes Gladwell's point that social media users are far more occupied with being cast in a certain light than they are with either ensuring the truthfulness of their messages or with attempting to enact positive change with the rhetoric they employ. To use the language of Booth, social media users fall into the corruption of the "entertainer's stance," and unfortunately, the rhetor's representation

of him or herself has a tendency to overshadow the content of the would-be "activist" message being relayed—if there is any message being relayed at all.

A recent example of this overemphasis on social media users' *ethos* is the advent of Facebook's "filter" feature, which allows users to superimpose images over their profile photos to show support for a cause. In June 2015, 26 million people superimposed images of rainbows over their Facebook profile photos in support of LGBTQ rights (Kelly). This widespread adoption of a specific image to display public support for a cause is an example of visual rhetoric, in which the rhetor (in this case, the Facebook user) employs an image or visual representation of his or her values in order to convey a certain message. As Booth argues, the content of the rhetorical message must be given equal consideration as the speaker's representation of himself and the audience's perception of the message. When adopting a profile photo "filter," however, the Facebook user need not take any action beyond the click of a button to show his or her support for a cause. While, yes, 26 million Americans adopted similar-looking profile photos, the question begs to be asked: Why? As seen in Figure 1, Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg adopts the "celebrate pride" rainbow flag Facebook filter. In this image, Zuckerberg's face is visible behind the multicolored rainbow flag, visually stating, *here I am, and here is what I support.* This example of visual rhetoric, while harmless, is both short-lived and centered around the rhetor's projection of him or herself rather than communicating a meaningful message that may lead to some sort of action. Zuckerberg adopted the "celebrate pride" filter on June 26, 2015, but by June 29, 2015, Zuckerberg's profile picture—the same image that, just three days before, had been filtered with the rainbow flag—was filter-free, indicating that even the most long-term social media users

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are not immune to the rhetorical corruption that stems from this overemphasis on self-representation.

Fig. 1. Mark Zuckerberg's Facebook profile photo features the superimposed rainbow flag filter. (Zuckerberg, Mark. "Created with facebook.com/celebratepride." *Facebook*. Facebook, 26 Jun. 2015. Web. 1 Apr. 2016).

There is no harm in publicly showing support for a cause, but the danger of such a heavy focus on how individual users represent themselves on social media is that the content of the message comes secondary to the *ethos* of the rhetor. Rather than sharing the message for the sake of educating a population about a social issue, social media users will often—as in the case of the Facebook profile filters—shape their rhetoric so that it casts them in a certain light. Ben Agger, author of *Oversharing: Presentations of Self in the Internet Age*, writes on this subject, "Players tell you what you want to hear;

they are involved in sales or marketing—here the marketing of the self" (6). With the adoption of the aforementioned Facebook profile picture filter, social media users are—quite literally—displaying themselves how they want to be seen by "marketing themselves" as supporters for LGBTQ rights. This identification with a certain value group is not harmful, but it certainly is not *activism*.

The idea that other social media users might look at another user's profile photo and instantaneously understand his or her belief system is impossible; each person has a deeply-rooted, complex set of values that cannot be summed up in the superimposition of a rainbow flag over his or her face. And yet, on social media, this image *is* the visual rhetoric that audiences (the "friends" and "followers" of other social media users) are left to grapple with, and thus, the rhetorical stance is incomplete due to the lack of content the audiences are given in order to fully understand the rhetorical situation at hand. In many ways, the visual rhetoric of self-representation *oversimplifies* the message behind the rhetoric. Some might argue that the issue itself is simple: either one supports LGBTQ rights or he or she does not. Really, though, the issue is not quite so black-and-white; the LGBTQ rights movement is multifaceted and complex, and users might only support (or even understand) a portion of the cause that the rainbow flag "filter" points toward. With the lack of information made available via the "content" of such visual rhetoric, not only is adopting a Facebook profile photo not *activism*, but it is also not a balanced use of rhetoric.

Social media does have great potential to be effective, but Facebook and Twitter users cannot rely solely on the rhetoric of social media to serve as activism. As it stands, the *media* of Facebook and Twitter is often seen as the *message*: the tweet, the meme, or

the 30-second video becomes the content, and the significance of the real social issue at

hand is lost. Because of social media users' preoccupation with the medium and how

their constructions of self are projected, the idea that there are real movements—real

causes—with real lives at stake is secondary to the way the user intends to be seen by his

or her followers and friends. Social media rhetoric does not exist in isolation, and unless

users place less emphasis on their *ethos* and more emphasis on action, on-the-ground

activism is unlikely to take place.

Polarizing Rhetoric

In this section, I will continue to analyze the rhetoric of social media by exploring

how Facebook and Twitter posts are composed in such a manner that often polarizes the

people or groups that movements seek to help. Due to the rhetorical corruption of the

"entertainer's stance" and the rhetor's tendency to make generalizations about people or

groups, social media users must be aware of the polarizing rhetoric that is inherent to

many social media movements.

The rhetoric of social media becomes even more problematic when the lines

between verified fact and emotionally laden speculation become blurred. Despite the

statistical proof of those causes that have benefitted from social media advocacy, some of

the "activist" rhetoric posted on Facebook and Twitter has a polarizing effect, creating an

"us vs. them" mentality. We must, as active audiences, question where "trolling" ends

and truth begins. Since the messages relayed through social media are often highly

biased, based on the values or variably factual information from one person (the rhetor),

the vast availability of information on social media pages presents a significant problem:

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it forces people to take sides on what were originally non-partisan issues. In the article "Defining Deliberate Space: Rethinking Persuasion, Position, and Identification," Arabella Lyon uses the legal framework of deliberation to assess the rhetorical value of "identity" within activist and human rights discourse. Lyon's aim is to prove that the goal of activist rhetoric should not be for audiences to identify with the victim, the author, or the organization, as such identification distorts the inherent (and often positive) differences between individuals and between cultures. Attempts at rhetorical identification often lead to what Lyon calls "misrecognition" (59), a state in which false beliefs about others and ourselves rise. This critique points out that identification, such as that which occurs when individuals categorize and negatively associate an individual, an image, or an event with the rhetoric being delivered, polarizes—rather than unites—populations who might otherwise band together for a common goal. In social media rhetoric, this "misrecognition" results in rhetors (already the heavy point of the rhetorical triangle) sympathizing with the "us," when in reality, the problem at hand may not be an "us vs. them" issue to begin with.

Using recent events in Ferguson, Missouri to frame Lyon's hypothesis, we can see that a single event (the shooting of a young, black man by a white police officer) has sparked innumerable instances of social media "activism" in which the rhetor attempts to identify with one of the parties involved in the event. While social media posts in response to these events may appear as simple acts of citizens voicing their opinions on public forums, the rhetoric these citizens use to identify with the victim or the officer does little more than alienate and draw distinctions between groups—in this case, racial groups—to create false beliefs about people and cultures. More than anything, the

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Ferguson-related rhetoric employed on social media is sparking unrest and spreading hateful messages that are often founded on unproven, variably factual information. Lyon's point that identification distorts populations' perspectives on an issue is undoubtedly true here; by categorizing human beings (as black or white, right or wrong, rich or poor, etc.) through the rhetoric on social media, there is no activism being performed. Instead, the generalizations made by social media users overshadow the meaning of the act or event itself. While social media users may not be intentionally misappropriating information for the sake of projecting their own *ethos* to their audience, the act of choosing sides indicates the rhetor's desire to fit into a specific image, leading to a rhetorical imbalance with a heavier emphasis the speaker's sense of self than on either the complete, contextualized message *or* on the audience's needs.

Now, it might appear as though identifying with a particular party is not dangerous in isolation, but the nature of polarization is that it always has two sides. In addition to identifying with the "us," social media rhetoric has a tendency to villainize the "other." An example of this polarizing rhetoric can be found in the recent advent of the hashtags #blacklivesmatter and #policelivesmatter. The rhetoric of these phrases implies that social media users can only choose one side, which sends the message that the "other" lives seemingly do not matter or matter less—even if that is not what the rhetor truly believes. In regard to this specific rhetorical analysis, there has been a significant amount of social media "buzz" surrounding the use of these hashtags. Advocates of the #blacklivesmatter movement have pointed out that this phrase does *not* seek to imply that other, non-black lives are insignificant; in fact, online proponents of the #blacklivesmatter movement are very clear about their goals. The website for the

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#blacklivesmatter movement clarifies the meaning of the phrase: "When we say Black

Lives Matter, we are broadening the conversation around state violence to include all of

the ways in which Black people are intentionally left powerless at the hands of the

state. We are talking about the ways in which Black lives are deprived of our basic

human rights and dignity" (Cullors, Tometi, & Garza). When used in isolation,

#blacklivesmatter is an empowering affirmation for members of the movement. Recently,

however, other groups on social media have adopted the format of the #blacklivesmatter

hashtag, which turns a harmless act of advocacy into a rhetoric of making people choose.

When scrolling through their Facebook or Twitter feeds, social media users are

confronted with messages that resemble the #blacklivesmatter hashtag, such as

#policelivesmatter. Again, in isolation, this particular phrase, #policelivesmatter—which

allows users to show support for a specific group—may simply reflect an individual

user's values. When pitted against #blacklivesmatter, however, the rhetoric of these

hashtags is so similar that social media users are forced to take sides on what is, in

essence, a nonpartisan human rights issue: all human lives matter, regardless of race or

occupation.

Both #policelivesmatter and #blacklivesmatter seek to unify the populations that

identify with the individual causes, but the polarization that they set in place forces social

media users to make generalizations about people or groups. Wendy S. Hesford, in her

article "Human Rights Rhetoric of Recognition," poses the argument that activist rhetoric

relies too much on how people are defined and represented in the media. The rhetorical

tactics of exposure and shaming are too often used in place of true universal activist

discourse, leading to a skewed acknowledgement of the concept of what social change

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should consist of. To correct this, Hesford proposes a shift to a more broad definition of universal activism, recognizing the challenges of defining differing rhetorical contexts and the contradictions they appear to pose. Here, Booth's corruptions of rhetoric, particularly the "entertainer's stance," show their real danger. Audiences are likely to be swayed by this falsely imposed dichotomy of the "self" versus the "other," as indicated by the #blacklivesmatter vs. #policelivesmatter dichotomy. Modern rhetorical partisanship, when in the form of social media posts by civilians, often takes the form of what Hesford calls "shaming," or showcasing an individual or group as the wrongdoer in a situation without the accused party being given a humanized voice in the conversation. Because proponents of each movement are unlikely to devote the limited number of characters in their tweets to positive recognition of who they view as the wrongdoer, this "shaming" skews the rhetoric of social media in a manner that is likely to be misrepresentative of the entire rhetorical situation.

Similarly, individuals are more likely to stand by a cause if they can either isolate themselves from the villainous "other" or if they can sympathize with the victim's "self." While this may appear to be a natural, instinctual reaction, Hesford is correct in regarding these movements as dangerous when employed as "activist" rhetoric. Instead of social activism taking the form of generalizations and unfounded associations, activist rhetoric must be contextualized before it takes shape; in other words, defining and acknowledging all parts of the rhetorical situation is necessary in order for social media activism to hold. Certainly, individuals will take sides on an issue, but instead of dehumanizing the "other," activist rhetoric should be based on humanizing all parties, whether the speaker believes the other side to be guilty or not. Too often, the speaker is worried about how he

or she will be viewed, and in their pursuit to be seen as participants in a movement, social media users often project dangerous, polarizing messages that dehumanize the "other."

In "Clicks or Commitment: Activism in the Age of Social Media," Peter Buell Hirsch emphasizes this point about polarization by comparing modern-day social media activism to other historical social movements, claiming that each generation reinvents social activism to meet the needs and rhetorical situation of the time. Hirsch recognizes that individuals have historically been inclined to join social movements by visibly identifying with a cause, while not always being willing to put themselves at personal risk. While Hirsch acknowledges many factors that successful social movements have contained, he highlights the use of language and terminology in these movements as a determining element in many cases. Labeling issues and subsequently defining sides of those issues with terms such as "pro-life/pro-choice" and "marriage equality" has, again, transformed activists' discourse into a rhetoric of making people choose. While this transformation is not inherently dangerous, the trouble arises when individuals adopt the "entertainer's stance" and shift the focus away from the rhetorical message itself. While this move may seem counter-intuitive (ignoring the event, cause, or movement that sparked the rhetoric), we must remember that social media messages are quickly composed and designed for immediate impact, and users are unlikely to take the entire rhetorical stance into consideration before posting—particularly if the rhetor is passionate about the cause or movement about which he writes.

Is it possible, then, for social media rhetoric to abandon its corruptions? In "Beyond the Modern Synecdoche: Towards a Non-Fundamentalist Human Rights Discourse" Ricardo Baldissone introduces a potential—albeit theoretical—solution to

how social media might be adapted to suit the need for a non-polarizing rhetoric. Baldissone claims that human rights discourse is currently following a synecdochic model, in that the concept of what "humanity" is has been shaped only by parts of certain groups of human beings. This inaccurate representation of mankind, the author contends, eliminates discourse about human differences and suggests that human rights and activist discourses unintentionally marginalize subjects such as women, children, and what are often referred to as "minority" groups. Baldissone argues for an acknowledgement of human multiplicities in rhetorical discourse, which would require a new human rights vocabulary to grammatically pluralize the now-limiting vernacular used to represent different groups.

Baldissone's plea to systematically change the language of activist rhetoric poses a potential solution to the problems outlined by Lyons and Hesford. Because modern audiences vary so dramatically in their contexts and their cultural representations, Baldissone's analysis of language provides an intriguing focal point for the future of rhetoric and its role in social media activism. The rhetor's *ethos*—so often the "heavy point" of the rhetorical triangle—could prove to be a tool through which human multiplicities are recognized on social media. Because most social media platforms involve some sort of personal identification on the part of the speaker or writer—be it a profile photo, username, or even the user's full name—there is a sense of accountability associated with modern human rights rhetoric that was not present in the 1960s and 1970s, where anonymous pamphlets and letters were the primary modes of written social activist rhetoric. This accountability can serve as a viable tool for promoting intentionality on the part of the rhetor; if social media users become more conscious of

the rhetorical corruptions that the medium of social media is prone to, the use of activist

rhetoric on social media may, indeed, work toward mobilizing productive social

movements.

Limited Unification: A Means to an End

In this section, I will analyze the role of social media rhetoric as a means to unite

populations so that they may achieve activism. Using the rhetoric surrounding the 2011

Occupy Wall Street movement as an example of a successful activist movement where

social media worked in conjunction with on-the-ground activism, I argue that social

media alone cannot lead to such demonstrations.

For the past few decades, media has permeated many aspects of its users' daily

lives, so much so that Marshall McLuhan notes that modern populations consume media

just as readily as we consume natural resources. He writes, "… a society whose economy

is dependent upon one or two major staples like cotton, or grain, or lumber, or fish, or

cattle is going to have some obvious social patterns of organization as a result" (34).

Extreme reliance on these resources creates what McLuhan deems "great endurance"

within a population, creating bonds where bonds did not exist previously (34). Certainly,

Facebook and Twitter have created a sense of unity among users who would not

otherwise be connected. Geographically, social media users may be thousands of miles

apart, and yet, Facebook and Twitter allow people to connect and engage with millions of

like-minded individuals. Judith Dueck and Michael Rempel argue in their article,

"Human Rights and Technology: Lessons from Alice in Wonderland," that social media

has great potential as a means to an end: "The end objective is not thousands or millions

of people engaged in social media. Rather the goal is the realization of an articulated and desired change" (15). These authors point to the fact that social media can lead to meaningful activism without replacing it with clicks, likes, and shares, echoing my argument that social media can lead to activism in action, but unfortunately, the rhetorical stance employed by many social media users is skewed so that the reason behind the activist messages is lost.

The idea that social media can be a tool for organization without replacing on-the-ground activism is key here, and the Occupy Wall Street movement that began in September 2011 is an illustrative example of how social media can work as a vehicle toward on-the-ground activism without replacing it entirely. The Occupy Wall Street slogan, "We are the 99%"[3] has become one of the most recognized protest phrases of the last century, and Paul Taylor of the Pew Research center states that, "[It's] arguably the most successful slogan since 'Hell no, we won't go,' going back to the Vietnam era" (qtd. in Horsley). The phrase "We are the 99%" alludes to both the economic and social disparity in the United States between the wealthiest 1% and the remainder of the population. This slogan, although only consisting of a few words, is an example of effective 21st century activist rhetoric; while, on its own, the phrase does not incite activism, the rhetor's *ethos* does not overshadow the content of the message. The inclusive language of "we" in "We are the 99%" places the rhetor in immediate affective proximity to his audience, and the rhetorical message is clearly stated within the slogan

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[3] Activist and anthropologist David Graeber declares himself the inventor of the slogan "we are the 99%" (Gerbaudo 110).

itself, preventing the "entertainer's stance" from being abused. The phrase is short, straightforward, and laden with meaning.

As I do in this essay, Paulo Gerbaudo identifies social media as a means to employing on-the-ground activism, and in the case of Occupy Wall Street, he argues that social media alone is not responsible for the success of the movement (103), but social media certainly aided in the protest's visibility. *Adbusters*, the Canadian countercultural magazine that launched the first advertisements for the Occupy movement, sent out the virtual call to online activists on its blog eleven days before the occupation was scheduled to begin: "On September 17, we want to see 20,000 people flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street for a few Months. Once there, we shall incessantly repeat one simple demand for a plurality of voices" (qtd. in Gerbaudo 108). The rhetoric in this message is similarly inclusive to the "We are the 99%" slogan; the function of "we" in both the organization's self-referencing pronoun and the images of the collective "we" that will assemble in response to this call gives audiences a sense of unity, even though no collective action has yet occurred. The idea that 20,000 like-minded people are expected to come together to "incessantly" repeat a "simple" demand gives the impression that this gathering will be an easy means by which to engage in activism, and surely, the idea that these 20,000 will speak for "a plurality of voices" is an effective use of all components of the rhetorical stance: the intended meaning is clear, the audience's role is plainly stated, and the rhetor establishes *ethos* without overshadowing the content of the message. The questions of "who are we?" "what is our message?" and "what do we want our audience to do?" are all answered by this initial post.

In order for social media rhetoric to be effective in leading to activism, the messages must contain—as do these examples from the Occupy Wall Street protests—an element of intentionality. Instead of social media users allowing their individual identities to obscure the content of their Facebook and Twitter posts, the rhetoric of social media needs to be thoughtful, intentional, and it must work toward a larger cause. Gerbaudo writes that social media provides "a means not simply to convey abstract opinions, but also to give a shape to the way in which people come together and act together… to *choreograph* collective action" (4). He argues that social media has been chiefly responsible for what he calls the "choreography of assembly" for Occupy Wall Street, and these demonstrations would not have been possible without the power of social media (5). In the case of Occupy Wall Street, the rhetoric of social media is not wholly responsible for the physical assembling of a highly dispersed and individualized constituency. Instead, the rhetoric of the movement is inclusive to the point that it represents the voice of a collective community rather than one individual's opinion.

Despite its individualized nature, social media does unify populations that, in another time, may not have been able to organize due to geographic constraints. The highly social nature of social media lends itself well as an organizational locus for real-world activism; when the emphasis of activist messages rely equally on all parts of the rhetorical stance, platforms like Facebook and Twitter may lead groups to unite toward a common, real-world goal of promoting positive change.

Conclusion

The studies and examples I have explored in this essay are just the tip of the rhetorical iceberg; the available information on social media is vast, and the movements

taking place on Facebook and Twitter at any given time are far too numerous to name. The advent of social media has created a world in which humans can connect across geographies, socioeconomic barriers, and ideologies, and the power of social media as a means to unite is powerful and unprecedented. This essay explored both how the rhetoric used by social media users may detract from the power of social movements and also how the rhetoric of social media has the potential to choreograph activism on the ground. In order for the rhetoric of social media to become—and remain—effective in uniting social media users toward a common goal, I call for an intentionality of the rhetoric used on these platforms. In order to put an end to the polarizing language that has so often eclipsed the meaning of the social movements themselves, I encourage social media users to consider their rhetorical stance before they post, share, click, or tweet. More specifically, social media users need to think beyond the scope of their audience's perception of them, abandon the corruption of the "entertainer's stance," and consider the effect that their messages might have on their friends and followers.

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