Chapter 12
Considering *Chronos* and *Kairos* in Digital Media Rhetorics

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ABSTRACT

Any account of the rhetoric of digital spaces should begin not with the provocation that rhetoric is impoverished and requires fresh import to account for new media technologies, but instead with a careful analysis of what is different about how digital technologies afford or constrain certain utterances, interactions, and actions. Only then might one begin to articulate prospects of a digital rhetoric. This chapter examines the importance of time to an understanding the rhetoric of digital spaces. It suggests that rhetorical notions of kairos and chronos provide an important reminder that it is the rhetorical situation, along with rhetorical actors at individual to institutional levels, that construct the discursive spaces within which people participate, even in digitally-mediated environments.

INTRODUCTION[1]

"So low has Rhetoric sunk," I.A. Richards (1936) writes, "that we would do better just to dismiss it to Limbo than to trouble ourselves with it—unless we find reason for believing that it can become a study that will minister successfully to important needs" (p. 3). More than seventy-five years after Richards characterized an invigorated study of rhetoric as the study of "misunderstanding and its remedies," with substantial interventions shaping the problem space of rhetoric by Burke (1941, 1969), Booth (1961, 1974), and the great European re-visioning of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), rhetoric is now theorized significantly beyond a solely Aristotelian orientation (p. 3). Ancient rhetoric provided the rill from which

the river of rhetoric might grow, but through the intervening millennia of erosion and geographical changes to disciplines and to education broadly, ancient rhetoric became but one tributary to a vast river fed also by philosophy, linguistics, philology, psychology, and other disciplines. Accounts of rhetoric as *mere* persuasion, or even elevated notions of persuasion closer to dialectical argument, leave rhetoric firmly located in antiquity.

Our goal in this chapter is to connect complex discussions in historical and contemporary rhetoric with emerging discourses about digital media environments and that necessitates that we immediately address the question in this volume of "digital rhetoric." To do this, we draw on an account by Miller in a recent interview with *Figure/Ground Communication* (Ralon, 2012). Miller suggests that digital rhetoric might, "at this stage," be characterized as "a hypothesis—or maybe a hope" (para. 3). Her justification for this claim is that both the scope and focus of a digital rhetoric currently appear to remain under-theorized and that the intellectual form of rhetoric remains varied, particularly when taken beyond the U.S. context in which rhetoric found its revival in the 20th century.

"So low has Rhetoric sunk," we might say, that we would do better just to dismiss it and find a more contemporary media theory. Communication theorists such as Castells (2000), for example, provide researchers with ways of talking about the relationships, interactions, and contexts that make up our networked society to account for the kinds of discursive utterances, interactions, and actions we are seeing with the rise of digital technologies. Similarly, Engeström (1999, 2000) offers a rich agenda for educators interested in the technological, economic, and cultural dynamics in the modern global workplace. Taylor (2001) offers complexity theory as a way to understand how networks and networked communication has changed the cultural landscape of our society.

Can we find reason for believing that rhetoric can become a discipline that will *minister successfully* to the important changes of late 20th and early 21st century media environments and discursive landscapes? We emphatically argue that rhetoric can. A thoughtful account of the rhetoric of digital environments begins not with the provocation that rhetoric is impoverished and requires fresh import from other disciplines to account for new media technologies but, instead, asks what is different about how new media technologies afford or constrain certain utterances, interactions, and actions. Classic and contemporary rhetorical theory offers us a carefully elaborated language for describing how rhetors, exigencies, discourse, and situation interact both theoretically and practically. Thus human-computer interactions extend from textual interfaces and literacy practices which extend from oral traditions and dialectic.

To examine how rhetoric can minister successfully to our contemporary communication technologies, we offer a study of discourse acts taking place in a micro-blogging space called Twitter. For our purposes, the choice of Twitter is not a reflection of its superiority over other media. Rather, we look to this platform as one commonly used, albeit very popular site, a space that currently has significant purchase with a wide user base. As well, Twitter and some of its features may help us explore particular rhetorical concepts, *kairos* and *chronos*. While these features are not entirely unique to Twitter, they certainly shape much of the discourse surrounding this tool and provide us with some insight into the founder's perception of prospective users' needs. In large, prominent lettering at the top of their "About" page, Twitter thus boasts of being the "*fastest*, simplest way to stay close to everything you care about" and that one of its chief goals is to serve as "a *real-time* information network that connects you to the latest stories, ideas, opinions and news" (Twitter, 2013, emphasis ours). The

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