ABSTRACT

Democratic Digital Campaign Strategies in the Age of Trump:
Circulation Theory, Digital Networks, and Memes

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This thesis examines the varied digital campaign strategies of prominent, establishment Democratic politicians during the Trump administration. In order to counter the massive online presence of Donald Trump, establishment Democratic politicians accelerated the use of digital memes in campaign discourse. I use a circulation framework to analyze and chart the movement of specific meme formats and meme iterations across and between digital networks. I analyze three case studies of digital campaign discourse; the widely-circulated hashtag #TheResistance, Mike Bloomberg's self-satirical Instagram meme campaign, and Pete Buttigieg's "victory" speech on the night of the 2020 Iowa Democratic Caucuses. Taken together, these case studies illustrate distinct ways prominent Democratic campaigns use memes to leverage rhetorical power while concealing the liberal ideological valences of such texts. I argue critical rhetoricians should more fully account for the corporate and centralized origins of seemingly diffuse digital meme trends.
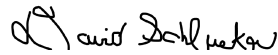
Democratic Digital Campaign Strategies in the Age of Trump: Circulation Theory, Digital
Networks, and Memes

by

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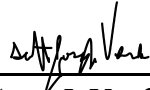Requirements for the Degree
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

DEDICATION

To my friends and family, specifically my mother, Sheila Marie Allan, and my girlfriend, Josefina Artigas Do. When I told them I was spending two years of my life in Waco, Texas, studying the rhetoric of Internet memes, they somehow never laughed at me. I truly appreciate the incredible amount of support and love from my friends and family. I know they'll be there every step of the way.

CHAPTER ONE

The Digital Rise of Donald Trump

Introduction

Donald Trump, and his campaign for president of the United States in 2016, bluntly challenged the existing political rhetorical rulebook that governed and guided mainstream political discourse for decades. While there is no singular, authoritative "rulebook" for conventional political rhetoric, the Trump campaign renegotiated what is considered acceptable political rhetoric and what is considered a viable and winning national political strategy. Trump and his campaign spouted ad hominem attacks and blatantly racist remarks, white supremacist memes and deriding nicknames, blatant incitements of violence and chants calling for the imprisonment of his opponent, Hilary Clinton. Trump's campaign marks a stark turn from the confident, competent, and emotionally intelligent presidential-hopeful orator such as Obama, Reagan, or Clinton.[1]

Donald Trump, the ruthless real-estate mogul, espoused openly xenophobic, patriarchal, and hyper-nationalist ideals on the campaign trail, promising to return the United States to a nostalgic and dignified former state of esteem.[2] Trump strongly criticized the liberal establishment's embrace of "identity politics" and "political

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[1] Fred I. Greenstein, *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to Barack Obama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 5-6.

[2] Emrys Westacott, "Why Trump's 'Make America Great Again' nostalgia is a dangerous political tool," *Timeline*, July 25th, 2016, https://timeline.com/false-nostalgia-donald-trump-e935ef77018c.

correctness," perfectly encapsulated in Trump's barrage of insults against the presidency of Barack Obama, the first Black president in US history.[3] Trump blamed racial and economic justice movements, such as Black Lives Matter and Fight for $15, for the white "common man's" fall from grace and prestige.[4] Trump successfully actualized underlying affective formations of shame, frustration and anger that have developed for many white, rural and suburban communities.[5] As white people in the US grappled with declining wages, declining quality of life, and declining life expectancy over the past few decades, all material conditions that are direct consequences of the adoption of the bipartisan and neoliberal "Washington consensus,"[6] Trump, instead, pointed to increasing cultural and racial plurality as the source of these problems. Many praised Trump for refusing to be beholden to political correctness and "saying what's on his mind."[7] For rhetorical scholars who utilize affective frameworks to analyze rhetorical "texts" such as Woods

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[3] Moira Weigel, "Political correctness: how the right invented a phantom enemy," *The Guardian*, November 30th, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/30/political-correctness-how-the-right-invented-phantom-enemy-donald-trump.

[4] Alexander Burns, "Donald Trump Rode to Power in the Role of the Common Man," *The New York Times*, November 9th, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/09/us/politics/donald-trump-wins.html.

[5] Donovan O. Schaefer, "Whiteness and Civilization: Shame, Race, and the Rhetoric of Donald Trump." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 17:1 (2020), 1-18.

[6] George Monbiot, "Neoliberalism – the ideology at the root of all our problems," *The Guardian*, April 15th, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot.

[7] Roderick P. Hart, *Trump and Us: What He Says and Why People Listen* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

and Hahner, Papacharissi, and Massumi, rather than saying what's on his mind, Donald Trump successfully activates pre-existing and pre-cognitive formations of anxiety and fear through his campaign rhetoric.[8]

Trump's win in the 2016 election, over the more qualified, more experienced and more competent Hilary Clinton, came as a shock to many political pundits and pollsters.[9] How did Trump pull off such an upset? While I resist proscribing one causal factor for Trump's win and exceeding of expectations, it is clear that many corporate news analysts underestimated the role of digital media in building, mobilizing, and energizing support for Trump. While Trump was being consistently laughed at and dismissed as an unrealistic candidate throughout the Republican Party nomination process and the general election, Trump's campaign built support and attracted new and seasoned internet users to white nationalist ideals.

The presidential election of 2016 clearly demonstrated the importance of viral, digital media in stultifying, shifting, and warping political discourse.[10] To put it simply, Trump and his racialized political platform gained considerable traction across digital networks, as his campaign attempted to bypass and counteract the established and prevailing dismissal of his candidacy. Digital networks, both mainstream (Facebook and Twitter) and those less popular (4chan and reddit), are no longer fringe arenas for

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[8] Schaefer, "Whiteness and Civilization," 11.

[9] Patrick Healy and Jeremy W. Peters, "Donald Trump's Victory Is Met With Shock Across a Wide Political Divide," *The New York Times*, November 9th, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/us/politics/donald-trump-election-reaction.html.

[10] Heather Suzanne Woods and Leslie A. Hahner, *Make America Meme Again* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2019).

inconsequential political babble. As digital networks begin to play such an increasingly

central role in people's lives, from shopping to social connection, dating to education, sex

to politics, rhetorical scholars must continue to investigate and examine through what

means and mediums internet users are interpellated into digital subjects. How are internet

users' habits, practices and routines cultivated? And how do these practices shape and

express systems of power? Specifically, in the case of the 2016 election, how did the

tactical design and proliferation of alt-right memes attract seemingly apolitical internet

users or political centrists towards Trump's white supremacist campaign and platform?

This previous question is answered quite extensively in Woods and Hahner's

Make America Meme Again. They argue memes, in general, were the primary rhetorical

tool for recruiting at their disposal, as they "normalize and generate devotion to

extremism"[11] even while being able to "conceal or hide their rhetorical work, even as

they sway viewers".[12] By hiding behind the charge that their hateful propaganda was

simply "just a meme," the alt-right, through digital publics on r/the_donald and 4chan's

/pol/ were able to massively radicalize potential voters online through affective

amplification. The alt-right, a diffuse, ill-defined affective public, even with no true

"guiding ideology," was still able to launch a guerilla-style incursion on political

discourse and successfully "meme Trump into the White house."[13] Memes have

significant rhetorical force given their easy consumption, their quick diffusion across

various digital networks, and their ability to be a powerful transmitter of affect.

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[11] Woods and Hahner, *Make America Meme*, 15.

[12] Woods and Hahner, *Make America Meme*, 8.

[13] Woods and Hahner, *Make America Meme*, 17.

Given Trump's overt flaunting of the traditional speech protocols that have previously constrained and influenced the rhetoric of presidential hopefuls, and his use of viral digital media to amplify the affective reach of his campaign, it begs the question of how the Democratic Party's digital and political campaign strategy adapts to the changing rhetorical landscape? How does the Democratic Party respond to their historic loss in the "meme election"[14] of 2016? What techniques and methods will the Democrats use to mobilize and energize voters when, in 2016, memes, chatrooms, and retweets of alt-right content creators seemed to have more palpable influence on voter turnout than the traditional and established television news media? In a highly technical and digitized social world, how does the Democratic Party vie for prominence in an increasingly competitive "attention economy"?[15]

Clearly the Democratic Party is not a totally unified structure, so to ask simply about the change in digital campaign strategy of the Democratic Party writ large might lead to some interesting, yet imprecise, conclusions. The Democratic Party is a large tent. The Democratic Party is instead closer to an assemblage, a loose connection of politicians, donors, interest groups, voters, volunteers, and NGOs, who all have competing policy interests and goals.[16] There is no doubt that the Democratic Party is not

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[14] Ryan M. Milner and Whitney Phillips, "Dark Magic: The Memes That Made Donald Trump's Victory," *US Election Analysis 2016*, http://www.electionanalysis2016.us/uselection-analysis-2016/section-6-internet/dark-magic-the-memes-that-made-donaldtrumps-victory/.

[15] Damien Smith Pfister and Misti Yang, "Five Theses on Technoliberalism and the Networked Public Sphere," *Communication and the Public* 3:3(2018), 247–262.

[16] Kathleen Bawn, Marty Cohen, David Karol, Seth Masket, Hans Noel, and John Zaller, "A Theory of Political Parties" (Unpublished manuscript, University of California, Los Angeles Political Science).

a homogenous entity with exactly identical platforms and ideals. The "progressive" wing

of the Democratic Party, home to well-known Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth

Warren and Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilhan Omar, and the

"moderate" or "centrist" wing of the party, populated by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi

and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, have substantive policy disagreements

spanning a whole host of issues including healthcare, defense spending, and domestic

surveillance.[17] The socially conservative factions, such as the Blue Dog Coalition, and

the socially liberal faction, like the Congressional Progressive Caucus, disagree on

matters of social and fiscal policy. Meaningful and substantive divergences exist in the

Democratic Party. Therefore, rather than attempting to amalgamate these divergent

perspectives and ideals by focusing on the entire Democratic Party, this thesis will

investigate and analyze the digital campaign rhetoric of center-left, establishment

Democratic politicians. This centrist portion of the party, more so than the party as a

whole, is more tightly coalesced around certain policy positions and a commitment to

governing "moderately."

Analyzing and investigating the digital campaign rhetoric of prominent and

establishment Democratic party members is not only pedagogically worthwhile, I argue,

it's absolutely crucial for this historical moment. I define center-left members of the

Democratic Party as Democratic politicians that support moderate, measured, and modest

policy positions that align with the general platform off the Democratic Party. These

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[16] Thomas B. Edsall, "The Democratic Party is Actually Three Parties," *The New York Times*, July 24th, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/24/opinion/2020-progressive-candidates.html.

policy and value positions often include support for reproductive rights, immigration reform, gun control, etc. I defined establishment members of the Democratic Party as politicians well-regarded and well-supported by the hierarchical structure of the Democratic Party. Despite the rising popularity of progressive politics, seen in the popular, yet failed, presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders and in the social media savvy Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the Democratic Party is undoubtedly a political party dominated and governed by center-left principals. Those in institutional positions of power within the Democratic Party, who are able to set legislative agendas, distribute campaign funding, and generally speak "for" the party, are mostly center-left politicians and, by definition, establishment politicians. This can be seen in the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, the Senate Minority Leader, Chuck Schumer, and the 2020 presidential nominee, Joe Biden.

Political parties, and those that lead them, are tasked with the objectives of coordination and management of competing political positions and viewpoints within the party. It is crucial that rhetoricians seek to analyze, interpret, and criticize Democratic Party leadership to demystify and reveal the taken-for-granted assumptions regarding civic, political and social life that lies dormant in political campaign messaging. To more fully develop this argument, I turn to a brief discussion of the justifications of this thesis project and the questions that will guide my research.

Justification and Research Questions

This thesis seeks to provide a timely and critical analysis of campaign rhetoric from prominent, establishment Democratic politicians across digital networks following

the election of Donald Trump. Trump successfully utilized viral digital media, often from

fringe and seemingly inconsequential alt-right pockets of the internet, to generate

affective traction, stultify public discourse, and introduce seemingly apolitical and

withdrawn digital subjects to his white nationalist political movement.[18] Examining the

memetic campaign strategies of prominent Democrats, including the alterations,

mutations, and replications in their broader movement across digital networks, will

illuminate their ultimate interpretations of Trump's rise to power.

Elections are hotly contested phenomenon. Sometimes elections are contested in

the administrative sense, as during the 2020 Iowa Democratic Caucuses where

mismanagement and unfamiliarity with new technology impeded the efficient tabulation

of results.[19] More commonly, however, elections are contested in the interpretative sense.

Politicians, interest groups, voters, news media, and political parties have a vested

interest in forging a persuasive and easily-circulatable interpretative frame for the results

of a certain election.[20] Trump won due to his "strong on immigration policies" or he won

because of criticism of free trade or he won because of his hard stance on China. These

competing interpretative frames don't necessarily need to reflect reality or true voter

preferences, but merely need to be believable and affectively galvanizing. Voting is a

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[18] Woods and Hahner, *Make America meme*.

[19] Sara Morrison, "The Iowa caucus smartphone app disaster, explained," *Vox*, February 6th, 2020, https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/2/4/21122211/iowa-caucus-smartphone-app-disaster- explained.

[20] Marjorie Randon Hershey, "The Constructed Explanation: Interpreting Election Results in the 1984 Presidential Race," *The Journal of Politics* 54:4 (1992): 943-976.; Stephen C. Craig, Michael D. Martinez, Jason Gainous, and James G. Kane, "Winners, Losers, and Election Context: Voter Responses to the 2000 Presidential Election," *Political Research Quarterly* 59:4 (December 2006): 579-592.

chaotic and messy process. Interpretative frames for election results operate as a heuristic, or model, for people to make sense of, and attribute significance to, electoral results. Ensuing campaigns, especially from the losing party, need to implicitly or explicitly interpret their previous loss in order to frame their new electoral strategy. Examining how the losing side of the two-party "establishment" system crafted their campaign strategy following the "white-lash" of the 2016 election will demonstrate whether prominent establishment Democrats frame the rise of Trump as an aberration, an incendiary moment that will be smothered as soon as it sparked, or as a culmination of decades of ineffectual governance and insufficient challenging of hateful ideology throughout the US. What do the digital memetic campaign strategies purported by establishment Democrats tell us about their interpretative frame concerning the results of the 2016 election? If political campaigns truly represent a party's interpretative frame for previous elections, and digital memes reflect and shape broader social and cultural contexts, this thesis' rhetorical analysis will reveal ideological commitments. On what ideological, rhetorical, and argumentative bases does the "resistance" to Trumpism make their pitch? What do those ideological, rhetorical, and argumentative bases demonstrate about what comes "after Trump"?

     This thesis project will contribute to rhetorical study of memes, circulation theory, and political rhetoric. Toward this end, I propose three sets of questions that will guide my work in this area: questions about how digital memes function, questions about how digital memes both reflect and shape broader aesthetic, cultural, and, ideological systems, and, finally, questions about how prominent political campaigns utilize memes in their broader digital campaign strategy.

The first set of questions require the creation of a definitional framework for digital memes; what are memes, how do they "work," and what "work" do they do? What aesthetic, cultural, and platform-specific characteristics do "successful" memes possess? How do memes circulate, mutate, and change with each participatory instantiation? Although the answers to these questions require theoretical context, and will be explored more fully in the literature review, this first set of question points to the rhetorical, persuasive, and constitutive power of memes, as a combination of "visual and verbal appeals designed to persuade a broad set of audiences."[21] Memes are an incredibly important visual argumentative form.[22] Memes are prominent, massively popular, infective, and unique in their aesthetic and argumentative qualities. The first set of questions for this project will help provide further context for the rhetorical study of digital memes.

The second set of questions pushes beyond the qualities and functionality of memes and deals with their broader context within a highly networked, digitized and commodified world. How do digital memes reflect, alter, and negotiate broader cultural, social, and political systems? What does the massive popularity of highly participatory, diffusely sourced, and easily circulated memes demonstrate about relatability and shared cultural values? The internet is highly fragmented space. The successful viral uptake of a specific meme or meme format requires powerful affective arousal (usually through

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[21] Woods and Hahner, *Make America Meme*, 15.

[22] Leslie A. Hahner, "THE RIOT KISS: FRAMING MEMES AS VISUAL ARGUMENT," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 49 (Winter 2013): 153.

humor), a relatable premise or idea, and an invitation to action.[23] Memes move participants to action, either through sharing and liking, or through re-creation, invention, and adaptation. Digital memes are created and shared within a conflicting set of contexts, exigencies, and digital ecosystems. To create the necessary conditions for massive uptake, mutation, and re-articulation, memes need to appeal to a broad set of audiences in some capacity. Therefore, memes and their popularity reveal shared cultural, political, and social conceptualizations. Some memes are intended to be more broadly received, others are specifically designed for circulation within a digital sub-community. This set of questions will open up productive lines of inquiry surrounding the cultural function of digital memes, how they represent a shared form of discourse, delineating in-groups and out-groups and providing an argumentative form for digital subjects to make sense of, challenge, and negotiate the bounds of social, cultural, and political arrangements.

The final set of questions will specifically locate the function and broader cultural significance of memes within the context of electoral campaigns. How do memes make arguments or circulate argumentative frames for specific electoral contests? How effective are memes, as specific facet or tactic of digital campaigns, in contributing to electoral success? More specifically in the context of this thesis, what do the establishment members of the Democratic Party's use of digital memes demonstrate about their interpretative frame concerning the 2016 election? Or the political moments of the Trump presidency? What political, social, and cultural projects are foreclosed based on this interpretative frame? To briefly borrow from the robust field of cultural studies, why this way, and not another way?

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[23] Limor Shifman, *Memes in digital culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

This third and final set of questions are crucially important because they point towards the ultimate significance of the project. We certainly find ourselves in a unique historical moment that has thrown many baseline assumptions concerning international and domestic politics into crisis; global pandemic, white nationalism, unprecedented levels of anti-racist protest and social unrest, economic recession, widespread misinformation, accelerating climate change, international democratic backsliding, and a president who flagrantly rejects the constrains of liberal institutionalism.[24] This is not to say that the United States has never experienced such crises in the past. Every factor previously listed has historical antecedents and linkages that are vitally important to trace and study. However, we are experiencing a confluence of social and political events that are urging many to ask questions concerning the capacity of capitalism, liberalism, and democracy to deal with such crises. To put it bluntly, this is not business as usual. This moment is ripe for the opportunity to question, critique, and transform seemingly immovable social and political systems. The severity and magnitude of these compounding crises requires thought, criticism, and solutions that exceed routinized and expected politics. The third and final set of questions will point towards how the Democratic Party's establishment members are able to deflate radical criticism and mobilization during a unique moment of compounding crises, and funnel it towards purely electoral, respectable, and liberal-institutional ends. How do the digital memetic campaign strategies of establishment Democrats rhetorically, argumentatively, and ideologically constrain widespread disaffection and frustration with contemporary

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[24] Alfredo Saad-Filho, "The Left Must Seize This Moment, or Others Will," *Jacobin*, April 23rd, 2020, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/04/coronavirus-crisis-covid-economy-recession-pandemic.

capitalist-racialized social order and affectively re-direct it towards the maintenance of such social order?

We need rhetorical criticisms of the "Left" just as much as rhetorical criticisms of the "Right." The Trump administration is clearly a proponent of violent, white supremacist ideology and policy. This can be seen in his description of white supremacists as "very fine people," his "Muslim Ban" which barred immigration from primarily Muslim and non-white nations, his brutal immigration policy carried out by ICE, his calls for Black people and people of color to "go back to where they came from," and countless other examples. However, to completely bracket off criticism of establishment Democrats' digital campaign strategy, political platforms, and interpretative frame of the 2016 election forwards an overly simplistic and dualistic idea of American politics. Both parties can be, and most certainly are, capable of doing bad things and both parties are capable of making arguments and appeals with objectionable pretenses and conclusions. Critiques of the establishment "Left" generally, and the US Democratic Party specifically, are absolutely necessary because despite utilizing the discourse and specific sloganeering of various leftist social causes, the party structure, platform, and digital campaign strategy preclude popular influences concerning systemic reform. Criticism is necessary to identify contradictions, reveal cooptation, and forge the conditions necessary for reorganization and revolution—ultimately, to create a more egalitarian, just, and democratic world.

Review of Literature

To make a valuable contribution to the rhetorical study of digital rhetoric and campaign rhetoric, it is crucial to contextualize my research within the healthy and robust set of existing contributions. By surveying existing literature on the topics of critical approaches to rhetorical inquiry, digital rhetoric, and political rhetoric, I seek to not only carve out my personalized niche within the broader conversation, but also reveal research gaps in existing literature. I will also highlight areas for future research that lie beyond the scope of my thesis. Ultimately, this review of relevant literature will serve my overall argument for the thesis by contextualizing digital rhetoric scholarship and circulation theory scholarship to the ascendancy of Donald Trump. Currently, circulation-based approaches to rhetorical texts don't tend to focus on politics in the electoral sense, opting instead to study cultural and social phenomena and their movement across digital networks. Additionally, political rhetorical inquiry, largely housed in presidential rhetoric, may not sufficiently use circulation theory in their criticism of political public address and oratory.

This review of literature is organized thematically. First, I will briefly survey the field of rhetoric's robust collection of critical rhetorical approaches and their related debates. Such criticisms attempt to move rhetorical study beyond its bounded and situated foundations. Second, I will review rhetorical scholarship on digital memes. Third, I will briefly review relevant literature concerning political rhetoric. These scholars of public address, out of all subfields of rhetorical study, focus most closely on political oratory, which is incredibly pertinent to this project. However, I will identify the methodological omissions of political rhetorical studies, specifically explaining how

circulation theory is central to political rhetoric, especially within a highly digitized and closely networked social and political world. Lastly, I will briefly review scholarship concerning the rhetoric of Donald Trump. While their contributions are important in helping students of rhetoric understand how Trump's rhetoric incites, energizes, and enrages, there is a considerable dearth of scholarship that explains how Trump's political and rhetorical campaign strategy effectuates, molds, or shifts the rhetorical terrain of other campaigns.

Critical Rhetorical Studies

Broadly, critical rhetorical approaches to texts seek to unsettle normative assumptions concerning speech, audience, and rhetor that have guided classical rhetorical inquiry. Prior scholarly focus on a specific "text," such as a speech given by a famous orator at a party convention, attempted to determine contextual constraints and overarching exigencies, as described best by Bitzer.[25] For scholars in this tradition, public rhetorical performances are structurally responsive to the situational context. Rhetorical utterances are therefore fixed, bounded and situational. There exists a singular, unidirectional relationship between situational constraints, rhetorical performance, and audience. The pressing situation determines how actors must respond through rhetorical injunction. Rhetorical approaches that examine and (re)create a highly contextualized rhetorical situation for their analyses assume that rhetorical criticism "begin(s) with a

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[25] Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1968): 1-14.

finished text in need of interpretation."[26] Texts, although closely related and born out of

context, are two distinct phenomena.[27]

Whereas traditional approaches to rhetorical criticism seek to analyze specific

argumentative appeals invoked by the speaker within a highly contextual situation during

public speech, postmodern approaches question the ability of meta-narratives to establish

and maintain societal legitimation. What many critical rhetorical approaches introduce is

the collapsing of text into context.[28] Rather than consider rhetorical texts as a unified

whole, a homogenous entity birthed via the behest of the rhetor and out of the structural

relationship to exigencies, postmodern rhetoricians argue rhetorical scholars should

understand texts as fragments.[29] Following McGee and others, bounded and highly

contextualized rhetorical events have been dissolved, transitioning from a unitary

utterance born out of the mind of the individual speaker to a process of "text creation"

undertaken by the "audience."[30] Text (re)construction is done more by the consumers

than by the producers of a rhetorical text. And this is a job for a critical rhetorician, as the

postmodern fragmentation of culture suggests that scholars should move on from

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[26] Michael Calvin McGee, "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990): 279.

[27] McGee, "Text, Context."

[28] McGee, "Text, Context," 282-283.

[29] McGee, "Text, Context," 279.; Megan Foley, "Sound Bites: Rethinking the Circulation of Speech from Fragment to Fetish," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 15:4 (2012): 613-622.; Stephen Heidt, "The Presidency as Pastiche: Atomization, Circulation, and Rhetorical Instability," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 15:4 (2012): 623-33.; Robert J. Cox, "On 'Interpreting' Public Discourse in Post-Modernity." *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54(Summer 1990): 317-329.

[30] McGee, "Text, Context," 288.; Foley, "Sound Bites," 615.

analyzing a single, bounded speech. Rhetorical texts are atomized into rhetorical shards, quickly circulated across digital and social networks. Textual fragments are highly dispersed via the quick pace of information transmission and circulation across digital networks.

All postmodern rhetorical approaches are not created equal. In other words, "postmodernism" is often used as a catch-all by modernist academics and political centrists to undermine and write off leftist critics of prevalent political and social systems. Postmodernism is an incredibly messy and hard to define constellation of various approaches to rhetorical texts. Some postmodern critics, like Jean Baudrillard, forward a pessimistic interpretation of communicability in a highly fragmented and "hyper-real" society, arguing that Western subjects have been hopelessly saturated with meaningless signs.[31] And yet others, like Pauline Rosenau[32] and Raymie McKerrow,[33] forward a more optimistic postmodernist criticism, arguing that social relations are ultimately in flux and open to intervention and reinvention. And still others, fall somewhere in the middle. This thesis adopts optimistic postmodern or critical approaches, "concerned…with fostering critical sensibilities in the community at large."[34] This thesis seeks to render the subtle microphysics of power visible, opening up

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[31] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

[32] Pauline Rosenau, *Post-modernism and the social sciences: Insights, inroads, and intrusion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[33] Raymie E. McKerrow, "Critical rhetoric in a postmodern world," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77:1 (1991): 75-78.

"the possibility of revolt."[35] It seeks to uncover how the varied rhetorical and memetic

campaign strategies utilized by prominent Democratic politicians shape, constrain, and

stultify leftist political projects and subjectivity in a historical moment ripe for radical

upheaval and systemic change.

A brief review of postmodern and critical rhetorical approaches will inevitably

gloss over and exclude some appropriate approaches. Ultimately, what unites both the

optimistic and pessimistic postmodernist is the skepticism of modernism, as a political

and social philosophy and its ability to produce a just and equal social world. Moreover,

what unites both the optimistic and pessimistic rhetorical postmodernist scholar is the

skepticism of modernist (or rigidly structural) rhetorical approaches in producing

pertinent and liberating scholarship in a highly digitized and fragmented social world.

Most critical approaches to rhetorical texts build upon foundational insights of

Michel Foucault. A prominent scholar in philosophy and language, Foucault outlines the

close relationship between power, knowledge and subjectivity. He argues that what

constitutes objective, true and legitimate knowledge is determined by power relations.[36]

Additionally, power does not rest solely in centralized locations like the state or the

corporation. By rejecting post-positivist and structuralist approaches to social systems,

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[34] A. Susan Owen and Peter Ehrenhaus, "Animating a Critical Rhetoric: On the Feeding Habits of America Empire," *Western Journal of Communication* 57 (Spring 1993): 169-177.

[35] Raymie E. McKerrow, "Critical rhetoric: Theory and praxis," *Communication Monographs*, 56:2 (1989), 97.

[36] Michel Foucault, *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977.* (C. Gordon, Ed.) (C. Gordon, L. Marshall, J. Mephram, & K. Soper, Trans.). (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

Foucault argues that power is instead wielded discursively and diffusely, through discourse.[37] Micropractices and other seemingly mundane and overlooked behaviors, like rhetorical utterances and specific rhetorical choices, become the building blocks for seemingly powerful institutions like citizenship, neoliberalism, and corporatism. For Foucault, power is not simply repressive, or clearly demarcating what a subject is not allowed to do. Instead, power is productive; it invites and incentivizes bodies to perform and act in highly restricted protocols that masquerade as autonomy and freedom.[38]

Foucault's insights concerning regimes of truth have been foundational towards critical rhetoric. Regimes of truth appear as "fictionalized games influencing and directing our social practices while masquerading as naturally independent entities that both precede and supercede our lived experience."[39] However, regimes of truth are naturalized through consistent iterations and subtle mechanisms of power that cultivate liberal subjectivity in a way that is conducive to power relations. In other words, power relations appear natural and unchangeable but are actually "mobile, reversible, and unstable,"[40] open to interruption and generative change. This thesis follows Foucault's interpretation of power relations as unstable. I don't seek to mislead anyone and paint a naively optimistic picture of American electoral politics. Capitalism, militarism, white

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[37] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.) (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

[38] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 31.

[39] Raymie E. McKerrow, (2011) "Foucault's Relationship to Rhetoric," *Review of Communication* 11:4, 255.

[40] Michel Foucault, "The ethics of concern for the self as a practice of freedom," In Foucault, M. *Ethics, Subjectivity and truth/essential works of Foucault, Vol. 1*. Trans. R. Hurley. Ed. Rabinow, P. (New York: The New Press, 1997), 292.

supremacy, patriarchy, and hierarchical political parties are deeply entrenched social systems that constrain resistance tactics and strategies available to those who wish to transform this world. However, given that power is not centralized or repressive, where power is exerted through relations, there exists an avenue or arena for the contestation of said power relations.

While critical approaches, building upon Foucaultian foundations, has pushed rhetorical inquiry in productive ways, by contributing the assumption of the collapsing of text into context and the general fragmentation of culture, this approach is not unquestionably accepted without valuable criticism. Darrel Wanzer delivers a devastating critique of the scope and perspective of postmodern approaches generally, and McGee's fragmentation thesis specifically, without completely dispensing of McGee's work.[41] Wanzer argues that the fragmentation thesis reinforces a western/colonial perspective with indifference or ignorance to the subject position of colonized populations. For those (colonized) bodies, fragmentation is not a new phenomenon, housed within a postmodern context. Fragmentation may seem new from a colonial point of view. For colonized bodies, Wanzer argues while citing Franz Fanon,[42] their entire subjectivity has been reduced to a form of non-being before being reconstructed in the mental image of the colonizer.

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[41] Darrel Allan Wanzer, "Delinking Rhetoric, or Revisiting McGee's Fragmentation Thesis through Decoloniality," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 15:4 (2012): 647-657.

[42] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

Wanzer concludes with a call for epistemic decolonization within rhetoric studies, arguing that it is not just the role of People of Color and Black people to undertake this position. Wanzer's article calls on Western rhetoricians "to renounce their privilege, give the gift of hearing, and engage in forms of praxis that can more productively negotiate the borderlands between inside and outside, in thought and in being."[43] Wanzer utilizes the work of other decolonial scholars like Walter Mignolo[44] and Nelson Maldonado-Torres[45] to flip McGee's approach in favor of a "decolonizing method" rather than dispensing of his fragmentation thesis in its entirety. This thesis seeks to be in line with Wanzer's call to unseat colonialism by drawing historical linkages between past and present to demonstrate that Trump's ideological foundations are distinctly American. Although his digital rhetorical tactics may be unique, which has shifted the rhetorical terrain of Democratic politicians campaigning across digital networks, his violently nationalist and blatantly racist governing style are the expected outcome of a country that has never fully reckoned with its violent foundations of chattel slavery and indigenous genocide. Furthermore, as a result, any moderate or center-left call to "return to normalcy" following the presidency of Donald Trump rhetorically naturalizes the systemic brutality and institutional inequity that are features of American political economy, not aberrations birthed from the Trump administration.

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[43] Wanzer, "Delinking," 654.

[44] Walter D. Mignolo, The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

[45] Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Decolonization and the New Identitarian Logics After September 11," *Radical Philosophy Review* 8 (2005): 35-67.

Next, I will turn towards a brief review of literature concerning rhetorical scholarship and criticism of digital memes. This ongoing academic conversation productively takes up many of the assumptions of postmodern rhetoricians and specifically applies it to the digital sphere and attention economy. Fragmentation of culture is certainly accelerated by intense velocity at which sharing, spreading and circulation of online texts occurs.

The Rhetorical Study of Digital Memes

Rhetorical study of memes is built upon many of the foundational assumptions forwarded by critical rhetoricians. Rather than adhere to modernist tenets of rhetorical study that require the scholar to situate, contextualize, and calcify a singular text, meme scholars, instead often opt to study digital media ecologies or ecosystems and how a meme is moved by and moves through those affective arrangements. Given the incredible rate of diffusion of memes across digital social networks, not only is it oftentimes impossible to re-establish the original contextual arrangement a meme was born into, oftentimes doing so would impede a rhetorical scholars' ability to chart and map the variations and mutations of those texts as they are shared, retweeted, and taken up in different ways.

Rhetorical scholarship concerning digital memes, in addition to building upon postmodern and critical rhetoric, has roots in classical, Aristotelian criticism. To Aristotelian critics, the enthymeme is the most central argumentative form for persuasive speakers. Enthymemes are incomplete arguments made by public speakers that rely upon

the audience to supply the missing premise.[46] These missing premises are "filled-in" due to the social and cultural context in which the speaker and audience are imbued. Digital memes function similarly, to an extent. Digital memes are often incomplete in that they don't fully and holistically lay out the message or the joke. Digital memes represent a form of social discourse that creates in-group and out-group distinctions through their relatability and understandability. They serve a specific generational, social, and cultural function through their shared humor or messaging. Understanding, decoding, and "getting" the meme or the joke requires broader familiarity with the aesthetic, comedic, and cultural reference points of a specific subgroup, like r/the_donald, or a broader social group, like Generation Z. The shared cultural grammar helps the meme consumer fill in the missing premise of the meme text.[47]

What sets digital memes apart from their ancient, Aristotelian, enthymematic ancestor is the invitation for individualized participation, mutation, and alteration. Successful digital memes "move an audience by wedding action and invention."[48] Rather than passively filling in the missing premise, digital memes compel, motivate or move audience members to do something. Whether the action is simply liking the meme on Facebook, or retweeting the meme on Twitter, or crafting a unique and different iteration of the meme format, digital memes gain their life-force through their participatory

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[46] Valerie J. Smith, "Aristotle's Classical Enthymeme and The Visual Argumentation of the Twenty-First Century," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 43 (Winter & Spring 2007): 117.

[47] Michele Kennerly and Damien Smith Pfister, eds., *Ancient Rhetorics and Digital Networks*, (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2018).

[48] Woods and Hahner, *Make America Meme*, 52.

logic.[49] Limor Shifman explains that memes must be analyzed through a cultural logic of diffuse participation. Memes can be defined, according to Shifman, by their capacity for remixing and imitation across digital landscapes. Creating a meme can demonstrate one's "literacy" with current cultural and social phenomenon while simultaneously demonstrating one's personal take or twist on that week's viral meme. Shifman explains that memes "allow people to be 'themselves,' together."[50] Without using the word 'affect', Shifman makes it clear that memes must be analyzed through their circulatory capacity to create emotional feelings of belonging to a social community. Shifman's myriad of examples, including "planking," "Charlie bit my finger," and "Pepper Spraying Cop," are all case in point: memes generate rhetorical force through their invitation to personally participate involved in remixing, mimicking, and editing.

Rhetorical meme scholars and digital rhetoric scholars, for the most part, follow Shifman's focus on individualized participation. To these scholars, rhetorical critics of digital texts need to change their systemic analysis to attend to the ephemerality, spontaneity, and affectivity inherent to digital networks and their platforms. Brian Massumi describes communication across digital networks as an "pool of potential" through which various affective states are actualized through specific texts, like memes.[51] This interpretation is similar to E.S. Jenkin's forwarding of modal analysis, which utilizes

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[49] Davi Johnson, "Mapping the meme: A geographical approach to materialist rhetorical criticism," *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies* 4:1 (2007), 27–50.

[50] Shifman, *Memes*, 34.

[50] Brian Massumi, A user's guide to "Capitalism and Schizophrenia": Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992) 66.

a Deleuzian and ethological approach to studying rhetorical texts and their circulation across digital social networks. According to Jenkins, "whereas typical rhetorical inquiry focuses on actualizations (particular images and contexts), a modal focus directs attention to the virtual relations established between rhetor, texts, and audiences as they interface with memes."[52] In other words, digital meme texts need to be understood as particular and specific actualizations of a broader relational and affective field that limit and structure such actualizations. In the same vein, Zizi Papacharissi explores the performativity inherent to the cultivation and curation of a "relatable," "connectable," and, as a result, affectual online profile, specifically through Twitter.[53] Lastly, Jodi Dean[54] and Joseph Faina[55] name the underlying, affective compulsion to "share" across digital networks as the politics of publicity. This guiding logic of publicity interpellates people on the Internet into digital subjects, such that if a user's interactions or content do not circulate online it "is a failure to participate politically."[56] These scholars all argue that specific rhetorical texts can't be divorced from the underlying affective formations that constrain and orient the actualizations of those specific texts. The social relations that

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[52] Eric S. Jenkins, "The Modes of Visual Rhetoric: Circulating Memes as Expressions," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 100:4, 443.

[53] Zizi Papacharissi, "Without You, I'm Nothing: Performances of the Self on Twitter," *International Journal of Communication* 6: 1989-2006.

[54] Jodi Dean, "Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics," *Cultural Politics* 1:1, 51-74.; Jodi Dean, *Publicity's secret: How technoculture capitalizes on democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

[55] Joseph Faina, "Twitter and the New Publicity," *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 69:1 (2012): 55-71.

[56] Faina, "Twitter," 65.

underpin those texts are the crucial and fruitful places for analysis. Whether it's the representation of control society (Jenkins), the "profoundly depoliticizing" impact of communicative capitalism (Dean), or the demonstration of "ambivalent" affect (Phillips and Milner),[57] the underlying affectual formations need to be studied, criticized, and explicated by scholars.

Given the affective and participatory logic of memes, any rhetorical analysis of digital memes can't be divorced from its circulation.[58] As rhetorical texts circulate throughout and across various networks, these texts gain new life as different iterations and interpretative frames are proliferated. Catherine Chaput forwarded a framework of rhetorical circulation to prompt rhetorical scholars to focus on the fluid and fluctuating nature of "transsituated circuits" of rhetoric.[59] She specifically argues that digital media technology has instituted the rhetorical transsituation, a constantly reorganizing and shifting arrangement of audience, exigence and rhetoric.

The rhetorical circulation framework, as per Chaput and others, has been taken up in productive ways in rhetorical studies.[60] Rhetorical circulation has been used to analyze

[57] Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner, *The ambivalent internet: Mischief, oddity, and antagonism online* (Somerset, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017).

[58] Cara A. Finnegan, *Picturing poverty: print culture and FSA photographs* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003).

[58] Catherine Chaput. "Rhetorical Circulation in Late Capitalism: Neoliberalism and the Overdetermination of Affective Energy" *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 43:1 (2010): 6.

[60] Scott J. Varda and Leslie A. Hahner. "Black Panther and the Alt-Right: Networks of Racial Ideology," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 37:2 (2020): 133–47.; Caroline C. Koons, "The Rhetorical Legacy of 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic,'" *Southern Communication Journal* 80:3 (2015): 211–29.; Jason Edward Black, "Native Authenticity, Rhetorical Circulation, and Neocolonial Decay: The Case of Chief Seattle's Controversial Speech,." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 15:4 (2012): 635-

texts in popular culture, patriotic cannon, indigenous oratory, among others. However, there is a lack of application of rhetorical circulation framework to politics in the electoral sense. Clearly, the circulation and reinterpretation of patriotic anthems, like the "Battle Hymn of the Republic,"[61] and pop cultural landmark moments, like *Black Panther*,[62] are political in the cultural and social sense. However, this thesis will extend the rhetorical circulation approach to memes that are specifically designed to sway potential voters in specific elections. Digital meme scholarship and the rhetorical circulation framework have provided incredible insights into the way diffusely-produced memes reflect and shape broader social and political systems. What is now needed is further criticism and explication of how highly centralized, carefully designed political meme campaigns sway voters and direct affective energies toward inert and ineffectual ends, while foreclosing radical alternatives and reorganizations to neoliberal social systems. Digital meme scholarship that does center on memes and electoralism, like Woods and Hahner's Make America Meme Again, still largely focus on the diffuse and widely fragmented production of memes from various digital alt-right sub-communities, like r/thedonald. This thesis seeks to productively move rhetorical meme scholarship and the circulation approach from the diffuse, ephemeral, and spontaneously-viral towards the carefully-designed, corporately-planned, and centrally-produced meme texts of establishment Democratic politicians and policymakers.

645.; Jamie Landau and Bethany Keeley-Jonker, "Conductor of Public Feelings: An Affective-Emotional Rhetorical Analysis of Obama's National Eulogy in Tucson," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 104:2 (2018): 166–188.

[61] Koons, "Rhetorical Legacy."

[62] Varda and Hahner, "Black Panther."

Focusing on party-planned memes is especially important given the growing corporatization of the internet[63] and the high prominence of algorithmic governmentality[64] that operates through digital networks. Studying digital communication through a purely ethological (Jenkins) or Deleuzian (Massumi) approach, with a focus on fluidity and potentiality, can elide the algorithmic sorting undertaken by a specific platform, which necessarily promotes certain content at the expense of others. What may appear as incredibly spontaneous, polyvalent, and difficult to predict, may be the result of a carefully planned meme campaign, a dangerous wedding between corporations looking to sell products and social media companies looking to maximize profitability. The corporation-meme-account relationship can make the most "astro-turfed" and carefully strategized meme format appear "naturally" viral and pluralistically-produced.

 This thesis builds upon critical insights of rhetorical meme scholarship while attempting to push the field in fruitful directions concerning electoralism and the carefully-planned and centrally-produced meme text. Next, I will turn towards a brief review of literature concerning rhetorical scholarship and criticism of political oratory. This constellation of scholars, I argue, would be better served by more seriously engaging with the rhetorical circulation framework given the increasing percentage of people who consume "news" through digital and social networks.

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[63] Yang and Smith Pfister, "Five Theses," 251.

[64] Antoinette Rouvroy and Thomas Berns, "Algorithmic Governmentality and Prospects of Emancipation: Disparateness as a precondition for individuation through relationships?" *Reseaux* 1:177 (2013), 169.

Presidential Rhetoric/Political Rhetoric

Given rhetorical studies' genesis from speech communication departments in the early 20th century, much of the early curriculum and research from rhetorical communication scholars centered around public address and political oratory. This epistemic focus involved dissecting and closely analyzing the oratorical works and rhetorical style of "Great Men," such as Benjamin Disraeli[65] and William Ellery Channing.[66] Eventually, as the 20th century pressed on, Aristotelian methodological hegemony gave way to methodological pluralism. According to Medhurst "this change included a movement from speech to rhetoric (as controlling term), from history to criticism (as type of scholarly activity), from one monolithic method to multiple methods or perspectives."[67] Rather than scholars tabulating the number of metaphors invoked by a speaker or the describing the delivery of a specific speech, rhetorical scholars adopted a much more analytical approach to rhetorical texts. Rhetorical criticism was now just as much about invention as it was description. Rhetorical scholarship shifted from an attempt to pursue objectivity to a form of critical subjectivity "as acknowledgment of the radical situatedness of all knowledge claims."[68]

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[65] Carroll C. Arnold, "The speech style of Benjamin Disraeli," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 33:4 (1947), 427-436.

[66] Marie Hochmuth, "William Ellery Channing, New England conversationalist," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 30:4 (1944), 429-439.

[67] Martin J. Medhurst, "The History of Public Address as an Academic Study," in *The Handbook of Rhetoric & Public Address*, ed. Shawn J. Parry-Giles and J. Michael Hogan (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 19–66.

[68] Medhurst, "The History of," 36.

Political communication scholarship in the 1970s, both organizational communication and rhetorical communication scholarship, mirrored this focus on radical situatedness. Steinberg, for example, in Political Campaign Management forwards a systems approach to thinking about and strategizing for political campaigns. This research, which reads like an instruction manual intended to educate and prepare someone interested in launching a campaign, To Steinberg, campaign messaging and strategizing must respond to the undeniable and available exigencies of the time. Steinberg explains, "the manager must be aware of the environment that determines the parameters within which the organization operates. Once that environment and its implications are understood, the manager can develop a strategy best able to cope with it."[69] Similar to Bitzer's rhetorical situation approach, Steinberg argues that political campaign managers must situate their campaign within a larger suprasystem and devise a specific strategy to respond to the apparent exigencies of the situation and historical moment.

In the context of rhetorical inquiry, Tulis, in his famous introduction to The Rhetorical Presidency, explains how the primary task of the modern American presidency is popular communication, or mass rhetoric, to address "the people" and circumvent congressional deliberation and negotiation. To Tulis, analyzing the rhetorical presidency is important because "presidential rhetoric is…[the] most visible practical manifestation" of "underlying doctrines of governance."[70] Tulis also forwards a systems perspective,

[69] Arnold Steinberg, *Political Campaign Management* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1976), 18.

[70] Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 13.

which he argues "permits one to probe the various ways our political system should foster or constrain leadership."[71] Medhurst, however, identifies some conceptual shortcomings with Tulis' contribution. To Medhurst, working through a Rhetorical Presidency framework, rather than a Presidential Rhetoric framework, inappropriately understands rhetoric "as a substitute for, or as a false form of, political action rather than as being, in and of itself, a type of action – symbolic action."[72] Medhurst argues that Tulis' framework puts too much of an epistemic emphasis on the institution of the presidency, rather than the art of rhetorical persuasion undertaken by a president. Medhurst forwards that the "most basic principle of rhetorical theory is that the speaker or writer must begin with a thorough understanding of the rhetorical situation."[73] Although Tulis and Medhurst disagree on the principle subject under investigation, they both agree on and advocate for a situated and bounded approach to rhetorical criticism.

Presidential rhetorical study, for the most part, follows Medhurst's inherently Bitzerian rhetorical situation approach to criticism. Many scholars focus on case studies of specific presidential utterance such as conversations,[74] rhetoric in times of war,[75]

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[71] Tulis, Rhetorical Presidency, 12.

[72] Martin J. Medhurst, "A Tale of Two Constructs: The Rhetorical Presidency Versus Presidential Rhetoric," In *Beyond the Rhetorical Presidency*, ed. Martin J. Medhurst, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996), XIV.
[73] Medhurst, "A Tale of Two Constructs," XV.

[74] Roderick P. Hart and Kathleen E. Kendall, "Lyndon Johnson and the Problem of Politics: A Study in Conversations," In *Beyond the Rhetorical Presidency*, ed. Martin J. Medhurst (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996).

[75] Robert L. Ivie, "Tragic Fear and the Rhetorical Presidency: Combatting Evil in the Persian Gulf," In *Beyond the Rhetorical Presidency*, ed. Martin J. Medhurst (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996).

econo-rhetoric,[76] rhetoric of enemy construction,[77] among others. There are also excellent examples of rhetorical histories of specific presidents and the requisite crises that were faced during those presidencies like Stuckey's *The Good Neighbor*,[78] Medhurst's *Eisenhower's War of Words*,[79] Murphy's *John F. Kennedy and the Liberal Persuasion*,[80] and Greenstein's *The Presidential Difference*.[81] These insightful contributions rest upon primarily modernist tenets. Presidential and political rhetorical criticism, for the most part, are indebted to rationalist deliberation, persuasion, and contestation.

There are certainly examples of critical rhetorical approaches to presidential and political rhetorical criticism. Benson's "Desktop Demos" surveys the increasing digitization of public address through his analysis of the whitehouse.gov website during

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[76] James Arnt Aune, "The Econo-Rhetorical Presidency," In *The Prospect of Presidential Rhetoric*, Ed. James Arnt Aune and Martin J. Medhurst (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008).

[77] Marilyn J. Young, "Of Allies and Enemies: Old Wine in New Bottles or New Wine in an Old Jug?" In *The Prospect of Presidential Rhetoric*, Ed. James Arnt Aune and Martin J. Medhurst (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008).

[78] Mary E. Stuckey, *The Good Neighbor: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Rhetoric of American Power* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013).

[79] Martin J. Medhurst, *Eisenhower's War of Words: Rhetoric and Leadership*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994).

[80] John M. Murphy, *John F. Kennedy and the Liberal Persuasion* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2019).

[81] Greenstein, Presidential Difference.

the Clinton administration.[82] Murphy's "Power and Authority in a Postmodern Presidency" explores how presidents rhetorically construct authority in a postmodern age, ushered in from "God's withdrawal from this world…and the eclipse of that subject by a 'discursive formation.'"[83] G. Thomas Goodnight's "Reagan, Vietnam and Central America" explicates the contestation of historical narratives, specifically the contested significance of the Vietnam War and its attempted use for American military involvement in Nicaragua and El Salvador.[84] However, even these varied approaches to Presidential rhetoric are still devoted to close textual analyses of a specific rhetorical text, while ignoring the uptake ad circulation of such texts across digital networks.

A critical approach to presidential and political rhetoric that doesn't specifically account for circulation can replicate some of the flaws of rhetorically situated approaches. To suspend a text, and elide its circulatory path, can lead to incomplete conclusions about the rhetorical impacts of such a text. Swanson, speaking in the context of television coverage of political oratory, argues, "campaign speaking thus represents a relatively small part of a campaign's total communications program. Given the nature of the new politics, myopic concern with speechmaking to the exclusion of other forms of

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[82] Thomas W. Benson, "Desktop Demos: New Communicative Technologies and the Future of the Rhetorical Presidency," In *Beyond the Rhetorical Presidency*, ed. Martin J. Medhurst (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996).

[83] John M. Murphy, "Power and Authority in a Postmodern Presidency," In *The Prospect of Presidential Rhetoric*, Ed. James Arnt Aune and Martin J. Medhurst (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 31.

[84] G. Thomas Goodnight, "Reagan, Vietnam, and Central America: Public Memory and the Politics of Fragmentation," In *Beyond the Rhetorical Presidency*, ed. Martin J. Medhurst (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996).

communication seems anachronistic."[85] Such discontents are worth repeating in the context of rising prominence of digital social networks. The study of political rhetoric and public oratory shouldn't be divorced from the institutional mechanisms through which subjects consume such content. It is the sound bite, the meme, the highly condensed news clip, the *fragment* that has gained prominence and popularity. Rhetorical criticism of political speech should reflect such changes in prominence.

Presidential and political rhetorical scholars, in their over-commitment to Bitzerian rhetorically situated analysis, have hampered their ability to fully and holistically explain the rhetorical force of a specific text in an increasingly digitized age. The incredibly high velocity of circulation across digital networks has dissolved the rhetorical situation and left a rhetorical transsituation in its place. Presidential and political rhetoric should more seriously consider and apply the insights of circulation approaches to their specific texts. This project will follow Woods and Hahner (in the context of alt-right memes), Foley (in the context of sound bites), and Heidt (in the context of pastiche) in their application of a circulation approach to politics and its coverage. As I will unpack in my specific case studies, the circulation of digital meme campaigns of prominent establishment Democratic politicians reveals and demystify the ideological assumptions of the Democratic Party, and the continuities between Trumpism and the purported "resistance" to it.

I will now turn to brief review of scholarship concerning the rhetoric, style, and communicative appeals of Donald Trump and his campaign. Although the rhetorical

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[85] David L. Swanson, "The new politics meets the old rhetoric: New directions in campaign communication research," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58:1 (1972): 36.

tactics of Trump are not the focus of my investigation, briefly outlining extant

scholarship will help ground my contribution to the ongoing scholarly conversation.

Trump

There has been considerable attention paid by rhetorical scholars towards Donald

Trump's rhetoric and style since he launched his campaign for president in 2015.

Excellent scholarship has been produced on his unique brand of comedy,[86] his use of

Twitter,[87] his rhetoric of shame and dignity,[88] his rhetoric of ressentiment,[89] his "cruel

intentions,"[90] his labeling of CNN as "fake news,"[91] the rhetorical trope of immigrant

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[86] Christopher J. Gilbert, "Pissing in Political Cisterns, or Laughing into the Pot of 'The Flight 93 Election,'" *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 17:1 (2020): 19–37.

[87] Brian L. Ott, "The Age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the Politics of Debasement," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34:1 (2017): 59–68.

[88] Schaefer, "Whiteness and Civilization."

[89] Casey Ryan Kelly, "Donald J. Trump and the Rhetoric of Ressentiment," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 106:1 (2020): 2–24.

[90] Marina Levina and Kumarini Silva, "Cruel Intentions: Affect Theory in the Age of Trump," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 15:1 (2018): 70–72.

[91] Johan Farkas and Jannick Schou. "Fake News as a Floating Signifier: Hegemony, Antagonism and the Politics of Falsehood," *Javnost - The Public* 25:3 (2018): 298–314.

"infestation,"[92] his use of enthymemes,[93] and Trumpist rhetoric within a rhetorical circulation perspective.[94]

There is a considerable gap in the literature concerning leftist digital campaign strategies and memetic strategies overall after the election of Donald Trump, especially from a rhetorical perspective. While there are certainly insightful studies of Trump's use of social media, both from a rhetorical perspective and a post-positivist perspective, there is a dearth of scholarship concerning the memetic strategy of the Left. It is well supported that Trump's use of social media is quite unique from other presidents and prominent politicians, both in his personalized Twitter account, his frequency of use, the way he bypasses entrenched media conglomerates through social media, his interaction with supporters, and his use of vulgar and offensive language. There is a plethora of scholarship that demonstrates Trump's departure from traditionalist political decorum. What is missing in rhetorical and communication scholarship, however, is how Trump's vulgar, openly divisive, and blatantly racialized approach to social media has changed the digital campaign strategies of his opponents and critics. It's clear that we're dealing with a different animal. However, the mark of a truly influential rhetorical and historical figure is not their unique qualities when speaking or Tweeting, but their alteration of the general rhetorical terrain utilized by friends and foe alike. To fully study the implications of

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[92] Christopher J. Jenks and Aditi Bhatia, "Infesting Our Country: Discursive Illusions in Anti-Immigration Border Talk," *Language and Intercultural Communication* 20:2 (2020): 81–94.

[93] Joan Faber McAlister, "Trolling in Trump's Twitterverse: The "Woman Card" as Enthymeme," *Media Report to Women* (Winter 2018): 6-23.

[94] Catherine Chaput, "Trumponomics, Neoliberal Branding, and the Rhetorical Circulation of Affect," *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 21:2 (2018): 194–209.

Trump's bombastic and pugnacious digital presence, scholars must chart the circulation of Left responses to such discourses, through and across digital networks, and explicate the warps and changes that take place along the way.

Method

This thesis will employ a critical communications perspective that resists the compulsion to proscribe a universalistic methodology and, instead, opts for analyzing and uncovering the set of social relations that underpin and are effected by digital campaign strategies utilized by prominent Democratic politicians following the election of Donald Trump in 2016. This is especially important given that this thesis will specifically focus on memetic strategies that necessarily need to adapt, change, and acclimate to maintain "virality" or "popularity" within an attention economy. Meme strategies need to be altered to adjust for changing broader socio-cultural contexts to stay relevant. Memes mutate, similar to a pathogen, to maintain liveliness, affective energy, and cultural relevance. To analyze memes through a singularized perspective would ignore the mutations, uptake, and participatory logic of memes as a rhetorical tactic. Therefore, the approaches used in this thesis are varied and multi-faceted, specifically attuning to the contexts of digital networked communication and communicative capitalism.

Raymie McKerrow, in the widely cited "Critical Rhetoric," explains how to shift rhetorical studies from its universalist and Platonic foundations. Working through Foucault's contribution to rhetorical criticism, as an avenue to demonstrate the existence of constraining social relations, McKerrow argues rhetorical critics should refuse the

proscription of a "formula or prescription."[95] Instead, rhetorical critics should seek to

render the subtle microphysics of power visible, opening up "the possibility of revolt."[96]

The ultimate goal is to "demystify and reveal the commodified social, political, and

economic relations under-pinning state political projects, particularly those in late

democracies…that devalue and diminish citizenship as they communicate for

hegemony."[97] This thesis seeks to explore how the varied rhetorical and memetic

campaign strategies utilized by prominent Democratic politicians shape, constrain, and

stultify leftist political projects and subjectivity in a historical moment ripe for radical

upheaval and systemic change.

   Rather than forward a singular and unidirectional "methodology," this thesis will

utilize a circulation framework to analyze and chart the movement of specific meme

formats and meme iterations across and between digital networks. Building upon

Chaput's crucial contribution to circulation theory, I will analyze and explore the

affective potentiality that exists within digital networks and communities.To Chaput, the

move to "situatedness, long upheld as the strength of rhetoric, enables many elements of

late capitalism to go under-interrogated because they do not exist in a location but in the

connective tissues of affectivity passing through locations."[98] Neoliberal late capitalism

has blurred the seemingly stark boundaries between politics and pleasure, work and

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[95] McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric," 100.

[96] McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric," 100.

[97] Kirsten Kozolanka. Publicity and the Canadian State: Critical Communications Perspectives (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 19-20.

[98] Chaput, "Rhetorical Circulation," 19.

leisure, emotion and reason. Rhetoric is always in motion and in circulation, given that circulation is the way value is extracted from affective labor across digital networks.

My use of Chaput's circulation framework will need to be adjusted given the topic of investigation. Woods and Hahner, Shifman, and Jenkins selected mass participatory internet meme trends and fads for their analyses, like Pepe the Frog, planking, LOLCats, and Fail/Win, meme texts that are produced from vastly dispersed and diffused digital locations. These meme trends and formats are taken up and re-worked through reiteration and re-actualization. The rhetorical texts analyzed in this project are more centrally produced than the seemingly spontaneous, liminal, and unstructured meme texts chosen by other scholars. The meme campaigns from Democratic politicians are targeted, specific, and highly coordinated. As a result, rather than examining these meme texts through an "a-hierarchical" and horizontal digital media ecology, I will be primarily focusing on the grounded, centralized, and corporatized meme hubs that exist within digital media ecologies, like popular Instagram meme pages. Not all nodal points are created equal or hold equal weight, not all digital media ecologies are a-hierarchical. Centralized meme hubs possess more gravitational and affective "pull" than other accounts. The circulation approach is still important, however, because the interpretative frame initially provided by a verified campaign account is not the finalized or calcified interpretation of the specific text. Differing and diverse affectual responses "spin out" from the initial meme text.

This process of applying a circulation framework to digital meme campaigns will involve charting the movement of a specific meme or meme format. Although it may be clear where and when a specific campaign meme was initially crafted, it's less clear how

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the meme circulates affect, while inspiring reactions, responses, and reiterations of the original meme. This process will involve identifying the aesthetic, social, cultural, and political qualities of "responsive" memes. I used a fairly rudimentary approach to collecting the "data" of this project. The adherent meme text of each case study was taken from Instagram and Twitter, both in the form of a screenshot of the memetic campaign strategy but also in terms of the link to the individual post. However, it is clear that memes are messy and hard to define. The specific rationale for demarcation and exclusion of individual iterations of memes for consideration, or reasons why some individual texts didn't make the cut, is explored more fully in each chapter.

The texts I have selected for consideration are digital memes produced between 2016 and 2020 that either publicize a specific Democratic campaign or express generalized Pro-Democrat and anti-Trump sentiment. These memes campaigns are party-produced and centrally planned. The circulation and (re)iteration of such memes were not. The three specific case studies selected for this project (the popular hashtag #TheResistance, Mike Bloomberg's Instagram memes, and Pete Buttigieg's "victory" memes) provide a meaningful and representative starting point for the analysis of Democratic digital campaign strategy in the age of Trump.

Just like any other approach to analyzing a set of rhetorical texts, there are certainly exclusions inherent to this project's approach. This project will primarily focus on American electoralism, mostly English-speaking and western digital sub-communities. I have selected the topic and texts for this project because I am more familiar and experienced with the American electoral process and English-speaking and western online culture. My decision to focus on a distinctly American context does not stem from

a defense of a strictly western focus or a belief that politics in the "core" or center of

empire is any more important than politics in the "periphery" of empire. Democratic

backsliding, or the gradual or sudden decline in the quality of democratic states, is

occurring across the globe, in the Global North as well as the Global South.[99] Although

Trump might seem like an exception or an anomaly to some in the US, there are

marginalized groups all over the world who are combatting and resisting the nativism,

white supremacy, and fascism purported by their current executive. Whether it's Duerte

in the Philippines, Bolsonaro in Brazil, or Putin in Russia, it's clear that the rise of

Trump's authoritarian and xenophobic platform is merely one piece of a worldwide

fascistic puzzle. I don't intend to crowd out non-Western perspectives in this project and

hope scholars can take up future research projects that analyze the digital and memetic

campaign strategies of oppositional parties. Singh's criticism of neoliberal rhetoric in

Singapore could be such an example.[100]

This project's use of circulation framework is not implying that "context" is a

useless category. Inversely, this project is not simply attempting to update rhetorical

criticism of public address for a new age. Instead, this thesis seeks to define, explain, and

explore the proliferation of distinct memetic rhetorical tactics that have developed since

the election of Donald Trump. So long as subjects continue to use digital networks at

incredibly high rates, campaigns will continue to rely on digital memetic strategies as an

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[99] Ash Bâli and Aziz Rana, "Constitutionalism and the American Imperial Imagination," *U. Chi. L. Rev*. 85:257 (2018): 257-292.

[100] Rohini S. Singh, "In the Company of Citizens: The Rhetorical Contours of Singapore's Neoliberalism," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 16:3 (2019): 161–77.

important avenue for the dissemination of campaign advertising and messaging. If Woods and Hahner are correct that memes "conceal or hide their rhetorical work, even as they sway viewers,"[101] it is crucially important to study and closely examine the ways in which unsuspecting bodies on the internet are interpellated into digital subjects through memetic campaign strategies.

Chapter Structure

My thesis will contain five chapters: an introduction, three case studies, and a conclusion. My introduction will match the general format of the prospectus. The introduction will include an overview of the topic of investigation, a set of research questions to frame my overall argument, an explanation for the significance of this project, a review of relevant rhetorical theory literature, and a brief introduction to the methodology.

My first case study will examine the use and circulation of the popular hashtags, #TheResistance and #Resist. Used most primarily in the first two years of the Trump administration, especially in the lead up to the 2018 midterm elections, these two widely-circulated hashtags called upon digital subjects to put an end to the Trumpian threat to "American" values through voter participation. Prominent establishment and center-left Democrats utilized this hashtag to highlight Trump's un-American and un-presidential behavior and decorum. In this chapter, I will forward a digital ideographic criticism as first introduced by Gibbons and Seitz[102] and McGee. #TheResistance should be read,

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[101] Woods and Hahner, *Make America Meme*, 8.

[102] Michelle Gibbons and David Seitz, "Toward a Digital Methodology for Ideographic Criticism: A Case Study of 'Equality,'" In *Theorizing Digital Rhetoric*, Ed. by Aaron Hess and Amber Davisson (New York and London: Routledge, 2017).

understood and studied, as per McGee, as an ideograph, or "one-term sums of an orientation" that is "easily mistaken for the technical terminology of political philosophy."[103] As I aim to explain in my paper, #TheResistance doesn't necessarily stand for a clear outline or platform from the Left in response to the rise of Trump. Instead, #TheResistance is a structuring principle that is taken together "as a working unit"[104] with other ideographs, such as constitutional fidelity, checks and balances, or presidential fitness, to funnel leftist, anti-Trump frustrations towards an impossible return to pre-Trump, neoliberal normalcy. In other words, #TheResistance rhetorically posits Donald Trump's behavior and decorum as worthy of resistance due to its threat to foundational American beliefs. The result is the channeling of leftist frustration with Trump away from structural criticisms of militarism, capitalism and antiblackness that undergird American liberalism and redirect it towards passive online "political" participation.

Chapter three, my second case study, will investigate the self-referential and absurdist humor of Mike Bloomberg's Instagram meme campaign. On February 12th, 2020, numerous prominent Instagram meme accounts posted memes promoting the presidential campaign of billionaire Michael Bloomberg. The accounts may sound trivial and fringe, sporting humorous usernames like @Tank.Sinatra, @ShitheadSteve, @adam.the.creator, @fourtwenty, but these accounts represent an incredibly powerful avenue for the dissemination of content, collectively reaching a whopping 60 million

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[103] Michael McGee, "'The 'Ideograph': A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66 (1980): 7.

[104] McGee, "Ideograph," 15.

Instagram users. For this case study, I will analyze the purposeful aesthetic choices of the Bloomberg campaign's memes, the unique genre of absurdist and self-aware humor, and the circulation of such memes across digital networks. Bloomberg's bizarre pasquinade, targeted at himself and some of his campaign's most abhorrent qualities, (1) attempts to actualize existing "ugly" aesthetic and "ambivalent affect" underlying meme culture, in order (2) to normalize his problematic political past through "self-aware," ironic humor and (3) to constitute a collective of young, "apolitical" Internet users as Bloomberg supporters. More holistically, this chapter speaks to the rising prominence of corporatized meme production as a rhetorical tactic worthy of further critical consideration. The corporate use of prominent meme accounts for the production and dissemination of memes, under the guise of self-mockery and absurdist "stretched" humor, may affectively stultify criticism and debate concerning corporate practices, thereby naturalizing an exploitative neoliberal political economy.

My final case study focuses on Mayor Pete Buttigieg's incredulous and pre-mature claim to victory during the night of the 2020 Iowa Democratic Caucuses prior to the official tabulation and publishing of results from any of the caucus sites. In particular, I argue Buttigieg's speech, and the circulation of the accompanying "victory" soundbite across digital media networks, illustrates Burke's conception of a representative anecdote,[105] "a stable form or set of relations that pervade a discourse, one that appears and reappears in different guises or variations on a theme."[106] The presentation and

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[105] Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

[106] Lynn Harter and Phyllis Japp, "Technology as the Representative Anecdote in Popular Discourse of Health and Medicine," *Health Communication* 13:4 (2001): 412.

circulation of a representative anecdote "equips for living" and "invites participation," in that it "allows people to express their hopes and fears in familiar (and thus manageable) patterns."[107] The dramatic, ritualistic, and digital infrastructural constraints of the moment incentivized a rhetorical utterance from Buttigieg that conveyed a tentative finality and direction for the rest of the nominating process within an unexpectedly chaotic and muddled environment. And yet, the situation didn't entirely dictate Buttigieg's rhetorical utterance in a structural or deterministic manner, as a rhetorical situationist might describe. Instead, the "victory" speech, given during a night where it had become clear no clear "winner" would be announced, represented a rhetorically inventive mandate, demonstrating Buttigieg would be the one to bring order, normalcy and direction, not just to the Iowa Caucuses results but to the chaotic political and international environment caused by the erratic leadership of Donald Trump. Utilizing the chaotic and indecisive atmosphere of the Iowa Caucuses, Buttigieg's victory speech represents a condensed version of the underlying primary appeal of his entire presidential campaign; the mayor would be the one to bring competence and moderateness back to the seemingly destabilized domestic and international political order. Rather than forge a form of rhetorical finality and authority, Buttigieg's questionable rhetorical utterance, and its subsequent circulation, only intensified the confusion, vagueness, and opacity of the first contest in selecting a Democratic nominee for president.

In my conclusion, I will review and synthesize the findings from each case study. I will briefly review the justifications for the topic of investigation, memetic campaign

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[107] Barry Brummett, "Burke's representative anecdote as a method in media criticism," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 1:2 (1984): 164.

strategies of prominent Democratic politicians, and for the approach, the application of a

rhetorical circulation approach to such texts. It is my hope that this project, both in its

selected texts and approach, will ideally provide a model for the analysis and criticism of

corporately and centrally planned meme texts, as opposed to mass-participatory and

widely-diffused meme texts. Ultimately, I hope my thesis will help bring critical attention

to a new set of persuasive and rhetoric tactics utilized by political parties and

corporations that are currently under-theorized.

CHAPTER TWO

#TheResistance as Digital Ideograph: Rhetorical Construction of Pre-Trump Normalcy

Introduction

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 represented a departure from the neoliberal, bipartisan consensus in contemporary American politics. Trump certainly bragged about his objections to some tenets of popular Republican policy positions, such as his rejection of free trade agreements like NAFTA and the TPP. More importantly, however, Trump refashioned widely used political vocabulary to rhetorically constitute a new political identity. He questioned whether a conventional, "business as usual" Democratic or Republican presidential candidate would truly listen to the preferences and concerns of the white, common man. Trump claimed to be the spokesperson and representative of a silent majority, a group of white and working class individuals who had been forgotten, disgraced, and put down by "the swamp." Through his words, Trump organized a people within existing political formations, attracting disaffected voters from the left and the right. The racialized, anti-establishment, and populist appeals of the Trump campaign renegotiated the rhetorical constitution of an American people. Prevailing logics of political decorum, political correctness, and "big government" didn't serve the interests of these people, according to Trump. Trump artificially constructed a forgotten people, and he was the lone capable spokesperson who would return the people to their rightful place in the social-racial hierarchy.

Trump's populist victory did not exemplify a typical swing from a Democratic president to a Republican president. Trump crafted a new political vocabulary that reshuffled political identity, party politics, and election results. He rhetorically constituted a new identity. Trump's rhetorical utterances, like his call to Make America Great Again, facilitated identification and actualized underlying affective formations of rage and shame. People were no longer Republicans or Democrats, conservative or liberals, they were Trump supporters. Trump waged war on the level of definitions. "The people," "great," "winning," "citizen," and "America" are contested, social, and rhetorical phenomena.

Trump's rhetorical constitution of a people left behind by Washington elitism and globalist forces resonated with voters and prompted identification. The response by the Democratic Party, those marred as the "swamp" by the Trump campaign, took place on the level of redefinition. Early on in the Trump administration, widespread frustration and outrage with racist policies and objectionable slurs from the president prompted the development of the widely circulated hashtag #TheResistance. Taken up by a wide range of celebrities, federal and local politicians, activists, voters and consumers of political news, #TheResistance functions, as per Michael Calvin McGee, as an ideograph, or "one-term sums of an orientation" that is "easily mistaken for the technical terminology of political philosophy."[1] #TheResistance doesn't necessarily stand for a clear outline or platform from the Left in response to the rise of Trump. Instead, #TheResistance is a structuring principle that is taken together "as a working unit"[2] with other ideographs,

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[1] McGee, "Ideograph," 7.

[2] McGee, "Ideograph," 15.

such as constitutional fidelity, checks and balances, or presidential fitness, in order to funnel leftist, anti-Trump frustrations towards an impossible return to pre-Trump, neoliberal normalcy. Studying the use and circulation of #TheResistance as a digital ideograph suggests Democratic opposition to the Trump administration is largely based on his claim to threaten "traditional" and "classical" American values concerning decorum, civility and professionalism. In other words, #TheResistance rhetorically posits Donald Trump's behavior and decorum as worthy of resistance due to its threat to foundational American beliefs. The result is the channeling of leftist frustration with Trump away from structural criticisms of militarism, capitalism and antiblackness that undergird American liberalism and redirect it towards passive online "political" participation.

This paper begins with a review of literature of different approaches to measuring and analyzing the effect that social media, in general, and Twitter, in particular, has on public discourse and the development of digital or virtual communities. Engaging with critical theorists like Dean, Bruns and Burgess can help bridge the conceptual gap between ideographic scholarship and scholarship regarding communicative capitalism. Next, I outline and extrapolate the components of a digital ideographic framework, as first introduced by Gibbons and Seitz.[3] Following, I perform a digital ideographic analysis of the use and circulation of #TheResistance (including its related hashtags such as #resist or #resistance) on Twitter as forwarded by prominent Democratic politicians following the election of Donald Trump. Although an ideograph is certainly "flexible" and gains its "meaning-in-use" (synchronic structure), the earlier uses of an ideograph

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[3] Gibbons and Seitz, "Towards a Digital Methodology."

"become precedent" or "touchstones for judging the propriety of the ideograph in a current circumstance."[4] Lastly, I outline the implications of this project for leftist activism and political participation, as well as outline avenues for further research within rhetorical studies.

For the purposes of this chapter, I chose to search for tweets between November 2016 and November 2018. I opted for this temporal framework because it includes both the initial reaction that politicians had to the surprising election of Donald Trump and includes the lead up to the Midterm Elections in 2018. I exclusively focus on verified Twitter accounts from prominent Democratic politicians and caucus accounts. As Gillespie explains, Twitter search engines don't naturally route members to the latest or most popular tweets that contain a specific hashtag, but rather search engines route users to who is deemed the most credible voice on the issue.[5] Given that I am operating under the assumption of Twitter as a calculated public, one that algorithmically shapes and curates the content of user's timelines for political and social purposes, focusing on some of the most prominent and authoritative voices, like active, federal office-holding politicians, is certainly appropriate.

The sociopolitical and public vocabulary that exists at the disposal of politicians and political activists are not neutral terrains for the transmission of ideas. Put simply, words are not transparent signifiers that serve objective, denotative functions. Rather, language calcifies and sediments, constraining what is culturally defined as acceptable

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[4] McGee, "Ideograph," 10.

[5] Tarleton Gillespie, "The Relevance of Algorithms," in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 167–94.

behavior. This is what McGee means by the ideograph is the building block of ideology. The culturally acceptable vocabulary taken up by political actors, even while resisting xenophobic and sexist behavior and policies, rhetorically instills "a sense of belonging to a community"[6] and prescribes what is considered "acceptable behaviors."[7] By studying #TheResistance as a digital ideograph, I argue that the usage of the hashtag by prominent national Democratic Party politicians ensures that broader leftist dissent from the Trump administration is "more or less consistent with the rhetorical culture,"[8] in doing so, foreclosing the possibility for the development of radical alternatives to the corporate, duopolistic rhetorical "consensus" that shapes American politics. The hashtag serves a constitutive function; to be addressed as a member of #TheResistance invites specific behaviors, actions, and routines that fit within liberal policy-making, on behalf of the interpellated subject. Any study of digital ideographs can't be divorced from their circulation across digital networks. The incredible speed and scale of #TheResistance's circulation suggests that the pithiness and punchiness of ideographs make them conducive to circulation across digital networks. By interpreting #TheResistance as an ideograph that rhetorically frames Trump's decorum as antithetical to American values, it becomes clear the Democratic Party historically divorces the rise of Trump from the antiblack and colonial foundations of the "democratic" and "egalitarian" American political system.

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[6] Heidi Hamilton, "Can You Be Patriotic and Oppose the War? Arguments to Co-Opt and Refute the Ideograph of Patriotism," *Controversia* 8, no. 1 (2012): 15.

[7] McGee, "Ideograph," 6.

[8] Celest Condit and John Louis Lucaites, *Crafting Equality: America's Anglo-African Word* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); xiv.

Twitter and Hashtags: Digital Commons or Calculated Public?

Social media, assumed by some to be an unfettered digital commons, has transformed the way people communicate, organize, debate and consume. Given the relatively low access barriers to joining and contributing to various forums, groups and online discussions, the Internet represents a seemingly endless sea of conflicting, clashing, and chaotic discourses.[9] Understandably, for rhetoricians, the "fragmentary, anarchic and ephemeral" nature of Internet communication can be anxiety-inducing, similar to information overload.[10] Even in the context and scope of this paper, Twitter, one of the most widely used social media platforms, is an informational behemoth that is home to millions of new tweets every single day.

Some scholars believe that Twitter operates as a digital commons that can be a site for radical dialogue and social change, aimed at challenging dominant political and social institutions. Twitter has been noted as an interface that can foment strong social ties and instill a sense of community across vast geographic areas.[11] Having been described as an "imagined community,"[12] "digital public,"[13] and a space for "active

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[9] Jodi Dean, "Why the Net Is Not a Public Sphere," *Constellations* 10, no. 1 (2003): 95–112.

[10] Gibbons and Seitz, "Toward a Digital Methodology," 161.

[11] Anatoliy Gruzd, Barry Wellman, and Yuri Takhteyev, "Imagining Twitter as an Imagined Community," *American Behavioral Scientist* 55, no. 10 (October 2011): 1294–1318, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764211409378.

[12] Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev, "Imagining Twitter."

[13] André Brock, "From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 4 (October 2012): 529–49, https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.732147.

citizenry,"[14] Twitter, alongside other social media, may be a space for effective, transnational activist collaboration.[15] Similarly, Sanderson and Gramlich argue that Twitter can be a useful space for "transcend[ing] traditional media's treatment" of women's issues such as employment in the professional sports world.[16] By providing a platform and a voice to previously silenced feminist perspectives on critical and pertinent issues, Twitter can be a site for the critical contestation of social values. Chaudhry, utilizing the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 as their prime example, argue that the rising popularity of Twitter in Saudi Arabia should make transnational activists cautiously optimistic about progressive change. The use and circulation of critical hashtags are able to draw attention to and raise consciousness concerning women's issues in Saudi Arabia, such as the popular hashtag, #Women2Drive.[17] Twitter may be able to launch a "quiet revolution" that empowers "women to demand more rights and inclusion in the social and political life of the country."[18] These scholars would applaud the wide circulation of #TheResistance and argue it demonstrate the radical ability of the Twitter-verse to become a terrain of struggle and dissent vis a vis the regressive Trump presidency.

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[14] Jimmy Sanderson and Kelly Gramlich, "'You Go Girl!': Twitter and Conversations About Sport Culture and Gender," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 33, no. 2 (June 2016): 113–23, https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2015-0048.

[15] Wei, Zhang, and Cheris Kramarae. "Women, Big Ideas, and Social Networking Technologies: Hidden Assumptions." In *Globalization, Technology Diffusion and Gender Disparity: Social Impacts of ICTs.* edited by Rekha Pande and Theo van der Weide, 70-82. Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2012.

[16] Sanderson and Gramlich, "'You Go Girl!'," 113.

[17] Irfan Chaudhry, "#Hashtags for Change: Can Twitter Promote Social Progress in Saudi Arabia," *International Journal of Communication* 8 (2014): 943–61.

[18] Chaudhry, "#Hashtags for Change," 957.

Should the proliferation of social activism on Twitter and other communicative technologies leave us cautiously optimistic concerning international or domestic political progressivism? Dean argues that optimistic outlooks surrounding the use of Twitter for waging political struggle is dangerously divorced from the broader sociopolitical context of communicative capitalism.[19] Communicative capitalism "conceptualizes the commonplace idea that the market, today, is the site of democratic aspirations, indeed, the mechanisms by which the will of the demos manifests itself."[20] Too often, the action of contributing to online socially progressive discourse comes to stand in for the message, resulting in a sense of personal satisfaction from merely participating. According to Dean, "ideals of access, inclusion, discussion and participation come to be realized in and through expansions, intensifications and interconnections of global telecommunications."[21] Personally retweeting and endorsing the right message on Twitter brackets off collective and politicized critiques and action. Dean explains, "Specific or singular acts of resistance, statements of opinion or instances of transgression are not political in and of themselves; rather, they have to be politicized."[22] Politicization requires situating a retweet concerning a specific issue, such as Trump's un-presidential Twitter activity, "in the context of opposition to a shared enemy or opponent."[23] Dean's critique of passive, digital and personal politics within communicative capitalism can

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[19] Dean, "Communicative capitalism."

[20] Dean, "Communicative capitalism," 54-55.

[21] Dean, "Communicative Capitalism," 54.

[22] Dean, "Communicative Capitalism," 57.

[23] Dean, "Communicative Capitalism," 57.

help strengthen an ideographic analysis. Since ideographs contribute to a political and cultural vocabulary, thereby constraining and prohibiting certain actions, Dean's contribution helps us understand that ideographs incite retweets *as actions*. Since ideographs are culturally bound terms that create predictable behavioral responses, the circulation of digital ideographs within communicative capitalist contexts ensures predictable *digital* behaviors. Whereas McGee would understand ideographic language as constraining actions of interpolated subjects, reading McGee and Dean together can help explain that the decisions that are constrained are strictly digital; ideographs constrain interactions with tweets, users and distinct conversations.

Hashtags are interpellative technologies because they call digital subjects into being. Hashtags operate as a rhetorical marker of identity and subjectivity. Rhetoricians should approach online activity and profile work as purposeful negotiations of one's individual profile, rather than a commitment to a cohesive political project. Put another way, the decision to circulate a specific hashtag is a vital part of the process of negotiating, concealing, and highlighting specific parts of the digital self. Faina, citing Dean, argues that publicity is a guiding logic for online political participation. Faina argues that "the dominant mode of publicity enacted in Twitter is…a constant reproduction of information that constitutes its own public that may stand in for rather than represent its off-line referent."[24] Being known, seen and accessible on social media serves as the "technocultural mode of subjectivization."[25] Being constituted and understood as a political subject requires a constant pursuit of publicity. The structure of

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[24] Faina, "Twitter," 57.

[25] Dean, Publicity's Secret, 114.

Twitter confirms this; one's Twitter profile gains personality and uniqueness through interactions with follower and following lists. If a tweet is sent and no one follows the user, was the tweet really sent at all? More specifically, given the existence of publicity as a guiding ideology of late capitalism, tweeting out #resist to a meager number of followers will not qualify as a sufficiently political act. Faina argues that "In a mediated world, failure to achieve publicity, recognition, is a failure to participate politically."[26] Given the context of communicative capitalism that utilizes digital publicity as a benchmark to determine political participation, the mass circulation of popular hashtags like #resist should worry scholars that deeper questions and concerns are omitted. In other words, what are you choosing to ignore while you #resist? What structural forms of violence are hidden via the rhetorical framing of #TheResistance as strictly oppositional to Trump's anti-presidential ethos? According to Dean, "for the victim to matter politically, it has to become…visible, accessible…Those who aren't known are not victims. They simply are not – they simply don't 'exist' at all."[27]

Dean's analysis, although in the context of protests against the American-led invasion of Iraq, provides important insights for the critical analysis of liberal and progressive protest in the age of Donald Trump. While it would be short-sighted and anti-pragmatic to dismiss the potential for digital networks to aid the organization of leftist resistance, it would also be dangerous to uncritically accept digital communicative technology as a fundamental organizing axis. Digital networks, in their purported goal of fostering social connections, can also create an atomizing effect for digital subjects. The

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[26] Faina, "Twitter," 65.

[27] Dean, Publicity's Secret, 125.

result can often look like the weak constitution of a "people," bound together with picayune ties of solidarity and ideological convictions that don't fundamentally challenge existing structures. I argue the circulation of #TheResistance exemplifies this process of digital individuation; the hashtag connected a group of individual resistors without organizing a cohesive resistance. Micah Sifry (2020) explains,

> While millions of Americans have marched in protest in hundreds of cities and small towns in the last three years, forms of digital organizing may have gotten in the way of a real revival of grassroots Democratic activism. Those millions of people are not for the most part joining local groups and reviving the party's base. More often they are channeled by sophisticated algorithmic sorting tools into performing just-in-time acts of voter engagement with as little friction or social interaction as possible. There is a danger that, just as Facebook turned real friendship into a status update to be monetized, the national liberal-left email groups have turned real membership into a metric to be optimized.[28]

In this way, the circulation of #TheResistance suggests that judging the efficacy of a political movement purely on its digital footprint might overestimate its true force. The circulation of #TheResistance tells us more about the profile curation of each individualized member of #TheResistance than of the necessary functions of resisting the rise of a white supremacist to the Oval Office. #TheResistance interpellates subjects through circulation. To be addressed by the hashtag, in its pithiness and rhetorical force, prompts circulation of the hashtag to publicly declare to the world the value system of the subject and of the self.

The establishment of affective social ties through digital networks, although appearing as spontaneous and haptic encounters, owe their constitution to highly technical programming and algorithmic curation. #TheResistance represents a simulation

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[28] Micah Sifry, "The Loneliness of the Resistance Protester," *The New Republic*, January 15, 2020, https://newrepublic.com/article/155999/loneliness-resistance-protester.

of in-time and in-place encounters for the pursuit of justice. Rhetorical scholars must more centrally understand algorithms as a rhetorical force in the shaping and curating of individualized timelines and worldviews. Bruns and Burgess argue that hashtags and the emergent public communication surrounding the topic encapsulated in the hashtag should be conceptualized as "calculated publics."[29] Twitter's search engine is "some undisclosed cocktail of what the algorithm deems 'authoritative' or socially relevant' results."[30] Citing Gillespie's argument regarding social media's algorithmic determination of relevance as undoubtedly laden with cultural and social values,[31] Bruns and Burgess demonstrate that technology, like the hashtag or Twitter interface in general, has its own ideological underpinnings, stemming from the institutions that enabled their creation. Interactions on Twitter are not free from the constraints of power relations that shape, influence and set the terms for political discourse inside the Twittersphere.

This is not to say that Twitter is a perpetual roadblock to the fomentation of leftist or progressive movements. Digital networks should not be ontologically castigated as always already atomizing. And yet, the optimistic embracement of digital networks, such as Twitter, due to its purported emergent and liminal quality of connectivity, is consistent with the market logic of social media itself. An uncritical approach to the digital activism may provide the scaffolding for the rhetorical façade of social media companies; Twitter, Inc. intends to craft a brand image constituted of dynamic trends, creativity, and in-time

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[29] Axel Bruns and Jean Burgess, "Twitter Hashtags from Ad Hoc to Calculated Publics," in #*Hashtag Publics: The Power and Politics of Discursive Networks* (Peter Lang Publishing, 2015), 13–27.

[30] Bruns and Burgess, "Twitter Hashtags," 25.

[31] Gillespie, "Relevance of Algorithms."

social connection. Theoretical approaches from communication scholars, from organizational communication to rhetorical communication, can't divorce the potential of digital networks from their attendant technical affordances (like Twitter's algorithmic sorting processes) and from broader sociopolitical systems that channel online activity towards specific ends (like communicative capitalism).

In addition to the technical affordances and sociopolitical context of digital networks, the circulation of ideographs facilitates the constitution of specific digital subjectivity. In other words, examining the widely circulated slogans and pithy catchphrases of a digital political community is a vital part of studying the rhetorical constitution of said community. Ideographs, the unquestioned core components of a dominant political vocabulary, create conditioned and routinized behavioral responses from interpellated subjects. Ideographs, I argue, are well suited for circulation on digital networks due to their condensed and pithy nature. Twitter in particular limits the length of tweets and replies. Twitter users need to make their joke, announcement, or thought in fewer words than they'd possibly use on other networks or through other mediums. Ideographs are excellent options because they do ideological work, without requiring the specific unpacking and dissection required from other ideas. #TheResistance, taken by itself, is quite vague. What's there to unpack or explain? The message matches the medium, almost seamlessly. Before exploring more fully the relationship between ideographs and digital networks, we must explore the concept of the ideograph.

#TheResistance as Ideograph

An ideograph is an "abstract word or phrase, drawn from ordinary language, which serves as a constitutional value for a historically situated collectivity."[32] Ideographs are central and organizing principles of political vocabulary taken up by citizens of a polity, proscribing acceptable and unacceptable behaviors.[33] These condensed forms of ideology carry widespread implications regarding the collective commitments of a society or social group. Political and social life within American society, for example, is heavily constrained and managed by ill-defined American values such as "liberty," "rule of law" and "national security." Ideographs are taken-for-granted, yet obscure and malleable, building blocks for political discourse. These building blocks are not confined to use by the global elite but are components of widespread discourse. Those that run for office or attempt to enter into civic discourse more generally need to at least attempt to describe how their position or opinion operates within the logic of the relevant political ideographs. According to McGee, an ideographic analysis is an important method because it "reveals interpenetrating systems or 'structures' of public motives."[34] Rhetorical scholars should seek to analyze and unsettle the deeply rooted culturally constructed values that often operate as "justifications for action performed in the name of the public."[35] How and why groups define or redefine American values has broad implications for what political outcomes are deemed plausible or possible.

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[32] Condit and Lucaites, *Crafting Equality*, xii.

[33] Cloud, "Rhetoric of <family values>."

[34] McGee, "Ideograph," 5.

[35] Condit and Lucaites, *Crafting Equality*, xiii.

Although McGee specified that ideographs are widely-used terms or words, his concept has been productively applied to images,[36] people,[37] representational ideographs,[38] digital ideographs,[39] and others.

Ideographs provide rhetorical scholars with a material approach to studying the immaterial and illusive power of dominant ideology. Gibbons and Seitz argue rhetoricians should take up "terminologically oriented work" given the vast expanse of objects of study that are available to rhetoricians in the digital age.[40] Specifically, they forward the digital ideograph as a rhetorical tool that can help make "sense of the mire of contemporary online public discourse."[41] Building upon McGee's foundational "ideograph" essay and Condit and Lucaites' ideographic study of 'equality,' Gibbons and Seitz argue that a digital ideographic framework doesn't seek to uncover the social scientifically proven "truth" of a phrase or term. Instead, digital ideographic work seeks to "employ textual analysis to help sort through and find patterns within" vast swaths of

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[36] Janis L. Edwards and Carol K. Winkler, "Representative Form and the Visual Ideograph: The Iwo Jima Image in Editorial Cartoons," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 83, no. 3 (August 1997): 289–310, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335639709384187.

[37] Ryan Neville-Shepard and Skye de Saint Felix, "There They Go Again: Invoking the < Reagan > Ideograph," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 56, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/10511431.2019.1708602.

[38] Mark P. Moore, "The Cigarette as Representational Ideograph in the Debate over Environmental Tobacco Smoke," *Communication Monographs* 64, no. 1 (March 1997): 47–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/03637759709376404.

[39] Gibbons and Seitz, "Toward a Digital Methodology."

[40] Gibbons and Seitz, "Toward a Digital Methodology," 174.

[41] Gibbons and Seitz, "Toward a Digital Methodology," 174.

circulated information.[42] Like other more rhetorical criticism methods, the digital ideograph attempts to forge a "defensible interpretations within an ongoing conversation."[43] Similarly, my analysis of #TheResistance through a digital ideographic frame doesn't attempt to reveal what powerful Democratic voices like Senator Murphy or Representative Waters were *really* thinking at the time. Instead, this paper offers a critical interpretation of the specific use of the #TheResistance as a way to frame Trump's behavior as an un-American aberration, rather than characteristic of the long antiblack and colonial past of America. This allows Democratic politicians to rhetorically bracket off structural critiques of the American political system and frame their party as the only way to return to pre-Trump political normalcy.

Ideographs play an important role in the creation of "civic identity" (Smith 1997), helping to pave over difference and inequality within a population.[44] Working through Althusser's concept of interpellation, Beasley argues that the myth of an American ideological consensus, such as a commitment to "freedom," is rhetorically constructed through the propagation of ideographs at ritualized performances, such as presidential inaugurations.[45] Ideographs contribute to the constitution of American political subjects that strive for abstract ideals like property, democracy and the rule of law. This chapter

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[42] Gibbons and Seitz, "Toward a Digital Methodology," 175.

[42] Gibbons and Seitz, "Toward a Digital Methodology," 171.

[44] Roger Smith, Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in American Public Law (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

[45] Vanessa Beasley, "The Rhetoric of Ideological Consensus in the United States: American Principles and American Pose in Presidential Inaugurals," *Communication Monographs* 68, no. 2 (June 2001): 169–83, https://doi.org/10.1080/03637750128055.

argues that #TheResistance functions as an ideograph within contemporary political discourse, a taken-for-granted and widely embraced cultural belief that interpolates bodies as liberal and civic subjects. #TheResistance, and other linked ideographs like #resist, reflect an "ideological orientation for the American people" that attempts to constitute dissent and protest against the Trump administration as inherent to fulfilling one's identification as American. The use and circulation of #resist suggests that Trump's behavior is contrarian to American values (or other ideographs) such as "law and order" and requires a fulfilment of one's civic duty to vote and virtually protest his unacceptable behavior and rhetoric.

Ideographs only operate in relation to one another as a "working unit." McGee explains "An ideograph, however, is always understood in its relation to another. It is defined tautologically by using other terms in its cluster."[46] An ideograph loses its constitutive value and coherence absent a relation to other ideographs. Therefore, "a synchronic analysis attempts to uncover the other ideographs being invoked that bring meaning to the ideograph under examination."[47] The synchronic structure of resistance, within the Trump presidency, is characterized by a contestation over what a patriotic American should support. There is no understanding of #TheResistance and #resist without stitching together its relationship to other ideographs within the attendant cluster such as "freedom," "rule of law," "checks and balances," and "presidential behavior." The clustering of #TheResistance and "law and order," in particular, rhetorically frames the criminal justice system as the remedy for leftist outrage with the Trump

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[46] McGee, "Ideograph," 14.

[47] Hamilton, "Can you be patriotic," 20.

administration. Representative Hakeem Jeffries, in August of 2017, tweeted "Birther-In-Chief pardons fellow hate-monger Joe Arpaio #Lawlessness #Disorder #Resist."[48] Jeffries' tweet was sent in response to Trump's pardoning of former county sheriff Joe Arpaio for contempt of court. Arpaio was held in contempt of court for refusing to adhere to a federal order to stop racial profiling while detaining people suspected of entering the US illegally. Jeffries, in this tweet, implicitly argues that Trump's pardoning of a known racial profiler, who refused to adhere to a federal order, is illiberal and threatens the rule of law. Jeffries tweet calls upon American citizens to #resist the lawlessness and disorder of the Trump administration. Jeffries frames the Trump administration as being associated with lawlessness, anarchy and racist disorder. The flip side of this rhetorical framing is that #resistance is associated and intimately tied with the reestablishment of security, law and order. The rhetorical framing of Jeffries' tweet suggests that any reasonable American citizen (read interpellated subject) should stand for the rule of law and #resist Trump's refusal of institutional constraints.

Jeffries' tweet has widespread implications for leftist activism because, to Jeffries, the only way to counteract the prevailing racism of the Trump administration is the maintenance of institutional order and control. Law and order, although rhetorically framed in Jeffries' tweet as the remedy to Trumpist inflammatory rhetoric, has long been used as a euphemism to defend the expansion of police presence in non-white neighborhoods. #TheResistance, as interpreted as an ideograph, is used by Jeffries to criticize Trump's bypassing of checks and balances as a threat to order. Answering the

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[48] @RepJeffries."Birther-in-Chief pardons fellow hate-monger Joe Arpaio #Lawlessness #Disorder #Resist."   *Twitter*, 25 Aug. 2017, 7:53 p.m., https://twitter.com/RepJeffries/status/901246121384837120.

hail of #TheResistance involves civic subjects retweeting and endorsing politicians that promise to re-instill Constitutional fidelity and institutional command. This rhetorical frame inherently foregoes a structural view of inequality in America, not as a result of personal failure or because of an unordinary chief executive, but because institutional order is the very means for the dispossession of Black, indigenous and underclass life. Put simply, Jeffries' tweet is untenable with the viewpoint that America was designed and structured to carry out violence under the veneer of peaceful "law and order." #TheResistance provided an opportunity to question the arbitrariness and racialized nature of the law as shown by Trump's pardoning of Arpaio. Instead, Jeffries' tweet binds #TheResistance to Trump to maintaining law and order.

#TheResistance was operationalized not only in relation to ideographs that deal with distinctly American values and legal institutions, such as Jeffries' use of "law and order." #TheResistance was also operationalized in relation to admirable personality traits and demeanor expected of someone holding the office of the presidency. Representative Maxine Waters, who is currently serving her 15th term in the House, is one of the most outspoken critics of Donald Trump and his administration. Waters is one of Trump's favorite Democrats to belittle, criticize and attack on Twitter. Trump's targeted attacks on Waters have even inspired his supporters to direct death threats at Waters. Trump's targeting of Black women politicians is indicative of his racist and sexist predilections but this does not mean that Waters' discursive moves on Twitter are above analysis or criticism. In January 31st, 2017, Waters tweeted, "Only in the @realDonaldTrump White House would professionalism and integrity be liabilities.

Bravo, Sally Yates! #resist."[49] Waters' tweet is in response to Trump's dismissal of

acting Attorney General Sally Yates for her refusal to defend and implement Executive

Order 13769, which banned the admission of refugees, travel and immigration from a list

of Muslim-majority countries.

In her tweet, Waters explains the professionalism and integrity displayed by Yates

in her role as acting Attorney General would normally be celebrated in a "normal"

administration. But for the Trump administration, these laudable traits are in fact

"liabilities." Waters clearly places #resist in a cluster of other related ideographs,

including professionalism and integrity. According to Waters, federal officials and

politicians should demonstrate proficiency, competence, and expertise. Trump's

dismissal of Yates represents a threat to the ethos of professionalism, which federal

officials should strive to embody and American subjects should support. In this context,

#resistance shapes collective action for #resistors around supporting competent and

expert politicians. Waters' tweet, although in specific reference to Trump's dismissal of

Yates, is largely charged at the decorum and behavior of Donald Trump. In this case,

#resistance doesn't require support of a specific policy, political project or revolution.

Instead, #resistance entails the rejection of Trump's dismissal of classically American

political civility. #Resistance involves a return to professionalism and integrity. The way

she specifies that this assault on political civility would take place "only in the

@realDonaldTrump White House" marks Trump as a unique threat to American values.

Calling for #resistance against Trump's rejection of political civility completely separates

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[49] @RepMaxineWaters. "Only in the @realDonaldTrump White House would professionalism and integrity be liabilities. Bravo, Sally Yates! #resist." *Twitter*, 31 Jan. 2017, 6:32 p.m., https://twitter.com/RepMaxineWaters/status/826589040623362050.

Donald Trump's rise to power from the historical legacy of other US presidents whose display perceived political civility were often only reserved for propertied, rich white men.

Waters' tweet demonstrates her attempt to redefine and renegotiate core American values, such as liberty and constitutional fidelity, such that Trump's behavior and conduct could be interpreted as contrary to American foundational values. However, blatantly racist remarks in the media, the use of concentration camps on "deviant" and "criminal populations," and the expansion of executive surveillance powers, despite the attempt by Democrats to frame these actions as an aberration, are all extremely consistent with and characteristic of America's foundationally racist and xenophobic past.

Ideographs are not static, but are open to updates, distortions and redefinitions. This does not mean that ideographs are meaningless. Rather, they are anchored in historical usages but open to be altered by historically situated and acceptable redefinitions. Therefore, ideographic analysis requires diachronic and synchronic attention. Charting the historical antecedents to resistance is important because it sets up ideological limits for acceptable applications of #TheResistance today.

Diachronically, resistance is a distinct component of American national and civic identity. The Revolutionary War and the mental image of the unlikely colony defeating one of world history's most significant colonial power has been foundational to the internal perception of America as a historically unique and democratic experiment.[50]

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[50] Michael McDonnell, "NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE AMERICAN WAR FOR INDEPENDENCE RECONSIDERED," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 20, no. 1 (July 2001): 3–17.

Born out of revolution and forged in the fire of experimental democracy, some argue that an American ideological consensus developed shortly after its birth that demonstrated a uniform and collective commitment to "Puritanical mission,"[51] "expansionist longing,"[52] and "an existential-cum-economic American Dream."[53] Clearly this American ideological consensus approach and the broader acceptance of a distinctly American identity obscures the existence of definitively anti-egalitarian institutional measures like the 3/5th Compromise, the barring of women from political participation, and genocide of indigenous. Despite its violent foundations, resistance has been readjusted to the contours of respectable forms of resistance.

Resistance as an ideographic term became compounded by the rise of Black activism, both militarist and reconciliatory, in the 1960s. The rise of militarist and captivating Black nationalists, such as Malcolm X or Huey Newton, who took up "foundational" American values, like the right to bear arms, the right to free speech, and the right to assemble, was perceived by the political "mainstream" as a direct threat to white sociality.[54] Anti-war, feminist and Black liberation activists were rhetorically framed by the political "mainstream," as unruly and barbaric fringe groups that

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[50] S. Bercovitch, "The Rites of Assent," in *The American Self: Myth, Ideology, and Popular Culture* (University of New Mexico Press, 1981), 5–42.

[52] R Slotkin, The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985).

[53] J. Hochschild, *Facing up to the American Dream* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[54] Rob Waters, "Black Power on the Telly: America, Television, and Race in 1960s and 1970s Britain," *Journal of British Studies* 54, no. 4 (October 2015): 947–70, https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2015.112.

represented threats to "law and order." Today, the definition and implications of resistance as an ideograph have now shifted, from the celebration of armed dissent against authoritarianism, towards a liberal, democratic, and conciliatory approach to protest and organizing.

Resisting injustice, although still conceptualized as distinctly American, takes on a different character. Now, acceptable resistance doesn't pose a threat to the constitution of the American polity and nation-state. Contemporary usage of resistance pathologizes dissent, protest and rebellion from Black and brown bodies because they pose "threats" to "law and order."[55] Contemporary uses of #TheResistance are anchored by the nationalistic historical arch of American resistance. The circulation of #TheResistance calls upon interpellated subjects to complete the historical chronicle started by Freedom Fighters and Civil Rights Movement leaders. For example, Senator Murphy outlines the moral implications at stake with #TheResistance. On February 23rd, 2017, about a month after the inauguration of President Trump, Senator Murphy tweeted "The moral arc of the universe doesn't bend toward justice naturally. It takes millions of us hanging onto one end, forcing it down. #resist."[56] Senator Murphy's tweet rhetorically ties the success of #TheResistance to the moral arc of the universe. Standing in opposition to Trump is rhetorically imbued with grave and incomprehensible significance that goes beyond the

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[55] Waters, "Black Power."

[56] @ChrisMurphyCT. "The moral arc of the universe doesn't bend toward justice naturally. It takes millions of us hanging onto one end, forcing it down. #resist." *Twitter*, 23 Feb. 2017, 8:00 a.m., https://twitter.com/ChrisMurphyCT/status/834764970109829121.

fate of fellow American citizens or the world but of the entire universe. Murphy positions

himself, his work and his tweet as a vital contribution to the moral arc of the universe.

Senator Murphy's tweet references one of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s most

prominent speeches, the "How long, Not long" speech that importantly forwards the

prediction, "How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it

bends toward justice."[57] The rhetorical allusion to King by contemporary American

politicians has been well-documented as a process of white-washing King's legacy. This

process of whitewashing decontextualizes King's systemic criticisms of antiblackness

and capitalism.[58] By referencing the legacy of King, a legacy that has been morally

accepted and validated across the political spectrum in American politics, Murphy

implies that the legacy of King and the Civil Rights Movement lives on in

#TheResistance. Here Murphy ideographically links #resist with "justice," arguing that

although progress and justice are not achieved naturally, the pursuit of justice is a distinct

component of our shared American history, show in the allusion to King. This tweet

addresses the audience member (Twitter user) and calls upon them to align themselves

with the moral arc of the universe, the "right side of history." Given that resistance

against injustice is distinctly American, supporting #TheResistance is distinctly

American. By implying that #TheResistance may be the latest instantiation of the King-

led Civil Rights Movement, or at least is built upon the legacy of the Civil Rights

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[57] Martin Luther King, "How Long, Not Long" (Selma to Montgomery March, State Capitol, Montgomery, Alabama, March 25, 1965).

[58] David Deifell, "Children in the Dream: Barack Obama and the Struggle over Martin Luther King's Legacy," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 8, no. 3 (2018): 157–72.

Movement, Murphy is continuously decontextualizing the radical demands of the 1960s such as the right to housing and greater economic, racial, and social equality.[59] Functionally, Murphy calls for Twitter users to support #TheResistance and feel good about continuing the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement absent the promise for the dismantling of structural inequality. Murphy's tweet helps the user recognize themselves as the one being addressed by the tweet. The tweet is certainly easy to identify with, as to refuse the call to carry on Dr. King's legacy would be unquestionably immoral. To retweet, like, or interact with Murphy's tweet is a moral obligation of incredible importance.

Like Dean and Faina argue, the virtual idea of the mobilization of millions comes to stand in for the necessary politicization of an issue. Murphy's tweet is undoubtedly referencing examples of mass mobilization like the Women's March, March for Science and anti-Muslim Ban protests that took place within the first month of Trump's administration. However, as Dean outlines, communicative capitalism has sufficiently accommodated examples of mass mobilization. Now, the "message'" of mass protest has been reduced to a medium. The message of #TheResistance certainly is circulated on Twitter, in-person dialogue and on national mainstream media. Given that now the market is understood as the organizing logic for political communication, contributing to #TheResistance is more important than the message of #TheResistance. Communicative capitalism ensures that everyone has a right and space to express their opinion. However, that doesn't necessitate or ensure that meaningful debate over the message will ensue.

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[59] Thomas Jackson, From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

Dean argues, "the circulation of content in the dense, intensive networks of global communications relieves top-level actors (corporate, institutional and governmental) from the obligation to respond)."[60] Instead of meaningfully responding to criticisms, now elite and top-level actors counter with their contributions to the general flow of Tweets, posts and video clips and hope that "sufficient volume will give their contributions dominance or stickiness."[61] Communicative capitalism, with its emphasis on personal and individual online contributions as politics, "forecloses the antagonism necessary for politics."[62]

#TheResistance, in an attempt to reframe ideographs so as to position Trump's behavior as antithetical to American values, positions Democrats, themselves, as "committed to the reclaiming of America," not as engaged in an effort to radically transform the country. This rhetorical reclamation of the soul of the nation's tolerant past, is often a nostalgic reach for one that never existed. These foundational American values that Trump seems to threaten, both on the world stage and domestically, are rhetorical fabrications used to organize a group into the American people. #TheResistance and its commitment to foundational American values (or ideographs) pave over structural inequality and deny the violent, colonial legacy of the nation in which these values developed. For example, @HouseDemocrats' February 11th 2017 tweet contrasts Trump's immigration policy with faux historical tolerance of difference. The tweet includes a video of a weekly address given by the then-chair of the Democratic caucus,

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[60] Dean, "Communicative Capitalism," 53.

[61] Dean, "Communicative Capitalism," 53.

[62] Dean, "Communicative Capitalism," 54.

Representative Joe Crowley. The caption for the video, an excerpt from one of the closing lines of Crowley's weekly address, states "I promise you we will fight back – we will resist. We will #resist on behalf of what is American. #DemAddress"[63] Crowley's three-minute long video, although briefly touching on a number of salient issues brought to the forefront during the first month of the Trump administration, primarily tackles the topic of immigration. Crowley posits that welcoming the immigrant stranger is a vital portion of America's identity. He argues that protesting and preventing the implementation of Trump's Muslim ban is a "test of who we want to be as a people." The @HouseDemocrats tweet argues that #TheResistance is vitally important for reclaiming and re-centering American values like acceptance and tolerance. #TheResistance is intimately linked with other ideographs that, when interpreted through the Democrats' frame, undoubtedly determine Trump's xenophobic rhetoric as un-American. The fight against racist and exclusive immigration policy is more than just a partisan squabble over policy, according to Crowley. Instead, it's a fight over American democracy and the identity of the American people.

The @HouseDemocrats tweet and Crowley's speech frame Trump's rhetorical stigmatization of Muslims as a historical deviation from the American norm. What @HouseDemocrats' idealization of #resistance leaves out, however, is the long and brutal historical legacy of genocide, slavery and ethnic exclusion of minorities that subverts the belief in traditionally "American" values like egalitarianism and tolerance. #Resist, in this case, means to stand in opposition to Trump's inflammatory rhetoric and policies.

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[63] @HouseDemocrats. ".@RepJoeCrowley: I promise you we will fight back - we will resist. We will #resist on behalf of what is American. #DemAddress." *Twitter*, 11 Feb. 2017, 1:10 p.m., https://twitter.com/HouseDemocrats/status/830494170498240512.

#Resist, in this case, conclusively does not mean stand in opposition to the settler colonial nation-state, built upon forced Black labor and undercompensated labor from people of color and women. The Middle Passage, the Chinese Exclusion Act, the indoctrination of indigenous children in boarding schools, and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II are all historical examples that demonstrate America has not always been a place for the celebration of difference that @HouseDemocrats' tweet claims it has been. As it's demonstrated in the analysis of @HouseDemocrats' tweet, #TheResistance, circulated as a digital ideograph, seeks to mark Trump as an exception to the tolerant and multicultural American rule. However, for Black, indigenous and people of color, America has always been a white nationalist settler colonial project, as unwelcoming as it is violent.

Interpreting the endorsement of #TheResistance by prominent Democratic politicians as an ideograph within the context of communicative capitalism helps update McGee, Condit and Lucaites' ideographic work to the digital age. #TheResistance as an ideograph certainly interpolates bodies as civic subject, inciting them to action and prohibiting other actions, just as McGee, Condit and Lucaites explains. However, given the incredible importance of publicity, in which visibility determines what is considered political, ideographs specifically condition online behaviors. Waters, Murphy, Crowley and Jeffries' tweets assert #TheResistance as an American institution, arguing that standing up to a flagrant rejection of institutional law and order is part of the identity of a civic American citizen. The circulation of #TheResistance via prominent Democrats attempts to re-contextualize the relationship between resistance and other ideographs such as patriotism, lawfulness and tolerance so as to mark Trump's behavior, decorum

and rhetoric as anti-American. #TheResistance, as a digital ideograph, seeks to constitute sufficiently passive, yet digitally activist subjectivities that retweet, favorite and engage with the right kinds of content on Twitter. Don't ask questions regarding the bipartisan expansion of military budgets or the historical legacy of the United States. Do #resist the aberration of Donald Trump, the smudge on the crystal clear glass-stained window of American foundational values.

Conclusion

Rhetoric is productive, in its ability to constitute a people. Rhetoric is also constricting, in its castigation of certain behaviors as unacceptable for the rhetorically constituted people. Digital networks, in their ease of access and rapid rate of circulation, provide an attractive medium for the circulation of short, punchy, and pithy terminology. Ideographs are well suited to invite circulation across digital networks. I argue the technical affordances of digital networks (like their timeline curation algorithms), the sociopolitical context of digital networks (like communicative capitalism), and the circulation of ideographs on digital networks combine to interpellate internet users as digital subjects.

In the case of #TheResistance on Twitter, its circulation helped cultivate the development of civic subjects who are active online and passive overall. #TheResistance stands in opposition to the unacceptable, unprofessional and uncivil behavior of the Trump administration and operates as a rallying cry for the reconstitution of American civility, an impossible and melancholic return to the past. In doing so, #TheDemocrats posit Donald Trump as the issue to be solved, rather than the product of interlocking and

mutually reinforcing systems of marginalization that produced him or made him a viable candidate.

This project has considerable limitations that are worth noting for they provide avenues for future exploration and research. First, further critical ideographic research should take up a much broader sample of tweets in order to support a more robust theoretical interpretation of #TheResistance. This project was quite constrained by my lack of access to software used by some scholars performing research on Twitter which helps them capture, store and categorize larger quantities of tweets. Second, scholars specifically interested in #TheResistance should broaden this ideographic analysis to other social media sites like Facebook, Instagram and Reddit. This could open up fruitful intersections between ideographic analysis and visual rhetoric. Lastly, further research should pay more attention to the uptake of #TheResistance in conservative and alt-right online spaces. The satirizing of #TheResistance by Trump-supporters online, although outside the bounds of this project, is definitely a crucial component to the synchronic structure of this ideograph.

Donald Trump is obviously racist, sexist, xenophobic and nationalist. He has clearly energized and supported extrajudicial, white nationalist violence. However, critical rhetoricians and activists should not confuse any form of resistance as worthwhile or ethical. As stated in the introduction, what collective and structural issues are bracketed off via the collective uptake of #TheResistance? What historical legacies are left intact and unquestioned if we treat Trump as an aberration that should be #resisted? Responding to the hail and identifying ourselves as civic subjects, or #resistors, may have a pleasurable, subjectifying effect. However, #TheResistance does not and rhetorically

cannot challenge the corporate, militarist and settler colonial bipartisan discourse that constrains radical political action. #TheResistance impossibly promises a return to pre-Trump normalcy. We should not heed its call. We should resist but shouldn't #resist.

CHAPTER THREE

Mike Bloomberg's Meme Campaign: Ambivalence, Self-Satirization, and the Internet's "Ugly Aesthetic"

Introduction

On February 12th, 2020, numerous prominent Instagram meme accounts posted memes promoting the presidential campaign of billionaire Michael Bloomberg. The accounts may sound trivial and fringe, sporting humorous usernames like @Tank.Sinatra, @ShitheadSteve, @adam.the.creator, @fourtwenty, but these accounts represent an incredibly powerful avenue for the dissemination of content, collectively reaching a whopping 60 million Instagram users.[1] Instagram, the most popular photo-sharing social media app in the world, is home to over one billion users every month,[2] many of whom are drawn to the odd humor put on display by prominent meme accounts. The Bloomberg campaign confirmed they were working with a firm called Meme 2020 to post sponsored content via third-party accounts. As seen in the 2016 election of right-wing populist Donald Trump and the surprising success of Democratic Socialist Bernie Sanders, memes, jokes, and images that are circulated in digital networks are not peripheral political discourses but are vitally important arenas for political and ideological struggle.

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[1] Taylor Lorenz, "Michael Bloomberg's Campaign Suddenly Drops Memes Everywhere," *The New York Times*, February 13, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/13/style/michael-bloomberg-memes-jerry-media.html.

[2] Andrew Hutchinson, "22 Instagram Stats You Need to Know in 2020 [Infographic]," *Social Media Today*, December 17, 2019, https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/22-instagram-stats-you- need-to-know-in-2020- infographic/569182/.

The form of all Bloomberg-Meme 2020 campaign memes was the same: an obviously fake direct message conversation between Bloomberg and the meme account. In some memes, Bloomberg asks the account to make him look cool and appeal to younger voters. In others, he reminds the meme account of the exorbitant amount of wealth he can use to compensate the memer. And in others, Bloomberg sends an already-existing and widely-circulated meme of Bernie Sanders to demonstrate his knowledge on current meme trends. Every caption for these posted memes confirms the meme was a legitimate, sponsored advertisement paid for by the Bloomberg campaign.

Fake direct messages are not new to the meme economy, as such messages have long been a way to satirize public figures and what they talk about in their private messages. However, Bloomberg's campaign strategy, a form of self-satirization, poking fun at his most distasteful and unlikeable characteristics, represents a unique shift in political communication, especially as it relates to digital networks. This purposefully inauthentic, cringe-inducing, self-referential meme campaign rewrites the "rules" of how corporate and political communication may be undertaken. Whereas other campaigns and corporate accounts attempt to take on a personable identity, usually demonstrating empathy when interacting with users, the Bloomberg meme campaign steers into its own surreal ridiculousness. By beating its political opponents to the punchline, Bloomberg's meme campaign seeks to rhetorically deflate the opposition. Such memes counter the charge that a Bernie Sanders supporter might throw at billionaire Bloomberg for being unaccountable to the mass working class or disarm a criticism a Pete Buttigieg fan might have of "Boomer" Bloomberg for being out of touch with young voters. These memes lean into satire to manage Bloomberg criticisms and bolster his messaging.

A rhetorical analysis of Bloomberg's Instagram meme campaign is especially

necessary given the blossoming attention afforded internet memes within rhetorical

studies. Scholars such as Limor Shifman,[3] Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner,[4] ES

Jenkins,[5] and Heather Woods and Leslie Hahner[6] have explicated the flexible,

circulatory, polysemic and ephemeral nature of internet memes. Classical approaches to

rhetorical texts, they argue, are less useful for an analyses of internet memes given the

rapidly shifting situational contexts and exigencies that are continuously formed and

dissolved through circulation. Instead, rhetorical meme scholars have opted for methods

that foregrounds the affective relations constituted through the interface between "text,"

user, and digital network. Jenkins, specifically, calls this approach mode analysis, a "shift

in focus from the actual (texts and contexts) to the virtual (the capacities for affect and

affection structuring an encounter)."[7] This chapter will utilize modal analysis, charting

the Bloomberg memes' as an "actualization" rendered out of a broader affective

potentiality characterized by political ambivalence and the "internet's ugly aesthetic." I

argue the Bloomberg campaign operationalizes ambivalence through choppily-edited

memes to excuse past behaviors. The movement of the memes themselves render his

objectionable past as banally humorous. The speed of the memes' circulation

demonstrates the power of ambivalence in its material and rhetorical functions. These

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[3] Shifman, Memes in Digital.

[4] Phillips and Miller, *Ambivalent Internet*.

[5] Jenkins, "The Modes of Visual."

[6] Woods and Hahner, *Make America Meme*.

[7] Jenkins, "The Modes of Visual," 442.

memes gained considerable traction despite Bloomberg's problematic past. The Bloomberg campaign deliberately centers the candidates' most objectionable qualities, signaling the possible onset of a potentially dangerous era of campaigning and advertising, one in which self-deprecation rhetorically neutralizes criticism.

The case of Bloomberg's meme campaign represents a much different context for analysis than the crowd-sourced, pluralistic, dynamic and viral sensation of alt-right memes[8] or LOLcats.[9] Most rhetorical scholarship points to the way imitation, remixing, and rapid circulation of certain meme formats across digital networks, making it nearly impossible to find a true "origin" or initial situational context for a particular meme text. By contrast, the Bloomberg meme campaign lends itself to a different trajectory of critical inquiry. It is important to analyze this meme campaign as corporately planned, branded, and carefully strategized. This chapter builds on the foundational insights of current meme scholarship while hoping to show new memetic directions, in which the economic, social, and political role of vertically structured, corporate marketing plays a more central role. A rhetorical analysis of carefully strategized, corporate meme production requires a shift in analysis from the ephemeral, the diffuse, and the fleeting to the centralized and corporatized meme hubs. Ultimately, given the success of prominent Instagram meme accounts in acquiring considerable "influence" and thereby altering and monetizing meme culture, this article seeks to *ground* the study of meme politics toward the rhetorical tactics, humor, and aesthetics of prominent Instagram meme pages, demonstrating perhaps the creation and circulation of memes is less pluralistic than

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[8] Woods and Hahner, *Make America Meme*.

[9] Shifman, *Memes in Digital*.

previously theorized. The corporation-meme-account relationship can make the most "astro-turfed" and carefully strategized meme format *appear* "naturally" viral. Although this is not the case with Bloomberg's meme campaign, as it was clear the memes were designed to demonstrate its absurdly inauthentic style, the rise of coordinated meme campaigns changes the rhetorical affordances explicated by previous rhetorical scholars. My hope is this chapter can help scholars launch analyses of weird, fractured, stretched, absurd, self-referential, postmodern, corporate advertising and marketing.

This chapter will explore how a 78-year-old billionaire presidential candidate sought to bolster his likability by highlighting his most unlikable characteristics, how he tried to make himself appear more relatable by demonstrating his unrelatability, and how he hoped to obtain the "highest" office in the United States by utilizing "low" forms of political communication (Instagram memes). Bloomberg's bizarre pasquinade, targeted at himself and some of his campaign's most abhorrent qualities, (1) attempts to actualize existing "ugly" aesthetic and "ambivalent affect" underlying meme culture, in order (2) to normalize his problematic political past through "self-aware," ironic humor and (3) to constitute a collective of young, "apolitical" Internet users as Bloomberg supporters. More holistically, this article speaks to the rising prominence of corporatized meme production as a rhetorical tactic worthy of further critical consideration. The corporate utilization of prominent meme accounts for the production and dissemination of memes, under the guise of self-mockery and absurdist "stretched" humor, may affectively stultify criticism and debate concerning corporate practices, thereby naturalizing an exploitative neoliberal political economy.

The Confusing, Chaotic, and Bizarre Presidential Campaign of Mike Bloomberg

Mike Bloomberg, the former mayor of New York City and majority owner of Bloomberg LP, officially announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination for president on November 24th, 2019. This came as no surprise as Bloomberg had used the previous few weeks to file a statement of candidacy with the Federal Election Commission and to donate hundreds of thousands of dollars to the DNC. Although his decision to sit out the first four contests of the primary election confused some political pundits,[10] given his immense wealth he used to finance his campaign and his name recognition, most believed he would be a serious contender for the nomination.[11]

Following his official candidacy announcement, Bloomberg invested an initial $37 million into television advertisements, concentrating his focus in states holding elections on the first "Super Tuesday" of the primary season. This initial ad buy totaled "more than the entire Democratic field" had "spent on TV advertising so far,"[12] aside from Tom Steyer, another Democratic billionaire candidate. The initial investment was the first of many media ad buys the Bloomberg campaign purchased across multiple mediums, including television, YouTube, radio, and, of course, Instagram memes. At the time he suspended his campaign on March 4th, 2020, Bloomberg had spent $900 million

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[10] Dan Merica, Christina Alesci, and Jake Tapper, "Michael Bloomberg Is the Latest 2020 Democratic Hopeful," *CNN*, November 24, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/24/politics/michael- bloomberg-2020-election/index.html.

[11] Amber Phillips, "Why Is Everyone Is Suddenly Taking Mike Bloomberg Seriously," *The Washington Post*, February 14, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/02/14/why-we-should- take-mike-bloomberg-seriously/.

[12] Merica, Alesci, and Tapper, "Michael Bloomberg."

of his own money to finance his campaign, the most ever for a self-funded politician in US history.[13] The Bloomberg campaign's initial advertisement explicitly contrasted Bloomberg with Donald Trump, highlighting the president's erratic and unacceptable demeanor and behavior. Whereas Trump was shown as an irrational, tyrannical liar, Bloomberg, on the other hand, represented the responsible, reliable, managerial boss you could trust to run a company. He stressed his business and philanthropic experience to frame himself as a "doer," a corporate problem-solver.[14] Bloomberg's campaign also pit him as an alternative to "radical" leftists of the nomination slate, such as Elizabeth Warren or Bernie Sanders, and as more innovative than mainstream politicians such as Joe Biden or Amy Klobuchar. Bloomberg's massive media buy - either from exposure or effective messaging - provided a surge in polls.[15]

However, Bloomberg's campaign shifted in early February. While still running television and YouTube advertisements that highlighted his competence and managerial experience, as the executive "problem solver," Bloomberg's campaign entered its "tongue-in-cheek" phase.[16] In early February, the Bloomberg campaign began "trolling"

[13] Shane Goldmacher, "Michael Bloomberg Spent More than $900 Million on His Failed Presidential Run," *The New York Times*, March 20, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/20/us/politics/ bloomberg-campaign-900-million.html.

[14] Scott Powers, "Mike Bloomberg Ad Asks: Do You Want a Debater or a Doer?," *Florida Politics*, February 28, 2020, https://floridapolitics.com/archives/321104-mike-bloomberg-ad-asks-do-you-want-a-debater-or-a-doer.

[15] Mark Niquette, "Rising in Polls, Bloomberg Will Soon Find Out If Support Is Real," *Bloomberg*, February 14, 2020.

[16] Kari Paul, "Bloomberg Debate Video Sparks New Concern over Social Media Disinformation," *The Guardian*, February 20, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/feb/20/mike- bloomberg-debate-video-facebook-twitter-instagram.

Trump with a series of billboards in Nevada and Arizona.[17] The billboards, placed in highly visible locations like on the Vegas Strip, poked fun at Trump's personal behavior like "Donald Trump cheats at golf" or "Donald Trump eats burnt steak." The billboards represented a strategic shift in the Bloomberg campaign; it was time to stop pretending that the former mayor of New York City, the billionaire with a history of sexist remarks and support for racist police practices, was just any other politician running for president. Bloomberg's campaign began by intensely investing in "traditional" arenas of political marketing, framing his argument to the voters in a "traditional" way: Mike can "get it done." However, by February, Bloomberg's campaign employed nontraditional arenas of political marketing and messaging. This brings us to Meme 2020.

Few people knew about Meme 2020 prior to the coordinated launch of Mike Bloomberg's Instagram meme campaign on February 12th. Following the suspension of the Bloomberg campaign and the Instagram meme campaign, it seems that Meme 2020 may be content that it is already slipping back into the shadows. The corporate website for Meme 2020 is basic and bare. It contains an email address and a statement: "We are a collective of creatives, designers, videographers, political operatives, influencers, writers, and strategists on a mission to make memes that matter."[18] Its verified Instagram account, a platform key to political meme culture, only follows 13 accounts, all candidates who were, at one point, a prominent candidate for the 2020 presidential election including

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[17] Marty Johnson, "Bloomberg to Troll Trump with Billboards during Phoenix and Las Vegas Visits: Report," *The Hill*, February 21, 2020, https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/484009- bloomberg-to-troll-trump-with-billboards-during-phoenix-and-las-vegas.

[18] "Meme 2020," https://www.meme2020.com.

Pete Buttigieg, Bernie Sanders, Tulsi Gabbard, Elizabeth Warren, Donald Trump, Bill Weld, Tom Steyer, Amy Klobuchar, and Joe Biden. The internet public relations firm, which brought together an impressive array of content creators from popular Instagram meme accounts and grabbed countless headlines with their Bloomberg memes, now suspiciously has gone dark.

The lead strategist for Meme 2020 is Mick Purzycki, tech entrepreneur and chief executive of Jerry Media. Jerry Media, a media and marketing company with considerable influence in the world of influencers, has received its fair share of headlines as well. Whereas Purzycki's work with Meme 2020 gained headlines for its peculiar and self-satirizing approach to political campaigning, Jerry Media has been the target of accusations of stealing content and misleading their followers, without adequately giving credit to the creator.[19] Purzycki, along with his more infamous business partner Elliot Tebele, have amassed an empire of influence, likes, and cash by stealing jokes from up-and-coming comedians and memers. Additionally, Purzycki, Tebele, and the rest of Jerry Media ran the social media account of the Fyre Festival, a now infamous failed music festival. Jerry Media was instrumental in hiding how disastrously behind schedule the organizers were in readying the private island for the music festival.[20] The end result was

[19] Ashley Carman, "Comedians Are Coming for One of Instagram's Biggest Joke Aggregators," *The Verge*, February 1, 2019, https://www.theverge.com/2019/2/1/18206914/fuckjerry-jerry- media-comedian-backlash-joke-stealing-vulture; Vic Berger, "Op-Ed: It's Time to Cancel FuckJerry," *Rolling Stone*, February 6, 2019, https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/vic-berger-opinion-cancel-fuck-jerry- media-789699/.

[20] Alexandra Sternlich, "Fyre-Proof: The Sudden Fall and Swift Reemergence of F*ckJerry's Elliot Tebele," *Forbes*, October 24, 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexandrasternlicht/2019/ 10/24/fyre-proof-the-sudden-fall-and-swift-re-emergence-of-fckjerrys-elliot- tebele/#b997cf864e85.

thousands of people stranded in the Bahamas and numerous federal arrests for wire fraud in relation to the festival.

To be clear, the same social media experts who stole content to bolster their empire of "influence" and assisted in defrauding music festival goers to protect their assets are chief strategists for Michael Bloomberg's Instagram meme campaign. The same fraudsters who profited by plagiarizing memes are being used to bolster a mainstream candidate's chance of election to the presidency. Although communication across digital networks certainly pluralizes "voice" and a "feeling of belonging," there is insufficient scholarly attention paid towards the massive wealth and power concentrated in the hands of those who own the "memes" of production. Meme 2020 disseminated the Bloomberg meme campaign through dozens of Instagram's top meme accounts, reaching in total about 60 million followers. The centralization of memes in verified meme accounts, and the congregation of those few verified accounts into social media firms, is a multi-million dollar business. Bloomberg and Meme 2020's partial-monopolization of "influence" through memes and their ability to buy, not even "game," the algorithmic sorting of content on user's personalized timelines represents an unprecedented rhetorical force that requires the attention of rhetorical scholarship for its unprecedented reach and affective traction.

It's Just a Meme!

Most critical rhetoricians focusing on internet or digital networks agree on the necessity to chart the affective possibilities, the underlying pre-emotive feelings that are transmitted and actualized through posts and memes. These approaches study why and

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how this specific mode of communication simultaneously generated and was afforded sufficient affective energy to gain traction and become viral, or at least spread, across multiple platforms. However, what lessons does the affective, modal approach to internet memes provide scholars concerning the meme that wasn't produced in scattered, diffuse, networked publics? How does this approach need to be modified, slightly, to meet the demands of a centrally planned, corporately calculated, and managerially-engineered meme campaign, like Mike Bloomberg and Meme 2020?

The contribution that this chapter makes to rhetorical meme studies is an attempt to re-center verified Instagram meme accounts as a central "hub" or nodal point, a prominent shaper of meme and internet culture generally. While the uptake and replication of the Bloomberg meme format certainly offered an opportunity for personalized participation and individualized subjectification, to completely dislodge these texts from the context of verified meme accounts, and their strong influence on comedic trends within digital meme ecologies would undermine critical inquiry. While understanding the central importance of digital networks for human communication, commerce, and for "feeling together" is crucial, perhaps the centralization of influence and affect in verified meme accounts, and the ability for prominent billionaire politicians to exploit such centralization, should force rhetorical scholars to reconsider how truly organic, destabilized, and shifting the digital media ecologies really are. Prominent Instagram meme accounts are central nodal points in the digital affective economy of internet memes. These accounts wield incredible influence, initiating new meme format trends and lending credibility to other meme formats that have yet to virally take hold across digital networks. Their monetization of posts, along with their inconspicuous

arrangements with corporations and campaigns, allows prominent meme accounts to facilitate interaction of their followers with seemingly spontaneously popular trends, fads and inside-jokes.

Take the release of Netflix's *Bird Box* as an example. *Bird Box*, a Netflix original thriller flick, was a widespread Internet meme prior to it becoming a smash hit and netting over 45 million streams within the first week of its premier in 2019. Bereznak argues "those millions of people were driven to watch Bird Box—a film that most people also agree is bad—just to better understand the collective conversation online."[21] The concept of the movie was quite memeable: humans must move through the world while wearing blindfolds due to the invasion of an invisible supernatural force, which when looked at, causes humans to commit suicide. The remixing and imitation of the blindfold concept flooded timelines and feeds across digital networks. The "*Bird Box* Challenge," videos and images of people performing mundane tasks while wearing blindfolds, was everywhere.

However, the participatory, diffuse, and seemingly spontaneous uptake of the meme was carefully coordinated and crafted. Netflix began their marketing of *Bird Box* by discreetly paying prominent video game streamers on Twitch to stream themselves playing videogames while blindfolded, kicking off a seemingly naturalized development of the memes surrounding the movie's release.[22] The rhetorical tactic employed by

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[21] Alyssa Bereznak, "The Bird Box Effect: How Memes Drive Users to Netflix," *The Ringer*, January 3, 2019, https://www.theringer.com/movies/2019/1/3/18167278/bird-box-memes- netflix-bots-marketing.

[22] Bereznak, "Bird Box Effect."

Netflix, corporatized meme production disseminated through influential online personalities and accounts, concealed the highly coordinated and profit-driven origins of what many believed to be just another momentary meme craze. Additionally, the memes were quite critical of the movie concept itself. Many memes centered on the corny concept or its striking parallels with a similar thriller released a year prior, *A Quiet Place*. *Bird Box* was not reviewed favorably by audiences or critics, but it didn't matter. Netflix users were drawn to the film through critical memes, many audience members merely wanted to be "in" on the joke. This self-mocking, guerilla style of memetic marketing is gaining considerable popularity and is quite successful in getting millions of people to consume a product that they agree is not enjoyable to consume.[23] This rhetorical tactic must be a focus for rhetorical critics.

The relationship between corporations and prominent meme accounts calls into question many of the conclusions of previous meme scholarship concerning the perceived spontaneity of viral meme trends. Not all memes are created equal. Prominent Instagram meme accounts are central nodal points that wield disproportionate influence in modulating and monetizing meme culture. This chapter will employ a methodology, similar to Jenkins' mode analysis and Woods and Hahners' rhetorical approach to memes. However, given that the planning, creation, and execution of Bloomberg's meme campaign is so vastly different than LOLcats or planking (as with Shifman), Pepe the Frog (Woods and Hahner), Fail/win (Jenkins) or other diffusely created and circulated

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[23] Mehmet Gökerik et al., "Surprise Me with Your Ads! The Impacts of Guerrilla Marketing in Social Media on Brand Image," *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics* 30, no. 5 (November 12, 2018): 1222–38, https://doi.org/10.1108/APJML-10-2017-0257.

memes, it dictates a slight change in methodology that will provide valuable insight into the way powerful capitalists can take charge of existing "verified" and professionalized social media accounts. I undoubtedly agree that memes are very important rhetorical texts that effect and are effected by the cultural, social, and political environment in which they are produced and circulated. However, I believe there is an apparent gap in the literature concerning the corporately planned and executed uptake of an aesthetic and format that most scholars have interpreted as dispersed and obscured. The rising prominence of this undetected rhetorical tactic has wide-ranging consequences: the dissemination of self-satirizing corporately planned memes through third party prominent meme accounts may stifle resistance or criticism, while naturalizing objectionable corporate practices through self-mockery. The actualization of ambivalent affect by corporations and campaigns through ironic and self-critical meme advertisements is rhetorically suffocating. In other words, corporations and campaigns, knowing the most pertinent and widely held criticism of their organizations, effectively use self-critical meme advertisements to make themselves appear less-threatening, taking advantage of ambivalence so crucial to the culture of digital humor. No campaign does this as clearly as Mike Bloomberg's Instagram meme campaign.

Mike's Memes, Ambivalence, and the Normalization of the Unacceptable

Political campaigns, across digital networks, often seek to carefully modulate affective intensities to create predictable emotive responses and maximize user engagement. Scholars of political marketing agree that political campaigns can be studied

as brands.[24] Lin and Himelboim argue that national campaigns can be conceptualized as political brand communities, which are most effectively fashioned through digital networks. Effective political campaigns on social media cultivate "group membership through community engagement" and "foster a sense of empowerment."[25] Nurturing the formation of affective ties between and across digital networks invites further participation and, ideally, voting and volunteering on behalf of the campaign. These affective ties are best promoted through the crafting of a personal and empathetic social media image brand that seemingly accurately reflects the candidate, their personality and their platform.[26] Political campaigns are quite successful in engineering affects through digital networks, usually through a frame of hope, optimism, or belief in a better America, in order to prime supporters to action. Bloomberg's meme campaign is an incredibly deserving set of texts for critical inquiry due to its complete reversal of these expectations. While many prominent politicians attempt to successfully engineer an empathetic and authentic digital ethos through social media accounts, the Bloomberg's Meme 2020 campaign sought to flout its unbelievably inauthentic portrayal of

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[24] Dennis Kavanagh, *Election Campaigning: The New Marketing of Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995); Peter Reeves, Leslie de Chernatony, and Marylyn Carrigan, "Building a Political Brand: Ideology or Voter-Driven Strategy," *Journal of Brand Management* 13, no. 6 (July 2006): 418–28, https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.bm.2540283; L. Spiller and J. Bergner, *Branding the Candidate: Marketing Strategies to Win Your Vote* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011).

[25] Jhih-Syuan Lin and Itai Himelboim, "Political Brand Communities as Social Network Clusters: Winning and Trailing Candidates in the GOP 2016 Primary Elections," *Journal of Political Marketing* 18, no. 1–2 (April 3, 2019): 5.

[26] Spiller and Bergner, *Branding the Candidate*.

Bloomberg's personality and naturalize the most detestable qualities of his campaign through self-satirical humor.

Mike Bloomberg's meme campaign was bizarre. The memes were purposefully formatted in strange and ugly ways. They were posted to Instagram accounts that peddle in "weird" humor. For some of the memes, there wasn't really a coherent "joke." Instead, the memes signaled an absurdist, self-critical, and overly ironic way to rhetorically normalize the worst aspects of his political and personal career. Bloomberg memes, then, attempted to conceal the persuasive and rhetorical work of such memes, as described by Woods and Hahner. Bloomberg's humor wasn't just ironic and absurdist, but also "generative and constitutive."[27] Meme 2020's actualization of the existing ambivalent affect, underlying much of the stretched, absurd humor specifically purported by the prominent Instagram meme accounts, rhetorically bolstered his case for president by using self-critical and ironic humor to disarm the more potent criticisms of his candidacy.

In this way, ambivalence is political. Ambivalence is colloquially understood as contradiction, uncertainty, and the inability or unwillingness to make a definitive choice between a set of options. Not making a choice is still a choice, one with political and social ramifications. The ambivalent refusal of a stance, in most forms and particularly in the context of the Bloomberg meme campaign, acclimatizes the status quo. Radically altering sociopolitical arrangements requires decisive vision, concepts, and affect. Affective ambivalence is amusingly weaponized by the Bloomberg campaign to deaden the affective force of leftist calls for structural change, calls which continue to gain affective traction, especially among younger generations. To accomplish this

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[27] Milner and Phillips, *Ambivalent Internet*, 18.

consequence, the meme campaign attempted to render his detestable political history more palatable and electorally acceptable. By absurdly making light of his unaccountability to the working class, Bloomberg encourages meme-consumers to laugh off a troubling reality and forego important criticisms.

Ambivalence is a useful rhetorical tactic for Bloomberg. Milner and Phillips utilized a framework of ambivalence to analyze the stranger rhetorical texts to be found through mediums like memes, hashtags or jokes. They describe ambivalent expression on the internet as

> simultaneously antagonistic and social, creative and disruptive, humorous and barded, the satirization of products, antagonization of celebrities, and creation of questionable fan art, along with countless other examples that permeate contemporary online participation, are too unwieldy, too variable across specific cases, to be essentialized as this as opposed to that.[28]

Milner and Phillips argue that the use of surrealist, greatly exaggerated, and absurdist humor is an integral facet of the ambivalent, "not this and not that," affect that permeates Internet culture. The Bloomberg meme campaign is a clear attempt to capitalize on existing affective arrangements of ambivalence that dominate internet culture because it mocks existing socioeconomic inequality, and Bloomberg's direct benefit from it, all while still suggesting internet users are powerless to challenge these institutional arrangements and cultivating ambivalent relations. The casually humoristic way in which the memes reference Bloomberg's power and wealth suggest that these contingent and malleable socioeconomic systems are immutable, leaving no other reaction to the status quo than to laugh it off in an ambivalent fashion.

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[28] Milner and Phillips, *Ambivalent Internet*, 10.

This is not to suggest that laughter, satire, irony, and comedy are not generative avenues for the important criticism of worldly arrangements. Warner[29] and Waisanen argue that irony can "inspire thought" and "incite curiosity" by playfully identifying the substances and patterns of power.[30] Digital memes and internet culture generally coalesces around similar ironic themes that point to the surrealistic nature of postmodernity and late capitalism. However, the rhetor, or the one doing the playful revealing of patterns of power, certainly alters the message. The one performing the satirical criticism matters. As much as satirical play can reveal the cultural limitations of dominant systems of power, laughing at something can also create a challenging distancing effect, it can make the insipid appear palatable and the intolerable tolerable. The Bloomberg meme campaign attempts to constitute a similar relationship between meme consumer and the political economy; you can't change my wealth, power, or your lack of either. By blatantly centralizing Bloomberg's objectionable past behaviors and qualities as the core subject of each meme, the self-satirical style of these rhetorical texts constitutes "feelings of political inefficacy, alienation, and atmospheres of cynicism."[31] This is not just to say that the Bloomberg campaign made jokes about serious issues that

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[29] Jamie Warner, "George Bush, Jon Stewart and Michel Foucault: Laughter as Political Problematization" (2004 Annual Meeting of American Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, 2004).

[30] Don J. Waisanen, "A Citizen's Guides to Democracy Inaction: Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's Comic Rhetorical Criticism," *Southern Communication Journal* 74, no. 2 (April 28, 2009): 136.

[31] James Anderson and Amie D. Kincaid, "Media Subservience and Satirical Subversiveness: *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, The Propaganda Model and the Paradox of Parody," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 30, no. 3 (August 2013): 175.

systemically limit the quality of life of millions of US citizens (which is still true).

Instead, I argue Bloomberg's surrealistic form of political advertising tactically uses

existing ambivalent affect to invite meme consumers to laugh it all off together.

In addition to the humor and rhetorical style of the meme campaign, the medium

of digital memes, and their affordances, help bolster Bloomberg's campaign messaging

and constitute ambivalent social relations between digital users and the political

economy. Woods and Hahner maintain that one of the most effective qualities of the

memes of the alt-right is they helped to recruit those that were turned off from

"traditional politics," characterized by dualistic, partisan bickering.[32] The memes of the

alt-right spread rapidly because they were perceived to be politically ambivalent, not

beholden to traditional political dialogue that many internet users deem tiresome and

generally unproductive. Most memes are perceived as politically neutral given their form,

their crass design, and the seemingly "low-stakes" involved in interacting with them.[33]

Bloomberg's meme campaign can be analyzed along similar lines as the memes

rhetorically mobilize this ambivalent affect to deflate criticism, naturalize an economic

and political system of inequality, and boost support for his presidential campaign.

The meme campaign rhetorically functioned by satirically flouting the most

criticized portions of Bloomberg's candidacy and career to ironically and ambivalently

render them non-issues. Milner and Phillips explain,

> these images…illustrate the ambivalence of constitutive humor, they… can
> facilitate harmful fetishization…the ability to extract a specific image or a few-
> second video clip means that one is able to reduce any event to a quick visual

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[32] Woods and Hahner, *Make America Meme*, 8.

[33] R. M. Milner, *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2016); 12.

punchline. This in turn allows one to sidestep the fuller political, historical, or emotional context – that which denotes an actual bite.[34]

Within the Democratic primary field, whereas Bernie Sanders and, to a lesser extent, Elizabeth Warren focused on structural inequities within unfettered free-market capitalism, Bloomberg attempted to portray himself as the "it's not that serious" candidate. In other words, the Bloomberg campaign attempted to counteract the affect of solidarity, togetherness, and communities of care (shown in Sanders' slogan of "Not me. Us" and Warren's slogan of "Big structural change") with the affect of ambivalence, technocratic control, and distancing (shown in Bloomberg's slogans of "Mike will get it done" and "I like Mike"). At a time when charges of sexism, graft, and racism were gaining salience and traction, the meme campaign attempted to deflect these criticisms. Bloomberg's campaign received persistent criticisms for a variety of legitimate reasons including his sexist ways of referring to women,[35] his support of stop and frisk policies and overpolicing of "criminal" minority neighborhoods,[36] his blatant way of "buying

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[34] Milner and Phillips, *Ambivalent Internet*, 120.

[35] Bloomberg's history of sexist and misogynist comments throughout his business and political career is well documented. Senator Elizabeth Warren famously criticized Bloomberg during the opening question of the Nevada Democratic Primary Debate for his use of demeaning and dehumanizing language when referring to women. See Emily Stewart, "Who said it: "Fat broads" and "horse-faced lesbians," *Vox*, February 19, 2020. https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/2/19/21144905/nevada-democratic-debate-mike-bloomberg-elizabeth-warren-women.

[36] Similarly, Bloomberg has a well-documented history of utilizing anti-black justifications for supporting questionable and discriminatory police practices, like "stop and frisk," while he was mayor of New York City. According to Rose, "During Bloomberg's 12 years as mayor, police in New York stopped and frisked roughly 5 million people — most of them young black and Latino men from some of the city's roughest neighborhoods. The vast majority had done nothing wrong. In 2013, the year Bloomberg left office, a federal judge ruled that the NYPD was violating the constitutional rights of black and brown New Yorkers." See Joel Rose, "Mike Bloomberg

himself into the race" through contributions to the DNC, among other concerns. Bloomberg memes were a strategic way to depress the brevity, impact and importance of these charges. Corporately planned memes are the perfect medium to facilitate fetishization. A user's focus is directed towards the choppy visual editing, the deliberately botched delivery of the punchline, or Bloomberg's shockingly crass language as displayed in the meme. This process avoids confrontation with broader political and economic institutions that benefit Bloomberg. As a dangerous rhetorical tactic, the successful actualization of ambivalent affect through the use of quirky, self-satirical memetic humor can mask institutional inequality, reify domination, and castigate any criticism of the established status quo as simply "caring too much."

The prominent Instagram meme accounts sought out by Meme 2020 for Bloomberg's Instagram meme campaign vary to some degree in terms of topic. However, there is definitely common and "characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone" that constitute an interrelated, digital community among and between the set of popular, verified meme accounts involved with the Bloomberg campaign.[37] The accounts such as @KaleSalad, @FuckAdvertisements, @ShitheadSteve, and @TankSinatra all espouse a very absurdist, surreal genre of meme humor. Oftentimes, the meme is overly straightforward, painstakingly so. Or there is no functional punchline at all. Some are merely screenshots of viral jokes posted on Twitter. And still others are just images that

Can't Shake The Legacy Of Stop-And-Frisk Policing In New York," *NPR*, February 25, 2020, https://www.npr.org/2020/02/ 25/809368292/the-legacy-of-stop-and-frisk-policing-in-michael-bloombergs-new-york.

[37] Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); 115.

depict things unnaturally out of context, such as beans protruding out of the center of what appears to be a jelly donut. There is nothing to truly "get" in the traditional sense of an inside joke. Instead, the memes on these accounts are perfectly ambivalent, they can fall either way. It is up to the user, the follower of these meme accounts, to fashion one's own "getting" of the joke. This is the way ambivalent humor can coalesce or constitute a networked public. Meme 2020 designed the Bloomberg meme campaign to coalesce nicely with this underlying affect. Through the proliferation and circulation of absurdist, overly fabricated, clearly fake memes, Bloomberg satirized his most unlikable characteristics to normalize them in a seemingly neutral and ambivalent way.

Through ambivalence, Bloomberg's memes bolster his case for president by undermining his case for president. Take for example, the Bloomberg meme posted by @fuckjerry, the main account of Jerry Media. In the meme, Bloomberg sends a direct, private message to @fuckjerry, asking him to "post a meme that lets everyone know [he's] the cool candidate?" @fuckjerry responds "Oof that will cost like a billion dollars." The meme is intended to engender a humorous reaction due to Bloomberg's self-aware realization that he is certainly not the "cool" candidate, he is the culturally out of touch billionaire. The meme is intended to direct affective relations to nullify viewer negative attitudes towards his wealth. Moreover, Bloomberg's wealth seems out of touch with the majority of American voters. Having such wealth at his disposal while hunger and lack of access to healthcare systemically undermine quality of life in America is problematic at best. The meme attempts to rhetorically disarm progressive leftist critiques that "billionaires should not exist," an increasingly popular rallying cry from those on the progressive left of the Democratic Party such as Senator Bernie Sanders or

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. The brunt of the "cool candidate" meme rests upon how absurd and unfathomable the extent of Bloomberg's wealth and power truly is. This meme attempts to use ambivalent humor to politically neutralize the issue of Bloomberg's wealth and its indices of massive wealth inequality.

Similarly, the meme posted by @drgrayfang undermines Bloomberg's trustworthiness as a candidate given the immense political power afforded by his wealth. In this meme, Bloomberg asks @drgrayfang for a "shoutout" to which the memer responds "idk I'm super hungover." Bloomberg responds "I have 61.9 billion dollars" which funnily convinces @drgrayfang to get over his condition, "I'm actually feeling much better." As accusations began to fly that Bloomberg bought his way onto the primary debate stage, from even seemingly "moderate" or "establishment" candidates such as Amy Klobuchar, these memes affectively dull collective questioning regarding the extent to which wealth dictates electoral politics. As the popularity of Bernie Sanders and the rising approval rating of socialism among younger millennials continues to grow, Bloomberg attempts to constitute and court votes via the ambivalence of internet humor and community.

Even the memes that didn't explicitly mention his wealth or "out of touch" relationship with younger, internet users demonstrate the extent to which his wealth can dictate seemingly democratic institutions, such as the DNC. Each meme was a stark demonstration of his power and influence, afforded by the billions at his disposal. Implicitly, each meme made an argument under the guise of apolitical and ambivalent humor. The meme campaign suggests that it is humorous and banal for one person to use massive wealth to dictate mass communication and political decision-making.

Bloomberg's memes situate him beyond a billionaire presidential candidate, instead he's a self-aware billionaire who "gets" ambivalent humor. Yet, that same ambivalence as a marketing strategy does nothing to address continuing criticisms of Bloomberg's past transphobic comments,[38] racist policies, and incredible stockpiling of wealth. In addition to the topics Bloomberg and Meme 2020 chose to satirize in the meme campaign, the aesthetic properties of each meme undoubtedly contribute to their persuasive appeal.

The "Ugly Aesthetic" of Bloomberg's Instagram Memes

Internet memes, especially the memes posted on the set of verified Instagram meme accounts during the Bloomberg meme campaign, have an identifiable aesthetic. Douglas argues that this aesthetic celebrates the "sloppy and the amateurish."[39] It highlights the intentionally poor use of tools like Photoshop or other picture editing software. Text overlaying faces, the stretching of images "into wrong aspect ratio," overly saturated images, and excessive and exaggerated filters are some recurring examples of such an aesthetic. Douglas explains "Internet Ugly…is the one that best defines the internet against all other media. It is certainly the core aesthetic of memetic internet content."[40] Hastily copy-pasted image-memes are not docked for lack of technical execution. Instead, memes are often celebrated for their "painstaking attention

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[38] See Lucy Diavolo, "Michael Bloomberg's Transphobic Remarks Illustrate How Democrats View Trans People as a Political Football," *Teen Vogue*, February 19, 2020, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/michael-bloomberg-transphobic-remarks-trans-people-political-football.

[39] Nick Douglas, "It's Supposed to Look Like Shit: The Internet Ugly Aesthetic," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (December 2014): 314.

[40] Douglas, "Look Like Shit," 315.

into imitating a total lack of attention."[41] The reasoning behind the existence of this "ugly aesthetic" can be encapsulated by a purposeful rejection of the principles concerning photo editing. While digital abilities to edit, clarify, and create visually impressive images have never been more available to the average internet user, the "ugly aesthetic" of the internet comically celebrates obfuscation, the muddying of images and memes that could be crisply curated.

The Internet's "ugly aesthetic" is influenced by and influences the broader ambivalent affective relations that are constituted through and across digital networks. The "ugly aesthetic" attempts to playfully subvert "caring" or "trying." While some internet users may feel compelled to carefully craft a cohesive personal brand and identity through social media profiles, the existence of the "ugly aesthetic" demonstrates the popular reactionary sentiment aimed at "normies" and "tryhards." Network publics, centering around or greatly influenced by memes, prioritizes the "amateurish, the accidental, and the surprise hit,"[42] the "not this and not that." The Bloomberg meme campaign represents an attempt to actualize underlying affective tendencies that celebrate the aesthetically unpleasant and the poorly edited. Meme 2020, a professional meme production firm with world-class photo editing and production software at their disposal, specifically crafted warped and deformed memes to publicize the campaign of Mike Bloomberg. The aesthetic qualities of the memes are rhetorical in that their persuasive appeal are concealed via the prominence of the sloppy and poor editing. By subverting popularly-followed principles of political marketing, the Bloomberg campaign seeks to

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[41] Douglas, "Look Like Shit," 325.

[42] Douglas, "Look Like Shit," 315.

be not taken seriously, in a traditional sense. The amateurish editing and production purposefully disqualifies Bloomberg from deliberate debate and critique, thus undermining his political opponents. By defacing his campaign advertisements to appear crass and unprofessional, Bloomberg insulated himself from critique, beating his critics to the punchline. The aesthetic qualities of Bloomberg's memes are a corporate and ruthless twist on Louise Hays' famous quote, "Laugh at yourself and at life and nothing can touch you." The "ugly aesthetic" was carefully chosen as to dissuade the other "serious" candidates from stooping to Bloomberg's level. Engaging, in any way, with Bloomberg's Instagram meme would *validate* them. And yet, letting them fester and affectively shape public electoral discourse would *undermine* criticisms from opponents. The "ugly aesthetic" qualities of the Bloomberg's Instagram memes expertly caught his opponents in a rhetorical Catch-22.

Take, for example, the meme posted by @tank.sinatra. In this meme, Bloomberg asks @tank.sinatra to review a meme he just created. The meme in question, a popular format of Bernie Sanders "once again asking for financial contributions," is crassly designed and poorly edited. Normally, the meme format presents the beginning of Sanders' statement so that it reads "I am once again asking for…," inviting participants to finish the statement with their own remix and alteration on the core meme format. In the Bloomberg meme posted to @tank.sinatra's account, however, the meme is clearly and purposefully butchered. Bloomberg's remix on the meme, asking @tank.sinatra to make him look cool, appears prior to the "I am once again asking for…" This purposeful mis-iteration encapsulates the "ugly aesthetic" of digital meme culture through its incongruent

organization and design. Bloomberg's purposeful "ugly" distortion and deformation of the meme is a testament to the broader "ugly" aesthetic popular in digital meme publics.

While the prominence of the "ugly" aesthetic is, at its core, a celebration of the internet's pluralization of content-production, the Bloomberg meme is an example of a corporately designed piece of political marketing and advertising, strategically using the "ugly" aesthetic to persuade internet users under the guise of ironic comedy and rhetorically invites meme consumers to consider the Bloomberg campaign in the primary election. The cooption of seemingly "resistant" or "anti-establishment" aesthetics for corporate profiteering certainly has a long history. However, Bloomberg's meme campaign provides rhetorical scholars with a unique case in that his argument rests on its authentic anti-authenticity. Nike's employment of Colin Kaepernick for an advertising campaign, for example, seeks to authentically establish affective ties with the consumer concerning racial justice. Nike attempts to present itself as aligned with Kaepernick's resistant ethos, in an effort to enhance brand identity and ultimately, sell products. The Bloomberg campaign, however, is proudly satirizing his problematic and "out-of-touch" relationship with younger generations, specifically internet users. By purposefully producing crass and poorly crafted memes and capitalizing on the "ugly aesthetic," Bloomberg attempts to persuade potential voters by showcasing his indescribably inauthentic way of reaching out to younger, internet-using, voters.

Examining the aesthetic properties of Bloomberg's memes also requires attention to circulation, or analysis of these images beyond Instagram. Bloomberg memes were celebrated, mocked, criticized, remixed, shared, liked, screenshotted, and interacted with in various ways across various digital networks. Limiting a rhetorical analysis to a

bounded and situated criticism of the memes would impede our critical inquiry which is to account, as much as we can, for the full rhetorical force of these texts.

Uptake and Circulation

The Bloomberg meme campaign received conflicting responses. On Instagram proper, comments applauded the creativity of Bloomberg's campaign, while some criticized the meme accounts for "selling out" to such an unapologetic plutocrat. The initial confusion surrounding the release of the Bloomberg meme campaign offered an interesting opportunity for lower level Instagram meme accounts and influencer accounts to model the format. Some accounts attempted to merely satirize Meme 2020's ability to get the major meme accounts to plug such a controversial presidential candidate. Others labored to convince their followers that they were a part of the coordinated Bloomberg meme campaign. Still others attempted to joke about how they were too small to even be on Meme 2020's radar. As the Bloomberg meme format was taken up, spread, and circulated, the normalization of the Bloomberg campaign's detestable qualities continued to take hold.

Understandably, there was a lot of negative backlash to Bloomberg's meme campaign. Some Instagram accounts recreated a fake series of direct messages with Bloomberg to explicitly include his anti-black statements in support of racialized "stop and frisk" policies, his defense of over-policing in minority neighborhoods in New York City, and his previous transphobic comments. Others pointed out how the meme campaign was a thinly veiled attempt to connect with younger voters by using a popular meme format depicting an obviously older Steve Buschemi attempting to blend in with

high school students. Others criticized the memes from a less overtly "political" lens by just pointing out the absurdity of the meme campaign. A meme posted to @DolanDark's Twitter account, for example, reused the fake direct message format of the Bloomberg campaign but, in this iteration, Bloomberg graphically describes his unconventional masturbation techniques.

Bloomberg's meme campaign gained massive attention from major news organizations, as should be expected when a major presidential candidate releases a campaign meme advertisement that includes him saying "Hello Shithead." Most legacy news organizations reported on the meme campaign, writing it off as an odd, yet inconsequential, facet of Bloomberg's overall presidential campaign. Other news organizations, like CNN, interviewed owners of the 3rd party meme accounts that posted Bloomberg memes. While mainstream news organizations struggled to describe the rationale of such an unconventional and unusual political marketing tactic, it revealed an interesting split that was apparent in the election of Trump. The circulation of memes and jokes on digital networks were not unimportant and inconsequential, they played a major role in determining the contours and by stultifying political discourse. There were those that recognized this fact (Meme 2020, Mike Bloomberg, Donald Trump), and those that refused to acknowledge it. The refusal to acknowledge the rhetorical force carried out through Trump and Bloomberg's use of memes can help explain how the xenophobic flaunter of political decorum shocked political pundits during the 2016 election. Trump, an extremely dangerous and authoritarian leader, and his campaign expertly amplified affective formations. Trump, and to a lesser extent, Bloomberg, focused on making potential supporters feel. Persistent ignorance to the role of affective intensities,

modulated through internet memes, in directing seemingly rational behavior, such as voting, will ensure that democracy and deliberation will continue to be threatened by plutocrats and prominent meme accounts.

Conclusion

Nick Douglas, in the conclusion of his important article on "the internet ugly aesthetic," makes a very categorical and deterministic prediction:

> Advertisers and politicians adopting Internet Ugly for their own agenda will *inevitably* come across as posers…They will also prioritize their message over accurate imitation of the aesthetic, so they will inevitably mangle the aesthetic. They are nakedly seeking acceptance from a social group they haven't actually joined, one they will abandon when it's no longer popular and desirable.[43]

To Douglas, the appropriation of the "ugly aesthetic" is a dialectical process; meme formats are "organically" produced across diffuse digital networks such as 4chan and Reddit, these meme formats are inaccurately stabilized and codified on "accessible outlets" like BuzzFeed or Gawker. Then the formats are appropriated for corporate ends, thus rendering the original format unattractive for the "primary" sites of meme production, prompting "original meme-makers" to craft something new and "restart the cycle."[44] To this interpretation, advertisers and politicians are motivated by appearing authentically and intimately a part of popular internet trends and memes. Given that memes are constantly evolving, politicians' reliance on the cemented "snapshot" of popular memes trend will structurally reveal their shallow appropriation. This argument was mirrored by multiple journalists in the context of Bloomberg's meme campaign, such

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[43] Douglas, "Look Like Shit," 336.

[44] Douglas, "Look Like Shit," 336.

as Kaitlyn Tiffany's argument that Bloomberg's meme campaign failed because it "misunderstood internet culture."[45]

Rhetorical analysis of the Bloomberg meme campaign on Instagram troubles this simplistic and dialectical process outlined by Douglas and Tiffany. Bloomberg's meme campaign, although attempting to reach a younger audience, never intended to present Bloomberg as an authentic purveyor of meme culture. Meme 2020 never intended to convince people Bloomberg scrolled through r/dankmemes, a popular meme reddit community, in his spare time. His decision to seek the help of an Instagram "influence" firm with such a crass name as Meme 2020 demonstrates this fact. Bloomberg's meme campaign, instead, attempted to rhetorically disarm criticisms of Bloomberg's worst qualities as a presidential candidate. Bloomberg' self-satirization, an effort at courting ambivalent affect, positioned himself as the "not serious" candidate, in stark opposition to Democratic candidates such as Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren who both urged potential voters to think critically about structural inequality. Bloomberg's Meme 2020 campaign attempted to solicit ambivalent affect, which undergirds Internet culture, humor, and aesthetic properties such as "Internet ugly." By targeting a digital public, coalesced around ambivalent meme humor, Bloomberg sought to normalize substantive criticisms of his candidacy, from his excessive wealth to his "out of touch" lifestyle.

Thematically, this chapter builds upon cultural internet scholars such as Douglas, Milner and Phillips, and methodologically, this chapter builds upon rhetorical meme scholars such as Shifman, Woods and Hahner, and Jenkins. This chapter reorients

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[45] Kaitlyn Tiffany, "You Can't Buy Memes," *The Atlantic*, February 28, 2020, https://www.theatlantic .com/technology/archive/2020/02/bloomberg-memes-instagram-ads/607219/.

rhetorical meme criticism toward grappling with the full extent of corporate, instrumental control over meme production and distribution. This is not to say that dispersed, unconcentrated, and liminal production of memes does not exist. Those decentralized nodes are crucially important in shaping meme trends and political discourse. However, to completely embrace an ethological approach to the production of memes may underestimate the role of paid promotion of meme formats and arguments that takes place within communities coalesced around verified meme accounts on Instagram. There is power and influence centralized and concentrated in a few dozen accounts who have the ability to massively shift the terrain of meme discourse. Given the "coming meme battles,"[46] taking critical stock of the meme landscape, and analyzing how influence is quite centralized despite the appearance of digital pluralization, can help scholars prepare for and circumvent coordinated attempts at radicalization through digital media.

Bloomberg's $900 million campaign came to an unexpected halt. Super Tuesday did not bring the successes Bloomberg hoped it would bring. He lost every state primary contest. Not everything was lost, however. This plutocrat did win the American Samoa primary, though this prestigious contest does not offer as many delegates as Texas or California. Bloomberg did not secure the Democratic nomination. He did, however, push political marketing in a new, worrisome direction for political debate and deliberation across digital spaces. Social media users should continue to resist the corporatization of social media. Our politics – and our memes – depend on it.

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[46] Woods and Hahner, *Make America Meme*, 211.

CHAPTER FOUR

Pete Buttigieg's "Victory" Speech in Iowa: Burke's Representative Anecdote and
Soundbite Circulation

"If you can be a confident voice in chaos, people will believe you. And then you
just hope it lasts."[1]
        - Hilary Rosen, Democratic Party Strategist, commenting on Buttigieg's Iowa
Caucuses speech

Introduction

The results of the Iowa Presidential Caucuses are expected to initiate the

crowning of a decisive victor, the charting of a pathway forward for candidates, and the

seizing of valuable momentum as the campaigns turn toward the New Hampshire primary

and beyond. This was especially true of the 2020 Democratic Iowa Caucuses. After

Donald Trump's improbable electoral victory in the 2016 presidential election, and his

ensuing departure from traditional "presidential" behavior upon being sworn into the

Oval Office, many Democratic voters sought a return to "normalcy."[2] After months of

grueling campaigning and vociferous debate among the top contenders for the

nomination, voters yearned for a sense of direction concerning the Democratic response

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[1] Edward-Isaac Dovere, "The Audacity of Pete," *The Atlantic*, February 4, 2020.

[2] Charles Pierce, "It Looks Like Democratic Primary Voters Want a President
They Can Ignore 4 or 5 Days a Week," *Esquire*, March 4, 2020,
https://www.esquire.com/news/politics/politics/a31 215770/joe-biden-super-tuesday-
return-to-normalcy/; Ryan Teague Beckwith, "Joe Biden's 'Return to Normalcy' Has
Echoes of 1920," *Yahoo*, April 11, 2020, https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/joe-biden-
return-normalcy-campaign-100000981.html.; Ed Kilgore, "Old Folks Like Biden, and
That Could Really Matter in November," *New York Magazine*, April 13, 2020,
https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/04/old-folks-like-biden-that- could-really-matter-
in-november.html.

to President Trump. American voters heavily anticipate and enjoy the ritualistic and cultural functions surrounding the decision cast by Iowa, the sparsely populated, predominantly white, Midwestern, "flyover," corn-growing state. While a win in Iowa has never guaranteed a candidate will secure the nomination, the first competition undoubtedly sets the terms and tone of the ensuing contests. Seemingly infallible early front-runners have fallen and unlikely underdogs have been given new life at the hands of the Iowa caucus-goers.

February 3rd, 2020, the night of the Iowa Democratic Caucuses offered no such satisfaction or clarity about what message the Democratic caucus-goers had sent concerning the future direction of their party and the country. From a combination of app glitches, tabulation errors and general incompetence, the Iowa Democratic Party was unable to name a winner.[3] The general uncertainty regarding who captured the majority of the coveted state delegates did not stop candidate Mayor Pete Buttigieg from claiming victory. At around 11PM, with zero precincts reporting, no votes officially counted, and electoral chaos in the air, Buttigieg, speaking to his raucous crowd of Iowan supporters, proclaimed "by all indications, we are going on to New Hampshire victorious."[4]

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[3] Isaac Stanley-Becker, "How the Iowa Caucuses Came 'crashing down,' under the Watchful Eye of the DNC," *The Washington Post*, February 15, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/ how-the-iowa-caucuses-came-crashing-down-under-the-watchful-eye-of-the-dnc/2020/02 /15/25b17e7e-4f5f-11ea-b721-9f4cdc90bc1c_story.html#comments-wrapper;

[4] Pete Buttigieg, "Pete Buttigieg Iowa Caucus Speech Transcript," *Rev*, February 4, 2020, https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/transcript-speeches-at-the-iowa-caucuses-bernie- sanders-joe-biden-elizabeth-warren-andrew-yang-pete-buttigieg-amy-klobuchar-speak.

This chapter analyzes the rhetorical implications of Buttigieg's incredulous claim to victory. I am interested in how this proclamation, in violating established norms, such as the rite of capitulation allowed Buttigieg and his campaign sought to seize momentum and set a victorious narrative prior to the publishing of even one precinct result by the Iowa Democratic Party. This chapter will study how Buttigieg's campaign's decision to declare premature victory was influenced by the infrastructure of mass-media and digital communicative technologies. This strategic rhetorical invocation of victory must be analyzed within the social, political, and economic context in which digital networks of news-communication shape, limit and constrain public perception of popularity, electability and credibility. Far from a rhetorical misstep, the effort was at least calculated in the digital network economy, and anticipated rhetorical circulation.

In particular, I argue Buttigieg's speech, and the circulation of the accompanying soundbite across digital media networks, illustrates Burke's conception of a representative anecdote,[5] "a stable form or set of relations that pervade a discourse, one that appears and reappears in different guises or variations on a theme."[6] The presentation and circulation of a representative anecdote "equips for living" and "invites participation," in that it "allows people to express their hopes and fears in familiar (and thus manageable) patterns."[7] The dramatic, ritualistic, and digital infrastructural

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[5] Burke, Grammar of Motives.

[6] Lynn M. Harter and Phyllis M. Japp, "Technology as the Representative Anecdote in Popular Discourses of Health and Medicine," *Health Communication* 13, no. 4 (October 2001): 412.

[7] Barry Brummett, "Burke's Representative Anecdote as a Method in Media Criticism," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1, no. 2 (June 1984): 164.

constraints of the moment incentivized a rhetorical utterance from Buttigieg that conveyed a tentative finality and direction for the rest of the nominating process, within an unexpectedly chaotic and muddled environment. And yet, the situation didn't *entirely* dictate Buttigieg's rhetorical utterance in a structural or deterministic manner. Instead, the "victory" speech represented a rhetorically inventive mandate, demonstrating Buttigieg would be the one to bring order, normalcy and direction, not just to the Iowa Caucuses results but to the chaotic political and international environment caused by the erratic leadership of Donald Trump.

In addition to bringing together Burke's representative anecdote and rhetorical circulation to analyze the specific text(s), this chapter also explores the broader rhetorical tactic used by Buttigieg and other prominent Democratic politicians, the "victor-in-waiting" strategy. This rhetorical positioning of having already conquered an opponent, in the midst of an electoral contest, can oftentimes be used effectively, as argued by Stogsdill.[8] However, this rhetorical tactic, when used to bypass the ritualistic and dramatic contextual constraints of a specific electoral contest, can intensify electoral ambiguity. Contemporary digital campaigns require supplementation to the rhetorical anecdote model, given the procedures of a campaign are communicated and circulated in discrete rhetorical utterances designed for the pace and replications of digital and social networks.

This chapter begins with an introduction to rhetorical anecdotes. Then, I turn to a review of relevant literature concerning rhetorical circulation and political campaigning.

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[8] Steve Stogsdill, "FDR and the Victor-In-Waiting Strategy: Posturing Oneself During a Campaign as the Candidate Who Has Already Won," *American Communication Journal* 15, no. 2: (2013): 29-43.

This essay seeks to fuse insights from both methodological approaches. According to Japp and Harter, "the representative anecdote allows for identification of patterns across general forms of discourse, highlights the relation of discourse to its cultural context, and identifies the dominant values of an era."[9] I argue that this is consistent with Chaput's argument that scholars must unbound rhetorical inquiry from individually contextualized and discrete rhetorical performances due to the increasing importance of communication mediated through and across digital networks.[10] The rapid uptake and circulation of the defining soundbite of Buttigieg's "victory speech" across digital networks makes clear that rhetorical force exists beyond the situated, individual "text" and it would be critically undesirable to focus exclusively on the oratorical style employed by Buttigieg in the Iowa gymnasium on the night of the caucuses. Next, I provide brief context concerning the perceived importance of performing well in the Iowa Caucuses. I explore the constraints exerting pressure on Buttigieg and the rest of the candidates, as well as the media's ultimate discretion in rhetorically shaping what is considered an acceptable performance. Finally, I use a representative anecdote framework, as defined by Burke,[11] Brummett.[12] and others, to analyze the symbolic and rhetorically inventive properties associated with the circulation of Buttigieg's "victory" soundbite. Utilizing the chaotic and indecisive atmosphere of the Iowa Caucuses, Buttigieg's victory speech represents a condensed version of the underlying primary appeal of his entire presidential campaign; the mayor

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[9] Harter and Japp, "Technology," 412.

[10] Chaput, "Trumponomics."

[11] Burke, *Grammar*.

[12] Brummett, "Burke's Representative Anecdote."

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would be the one to bring competence and moderateness back to the seemingly

destabilized domestic and international political order.

Representative Anecdote and Rhetorical Circulation

The representative anecdote still serves a theoretically valuable role, recently

taken up by numerous scholars across a wide range of topics, including presidential

elections and politics,[13] city planning texts,[14] and television programing.[15] Representative

anecdotes provide a useful way for critics to analyze a set of texts that may not appear as

unified as a collection of speeches.[16] Representative anecdotes can reveal "the

fundamental characteristics of a discourse" and fuse "its essential values."[17] In other

words, representative anecdotes are smaller units of discourse that stand in for a broad set

[13] Emma Frances Bloomfield and Gabriela Tscholl, "Analyzing Warrants and Worldviews in the Rhetoric of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton: Burke and Argumentation in the 2016 Presidential Election," *The Journal of the Kenneth Burke Society* 13, no. 2 (2018); 1-12.; Michael L. Buttersworth, "Nate Silver and Campaign 2012: Sport, the Statistical Frame, and the Rhetoric of Electoral Forecasting: Nate Silver and the Statistical Frame," *Journal of Communication* 64, no. 5 (October 2014): 895–914, https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12113; Calvin Coker, "Romney, Obama, and the 47%: Gaffes and Representative Anecdotes in the 2012 Presidential Campaign," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 53, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 327–43, https://doi.org/10.1080/00028533.2017.1375759.

[14] Martha S. Cheng and Julian C. Chambliss, "The 1909 *Plan of Chicago* as Representative Anecdote: Constituting New Citizens for the Commercial American City," *Rhetoric Review* 35, no. 2 (April 2, 2016): 91–107, https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2016.1142809.

[15] Harter and Japp, "Technology."

[16] Bryan Crable, "'Burke's Perspective on Perspectives: Grounding Dramatism in the Representative Anecdote,'" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 86, no. 3 (August 2000): 318–33, https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630009384299.

[17] Harter and Japp, "Technology," 412.

of collective, political commitments. It is collectively taken up as a "basic narrative structure" that dictates the contours and constraints of similar texts or rhetorical utterances.[18] A representative anecdote encapsulates the essence of a dominant and wide-reaching discourse, a "stable…set of relations that pervade a discourse."[19]

For rhetorical scholars, the ability to draw connections between texts, as unified via the underlying representative anecdote, provides fruitful opportunities for criticism. Burke argued that motivations, though often unconscious, are nevertheless actualized and presented in discourse. By highlighting patterns across forms and instantiations of discourse, critics are able to identify dominant cultural values.[20] Brummett contends that common ways "of speaking about war, victory, civil unrest, marital problems, etc." exist within civic discourse that require scholarly attention.[21] The benefit to analyzing underlying cultural value systems allows critics to denaturalize the taken-for-granted in common language patterns. What collective commitments are excused based on the unquestionable and guiding value of "security"? What inequalities are naturalized via a commitment to "American identity" or calls to "come together"? How does a commitment to distinctly American "shared values" rhetorically constrain or shape what is considered acceptable politics?

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[18] Crable, "Burke's Perpective," 319.

[19] Harter and Japp, "Technlogy, 412.

[20] Harter and Japp, "Technology."; Phyllis M. Japp, "Gender and Work in the 1980s: Television's Working Women as Displaced Persons," *Women's Studies in Communication* 14, no. 1 (April 1991): 49–74, https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.1991.11089750;

[21] Brummett, "Burke's Representative Anecdote," 161.

Formulaic rhetorical performances concerning civic topics, like elections and campaigning, facilitate "identification" with "the representations set forth," thereby priming the audience for communally-defined action.[22] The use of representational anecdotes "invites participation in its rhythm."[23] Patterns, specifically ritualized ordeals that are imbued with cultural and political significance, foment expectancy on behalf of the "audience." Representative anecdotes manifest the essence of a dominant discourse, prompt identification, and rhetorically invite participatory action, thereby limiting and constraining culturally acceptable and desirable action.

Coker argues "in the context of political communication, representative anecdotes are those persistent and simplified examples of a significant argument that get replayed and reiterated in the course of a campaign."[24] Given representative anecdotes' ability to underlay, support, and constrain rhetorical utterances, to assure "conformity in which the vocabulary is constructed,"[25] representative anecdotes offer productive insights into politics, political campaigns, and political marketing. Campaigns, their speeches and events, their issues and debates, their gaffes and big moments, are certainly organized via a common, structural logic. Campaigns, especially campaigns for the presidential nomination of a major political party, are constrained via dominant cultural values. Entman explains that the *procedural* frames of a campaign, which measure a candidates' viability "based on their technique, success and representativeness" largely shape and

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[22] Cheng and Chambliss, "The 1909 *Plan*," 95.

[23] Brummett, "Burke's Representative Anecdote," 164.

[24] Coker, "Romney, Obama," 327-328.

[25] Burke, *Grammar*, 59.

constrain the types of arguments and appeals a campaign can make.[26] In other words, candidates are increasingly judged via their adherence and relation to procedural elements of the campaign, which are imbued with grave cultural and social importance. Bennett argues procedural and discursive frames of campaigns "serve as the backdrop against which the public can work out its tensions and satisfy its needs for security, order, leadership, and control over the future."[27] Given that the available discourse and procedural constraints of an election and campaign serve an important cultural function, campaign discourse is a valuable site to employ a representative anecdote framework so as to reveal the "fundamental characteristics" and "essential values" of a discourse.[28]

Representative anecdotes provides a useful framework for analyzing Buttigieg's rhetorical utterance on the night of the Iowa Caucuses. However, it only tells part of the story. Buttigieg's soundbite, that he was "going onto New Hampshire victorious," was quickly circulated across multiple mediums including cable television, digital network such as social media sites, and radio programs. How was Buttigieg's victory speech mediated, constrained and shaped by the digital communication infrastructure which seeks and prioritizes circulation and intensely affective content? It is now necessary to turn toward the circulation literature to determine how digital networks facilitate the spread and circulation of political rhetoric, such as soundbites of major campaign speeches.

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[26] R.M. Entman, Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and US Foreign Policy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); 140.

[27] W. Lance Bennett, "The Ritualistic and Pragmatic Bases of Political Campaign Discourse," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 63, no. 3 (October 1977): 219-220.

[28] Harter and Japp, "Technology," 412.

As communication becomes ever more pluralized and proliferated across various media, and the incredible rate at which digital content is created and circulated, the ability for scholars to highlight a situated, confined, and fixed context where rhetorical performance takes place becomes near impossible. Trevor Parry-Giles argues "as political and legal rhetorics increasingly proliferate, technologized as they are by modern mass media, the critic of those rhetorics must account for their reach, and the altered ways that they are expressed to and consumed by audiences."[29] Given that circulation is constantly modifying and shifting the grounds of the situational context of a text, it would be inappropriate to focus only on Buttigieg's oratorical performance in the Iowa gymnasium on the night of Iowa Caucuses. Chaput argues that digital media technology has instituted the rhetorical transsituation, a constantly reorganizing and shifting arrangement of audience, exigence and rhetoric.[30] Rhetorical circulation approach provides valuable directions toward how to perform rhetorical criticism concerning fluid, unbounded digital texts, such as the viral spread of Buttigieg's victory speech soundbite and the responsive jokes and reactions.

This is not to say that public address no longer has any influence or rhetorical importance. This chapter wouldn't offer any significance if I truly thought public address

[29] Trevor Parry-Giles, "The Character of Criticism: Reflections on the Critical Inquiry of Political and Legal Rhetoric," *Review of Communication*, 10, no. 1 (2010): 86.

[30] Catherine Chaput, "Rhetorical Circulation in Late Capitalism: Neoliberalism and the Overdetermination of Affective Energy," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 43, no. 1 (2010): 1–25, https://doi.org/10.1353/par.0.0047.

has been hopelessly fragmented, as per McGee's thesis.[31] Rather, as giant media

corporations continue to conglomerate,[32] and the time allotted for political oratory on

television and internet news continues to dwindle,[33] Foley argues the prevalence and

popularity of soundbites demonstrates that public oratory's importance has been

condensed. Digital networked communication's prioritization of efficiency, speed, and

potential for circulation have fomented a shift toward the condensation of coverage of

political speech. The search for the best soundbite, or short clips of political speeches and

performances, and their increasing importance within an "attention economy"[34] dictates

political speech writing and campaigning.

  Political campaigns know their candidate's 20-minute speech will be pared down

to a six second clip played on CNN and reposted across various digital networks, like

Twitter and reddit. Speeches are therefore constructed to maximize "biteability."[35]

Buttigieg's "victory" speech is no different. Buttigieg's declaration of victory, when no

official results had been tabulated, was simultaneously controversial and exciting.

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[31] Michael Calvin McGee, "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54, no. 3 (1990): 274–89.
  [31] R. Lance Holbert and William L. Benoit, "A Theory of Political Campaign Media Connectedness," *Communication Monographs* 76, no. 3 (September 2009): 303–32, https://doi.org/10.1080/03637750903074693.

[32] Megan Foley, "Sound Bites: Rethinking the Circulation of Speech from Fragmet to Fetish," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 15, no. 4 (2012): 613–22.

[33] Damien Smith Pfister and Misti Yang, "Five Theses on Technoliberalism and the Networked Public Sphere," *Communication and the Public* 3, no. 3 (2018): 247–62.

[34] Foley, "Sound bites," 615.

[35] Foley, "Sound bites," 615.

Buttigieg's specific wording, that "we are going on to New Hampshire victorious," was played across every major television network and spread across thousands of social networking and blogging posts. Within hours, the story of the night wasn't just the disaster of the Iowa Caucuses. The story was now Mayor Buttigieg's declaration of victory, spurring a substantive change in the narrative and implicitly making his case as the "competent" ender of "chaos." The "biteability" and potential for circulation need to be central components of any analysis of a major text of contemporary political oratory, such as Buttigieg's speech, given the way communication now functions through and across digital networks. I intend to honor Heidt's suggestion that rhetorical scholars of public address "trace the rhetorical echoes and determine where textual fragments appear, what function they perform, and how the communities of circulation animated to reappropriate those fragments are constituted in the act of circulation."[36]

The extreme importance and pervasiveness of the soundbite, as an effect of digitally mediated communication, complements a representative anecdote approach to rhetorical criticism. Coker explains, "The utility of a representative anecdote to a campaign under this interpretation is obvious. In addition to simplifying otherwise complex narratives, representative anecdotes have the benefit of pithiness in a 24-hour news environment."[37] Representative anecdote frameworks attempt to reveal the essential characteristics of a seemingly disconnected collection of discourses, just as soundbites, and their circulation across diffuse, disconnected networks, "concentrate public speech down to its pithiest core, seeming to capture the quintessence of political oratory at its

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[36] Heidt, "The Presidency," 627.

[37] Coker, "Romney, Obama," 331.

fullest."[38] Representative anecdotes don't require a focus on situated texts within bounded constraints but invite critics to draw connections across various modes of discourse. A rhetorical circulation perspective invites critics to chart the viral proliferation and remixing of texts across various modes of discourse. It is clear that despite perceived tension between this Burkean framework and a circulation framework, the representative anecdote approach is uniquely amenable to performing rhetorical criticism with regard to digital texts. This methodological permutation is desirable and necessary for a rhetorical text such as Buttigieg's speech and its viral soundbite circulation.

The Iowa Caucuses: Importance, Coverage, and Buttigieg

Pundits and political scientists agree on the fundamental importance of the first two contests of a presidential primary, the Iowa Caucuses and New Hampshire Primary. The sequential primary system, in which states vote for their preferred candidate in a series of state contests spread out over several months, means that the early voting states have a disproportionately strong influence on what candidate will go on to win the nomination.[39] Winning Iowa does not ensure a candidate will go on to win the nomination, but losing Iowa or failure to compete in Iowa can tank a seemingly prominent candidate's campaign, such as Senator Kamala Harris or Senator Cory Booker

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[38] Foley, "Sound Bites," 618.

[39] Todd Donovan and Rob Hunsaker, "Beyond Expectations: Effects of Early Elections in U.S. Presidential Nomination Contests," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 42, no. 01 (January 2009): 45–52, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096509090040.

in 2020. Despite apt criticisms of underrepresenting women and minority voters,[40] the

sequential primary system elevates Iowa and New Hampshire's role as the initial tests for

candidates' viability and electability. Candidates contribute substantial and

disproportionate resources toward the Iowa Caucuses despite its largely inconsequential

offering of pledged delegates.[41] Campaigns understand the first-in-the-nation contest as a

vitally important initial test of a candidate's ability to connect with white, working class,

rural voters.

News media coverage contributes to the cyclical inflation of importance for the

Iowa Caucuses by covering the coveted first contest more than any other presidential

primary contest. According to Christenson and Smidt, "Of the 2,861 news articles

published by the national media organizations that we coded, over 50% made reference to

the contest in Iowa, and 33% made reference to the competition in New Hampshire. In

comparison, California was only referenced 10.7% of the time."[42] While more populous

states hold primaries later in the calendar year, often times grouped into major election

days like the numerous "Super Tuesdays" of a primary season, their importance and

influence is greatly diminished at the expense of Iowa and New Hampshire. Out of the

considerable amount of time spent covering the Iowa Caucuses and its results, national

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[40] Thomas C. Dec, "Disenfranchisement in the US Presidential Nomination Process Through Caucuses and the Gatekeeping Role of Iowa and New Hampshire," *California Law Review* 107, no. 1 (2019): 267–308, https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38901ZG3D;

[40] Dino P. Christenson and Corwin D. Smidt, "Polls and Elections: Still Part of the Conversation: Iowa and New Hampshire's Say within the Invisible Primary," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (2012): 597-621.

[41] Christenson and Smidt, "Polls and Elections," 601.

media organizations make rhetorically influential choices in interpreting an expected or unexpected performance in Iowa. Iowa's "arcane and non-transparent caucus process" increases the media's influence over distinguishing the parameters between a positive and negative performance.[43] According to Donovan and Hunsaker,

> Reporters, editors, and pundits define the criteria for determining whether a candidate scored an "easy win," managed an "upset," was "far behind," or suffered "defeat." There is substantial discretion in framing whether 25% is a "Comfortable Second" (Bill Clinton in New Hampshire in 1992), or 23% is a "Strong Second" (Pat Buchanan in Iowa in 1992); or if 26% is a "Flat Tire" (Bob Dole in New Hampshire in 1996) or 26% is an "Overwhelming Defeat" (Howard Dean in New Hampshire in 2004).[44]

News media's rhetorical influence on defining and shaping the public's conception of an electable and viable candidate has never been greater, given the development of digital communication networks. Despite Iowa's predominantly white and trivial share of the overall delegates needed to secure a presidential nomination, popular news media spend countless hours interpreting and defining the established "electable" set of candidates.

The latest iteration of this institution, the Iowa Democratic Caucuses of 2020, represented the monumental first step in choosing a Democratic challenger for President Donald Trump. The stakes have never been higher, according to some popular news organizations.[45] To some, the heart or soul of the Democratic Party, or even the United

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[43] Donovan and Hunsaker, "Beyond Expectations," 51.

[44] Donovan and Hunsaker, "Beyond Expectations," 46.

[45] Reid Epstein and Adriana Ramic, "What's at Stake in the Iowa Caucuses," *The New York Times*, February 3, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/02/03/us/politics/2020-iowa-caucus-date-time.html; Jonathan Tamari, "The Iowa Caucuses Are Almost Here. The First Votes of the 2020 Election Could Clarify the Race - or Muddle It," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 31, 2020, https://www.inquirer.com/news/2020-iowa-caucuses-stakes-20200201.html.

States, was at stake. Aside from the normal, routinized, and cultural function served by the procedure of the Iowa Caucuses, the Democratic Party needed to formulate a coordinated response to their loss in the presidential election of 2016. Donald Trump, who shocked the world by defeating the experienced Hillary Clinton in the election of 2016, threw the Democratic Party into a crisis of identity and the caucuses would be the first step in rectifying that crisis. The Iowa Caucuses would ideally send a clear signal on the preferences of Democratic voters concerning which path would be best to take on Donald Trump. Throughout the entirety of the Democratic Primary Election, candidates were not comparing each other's platforms or records. Instead they were comparing each other's individual electoral "case" against President Trump. This was not a normal election. While Trump's disastrous flouting of the rule of law and codified procedures of liberal institutions created a chaotic and confusing environment for most "mainstream" politicians, establishment Democrats hoped the Iowa Caucuses would be the first step in the rejection of Trump and Trumpism.

This unique historical moment represented an opportunity for an unlikely, long-shot presidential candidate to rise from obscurity to become a major contender for the Democratic nomination for president. Mayor Pete Buttigieg attempted to draw himself as an exceptional foil to Donald Trump. The mayor was competent, calm, and composed, compared to the president's vulgar and personal attacks on Twitter. Buttigieg was as a Harvard graduate and Army veteran, while picturing Trump as a failed businessman and "draft-dodger." Buttigieg was a Midwestern mayor of a mid-sized city, not a product of, as Trump would describe it, the Washington "swamp." Specifically, Buttigieg believed that his carefully crafted image would be able to take advantage of Trump's rhetorical

and affective appeals toward the disaffected white working class.[46] Buttigieg used his experience as a mayor of a Midwestern city to attempt to identify with those frustrated with the gruelingly slow pace of the federal decision-making.

The coverage of Buttigieg leading up to the Iowa Caucuses was initially skeptical, highlighting his inexperience with federal governance. However, as his approval rating continued to rise, outpacing established and nationally known politicians such as Kamala Harris, Cory Booker, Beto O'Rourke, and Julian Castro, the common words used to describe Buttigieg shifted substantially. Now instead of being "inexperienced"[47] and "the weakest plausible prospective…candidate,"[48] Buttigieg now represented a young, "serious contender,"[49] and a "moderate,"[50] who was balanced and exciting. Buttigieg,

[46] Rachel Lu, "Why Pete Buttigieg Hits a Sweet Spot for Voters," *The Week*, April 25, 2019, https://theweek. com/articles/834918/why-pete-buttigieg-hits-sweet-spot-voters.

[47] Chris Smith, "'He's Flawed': Is Mayor Pete's Beautiful 2020 Dream Already Kaput?," *Vanity Fair*, August 21, 2019, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2019/08/is-mayor-petes-2020-dream-already-kaput.com.

[48] Rich Lowry, "The Buttigieg Illusion," *Politico*, June 26, 2019, https://www.politco.com/magazin e/story/ 2019/06/26/pete-buttigieg-2020-227239..

[49] Jeff Robbins, "Pete Buttigieg Shapes up as Serious Democratic Contender," *Boston Herald*, November 4, 2019, https://www.bostonherald.com/2019/11/04/pete-buttigieg-shapes-up-as- serious-democratic-contender/.

[50] Phillip Wegmann, "Buttigieg Hopes to Own Moderate Lane in Nomination Fight," *Real Clear Politics*, 2020 30AD, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2020/02/03/in_iowa_ buttigieg_presses_his_ moderate_message_142296.html..

previously understood as a fringe candidate, had precipitously risen to become a major contender, even rising to the top of some Iowa polls as early as November.[51]

"Victor-In-Waiting"

Buttigieg's "victory" speech typifies one of the many digital rhetorical tactics utilized by establishment Democrats in the age of Donald Trump, the "victor-in-waiting strategy."[52] While certainly the majority of political campaigns cultivate a confident tone ("we will bring it home on election day") and even a sense of inevitability of success ("nothing can stop us now"), Buttigieg's speech takes it a step further by declaratively claiming victory in spite of no official publishing of caucus results. Buttigieg attempts to rhetorically renegotiate the line between acceptably inspiring confidence in his campaign due to their surprising performance in Iowa and posturing himself as already having won the contest and conquering the stacked Democratic field. An investigation into Buttigieg's "victory" speech, and the circulation of the attendant soundbite across digital networks, demonstrates the danger of this rhetorical tactic used by not only Buttigieg but many establishment Democratic politicians; posturing oneself as already victorious, in the midst of an electoral contest, can circumvent the dramaturgical nature of the campaign and invite frustration and criticism for not sticking to unwritten convention. Certainly Buttigieg's "victory" speech was quite unique, as few other Democratic politicians in the age of Trump have literally claimed victory. However, the "victor-in-

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[51] Sydney Ember, "Pete Buttigieg Jumps Out to Lead in Iowa Poll," *The New York Times*, 16 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/16/us/politics/iowa-poll-democrats.html.

[52] Stogsdill, "FDR."

waiting" rhetorical tactic, used more generally by Democratic politicians, suggests a sense of political infallibility that elides the work yet to be done to win elections, enact legislation and transform the lives of constituents.

Communication scholars have written extensively on the ritualistic qualities of concession and victory speeches. According to scholars publishing germinal work on concession-victory ritual, like Corcoran[53] or Weaver,[54] these rhetorical utterances are formulaic and dramaturgical. Weaver describes the interplay between concession and victory speeches as a "reciprocal ritual." Corcoran terms this relationship as "rite of capitulation." All dramas need a good ending, to make the journey, in this case the expensive and hard-fought campaign, seem worth it in the end. Buttigieg's rhetorical performance attempted to bend the messy and unpredictable night of the Iowa Caucus to fit the mold, to write a satisfying ending to the story. Concession speeches are expected to acknowledge defeat gracefully, thank their supporters for their hard work and donations, offer a brief congratulation to their opponent, and describe an inspiring, yet difficult, pathway forward for the realization of a stronger America. A victory speech, which according to the procedural constraints of the genre, must take place after the concession speech, acknowledge the formal concession from the opponent, stress the importance of national unity, and offer a broad interpretation of their victory for policy, politics, and American culture.

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[53] Paul E Corcoran, "Presidential Concession Speeches: The Rhetoric of Defeat," *Political Communication*, no. 11 (1994): 109–31.

[54] Ruth Ann Weaver, "Acknowledgment of Victory and Defeat: The Reciprocal Ritual," *Central States Speech Journal* 33, no. 3 (1982): 480–89.

Buttigieg's soundbite is critical for rhetorical analysis given the way his statements circulate in the present electoral and cultural context. First, much of the literature on concession-victory speeches focus on general elections, mostly at the presidential level. There is no existing literature on the rhetoric of victory-concession speeches during the party nomination process. There is no upcoming primary, caucus, or election for a conceder in the general election, like there is for a conceder in a nomination competition. Second, when the dramatic, cultural, and ritualistic constraints of an election require cleanliness, finality, and conclusiveness, how do candidates rhetorically position their campaign in light of messiness, ambiguity, and electoral chaos?

Buttigieg's speech circumvents established procedural conventions that serve affective and epideictic purposes. The speech rhetorically transforms the strategy of "victor-in-waiting" to "victor-tired-of-waiting." The rite of capitulation serves an incredibly important civic purpose, "integral to democratic life and the legitimacy of authority."[55] The concession-victory interplay demonstrates that institutional legitimacy and democratic decision-making serve as a far more important backdrop than the specific candidates and issues that were raised in the campaign. This is why a common theme among victory and concessionary speeches is a tribute to democracy, what is usually described as the grand experiment, started in 1776 and founded on a commitment to transcendent and Enlightened values. Buttigieg's claim to victory underestimated the dramaturgical and affective function served by the concession-victory speech interplay and the expected testament to the American democratic project. Buttigieg and his "victor-tired-of-waiting" posture attempted to write a determinate conclusion to the Iowa Caucus

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[55] Corcoran, "Presidential Concession Speeches," 114.

narrative, while framing his leadership style and personality as distinct from Trump's trampling of democratic institutions. Buttigieg's speech called for a return to institutional legitimacy while forgoing institutional legitimacy. The premature claim to victory and the circulation of its soundbite was out of step with the usual function of the victory-concession interplay which is to heal wounds, bring together, and cyclically re-inspire faith in the democratic project every election cycle.

Concession speeches serve a vital, constitutive role in the repeated maintenance of the democratic state. According to Corcoran, "Nevertheless, the concession speech is a performance, an enactment of meanings and intentions arising less from the rhetorical text/strategy than from the cathartic expectations of large audiences and powerful witnesses."[56] While the specific oratorical performance is expected to check the necessary boxes to sufficiently fulfil its role as a "concession" speech, its purpose in bringing the electoral drama to a close and constituting an audience with faith in democratic institutions is much more important. The concession speech, in particular, "has evolved as an essential framing device, a prolog for the winning candidate's acceptance of victory," its performance is "prescribed by an unwritten law, the concession has become an integral, legitimating feature of a presidential election."[57] Buttigieg's attempt to constitute a victorious reality attempted to breach said unwritten laws concerning when, how, and why candidates give concession speeches.

The primary candidates in the Iowa Caucuses faced unique rhetorical constraints in the way they approached the conclusion of this fraught contest. The conceder must

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[56] Corcoran, "Presidential Concession Speeches," 113.

[57] Corcoran, "Presidential Concession Speeches," 115.

speak first, and for a shorter duration than the victor. The rite of capitulation, like many parts of a major political campaign is mediated by the media. Corcoran explains how mainstream media companies coordinate with campaigns to ensure their commitment to the substantive and procedural conventions of the process.[58] This is to ensure that both candidates don't speak at the same time and can be broadcasted out to millions of citizen-consumers. The media often serves as the adjudicator of the concession speech. This is why you'll often hear a candidate "exited with grace" or "concede graciously." Functionally, they determine whether or not the candidate was a good loser as required by the dramaturgical formula of the electoral performance.

Certainly there have been deviations from these genre-based norms in concession and victory speeches. While Corcoran and Weaver have identified a useful set of thematic and stylistic continuities, to view their work as totalizing set of necessary characteristics of a victory-concession speech would problematically elide context and individualized rhetorical style. Willyard and Ritter explain that rhetorical critics need to take into account more than just generic norms of concession and victory speeches. Their analysis of the 2004 presidential victory and concessionary speeches demonstrate that context and speakers are an integral and necessary component of any rhetorical analysis on the genre of victory-concession speeches.[59] Furthermore, Neville-Shephard explains that third party presidential concessions are influenced by a related, yet distinct yet of

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58 Corcoran, "Presidential Concession Speeches."

59 Jennifer Willyard and Kurt Ritter, "Election 2004 Concession and Victory Speeches: The Influence of Genre, Context, and Speaker on Addresses by Presidential and Vice Presidential Candidates," *American Behavioral Scientist* 49, no. 3 (November 2005): 488–509, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764205279439.

generic customs.[60] Third party concessions, he argues are "rarely graceful rituals of accepting defeat."[61] To be graceful in defeat would be to accept and acquiesce to a rigged, flawed and unfair two party duopoly, a perspective that most third party candidates take during their campaign.

Buttigieg's speech certainly includes numerous themes commonly found in victory speeches, like a call-to-unity, congratulating his opponents, thanking his campaign staff and volunteers, and a testament to democracy. However, the speech itself uniquely departs from the most foundational convention of the victory-concession interplay. Rather than wait for the official release of results, or wait for an opponent to concede defeat, he claimed victory for himself. In his speech he lists the humble locations of caucus sites, like "churches and community centers and high school gymnasiums." While Buttigieg was correct that caucuses had already been held at these locations, his declaration that "the time has come to turn the page and open up a new chapter in American story" directly sidestepped the institutional metrics, constitutive of the American story, that are relied upon to determine election results. Pete explains that "Iowa chose a new path" without determining with institutional certainty that his path, was the one chosen.

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[60] Ryan Neville-Shepard, "Triumph in Defeat: The Genre of Third Party Presidential Concessions," *Communication Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (April 2014): 214–32, https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2014.890119.

[61] Neville-Shepard, "Triumph in Defeat," 216.

"Victory" Amid Chaos: Buttigieg's Speech

The recording, tabulation, and reporting of 2020 Iowa Democratic Caucuses results were historically disastrous. Even though Iowa has a reputation for their confusing, muddled, and out-of-touch ways of selecting candidates, 2020's contest was especially undermined by a variety of factors. The Iowa 2020 Caucuses was revamped following criticisms about the lack of transparency surrounding the Iowa 2016 Caucuses and general skepticism of the DNC after the alleged mistreatment toward the then-runner up, Senator Bernie Sanders.[62] First, the Iowa Democrats implemented a mobile phone application in order to record the results from each precinct. For precinct chairs, the application was optional, yet encouraged as it was touted to render the seemingly opaque caucus prospect a bit more transparent. The use of the application from a state-wide and coordinated form was never tested prior to caucus day. It was found that a coding error impeded the app's ability to correctly calculate caucus results and even its ability to be downloaded on certain cell phone models owned by precinct chairs.[63] Second, each precinct was required to report three sets of results, as opposed to just reporting the winner as in previous caucus iterations. This necessitated keeping a "paper trail" of each caucus-goers' set of preferences for the first time. Lack of logistical preparation and technological training for caucus chairs doomed the Iowa Caucuses.[64] To make matters worse, even precinct chairs who tabulated the three sets of results correctly were unable

[62] Maggie Astor, "Why Did Iowa Make the Caucuses So Complicated?," *The New York Times*, February 4, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/04/us/politics/iowa-caucus-changes.html.

[63] Morrison, "Iowa Caucus Smartphone."

[64] Morrison, "Iowa Caucus Smartphone."

to report their precinct's results by phone because of busy phone lines at party headquarters. Many precinct captains reported being on hold with the state party for hours.

The chaos, confusion, and contradictions exhibited by the Iowa Democratic Party during the 2020 Caucuses spurred many to call for its rescheduling to later on in the election year.[65] These critics understood the all-important cultural, social, and political function of the first primary contest. The "formulaic, didactic, and even redundant" realization of procedure was frustrated by the inability of the Iowa Democratic Party to determine an officially verified winner.[66] The procedural constraints of a campaign, imbued with important values such as institutional memory, democratic pluralism, and popular tradition, were circumvented. This would not stop Buttigieg from attempting to fulfil the role of the victorious, confident, and proactive candidate that the procedural constraints of the evening demanded.

Buttigieg's speech, as shaped via the prominence and importance of digital communication technologies, exemplifies Burke's concept of representative anecdote. Buttigieg's speech, and the circulation of its attendant soundbite across digital networks, implicitly made the case for his candidacy for president. Buttigieg's preemptive claim to victory should be understood as the crystallized and condensed representation of the underlying essence of the Buttigieg campaign. The main appeal of the Buttigieg

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[65] Ian Millhiser, "Monday's Iowa Caucuses Should Be the Last," *Vox*, February 4, 2020, https://www.vox.com/2020/2/4/21122219/iowa-caucus-last-anti-democratic-abolish;

[66] Bradford Vivian, "Neoliberal Epideictic: Rhetorical Form and Commemorative Politics on September 11, 2002," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92, no. 1 (February 2006): 5.

campaign was that he would be the one to reestablish institutional legitimacy and return the government to tempered, competent hands. Just as the dearth of results from the Iowa Caucuses had cast a shadow of indeterminacy and confusion, Trump's administration had instituted a cloudy and confusing time for Democratic voters who prided themselves on a commitment to internationalism and transcendent, American exceptionalist values.

Buttigieg's speech attempted to impose a confident, commanding, and constitutive rhetorical reality. Basing his argument off of wildly incomplete internal campaign data from various precincts, Buttigieg excitedly proclaimed "an improbable hope became an *undeniable reality*."[67] Buttigieg did not describe the night as disappointing, confusing, or unsatisfying. Instead, Buttigieg attempted to impose narratological order on the chaotic night and shape the digital-media-intermediated interpretation of the night's results. Given the media's comprehensive ability to rhetorically determine what constitutes a "victory" in Iowa, Buttigieg's invocation attempted to mold popularly conceptualized understanding of the Iowa Caucuses. The speechwriters and Buttigieg offered an interpretative frame to the audience, knowing that the specific framing of a Buttigieg victory would quickly circulate and proliferate across digital networks.

The beginning of Buttigieg's speech was forceful, punctuated, confident, and hopeful. In other words, the speech was extremely "biteable,"[68] perfectly crafted for

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[67] Pete Buttigieg, "Pete Buttigieg Iowa Caucus Speech Transcript," *Rev*, February 4, 2020, https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/transcript-speeches-at-the-iowa-caucuses-bernie- sanders-joe-biden-elizabeth-warren-andrew-yang-pete-buttigieg-amy-klobuchar-speak.

[68] Foley, "Sound Bites," 615.

national media organizations to mine for soundbites. Buttigieg's speech, although over 18 minutes in length, was functionally reduced to a few concise clips, or highlights, and broadcasted across every major news network. Networks from across the "ideological" spectrum, from Fox News[69] to CNBC,[70] began their coverage of the Iowa Caucuses, after the Iowa Democratic Party's debacle, with Buttigieg's claim to victory. Buttigieg knew that voters expected the realization of a narratological arch in which a new "frontrunner" would be crowned following the conclusion of a perfectly run Iowa Caucuses. Buttigieg also know that the digital infrastructure and news media organizations sought to fulfil that symbolic, cultural and social function, so he attempted to rhetorically fill such a role.

The speech was not a gaffe or a slip of Mayor Buttigieg's tongue. His verified campaign Twitter account subsequently tweeted the opening lines of his speech, proclaiming how "Iowa…shocked the nation" with his undeniable victory. This further demonstrated that Buttigieg's rhetorical text was specifically constructed to maximize its "biteability" and it's potential to virally spread across digital networks such as Twitter and other social media sites. Within a mere 280-character window, Buttigieg attempted to tweet and retweet his way into a rhetorically constituted "reality" in which his showing in Iowa, regardless of how many votes or pledged delegates he would ultimately collect,

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[69] Paul Steinhauser, "Democracy 2020 Digest: Dueling Claims of Victory Muddy Iowa's Already-Clouded Caucus," *Fox News*, February 6, 2020, https://www.foxnews.com/politics/democracy 2020-digest-dueling-claims-of-victory-muddy-iowas-already-clouded-caucus;

[70] Tucker Higgins, "Pete Buttigieg Claims Victory in Iowa Cauceses, Though No Results Have Been Released," *CNBC*, February 4, 2020, https://www.cnbc.com/2020/02/04/buttigieg-claims- victory-in-iowa-though-no-results-have-been-released.html.

would be considered "victorious." The insights of Nathan Rambukkana[71] and Jodi Dean[72] are especially prescient here. Digital networks are not after-thoughts or reflections of the dominant political culture. More and more, sites like Twitter are becoming *the* preeminent sphere in the shaping of sociopolitical realities.

The speech and the circulation of its related soundbites should be analyzed and interpreted as a reductive yet archetypal statement "taken to be representative of the whole" of the Buttigieg campaign. The declaration of victory was a "simplified example of a significant argument" that was "replayed and reiterated in the course of a campaign."[73] While others, like former Vice President Biden, Senator Klobuchar, or Senator Warren, were merely talking about how they would return international respect and institutional legitimacy to the executive branch, Buttigieg was rhetorically *demonstrating* his leadership style. The quintessence of Buttigieg's main electoral appeal was encapsulated in his declaration of victory amid a confusing, unexpected, and destabilizing night of results, mirroring Trump's destabilizing refusal of the behavioral protocols of political civility and liberal institutionalism.

Buttigieg exclaimed that in the November general election, after presumably winning the Democratic nomination for president, he would unite a coalition able to "send not just Donald Trump's presidency, but Trumpism itself into the dustbin of history

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[71]Nathan Rambukkana, "#Introduction: Hashtags as Technosocial Events," in *#Hashtag Publics: The Power and Politics of Discursive Networks* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2015), 1-10.

[72] Dean, "Communicative Capitalism."

[72] Coker, "Romney, Obama," 331.

[73] Coker, "Romney, Obama," 327-328.

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where it belongs."[74] Buttigieg leveraged his identity as a Washington "outsider" to make the case that he would be able to ride the wave of a moderate majority and overcome the hyper-partisan and ideologically polarized environment that birthed Trumpism. While simultaneously capitalizing on existing disaffection with hyper-partisan gridlock, an underlying affectual state that certainly propelled Donald Trump to victory in 2016, Buttigieg attempted to rhetorically constitute an amorphous, vague majority consisting of "progressives, moderates, and…future former Republicans."[75] Although Trump was guilty of producing "trampled norms and... poisonous tweak[s]", aided by "cynicism and division," Buttigieg would return America's commitment to global leadership, ordered freedom, and competent governance.[76]

Buttigieg's cheery disposition in his attempt to reinstall faith in global democratic institutions rhetorically cloaks the bloody underside of a seemingly progressive American led international order. By diagnosing Trump's decorum as the source of global reactionary rejections of democratic governance, Buttigieg elides the US' role in eroding international law. Bâli and Rana (2018) criticize this hyper-focus on Trump's decorum and relations with other countries.[77] While many liberals believe Trump's ascendancy signals a new chapter in American presidential leadership, Trump's flouting of international and multilateral governance regimes is much more in line with American

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[74] Buttigieg, "Pete Buttigieg Iowa Caucus Speech."

[75] Buttigieg, "Pete Buttigieg Iowa Caucus Speech."

[76] Buttigieg, "Pete Buttigieg Iowa Caucus Speech."

[77] Ash Bâli and Aziz Rana, "Constitutionalism and the American Imperial Imagination," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 85, no. 2 (March 2018): 257–92.

history than most liberals care to admit. According to Bâli and Rana, "while the Trump administration has certainly broken with the decorum…of past American presidential policies, the unraveling of the international order put in place under American leadership…has been more than a quarter century in the making."[78] Trump was not unraveling an idyllic, rule-based liberal international order. Instead, it was the historical violations of internationally agreed upon norms by the United States that has directly undermined faith in Western, liberal institutions. Whether it was through containing communism or fighting the ever-elusive threat of terrorism, the United States has continuously deployed unilateral military forces throughout the globe, in violation of national sovereignty and multilateral peace protocols, under the guise of defending American exceptionalist values.[79] If uncritically accepted, Buttigieg's promise to return to international normalcy will ensure the overt failure of multilateral institutions in promoting equity and human rights around the globe.

Buttigieg assigns singular blame to Donald Trump's administration for the multi-decade breakdown of confidence in western-designed, international institutions. This represents an attempt to rhetorically naturalize the extra-legal exertions of force that the United States undertook throughout the Cold War, such as coups, invasions, and deadly economic sanctions. As Morefield explains,

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[78] Bâli and Rana, "Constitutionalism," 259.

[78] Bâli and Rana, "Constitutionalism."; Jeanne Morefield and Michael Goodhart, "Reflection Now! Critique and Solidarity in the Trump Era," *Theory & Event* 20, no. 1 (January 2017): 68–85; William Spanos, *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization: The Specter of Vietnam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

> An extremely partial list of sovereign governments that the United States either overthrew or attempted to subvert through military means, assassinations, or election tampering since 1949 includes Syria, Iran, Guatemala, Lebanon, the Congo, Cuba, Chile, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Grenada, Cuba, Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Iraq, Yemen, Australia, Greece, Bolivia, and Angola.[80]

Buttigieg's cheery and ideologically proud return to American leadership was really a rhetorical acclimation of American exceptionalist values to a new post-Trump era.

Buttigieg's speech attempted to demonstrate the essence of his campaign discourse; Trump has thrown international and domestic institutions into crisis, and he is the only one who can return the American political economy to normalcy, an imperial force justified through its adherence-in-name-only to international legal regimes. The chaos of the Iowa Caucuses provided a useful avenue for Buttigieg to rhetorically demonstrate the main appeal of his campaign; he would spell the end of the Trump-induced chaotic political environment through his competent demeanor, moderate governing, and confident ethos. The representative anecdote thus allowed us to draw connections across sets of seemingly disconnected rhetorical texts so as to find the underlying narrative-logic. The value in this methodological approach is to reveal the underlying cultural values that anchor available discourse. In this case, Buttigieg's rhetorical text was anchored by an implicit commitment to an American exceptionalist set of values that sought to naturalize and repeat the imperial and murderous ambitions of the post-war "institutional," liberal world order.

So far, this chapter established that Buttigieg's speech was constructed via the constraints of digitally mediated communication. The importance and popularity of

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[80] Jeanne Morefield, "Trump's Foreign Policy Isn't the Problem," *Boston Review*, January 8, 2019, http://bostonreview.net/war-security/jeanne-morefield-trump%E2%80%99s-foreign-policy- isn%E2%80%99t-problem.

digital networks in the dissemination of political speech clearly shaped the timing, form, and rhetoric of Buttigieg's declaration of victory. However, as Chaput reminds scholars, the usefulness and value of a rhetorical circulation approach doesn't come from merely highlighting the way digital media constrains discourse.[81] Instead, rhetorical circulation approaches require the charting of the diffusion of rhetorical texts across vast digital networks, highlighting the way circulation changes, modifies, and remixes discourse. How was Buttigieg's invocation of a "victorious" night received? How was it celebrated and mocked? What does that tell us about presidential campaigns in the time of perceived political chaos?

The Circulation, Uptake, and Reaction to Buttigieg's "Undeniable Reality": How Undeniable Was It?

Rather than adhere to the contextual bounds of Buttigieg's Iowa "victory" speech, it's crucially important to analyze how the viral spread and dissemination of the speech's soundbites continuously dissolved and reformed the situational constraints of the rhetorical text. In short, Buttigieg's rhetorical constitution of a victorious narrative didn't take hold as well as he and his campaign would have hoped. His soundbite and related tweets never actuated or constituted a popular, "moderate majority" that considered Buttigieg the true "frontrunner" after the debacle of the Iowa Caucuses. Buttigieg's viral claim to victory didn't create an interpretative frame that stabilized or cemented his vision of organizing the chaotic results of the Iowa Caucuses. Instead, Buttigieg's questionable rhetorical utterance, and its subsequent circulation, only intensified the

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[81] Chaput, "Trumponomics."; Chaput, "Rhetorical Circulation."

confusion and opacity surrounding the Iowa Democratic Caucuses. The circulation and (lack of) uptake of Buttigieg's "victory" speech demonstrates the danger of the "victor-in-waiting" rhetorical tactic.

Rather than successfully demonstrate Buttigieg's ability to re-inspire faith in democratic and liberal international institutions undermined by the Trump administration, his premature claim to victory opened up grounds for counterclaims to victory from the Bernie Sanders campaign.[82] In the days immediately following the Iowa Caucuses, after the Iowa Democratic Party released incomplete caucus results, Buttigieg was leading in state delegate equivalents, whereas Sanders had a commanding lead on the first alignment numbers, the closest equivalent to a "popular vote" in a caucus contest. Rather than confidently shaping the interpretation of one "winner" of the Iowa Caucuses, Buttigieg's speech opened the rhetorical doorway for two candidates to claim victory. Leftist media sites such as Jacobin[83] and The Intercept[84] quickly published defenses of their interpretation of Sanders' victory, reframing the first alignment numbers as the most important metric to determine victory given the institutional failure of the Iowa Democratic Party to calculate the results. Bernie Sanders' official campaign pages on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram declared Sanders had exited the state victoriously.

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[82] Steinhauser, "Democracy 2020."

[83] Ben Burgis, "Bernie Got the Most Votes in Iowa, Which Means He Won Iowa," *Jacobin*, February 7, 2020, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/02/bernie-sanders-won-iowa-caucus-democratic-party.

[84] Medhi Hasan, "The Pundits Wrote Off Bernie's Candidacy in Iowa and New Hampshire, He Proved Them Wrong," *The Interchept*, February 12, 2020, https://theintercept.com/2020/02/12 bernie-sanders-iowa-new-hampshire/.

On Twitter, the hashtag #MayorCheat, a play on Buttigieg's "Mayor Pete" nickname, became the top trending hashtag in the United States the day after the Iowa Caucuses and Buttigieg's "victory" speech.[85] The circulation and popularity of this hashtag, #MayorCheat, actualized widespread frustration with Buttigieg, the millennial candidate who described himself as more in-touch with younger generations than the rest. Some prominent political pundits on Twitter called the move "Trumpian." Others criticized Buttigieg's strategic impatience with the Iowa Democratic Party's processing of results, arguing that the mayor should have let the established process run its course, even if it had initially failed to produce timely and efficient caucus results. Buttigieg's rhetorical utterance, claiming his campaign and the voters had formed an undeniable reality, did foment a comparative frame between him and Donald Trump. However, Buttigieg's incredulous claim to victory, for many people across the ideological spectrum housed in the Democratic Party, highlighted the unfortunate similarities in their leadership styles.

Lastly, as investigative journalists continue to inquire about the failures of the 2020 Iowa Caucuses, it was reported that Buttigieg's campaign had made regular payments to Shadow, Inc., the company that was contracted to produce the faulty app used during the bungled night of the caucuses.[86] While some in leftist digital

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[85] Khaleda Rahman, "#Mayorcheat Trends After Pete Buttigieg Declares Iowa Caucus Victory Despite Results Being Delayed," *Newsweek*, February 4, 2020, https://www.newsweek.com/ mayorcheat-trends-pete-buttigieg-declares-iowa-caucus-victory-1485564.

[86] Lee Fang, "New Details Show How Deeply Iowa Caucus App Developer Was Embedded in Democratic Establishment," *The Intercept*, February 4, 2020, https://theintercept.com/2020/02/04/iowa-caucus-app-shadow-acronym/.

communities took this as definitive proof that Buttigieg had rigged the system, the circulation of this news definitely gave many potential Democratic voters pause. A campaign, that had made payments to the developers of a faulty and inoperable vote tallying application, prematurely declared victory in a contest marred by controversy and confusion surrounding its vote processing. This connection, between the Buttigieg campaign and the producers of the failed Iowa Caucuses app, was circulated widely on Twitter and reported across more "mainstream" sources of political news, such as CNN, The Hill, and Politico. Buttigieg's claim to victory, prior to the official tabulation of results, may have undermined his case to take on Donald Trump in the general election.

Mayor Pete Buttigieg would go on to a respectable showing in New Hampshire, placing second behind Senator Bernie Sanders. However, Buttigieg quickly fell off the radar as the primary contests moved to more racially diverse states, such as Nevada and South Carolina, where Buttigieg failed to persuade and connect with minority voters. The mayor came in a distant 3rd in Nevada and an even worse 4th place finish in South Carolina. Shockingly, Buttigieg suspended his campaign prior to the first "Super Tuesday" of the primary season in a coordinated effort to coalesce "moderate" support around former Vice President Biden.

The analysis of Buttigieg's "victory" soundbite suggests that Buttigieg's attempt at constitutive a "victorious" reality didn't take hold because of his speech's circumvention of established conventions of victory and concession speeches. However, rhetorical critics should avoid simplistic and linear calculations that a specific rhetorical utterance caused a complex phenomenon. I do not believe Buttigieg's widely circulated Iowa "victory" speech was the reason his campaign failed to take hold in states with more

minority voters. His poor record on police brutality and excessive use of force, his disproportionate amount of time spent campaigning in Iowa, and the inability to establish "ground game" in Black and Latino city centers, all undoubtedly contributed to his electoral demise, especially with Black voters.[87] However, as an evaluative and critical rhetorical scholar, it is safe to conclude that his rhetorical strategy failed to take hold. Rather than demonstrate his ability to restore order and competence to a chaotic political environment spurred by the Trump administration, the rapid circulation of Buttigieg's premature claim to victory in the Iowa Caucuses inspired comparisons to the erratic sitting president and further intensified the electorate's questioning of the results of the Iowa Caucuses.

Charting and analyzing how the speech and its representative sound bites circulated across digital networks is crucially important to a rhetorical text such as this; Buttigieg's speech was not intended merely to summarize the ordeals of the Iowa Caucuses. Buttigieg's claim to victory invited participation in, and identification with, his "undeniable reality" in which he had won the Iowa Caucuses. The tracing and charting of the circulation of Buttigieg's soundbites demonstrates the failure of his claim to victory to affectively resonate across digital networks. Buttigieg's premature declaration of victory was mostly interpreted as a critical overreach, thereby undermining the underlying appeal of his campaign as the young, energetic, yet sensible and balanced candidate.

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[87] Elena Schneider, "'On Life Support': Buttigieg's Struggles with Black Voters Threatens His Candidacy," *Politico*, January 24, 2020, https://www.politico.com/news/2020/01/24/pete- buttigieg-south-carolina-103325.

Conclusion

So who actually won the 2020 Iowa Democratic Caucuses? Given its insignificant share of total delegates, its disproportionately white and rural population, the ability of news organizations' to draw broad generalizations from a handful of votes, and the proliferation of institutional skepticism of the caucus process itself, does it really matter who won Iowa in 2020? Political journalist Reid Epstein summed up popular frustration with the first contest of the primary election in the title of one of his early April articles; "Iowa was meaningless."[88] Both Sanders and Buttigieg would eventually suspend their campaigns and throw their support behind Biden. Biden, who finished fourth in Iowa and fifth in New Hampshire, who created a lackluster campaign infrastructure in much of the initial "Super Tuesday" states, and who put in unimpressive and oftentimes rambling debate performances, seems to have rewritten the conventional rules of how to become a winning candidate. Perhaps the media's discretion of defining the contours of viable and electable candidates and the circulation of those judgments across digital networks demonstrate that scholars of rhetoric, political science, communication, sociology, and other disciplines are still systematically underestimating the role of digital communicative infrastructure in affecting and effecting the preferences of voters across the country.

This chapter, through an analysis of Buttigieg's Iowa "victory" speech, brought together the merits of the representative anecdote with a rhetorical circulation approach to the study of rhetorical texts. I argue that contemporary campaigns must supplement their

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[88] Reid Epstein, "Iowa Was Meaningless," *The New York Times*, April 9, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/09/us/politics/iowa-caucuses-meaning.html.

representative anecdote strategy with a form of messaging that is conducive to digital circulation, primarily through the use of pithy and punchy soundbites. However, the rapid rate of circulation and the prominence of digital networks doesn't mean the traditional narrative logic and procedural frames are unimportant for campaigns. In many ways, circulation magnifies the importance of adhering to the expected tone, pacing, and "unwritten laws" governing the victory-concession speech interplay. These speeches are formulaic, dry, and ritualistic, but that does not suggest these rhetorical texts are unimportant or inconsequential. Victory and concession speeches are constitutive texts, important avenues for the reinstallation of faith in the nationalistic American project. Limiting an analysis of Buttigieg's speech to the bounded, contextual, and limited circumstances of the Iowa high school gymnasium would hamper rhetorical scholars' ability to analyze the full picture. And yet, Buttigieg's speech was not a totally unbounded, completely fluid and formless rhetorical text or an egotistical declaration à la Trump. The procedural and ceremonial importance of the Iowa Caucuses, the Trumpist and chaotic political moment, as well as the prominence of digital communication infrastructure all shaped Buttigieg's decision to declare victory, seize the headlines, and become viral across digital networks. Rather than seeing these approaches as competing, I argue they can be reformulated to provide valuable insights into the way various rhetorical texts can be based on a common essence, or core value.

The limits of this critical project provide potentially useful avenues for further research. Given the rhetorical tradition's commitment to methodological pluralism, I argue it would be beneficial to approach these texts from an ideographic perspective, perhaps analyzing what "victorious" means in the context of Buttigieg's speech.

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Furthermore, a more social scientific approach, analyzing opinion polls of Buttigieg's electability or viability as a candidate following his speech, could prove interesting. Lastly, rhetorical scholars could choose to more fully analyze the counterclaims to victory made by the Bernie Sanders campaign. How is his prioritization of first ballot preferences in his claim to victory in Iowa implicated by his "populist" and popular style of leadership and representation? As mentioned already, the Democratic Party's reorganization and reframing following the election of President Trump has proven to be very fruitful topics for rhetorical analyses. In the face of Trump winning the presidency by flouting most conventional rules of political speech and civility, analyzing what issues and rhetorical strategies deployed by the Democrats can provide insights into what they find objectionable about Trump and what they don't. If the heart and soul of the Democratic Party, or even the United States, are truly at stake, perhaps it warrants some critical inquiry.

Did Buttigieg merely get too confident? Riding a meteoric rise from obscure, Midwestern mayor to presidential nomination frontrunner might have urged him to continue pushing the envelope. This case, declaring victory prior to the official tabulation and declaration of a winner from the Iowa Democratic Party, demonstrates the taken-for-granted rhetorical force wielded through the use of a word like "moderate." What is "moderate" about foregoing institutional metrics for governing elections? What is "balanced" about declaring a personal "undeniable reality"? What is "reasonable" about attempting to manipulate the existence of communication across digital networks? Buttigieg's speech, and its circulation, demonstrates the shallow depths of his political convictions that drove him to seek the Democratic nomination for the presidency.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Concluding Remarks

This project explored how political campaigns adapt to the technical and cultural affordances of digital networks, mainly focusing on the use of digital memes by establishment Democratic campaigns. Digital networks, and their incredible rate of circulation, offers a new level of affective engagement. Prior to the advent of digital or broadcast networks, potential voters needed to be in physical proximity to a candidate to hear a historic speech. Classical approaches to political oratory mirrored this constrained approach to rhetoric as rhetoricians employed a bounded, contextual, and/or Aristotelian approach to textual criticism. As communication infrastructure progressed, potential voters received periodic or daily coverage on political campaigning, at the behest of new communicative technologies like the radio and television. Rhetoricians modified their approaches to political oratory by focusing on salience, or how a rhetor, through the selection of topic and address, deliberately inflates the importance of a specific topic. Thereby, a powerful and persuasive rhetor can shift the perception of political realities through their choice of topic and the way they chose to invoke the topic. Rhetorical scholars examined the cultural and rhetorical clout of a president's bully pulpit and how presidents can speak past the legislative branch to reorient legislative agendas and dockets. These approaches, critical of bounded and situationist criticism, still primarily focused on the major oratorical moments of a candidacy or presidency. Digital networks,

as a major organizing axis and infrastructure for human communication, at least in part, liquefy the locus of political communication in these great speeches.

The three case studies explored in this project demonstrate three distinct strategies to facilitate circulation across digital networks. The case of #TheResistance demonstrates the use of short, punchy, ideographic terms to maximize affective intensity. Given technical constraints of the medium, such as character limits on tweets, prominent Democrats relied upon easily accepted and culturally-defined terms to stand in for a broader liberal ideology and facilitate circulation and identification as a member of #TheResistance. The case of Mike Bloomberg's Instagram memes demonstrates an attempt to capitalize on existing centralized nodal points of meme influence through the campaign's partnership with prominent, monetized, and professional Instagram meme accounts that peddle in stretched and hyperreal humor. Bloomberg attempted to exploit the standing of prominent meme accounts to facilitate circulation of ironic and seemingly counterintuitive memes advertising his campaign. The case of Pete Buttigieg's "victory" speech during the Iowa Caucus demonstrates an attempt to rhetorically impose narratological order on the Iowa Caucuses. Buttigieg's campaign, knowing that his flagrant message would steal headlines, deliberately shaped the digital-media-intermediated interpretation of the night's results. The campaign, assuming that the digital infrastructure and news media organizations sought to fulfil the symbolic, cultural and social function of the all-important first caucus, deliberately structured Buttigieg's speech to fit such a role. Similar messages, all highlighting the danger and instability of the Trump presidency, adopted different forms to encourage circulation across digital networks. And yet, all of them attempted to maximize "biteability" and shape their

messages in accordance with the technical, social, and cultural affordances of digital networks.[1]

The idea that campaigns specifically tailor messages to distinct mediums is well established and not entirely new. Any "Intro to Rhetorical Communication" class, or any class that takes up McLuhan's medium thesis, could tell you that the audience's different reactions to the Kennedy-Nixon debate proves this point (wow, those listening on the radio couldn't see his flop sweat!).[2] Rather than reiterate this argument, I ultimately argue that the digital campaign strategies of prominent establishment Democrats, in their attempts at condensation and precipitation (in a chemistry-solution sense, not a weather event sense), place political action under the jurisdiction of market-based consumption.

The case studies explored by this thesis suggest that contemporary digital campaign strategies embody the same core principles of neoliberal governance; flexibility, deregulation, and efficiency. Digital campaigning is unbounded from its inefficient and archaic antecedents of speeches and daily newspaper reports. Digital campaigning strategies are celebrated for their flexibility and adaptation to new mediums and platforms. Politics is a product, digital campaign strategies are the marketing schemes, and digital interactions from the user is the affective and immaterial labor that generates value for the campaign, in the form of votes and retweets. Sarah Benet-Weiser, writing in the context of political brand cultures, explains

> Individual consumers demonstrate their politics by purchasing particular brands over others in a competitive marketplace; specific brands are attached to political aims and goals, such as Starbucks coffee and fair trade, or a RED Gap T-shirt and

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[1] Foley, "Sound Bites."

[2] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1964).

fighting AIDS in Africa. Contemporary commodity activism positions political action as part of a competitive, capitalist brand culture, so that activism is reframed as realizable through supporting particular brands; activism is as easy as a swipe of your credit card.[3]

This intervention matters because the encroachment of market logics into non-economic domains is ideologically naturalized and taken for granted. Given that communicative capitalism is the guiding logic of digital networks, similar to the way people "vote with their dollar," the digital campaign strategies surveyed in this project attempt to influence people to vote with their retweet button. Contemporary digital campaign messaging is designed to maximize circulation and traction within networks, rather than attempting to forge community or create democratic possibility.

While digital networks may be a place for the percolation of alternative publics, the uncritical acceptance and celebration of establishment Democratic digital campaign strategies can leave leftist ideologically hitched to the very same concepts and ideology that produced Donald Trump. Even political campaign messaging that rightfully criticizes the Trump administration can capitulate to dominant political vocabulary, which constrains political imaginaries and the possibility for the development of radical alternatives to capitalist and anti-black corporate politics. As described in the first two chapters, language, as a social technology, is open to intervention and re-invention. However, language can also rigidify and be kept in place at the behest and intentional design of dominant systems of power, whose actors benefit from current linguistic regimes. Language calcifies and hardens ideological worldviews. The movement of concepts, hashtags, and meme formats across digital networks does not imply they are

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[3] Sarah Benet-Weiser, *Authentic(tm): The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2012): 18.

lone travelers, spontaneously wandering from digital enclave to enclave. Rather, seemingly inconsequential digital texts are ideologically indebted, using their seemingly unofficial appearance to cloak their persuasive work. The use of aesthetic, humoristic, and cultural conventions of the medium by Democratic digital campaign strategies create the appearance of campaign messages as just like any other tweet on the timeline. The form of the campaign message, while taking up the technical affordances of the platform, implicate the reception of the message by the digital subject. While a campaign meme may seem like any other humorous quip concerning online culture, the unofficial and low-stakes assumption about the text hides its ideological indebtedness. Campaign memes ground a specific issue, it enthymematically suggests a solution, and cultivates a specific relationship with the digital subject. It is incredibly important that rhetoricians take the seemingly unserious campaigns texts as ideological and constitutive texts.

I argue the Democratic attempt to achieve pithiness in their digital campaign messaging remains ideologically indebted to a set of political terminology that precludes the naming, envisioning, and creation of alternative political arrangements. The condensed nature of their digital campaign strategies relies upon *already existing* discursive constructions that wield rhetorical force. The succinct and affectively galvanizing strategies forego the opportunity to use Trump's victory as an opportunity to cultivate new ways of naming and describing the world because the current discursive regime is beneficial to the well-established Democratic Party. Rather than redefine what constitutes professionalism, the DNC seeks to frame Trump as counter to presidential professionalism. Rather than criticize the bloated weight of the Iowa caucuses, Buttigieg attempted to game caucus coverage to dominate headlines. Rather than use the economic

and political crisis of 2020 to change economic and political systems, Bloomberg's memes used surrealism to pacify frustration. Hegemony is constituted linguistically and discursively. The case studies demonstrate an attempt to reconstitute a faith in a failing world, rather than discursively fashion a just one.

Through the use of memes, ideographic hashtags, and representative anecdote soundbites, the surveyed digital campaign strategies in this project suggest leftist frustration with the Trump administration. Such leftist organizing suggests that replacing Trump is the goal, but not to uproot underlying causes of the rise of Trumpism. In chapter two, I explored how the hashtag #TheResistance rhetorically framed the behavior and decorum of Donald Trump as oppositional to foundational American values. In this context, the uncritical acceptance of this digital campaign strategy locks any #resistor to a commitment to foundational American values, which is often used, throughout history, as a rhetorical façade for continual structural violence.

In chapter three, I explored how Mike Bloomberg's meme campaign sought to normalize objectionable behaviors and policy positions through ironic humor. Although they shed light upon the absurdity and danger of the Trump campaign, Bloomberg's meme campaign employed surreal humor and purposefully ugly aesthetic design to constitute an ambivalent relationship between digital subjects and the unjust neoliberal political system, ultimately stultifying criticism. Bloomberg's self-ironic cloaks its persuasive work through its seemingly unrespectable and unprofessional forms of communication. Bloomberg's surrealistic rhetorical tactic doesn't challenge Trumpism because it attempts to subdue widespread frustration with existing sociopolitical arrangements rather than funnel widespread frustration towards systemic change.

In chapter four, I explored how Buttigieg's "victory" speech attempted to not just tell the audience about the competency and balance of Buttigieg, but to rhetorically demonstrate these qualities by establishing order out of chaos. Buttigieg's "victory" speech used the instability and confusion of Iowa to mirror the international instability left in the wake of the Trump administration's departure from international trade and security institutions. The acceptance of Buttigieg's 'victorious narrative' ensures a return to seemingly 'restrained' foreign policy that expedites shift to war by other means. In each of these cases, the criticisms of Trump deliberately use a set of rhetorical concepts that ensure ousting Trump is framed as the ultimate telos of political resistance and the extent of political subjectivity. The digital campaign strategies of establishment Democratic politicians during the Trump administration demonstrate a lack of political imagination. As discussed in Chapter One, the interpretative frame suggested by these campaign strategies suggest the 2016 presidential election was a momentary blip in the grand history of civil, rational, and moderate American political ideology.

The implications of this project and argument are quite important. On the surface, politicians are celebrated for using digital media to reach out to new voters, usually younger generations. These digital strategies are perceived as creative and innovative, as politicians don't run contrary to social trends and new communicative platforms, but actively attempt to maximize their reach through such trends and platforms. However, on a more inconspicuous level, these messages are depoliticizing, in that political choices are relegated to another atomizing hobby or interest. Within a broader attention economy, political campaigns vie for conscious engagement, and are thereby relegated to just another spot on a user's timeline. The pithiness, the condensation, the fragmentation, and

the biteability of contemporary digital campaigns make them indistinguishable from digital guerilla advertising. Twitter users can scroll past a functional declaration of war by Donald Trump or an introduction of articles of impeachment by Speaker Nancy Pelosi with such indifference and banality. Politicization of specific issues are not achieved. Instead, the goal is to achieve circulation and algorithmic staying power. An average digital subject, or Internet user, is encouraged to forego grappling with the relationship between these easily-ignorable tweets and legislative dockets, agency rule implementation, and voting behavior.

Although Democratic politicians should use available resources to reach younger voters, or broader sets of voters, current efforts preclude rely on foundationally American exceptionalist concepts that constrain political imagination. This is not to say that any politician who uses memes to reach out to new voters is a roadblock to leftist and abolitionist ends. There are multiple examples of progressive candidates effectively using digital media to challenge and defeat establishment candidates who tend to be more financially supported and conservative in nature. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has been credited for transforming political communication, bringing her democratic socialist views to new platforms like Twitch. Representative Cori Bush, in collaboration with the Sunrise Movement, amassed a massive online presence and defeated a twenty-year incumbent, William Lacy Clay, on her way to becoming the first Black woman to represent Missouri in the House. I didn't choose to profile these cases directly because, as discussed in Chapter One, a focus on *establishment* rhetorical strategy, in particular, is especially under-researched in the critical rhetoric field. Digital networks are centrally rooted into the lives of so many people. To ignore them or wish

them away would be unproductive. Digital networks, as social technologies, are deeply influential in the cultivation of specific subjectivities, worldviews, and behavioral practices. Digital networks are an interpellative apparatus, both constraining and productive.

The selected case studies in this project demonstrate this constraining effect, despite their appearance as an unmediated space for genuine communication and connection. Rhetorical scholars and activists should resist the seemingly perpetual condensation of political campaign messaging because these campaigns can tactically use the technical affordances of digital networks to redirect leftist frustration towards the maintenance of dominant social and economic systems. Rather than abandon digital networks and cast them off as a capitalist "distraction" from real, material reality, I argue critical rhetoricians should continue to study digital networks in order to equip the public with a fuller understanding of how to agitate and sabotage dominant systems of political control. Two such examples of productive weaponization of digital networks from leftists occurred during the summer of 2020.

First, young activists used TikTok to convince thousands of people to sign up to attend a rally for Donald Trump's campaign for president in Tulsa, Oklahoma. These individuals registered *en masse*, artificially inflating the expected attendance and ultimately leaving thousands of empty seats for Trump's first in-person rally since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. In this case, young activists used the speed of circulation and ease of sign-up access to interfere with a dangerous rally. Although this example was specifically directed at Trump, this example speaks to the broader potential in collective action in digital spheres. This tactic can be replicated to disrupt white nationalist activity

in other contexts. Here, young activists used the technical affordances of TikTok, such as the green screen effect which allows users to share their screens in their videos, to lay out a low-cost way to sabotage a Trump campaign. Some TikToks calling for this protest received millions of views.[4]

Second, K-pop fans crashed a police surveillance app that requested civilians upload videos of illegal activities during Black Lives Matter protests in Dallas, TX. K-pop fans uploaded thousands and thousands of "fan cams," or video compilations of favorite artist performing, singing, and dancing.[5] The Dallas PD App, called iWatch Dallas, was unable to process the overwhelming wave of "spamming" from K-pop fans, resulting in the crashing of the app. Furthermore, K-pop fans also "review bombed" the iWatch Dallas app on the Apple App Store. The accumulation of very poor reviews on the App Store lowered the iWatch Dallas app to an overall rating of 1 star, which in turn, means the App Store will suggest the app to less customers. K-pop fans used existing digital publics concerning music and music celebrities to quickly mobilize against an invasive and surveilling application. In these cases, the technical affordances of TikTok and Twitter were used to impede police surveillance and white nationalist rallies. There

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[4] Taylor Lorenz, Kellen Browning, and Sheera Frenkel, "TikTok Teens and K-Pop Stans Say They Sank Trump Rally," *The New York Times*, June 21, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/style/tiktok-trump-rally-tulsa.html.

[5] Palmer Haasch, "Dallas Police Asked People to Report Illegal Protest Activity via an App. K-Pop Stans Organized to Spam It with Fancams Instead.," *Insider*, June 1, 2020, https://www.insider.com/kpop-stans-fancams-iwatch-dallas-police-department-report-spam-blacklivesmatter-2020-6#:~:text=On%20May%2031%2C%20the%20Dallas,the%20app%20was%20temporarily%20down.

are numerous opportunities to use the speed and condensation of rhetorical messaging on digital network to cultivate community and interrupt violent mobilization from the right.

This thesis contributed to growing scholarship concerning rhetorical scholarship frameworks, especially those specific to digital circulation and memes. Rhetorical scholars must continue to critically analyze the seemingly dispersed enclaves and fringe nodal points of digital networks. Digital memes are perfect texts for a circulation framework because they invite individual participation. Meme formats and hashtags are decontextualized and re-contextualized in other contexts. Digital texts are more participatory than non-digital texts. Whereas a great speech may prompt identification, digital texts prompt remixing, playfulness, and humoristic reinvention. Memes are unstable rhetorical artifacts, in that its circulation through different digital subcultures can foment unexpected uptake and usage. Circulation framework pays attention to the different affective relations and their change over time. I employed a circulation framework by not only closely analyzing the individual texts but also charting the movement of the texts across digital networks. In this way, I examined the reception and reiterations of the case study texts. Given that the topic for this investigation was political campaign discourse, it would be incomplete to "suspend" a movement of a campaign message without following its reception by digital subjects and news stations. In other words, the use of a circulation framework helped me evaluate the effectiveness of the various case studies in constituting the intended reality, the intended "people," or the intended interpretative frame.

This project contributes to ongoing conversations and developments in rhetorical circulation methodology in three ways. First, in chapter two, I established how

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ideographic terminology is particularly suited to achieve circulation across digital networks. Ideographs, or the fundamental terminology which sums up an ideological orientation, are punchy and unquestionable in their culturally defined usages. Given that publicity is a guiding logic across digital networks, ideographs are perfect circulation candidates because they operate as a hard-hitting shorthand for broader ideological inclinations. Ideographs cultivate expected and routinized affective responses from digital subjects. Their qualities allow a tweet to say more in less words by relying upon such important terminology that has its own gravitational pull.

Second, in chapter three, Bloomberg's meme campaign suggests the appearance of seemingly diffuse, spontaneous, and viral internet trends may conceal its pre-planned and carefully crafted origins. I argued that the burgeoning relationship between advertising campaigns and prominent Instagram meme accounts may unsettle some components of rhetorical circulation frameworks. I argue current meme scholarship may underestimate the corporatized production of memes while opting for a metaphorical approach to memes as a germinating pathogen that virally and naturally reproduce. Rhetorical circulation frameworks cannot underestimate the ability of prominent meme accounts to dictate meme trends at the behest of corporate sponsors. To treat all memes as organic misidentifies the ideological and corporate valences of digital networks.

Finally, in chapter four, I argued that the rapid rate of circulation and the prominence of digital networks does not mean the traditionalistic procedural frames are unimportant for campaigns. In many ways, circulation magnifies the importance of adhering to the expected tone, pacing, and "unwritten laws" governing the victory-concession speech interplay. This finding stands in contrast to some postmodern or

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critical rhetoricians who find political communication to be an inconsequential symptom of postmodernity that has been dissolved and fragmented. A circulation framework is an incredibly valuable tool that rhetorical scholars can use to analyze dynamic texts. Only through the use and application of circulation frameworks to distinct kinds of texts will the weaknesses of such an approach be identified and addressed.

This thesis does not seek to cultivate a sense of finality, such that I and I alone have the correct "reading" of specific digital texts. Rather, I intend this project to generate more questions concerning themes of citizenship, digital networks, political participation, Internet culture and aesthetics, campaign strategy, and rhetorical theory. I am indebted to a cluster of scholars who profoundly shaped the way I think about digital communication. In each chapter, I briefly pointed towards future research inquiries with regards to the specific texts and themes of the individual case study. In chapter two, I suggested a critical approach to the circulation of #TheResistance could be helpful to examine the presence of ideographs as an independent variable. In other words, it would be useful to explore whether tweets that were critical of Trump and contained ideographs circulated more intensely than tweets that were critical of Trump but didn't use ideographs. In chapter three, I suggested that further research inquiries be made into the stretched and weird advertising strategies of contemporary corporations such as Old Spice and Adult Swim. These advertising strategies, similar to Bloomberg's memes, use bizarre humor and their departure from traditional advertising strategies to jolt the viewer. These stretched, weird, and postmodern advertising strategies are integral to the constitution of a brand image for these corporations. Future scholars could explore the relationship between self-critical and self-satirical advertising strategies and the

development of a brand image that is progressive, forward thinking, and seemingly

beyond critique. Finally, in chapter four, I argued that ideographic analysis demonstrates

how the terms of "victory" have changed within our present digital infrastructures.

Buttigieg knew that if he proclaimed victory early, he had at least a few hours to blitz his

campaign's message, and could leverage the digital apparatus to that effect. Furthermore,

a more social scientific approach, analyzing opinion polls of Buttigieg's electability or

viability as a candidate following his speech, could prove interesting in terms of

interrogating the quantitative metrics of that claim. Lastly, rhetorical scholars could

choose to more fully analyze the counterclaims to victory made by the Bernie Sanders

campaign.

For more long term and holistic projects, I believe my project opens up future

avenues for rhetorical criticism of Democratic digital campaign strategies. Campaigns of

the future will have to rely on digital networks, and their corporate infrastructures, to

spread a message. They will have to pay for the networked pathways that allow a

campaign message to "go viral." As such, studying the ways campaigns engage digital

messaging illustrates the ways political communication has shifted and the role of

audiences within and against such campaigns. As digital networks change, so will

cultural trends, and political campaigns will continue to alter their messaging to

maximize engagement. Again, altering messages to fit mediums is nothing new.

However, rhetorical scholars need to continue to study the cultural implications of

changing forms of political advertising. On another note, future research could explore

the digital campaign rhetoric of center-left or establishment politicians in other cultural

contexts. Despite the propensity for networked communication to collapse geographic

differences, there are culturally-determined elements of political vocabulary that require specific contextualization and dissection. Digital ideographs, in particular, are culturally-bound rhetorical concepts. As established in the introduction, the rise of nationalism and fascism is not an isolated phenomenon. Comparing the varied responses from the rejected "establishment" left party can provide insights into what argumentative frames are best equipped to disarm fascist movements.

This thesis is an important study of the ways establishment left campaigns used memes to leverage rhetorical power. Significantly, my analysis indicates that these digital forays do not innovate the rhetorical landscape for available political agency, but instead may suture audience members to the same patterns that allowed Donald Trump and related fascist actors to gain power. As campaigns begin to use available digital devices, rhetorical analysis of their effectivity and ideological valences is essential. Continued research into the landscape of digital media as corporately-designed communication should be at the forefront of rhetorical scholars' agendas.

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