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Signal Boost!: Hashtags as Performative Writing and Social Action

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Signal Boost!: Hashtags as Performative Writing and Social Action

by

Leah Louise Heilig

A Thesis

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Chapter 1: #Context: Situating the Rhetorical Transformation of Hashtags

With the establishment of the digital network and the widespread accessibility of emergent technologies, social media has become inescapably meshed with contemporary culture. As of July 2014, Twitter, one of social media's most recognized platforms, has 271 million active users (Twitter). And as the use of tweets and hashtags increases, so too does its impact on popular culture. From the commercialization of #YOLO to the ability to trend about favorite television shows or programs, digital actions have a prominent connection to mass media and culture and an equal connection to private lives. The emergence of social media as a dominant form of interaction and communication has resulted in the cultivation of online personas by its practitioners. These personas are used to establish digital identities, compose discourse, and form public arguments, leading to performance within the social context of cyber communities. Social context is further impacted when the performance of hashtag composition relates to civic discourse and political action.

With the critical examination of one common device routinely used across several social media platforms, the interaction, balance, reflection, and performance of digital composition with nonvirtual culture can be explored as it relates to epistemology, civic discourse, and pedagogy. The following thesis, therefore, will identify the use of politically-themed hashtags as performative writing, the use of virtual communities as civic spaces, and examine how politically themed hashtags are able to function as public arguments within those spaces. Following the establishment of hashtags as public arguments, I will assess the potential pedagogical applications within first-year composition (FYC) curriculum.

Within the study, the use of critical theory and rhetorical analysis will be employed to answer the following primary research questions. First, how do hashtags operate as performative writing? Second, how do virtual communities operate as civic spaces, and therefore how do hashtags operate as civic discourse? Third, how does the promotion of social exigency via hashtags establish agency for subject groups? Fourth, how can agency lead to activism? And finally, how can the composition, use, and textual analysis of political hashtags fit the educational aims of FYC pedagogy?

#NotAllMen, #YesAllWomen: My Introduction to Hashtags as Social Movements

For the last two years, I have held an account on the social media site Tumblr. While not as active a user as others, I occasionally check updates and follow a variety of blogs covering a wide array of subject matter. From frivolous topics such as animals in people clothes to updates on the political environment of Ukraine, the content of the blog posts on my dashboard, or news feed, is sporadic, eclectic, and often disjointed. However, during May and June of 2014, a uniform presence became apparent on Tumblr. As I scrolled through posts expecting the usual array of cats wearing neck ties and recipes for soufflés baked in Mason jars, blog after blog instead held a shared element: the hashtag #YesAllWomen. Suddenly, a platform that I expected to be arbitrary now had a consistent pattern. And said pattern generated over one million posts within four days of its creation (Grinberg).

Seeing the hashtag repetitively appear was enough to catch my attention, but it was the content attached to #YesAllWomen that promoted a deeper reflection. As I scrolled through my feed, I read posts that were intimate, unsettling, and uncomfortable. All of which were published by female bloggers. Through more exposure, I eventually realized that the hashtag

#YesAllWomen is a tool of narration, used to express personal experiences and exposure that individual women have had with rape culture, forms of assault, misogyny, and systemic violence or oppression throughout their lives. As I read more accounts, I became curious as to what served as the catalyst for this sudden outburst that tonally felt caught somewhere between narrative, memorial, critique, and confession.

My investigation of the origin of #YesAllWomen led, surprisingly, to a discussion about men's rights. A quick Google search led me to a news article on Elliot Rodger and what has now been labeled the 2014 Isla Vista Killings (Ellis). On May 23, 2014, Elliot Rodger killed six and injured thirteen people in a shooting spree before committing suicide. Prior to the killings, Rodger uploaded both a video and a manifesto that provided self-justification for his actions. The video, posted to YouTube under the title "Elliot Rodger's Retribution," and the 107,000-word manifesto titled "My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger" both focused on women romantically and sexually rejecting Rodger and were identified by Rodger himself as the major factors in his decision to conduct the killings. Rodger's manifesto went further in-depth in targeting women, including language heavily mired in rape culture and misogyny, and outlined an ideal world where women were placed in concentration camps and deliberately starved to death. In statements, Rodger also identified himself as a Men's Rights Activist (MRA), an ideology that runs counter to common facets of feminism.

Once Rodger's manifesto went viral, a multitude of responses followed. Mass media discussions covered a wide political spectrum, from gun control to mental health evaluation, but what tied directly to the hashtag that piqued my interest were the conversations taking place in the virtual community rather than the mainstream media. Across a variety of social

media platforms, but particularly Twitter, the use of the hashtag #NotAllMen was both emerging and becoming connected to several text posts responding to Rodger's digital manifesto.

Created in 2011 by Twitter user Sassykrass, #NotAllMen has become a well-known meme within digital feminist discussions. The hashtag is the ideological by-product of a concept over two decades old, mainly credited to Joanna Russ's *On Strike Against God*, published in 1985. In her novel, Russ writes, "Not all men are rapists, only some" (Zimmerman). Originally, the hashtag was employed as a tool for men to insert themselves into feminist conversations on a digital platform, but through extensive and often condescending use, the tag devolved into a satiric meme of itself (McKinney). Instead of serving its original purpose to indicate an exceptional identity apart from the male aggressor, the tag became both associated with dismissiveness towards patriarchal critique and as a method to deflect accountability or avoid self-examination. #NotAllMen subsequently acquired a stigma and was well-known and mocked among digital feminist circles (McKinney).

In the face of a renewed interest in discussing both MRAs and systemic violence against women, the hashtag #NotAllMen began trending after the Isla Vista killings in 2014 (Zimmerman). With its employment, focus became centered not on the awareness of assault against women but on legitimizing the defense of men against social critique. The attention of the social media audience was changed again when an anonymous Twitter user, responding to the initial exigent shift, created the hashtag #YesAllWomen as a counterforce to #NotAllMen.

The establishment of #YesAllWomen promoted a rerouting of the digital discussion, as women around the world began to use the tag in order to call attention to the originating issue of violence. Twitter user Soraya Chemaly's tweet was one of the multitude of responses attached to the hashtag and adequately reflects the repurposing of the tag, "#notallmen practice violence against women but #YesAllWomen live with the threat of male violence. Every. Single. Day. All over the world" (Grinberg). Within less than a week of the tag's initial inception, #YesAllWomen had been used over one million times. The tag was attached to personal narratives and perspectives, painting a larger portrait of the conceptualization of misogyny and violence.

The paradigmatic alteration of discussion to the Isla Vista shootings struck me as an important rhetorical event. As I personally observed more examples of the narratives that were attached to #YesAllWomen, I began to see something that reminded me powerfully of a grassroots movement. By evoking an already well-established meme, #YesAllWomen was able to gain instant recognition from an audience within a digital realm. Women then used that recognition to direct attention onto an uncomfortable subject typically marginalized within mass media. In #YesAllWomen, I saw both a phenomenon that I felt warranted further investigation and a movement that made me curious as to the nature of performative writing, public argumentation, and writing for social action within the realms of virtual communities.

The exigent shift that occurred behind the metaphysical curtain of mass media demonstrated a method of counter-composition, dependent upon participation for social awareness. The device that functioned as a channel for this participation, the hashtag, served a purpose beyond its basic instrumental use. When #YesAllWomen is viewed as a piece of

composition, it becomes obvious that a hashtag can perform beyond the strict use-value of a codifier. Applying the exigent shifts, cultural contexts, and rhetorical situation to the success of the hashtag, or trend, provides a window of insight into the rhetorical strategies and tactics of a userbase. In that vein, this thesis seeks to discuss the metamorphosis of the hashtag from its original use as a pragmatic codifier to a piece of composition, symbiotic and reflective of cultural context and exigent awareness.

Using a brief history of the hashtag in conjunction with critical theory, this study will establish that hashtags have the ability to serve as performative writing and civic discourse. Furthermore, when examined through the lens of strategy and tactic, hashtags can also provide a mode for the articulation of public argument as it exists within cyberculture. Finally, the study articulates the potential digital arguments have to puncture the conceptual boundary between virtual and non-virtual communities, thereby allowing an avenue for hashtag composition to become a practice of writing for developing agency and social action.

#ProperChannels: An Informal History of the Hashtag and Identifying Ideological Shifts within Civic Contexts

Throughout the study, I have been unable to find a peer-reviewed, authoritative account of the evolution of the hashtag and its uses. Because of a lack of formal research, I have therefore conducted an informal history using an assortment of non-academic sources such as blogs, popular news sources, social media websites, and programming manuals. While this is in no way a definitive archive of the hashtag's various incarnations, looking at areas of consensus between programmers and social media users offers enough insight to see basic paradigmatic shifts in the hashtag's use. Comparing differing historical accounts

published outside of the academic spectrum allowed me to form my own speculations in regard to the chronology of major, rhetorical transformations of hashtags. To create a more specific study, my focus on observing the transformation of hashtags was centered primarily on their development from a syntactical element understood by a niche community into a genre of civic discourse. As such, this history monitors the major alterations undergone in hashtag composition as they pertain to political statements, which will be defined as any statement of, for, or relating to citizens, communities, or social issues.

Throughout the various shifts in identity and function of hashtags, the users have increasingly integrated their external culture with hashtags. Through my tracking of the hashtag from its original inception to its current uses in social media, it becomes apparent that a form of rhetorical DNA exists in the device, a manner of operation that is apparent through the transformations of the hashtag, which makes the survival of the hashtag (and its purpose or message) dependent upon an active performances by its users. The following brief history discusses the transition of the hashtag throughout its different modes and purposes of language: the original use of grouping and codifying within programming languages, as a means to create social channels, the emergence of the hashtag into contemporary social media, the first uses of a hashtag to collect crowd-sourced reporting, the first hashtags that transitioned from reporting to calls of action, and the first hashtag formed as a critique of dominant discursive media outlets.

As already noted, the hashtag's roots are based in programming language—a device first appearing in digital text as early as 1972. Within the *PDP 11/40* manual produced by Digital Equipment, the hashtag, or pound symbol, was used to create an address within

computer language. Figure 1 is a capture from said manual, positioning the hashtag as it first served in a functional capacity.

The PC responds to all the standard PDP-11 addressing modes. However, there are four of these modes with which the PC can provide advantages for handling position independent code (PIC - see Chapter 5) and unstructured data. When regarding the PC these modes are termed immediate, absolute (or immediate deferred), relative and relative deferred, and are summarized below:

Mode	Name	Assembler Syntax	Function
2	Immediate	#n	Operand follows instruction
3	Absolute	@#A	Absolute Address follows instruction
6	Relative	A	Relative Address (index value) follows the instruction.
7	Relative Deferred	@A	Index value (stored in the word following the instruction) is the relative address for the address of the operand.

Figure 1: PDP-11 Manual, 1972

In general, this manual is meant to explain the commands for operating the three basic tasks of a Central Processing Unit (CPU): fetch instructions, decode instructions, and execute instructions (Attri). To accomplish these tasks, an addressing mode is needed. In simplified terms, an addressing mode is the means by which the fetched instructions are located and then delivered by operands, or computing actions, within programming (Lin). Addressing modes can be used to perform a variety of functions, but two of the most important actions are establishing an address in which to store memory as well as indexing data sets (Attri). As shown in Figure 1, the two modes constructed with the # symbol are immediate and absolute.

In the immediate categorization of an addressing mode (e.g., #n), and therefore stylistically the mode most similar to modern hashtags on current social media, the value stored in memory is directly attached to the operand, or action. Memory and performance are

inherent with its construction; “that is to say, the instruction itself dictates what value will be stored in memory” (8051 Tutorial). While memory in CPU programming is not strictly the same as its colloquial definition, from its inception the # symbol has an interrelation between content of some capacity and active processes. The use of immediate addressing modes not only links instruction with command, but it also significantly narrows the scope of the content being addressed by the command. From the use-value perspective, the # symbol has always been a device meant to carve out a niche for certain movements, a process that will become further significant when examining this space-creation in regard to social movements. However, while the applications of computer language was further refined—most notably through the authoritative book *The C Programming Language* by Brian Kernighan and Dennis Ritchie published in 1978—it would take almost an entire decade until the combined functions of fetching memory, performing tasks, and narrowing information was applied to other areas inclusive of personal, social elements beyond utility.

The development of C programming language, one of the most widely-used programming languages, ultimately solidified the use of the # symbol as a method of organizational grouping. The use of the # symbol for categorizing content was first associated with a social component in 1988, through the platform of IRC, or Internet Relay Chat. Through IRC, the # symbol placed various content under one umbrella for easy reference and ultimately discussion (Kalt). These umbrellas were referred to as channels and served as predecessors to modern chatrooms. Figure 2 shows an excerpt from another manual, *Internet Relay Chat: Channel Management*, which details the specifics of channel creation.

1.3 Channels

A channel is a named group of one or more clients which will all receive messages addressed to that channel. The channel is created implicitly when the first client joins it, and the channel ceases to exist when the last client leaves it. While channel exists, any client can reference the channel using the name of the channel.

Channels names are strings (beginning with a '&' or '#' character) of length up to 200 characters. Apart from the the requirement that the first character being either '&' or '#'; the only restriction on a channel name is that it may not contain any spaces (' '), a control G (^G or ASCII 7), or a comma (',' which is used as a list item separator by the protocol).

Figure 2: Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channel descriptions (Kalt)

In contemporary technology, channels made within IRC were most comparable to the early chatrooms of messenger services (such as AIM, MSN, etc.) or listservs. Channel creation served to narrow content, facilitating a virtual discussion for computer users on specific topics. While information and action were still entwined in a way similar to CPU programming, IRC opened up an avenue for active contributions outside of strict command codes by users, adding a more human element to the process.

As defined in Figure 2, channels humanize a necessary level of engagement from the users operating within them in order to maintain a virtual presence. According to Kalt, “the channel is created implicitly when the first client joins it, and the channel ceases to exist when the last client leaves it” (5). Besides its participatory element, the channel is also a non-persistent product—the channel hosting the clients disappears once it’s no longer in use. Like its newest incarnation, the # symbol of programming language from nearly thirty years ago is ingrained with an assumed performance; its use value is dependent on the longevity of participation from users. While modern hashtags do not disappear, in order for tagged content to be found, the hashtag needs to have a marked presence in user experience, because there’s

no exigential need for archive. The IRC method of grouping content under channels extends the niche of content established by early CPU programming but also extends it to forming a niche for users and audiences in addition to information.

The establishment of IRC channels demonstrates the precedence for the compositional process later used in contemporary social media outlets. The pre-emptive use of # is a method of grouping, again serving in the role of codification. In strictly stylistic observances, the lack of spaces or commas in the creation of the channel predicts the modern design of a hashtag as well as the limitations on character length. The use of incorporating programming language with social discussion established a form of specialized audience and added an element of organizational clarity within digital content. Channels established a temporary hub for discussion, making topical searches easier to conduct—a strategy that was later adopted on social media platforms such as Twitter for the same convenience.

Twenty years after the IRC channels, hashtags were integrated into contemporary social media. In 2007, Chris Messina, a Twitter user, posted the tweet as shown in Figure 3.

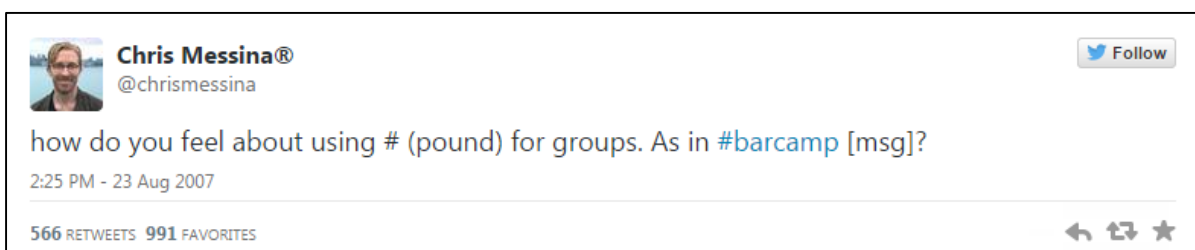


Figure 3: First use of a hashtag on Twitter (Bennett)

Again, the main purpose of the hashtag was to provide an umbrella-method of organizing content. Also like the channels, the hashtag #barcamp was created to give a conversational space to a specific audience—users who would go on to use #barcamp as a way to situate communication only with each other and not the Twitter userbase at large.

Operating in a manner similar to a listserv, the hashtag's organizational appeal lay in its ability to map out social territories of conversation, providing a place for members of the programming community to discuss relevant issues to their own social group. As Twitter integrated hyperlinks with the # symbol, the hashtag was an easy way to filter through content in order to gain information or entrance into a specific subject: from the mundane like company barbeque details to the more immediate like emergency alerts, hashtags made accessing information simple.

During October of 2007, a few months after Messina introduced the hashtag into mainstream social media, an eruption of firestorms in San Diego County, California, provided an appropriate *kairos* for the hashtag to transcend the niche social channels of programming-savvy communicators and function symbiotically with a dominant discourse. Because of the rapid spread of the fires, the dangerous situation generated the necessity for information that was immediate and easily accessible. At Messina's suggestion to a friend, web developer Nate Ritter, the hashtag then became the mode capable of distributing this information through data-mining, or the process by which one examines a large database in order to generate new facts (Bigelow). Ritter piloted the movement by monitoring news media sources and remediating their reports into short, quickly digestible tweets such as in Figure 4.

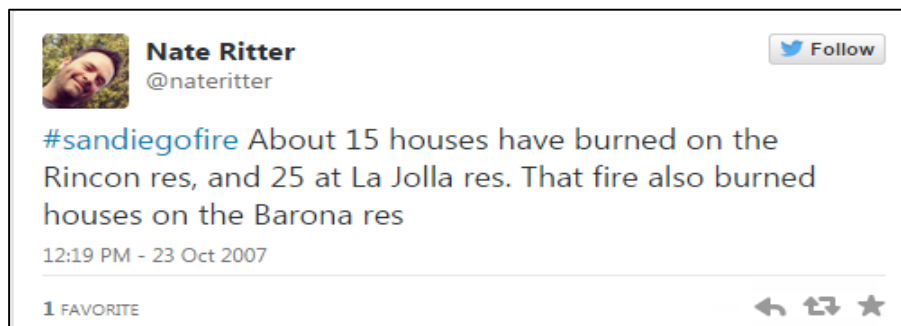


Figure 4: First use of the hashtag as a method of reporting (Bigelow)

The use of #sandiegofire was eventually adopted by other users, all experimenting in a new method of citizen-reporting to quickly communicate the spread of the wildfires. The hashtag #sandiegofire served as one of the first (if not *the* first) puncture between a specific social territory (programmers) and a broader, more dominant audience (average social media users) by crowdsourcing data from Twitter users. The use of the hashtag then formed another puncture between cyber and physical community spaces by catching the attention of the local media. Jerry Sheehan, former chief of staff for the California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology, was one of many professionals endorsing the effectiveness of #sandiegofire in the facilitation of wide, societal awareness: “The use of the # in the public safety event allowed the media to essentially turn citizens into news gatherers. If you remember the ’07 fires, there was a fair amount of crowdsourced content that was facilitated by Twitter” (Bigelow). The exposure the hashtag garnered during these events led to two new ideological facets: the adoption of a wider-spread userbase inclusive of more dominant discursive practices and the idea of using a hashtag as a place to pin content or information beyond basic chat functions. The use of the hashtag during the San Diego fires therefore set a precedent for the civic nature of the device, which would later be used to make a massive impact in regard to international political protest.

The relationship between hashtags, composition, and civic discourse was taken to a higher level of nuance and sophistication during 2009, when hashtag campaigns were applied to political protest. Two separate incidents established what was contemporarily and retroactively labelled the Twitter Revolution (Carvin). The first instance of hashtags transitioning from reporting to political action was observed by student-led protests in

Moldova. The students, protesting the victory of the Communist party in Moldova's election, attempted to mobilize action and awareness through creating #pman, a hashtag standing for Piata Marii Adunari Nationale, the main square in Chisinau where the civic demonstrations were taking place (Allison). The motive behind the hashtag signified a critical sociopolitical and, therefore, rhetorical shift. Instead of the data-mining purpose of #sandiegofire, #pman was developed with the intention of mobilization. With #pman, hashtags no longer civically served as just a channel or nexus for content but had the potential to operate tonally as a call to action.

While #pman and the Moldovan protests signified an important shift in the rhetorical purpose of the hashtag, #pman was ultimately unsuccessful at drawing in massive, viral attention in ways achieved by later hashtag campaigns. We can speculate that a potential reason for the hashtag's failure, aside from its relatively new use as a call to action, would be the inaccessibility of the tag itself to a generalized audience inclusive of the dominant discourse. While #pman undoubtedly was recognizable to fellow Moldovans, on a global scale it was not as easily understood. Rhetorically, #pman functioned as a method of conversation between users within a virtual community already informed of the message, and the simplicity of the tag did not necessitate as effective a conversation as its successor, the hashtag #IranElection.

The rhetorical potential and intention behind #pman was more greatly visible on a global level with the use of #IranElection and the protests following the 2009 Iranian elections. After the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad over Mir-Houssein Mosavi, Iranian citizens protested en masse over allegedly fraudulent voting procedures (Parr). When the

shooting of a protestor, Neda Agha-Soltan, was uploaded to the internet and subsequently went viral, further virtual momentum for the movement occurred. Globally, the hashtags of #IranElection and #neda (for Neda Agha-Soltan) received significantly high traction, with a peak of 221,744 Iran-related tweets per hour (Parr). The sheer visibility of #IranElection and its sister hashtags (#neda, #mousavi, #ahmadinejad, etc.) had two important results: it was the first major instance of citizen-reporting that put the pressures of accountability on mainstream media, and the hashtags evolved into a method to inspire political support, gather resources, and communicate on an international stage.

Because of the immediacy of citizen-reporting through Twitter and other social media outlets, many users were exposed to the civic unrest in Iran long before mass communication outlets covered the subject. Heavy backlash from users against major news networks such as CNN and FOX formed as a result (Parr), and several hashtags emerged as a method of critique against networks, most popularly #CNNFail (Allison) as shown in Figure 3.

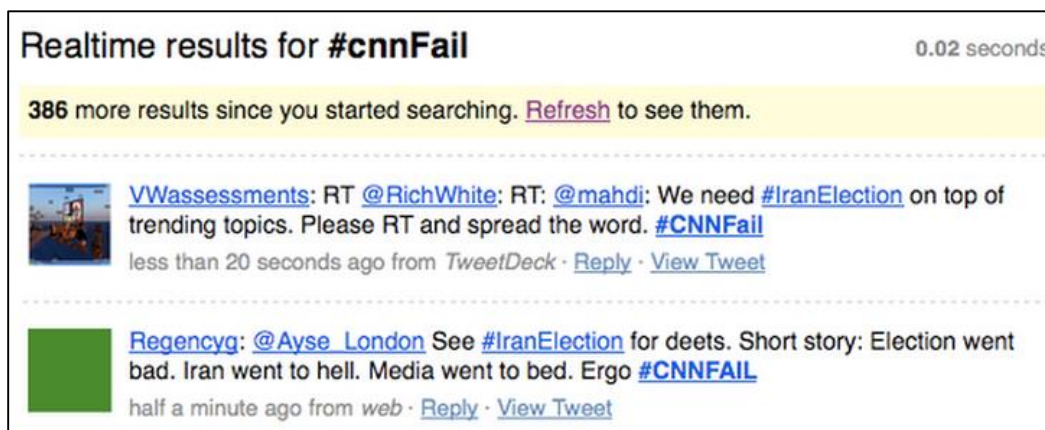


Figure 5: #CNNFail as a response to Iranian election (Terdiman)

The criticism aimed at mass media from alternate communication sources established one of the first visible uses of a rhetorical tactic, conducted in order to shift the boundary

between cyber and mainstream community. By pairing #CNNFail with #IranElection, content generated through both channels became associated with one another in the context of an issue that previously received no mass-media attention in the United States, gaining considerable focus in the cyberworld and holding CNN accountable for its lack of coverage.

The knowledge gained with the proliferation of #IranElection formed social exigency through the hashtag's movement and widespread use. The application of the hashtag then led to its inclusion in trending topics, emphasizing its importance and allowing an argument for awareness to become a platform for political mobilization. While #IranElection had become a widely accessible channel, it still incorporated a sense of community and specialization of audience by operating within a cyber-domain. That civic engagement was apparent in the use of the hashtag to generate resources and action for those in Iran, as evidenced in the example tweet as shown in Figure 6.



Figure 6: #IranElection tweets (Parr)

Like its predecessor #pman, the intentions of users retweeting #IranElection went beyond the use-value of forming a specialized channel. Instead, the hashtag became the agency through which virtual communication transformed into social action, while still being ideologically connected to the hashtag's original roots of programming languages. The methods used by technologically savvy composers to offer information about and critique of civic and cultural matters outside of the traditional social territory of digital conversation led to the hashtag's permeation into mainstream culture.

The Iranian elections in particular helped bolster the ideological shift of the hashtag from an updated IRC channel to its contemporary usage. The wide-spread momentum generated by the political movements therefore influenced the cultural acceptance of this new form of virtual communication. The adoption of the channel system by users outside of the domain of programming languages later facilitated a different application of the device, removing the use-value of the hashtag from the strictly organizational to organizational *and* compositional.

By 2009, the device had been formally adopted by Twitter (MacArthur). Hashtags have since been incorporated into nearly every major social media platform, including Instagram, Tumblr, Pinterest, Facebook, Google+, YouTube, Orkut, Fluidinfo, Catch.com, FriendFeed, Diaspora Software, WordPress, and others (Doctor). Following the Iranian elections, political associations with hashtags became a common practice, but as hashtags gained more traction, particularly on social media sites such as Instagram, they also existed to serve cultural associations and offer various forms of communication, such as ironic commentary to original posts, double-speak or satire with contradictory content attached to the hashtags, tongue-in-cheek self-identification, and other conversations relating to popular culture (Allison).

As it stands today, the hashtag has become an all-encompassing framing device, used to position content and add briefly articulated commentary. From the popular-culture applications (#YOLO, #sunsoutgunsout, #hotonayacht) to the political (#BringBackOurGirls, #BlackLivesMatter, #OccupyWallstreet), one thing every hashtag has in common is the need for contextual awareness and active participation in order for it to become successful.

Returning to the constrictions of performance within the IRC channels, the # requires the presence of users, or it ceases to exist.

#pointApointB: Moving from Presence to Performance

Almost ten years since its introduction within social media, the use of the political hashtag is currently caught somewhere between a reinvigorated bumper sticker and chatroom. Much like a bumper sticker, the hashtag itself is not a full argument and is dependent on a larger, contextual knowledge base to be effective. Also like a bumper sticker, a hashtag can exist merely to direct attention to larger, more complicated issues, such as the popular slogan of “Free Tibet” in the late 1980s. However, the hashtag complicates the relatively straightforward approach of the bumper sticker when its participatory nature is applied to political issues. By having elements of traditional chatrooms, such as the channel creation in IRC, combined with data-mining approaches to reporting, as in the case of #sandiegofire, the ownership of the hashtag becomes ambiguous when one considers the active nature of its production and distribution.

Looking at Twitter in particular, the userbase is expanding, with nearly 300 million users and an average of 500 million tweets per day (Twitter). The multi-modal approach to information sourcing associates the hashtags with a variety of subjects, and the character limit imposed on the content generated restricts the content from being more than a briefly articulated soundbyte. In the realm of cyberculture context is made by piece-meal, a series of contributions rather than a product of sole authorship. The traditional notion of “owning” a piece of text is complicated by this mosaic approach to epistemology. Authorial purpose is secondary to the participation of the text that has been composed by contributions from

audience members. Situational knowledge is then constructed in a real-time atmosphere, constantly feeding off of its own self-perpetuated frames and redefining its own rhetorical situation.

Digital composition has allowed instant and accessible platforms for the production and reception of writing, and it has established an interactive way to generate and receive public communication. Writing in cyberspace has now become a performative process as social media platforms require the use of participatory activity in order for people to contribute to the discussion at large. Even micro-levels of engagement, such as liking posts or retweeting, still require involvement of the audience, making both the producer of the product as well as its consumers' co-authors, or at least, co-facilitators of the communicated message. Conscious decisions are made not only in the production of text but in its distribution as well. Effective communication is evaluated publically and democratically, with the exposure of the content associated with the hashtag dependent on its use—it has transformed into a method of self-generated meaning-making. The fluidity, subjectivity, and versatility of information has an element of transparency in the domain of cyberculture through the instantaneous nature of its compositional production and ideological value.

By examining the production and distribution of the hashtag, inferences can be made about the rhetorical situation surrounding its users, who function as both audience and author, consumers and producers. Hashtags operate as a mode of symbolic action. While a hashtag is inarguably a product of composition with its first use, the nature of its reliance on active perpetuation in order to communicate left me with the question as to whether or not the hashtag is a piece of composition every time it is attached to new content, used in a reblog or

retweet, or is attached to a new piece of content by another user. Furthermore, I was left wondering whether the shelf-life of the hashtag makes an impact on the hashtag's potential to serve as a means of composition.

With the research of the origins and subsequent incarnations of the hashtag, I was left with the impression that the hashtag, above anything else, is a form of *present* writing. It exists in the immediate as it directly reflects current issues or attitudes. It also exists to serve participatory users, creating a channel of information developed with input only from the active engagement of those who access it. By first discussing the theoretical framework of language as symbolic action and then reflecting upon the ideological shifts of the hashtag, I will establish a marriage between facets of Kenneth Burke's dramatist approach to rhetoric and the current use of hashtags. After establishing writing as performance, I will then use the classical framework of the *polis* to position social media users as actors within a discourse community.

Chapter 2: #ExisgentalCrisis: The Forming of Social Action through Social Exigency

My analysis on the composition and distribution of hashtags operates within the theoretical framework of Burkean dramatism. With dramatism, a heavy focus is placed upon the application of motive as it relates to rhetorical strategy in the production and reception of communication. In general terms, dramatism is described by Burke as “a method of analysis and a corresponding critique of terminology designed to show that the most direct route to the study of human relations and human motives is via a methodical inquiry into cycles or clusters of terms and their functions” (Burke, “Dramatism” 445). To fully articulate the groundwork for my eventual claim of hashtags serving as public argument, it is critical to establish the foundation that hashtags are performative writing. Hashtags serve appropriately as artifacts in Burke’s dramatism by emphasizing the active component to the writing process.

On a very base level, hashtags embody recycled motive through a process called trending, gaining momentum in waves, and often losing it just as quickly. Very little about hashtags remain stagnant, as they are created and reproduced in real-time. The presence of hashtags then operates on a system similar to Burke’s cycles, with certain hashtags achieving a popular enough rate of use or retweets to earn a spot in featured topics on social media websites. Earning virtual attention or going viral also bridges the space between “human relations and human motives,” as the rhetorical success of a hashtag is dependent upon an unvoiced buy-in. For a hashtag to gain traction and solidify itself, there must be something unifying, recognizable, and attractive about its composition. Trending patterns produced by hashtags are articulators of what piques users’ interest most in the current moment.

Through investigating hashtags as performative writing and then by examining performative writing within virtual spaces, this chapter will establish how hashtags may function in the capacity of public arguments within the discourse communities formed by social media platforms. By synthesizing the performative frameworks of Burke with the definition of a *polis* found in Classical rhetoric, the applications of hashtags as civic discourse will be further examined to identify areas where political hashtags perform as writing as social action.

#BurkeingBad: Establishing a Frame of Reference for Performative Writing

Breaking down the most common, accessible elements of Burkean theory provides a basis for defining performative writing. While I was observing the movement of #YesAllWomen and retroactively contemplating former patterns of other trends I had witnessed, I found several connections to dramatism and writing as symbolic action. With Burkean theory, the most appropriate lenses through which to evaluate and categorize hashtags as an artifact of composition were found in an application of the pentad, identification and consubstantiality, identification and transformation, cooperation and competition, and an assessment of terministic screens as they apply to virtual communities.

The predominant question I had when trying to situate hashtags as a performative text was where it relates in the frame of Burke's pentad. The pentad consists of positions established by Burke which act as a means to understand both motive and action in any given rhetorical situation, or "the pentad is a strategic method for analyzing discourse by focusing on how it attributes human motivation to action" (Blakesley, "Dramatism and Rhetoric" 32). Initially, it was difficult to place hashtags into any clear role of the pentad (Act, Agent,

Agency, Purpose, and Scene). As they operate in real-time and also are contingent upon trending to be visible, hashtags could easily fit within the position of Act, or what action is occurring. However, political hashtag creation and distribution could just as well serve the function of Agency, as political hashtags are the avenue through which content is delivered to a massive audience. Finally, separate but still integral to the assessment of hashtag composition within the pentad method of analysis is whether or not users fulfill the role of Agent. As I will later discuss, social media platforms complicate the traditional distinction between author and audience. Users operate as Agents in the initial composition of the hashtag's message; however, users also perform as Agents when passing the message along when they tag new content with the same hashtag or perpetuate the original content through retweeting. Conceptualizing the performance of hashtags in Burke's pentad allows for a general contextualization in the theoretical framework.

It is impossible to remove identification from the conversation when looking at the connection between motive and the symbolic action of language. Rhetoric, if we are defining it as finding the available means of persuasion, is separate from identification. As David Blakesley states, "unlike persuasion, which is normally thought to involve explicit appeals and manipulation, identification allows for an unconscious factor as well" (15). Identification exists within social media through the use of persona, or users adapting an avatar (usually in the form of an account) to mark their presence within virtual communities. By adopting personas, users are able to retweet or tag content with hashtags they feel are directly relevant to either themselves personally or content they feel is worthy of being communicated. However, without occupying an actual, physical space, the body of the user must be created

through virtual means. These virtual bodies, called cyborgs, unite “the virtual and the real, the avatar and the actual” as discussed by Charles R. Garoian and Yvonne M. Gaudelius (335).

Users are Agents in their own right but are also physically disembodied actors in need of virtual representation to communicate within cyberspace. As such, the continued survival of certain political hashtags and the phenomenon of trending is a performance not only to promote content, but also to establish identity of the users through the use of demonstrative, public participation.

By evaluating hashtag use and composition as a method of identification, the unvoiced buy-in necessary to establish trends, as discussed previously, is therefore part of an active dialectic in virtual spaces. With the Burkean concept of consubstantiality, or “the unconscious desire to identify with others” (Blakesley, “Dramatism and Rhetoric” 15), trends can operate as a physical manifestation of users, or Agents, trying to reach a compromised space of visibility within the territory of social media. Because of the impermanent nature of hashtag trends, the process of reaching compromise for promoted material is constant with cyberspace. Managing consensus is a seemingly silent action that nevertheless continues as users continuously re-form their own identities:

flickering between the randomness of digital information and its patterning, the [cyborg] body’s identity is continually negotiated and re-negotiated, a play of resistance between the disjunctive attributes of cyberspace and the conjunctions that occur as the subject coalesces meaning and interpretation. (Garoian and Gaudelius 338)

Hashtags are a place to visibly recognize the renegotiation of social exigency within cyberspaces, with emergent patterns forming after a democratic, performative contribution to their manifestations. Meaning and interpretation are joined through hashtags by the user first

decoding the meaning of the abbreviated message (e.g., #YesAllWomen) and simultaneously performing with the message based on that user's own interpretation (e.g., a user tagging the picture of a dress code with #YesAllWomen). Agents therefore commit both an Act and find a method of Agency with hashtag composition and attribution. With identification, the constant redefinition of the rhetorical situation plays a part in framing not only identification and consubstantiality, but identification and transformation as well.

In order for one hashtag to trend successfully, it has to gain more attention than other hashtags organizing the content of similar topics. When looking at the process of identification and transformation as they relate to rhetoric, Burke identifies transformation as a means of symbolic violence, "the *killing* of something is the *changing* of it" (Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* 20). In the realm of performative writing, consubstantiality is the embodiment of the need to connect, whereas transformation is the desire to overtake. The phenomenon of transformation is also present within the performance of hashtags in rhetorical maneuvers. When looking at my predominant example of #YesAllWomen, the transformation of the hashtag from its origin (#NotAllMen) *transformed* the contextual meaning of the movement surrounding the tag. As more users identified with #YesAllWomen than #NotAllMen, the presence and performance of #NotAllMen took a significant decline. Another prominent example from current social media contexts is the willful transformation of #BlackLivesMatter to #AllLivesMatter following the failure to indict Officer Darren Wilson on charges regarding the shooting of civilian Michael Brown in November of 2014. The shifts of tone found within the subtle conversations provided by the hashtags were reflective of new Agents transforming the message based on areas of their civic identification.

Hashtag composition and use exemplifies the dualistic nature found between consubstantiality and transformation by also portraying the balance between cooperation and competition in the forming of identity. According to Blakesley (“Terministic Screens”), Burke found cooperation and competition necessary in order to achieve a heightened dialectic, with general consensus being too simple of a solution and a detriment to the meaning-making process, but “put several such voices together, with each voicing its own special assertion, let them act upon one another in co-operative competition, and you get a dialectic that, properly developed, can lead to views transcending the limitations of each” (Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* 63). If we position the hashtag as an Act, the composition of a tag such as #YesAllWomen is created with the intention of repurposing or in competition with an already-established conversation by transforming the meaning of #NotAllMen. If we position #YesAllWomen as Agency, it is a method of allowing cooperation, forming a new channel for women to express their narratives and to carve out a safe niche for an often uncomfortable conversation. Hashtags are unique in being able to visibly demonstrate both of these performances as they are unfolding, lending an avenue for opaqueness towards the meaning-making processes as they relate to massive social dialectics.

These social dialectics are expedited when they are made accessible to users, and direct appeals to user identities can occur when hashtags operate as terministic screens. By leading attention to the framing of posts, the hashtags attached to new content are channels meant to attract a specific audience or response within the arena of virtual communities. The positioning and context associated with a hashtag can have its own meaning by filtering how posts are interpreted by social media audiences. The wording of the hashtag itself can also

affect how the content is interpreted by providing the equivalent of brand recognition within cyberspace. Hashtags establish meaning through association, forming and maintaining their own scope and circumference of content for virtual communication.

The nature of Twitter Darwinism in regards to trending also connects Burke's dramatism to hashtags as performative writing. The active formation of epistemology within rhetoric is dependent upon "the nature of our terms [that] affect the nature of our observations, in the sense that the terms direct the attention to one field rather than another" (Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* 46). Competition exists within cyberspace for what earns exigency. When one hashtag succeeds (e.g., #YesAllWomen), it is often at the expense of others with which it coexists (e.g., #NotAllMen). The measured success of hashtags is dependent upon the involvement of the cyber community. When the community promotes certain hashtags over others, it reflects the nature of what the community judges important by exemplifying some channels of information over others. The flexibility of hashtags as either Act or Agency is also applicable to evaluating users as Agents; Agents, in cyberspace, are inseparable from their Scene: social media platforms.

#Polis: Virtual Communities as Civic Spaces

The contemporary function of hashtags is to provide a public organization for content into specific categories. When users of Twitter, Instagram, or any other social media platform choose to retweet or reblog content attached to a hashtag, the content is put into two locations: the channel of the hashtag (and therefore a stream of posts made by a variety of authors), and the presence on the user's dashboard, blog, or home page. When a political hashtag appears

on a user homepage, even as reproduced content, it makes a statement about that user, and that statement can have multiple determinations of value in regard to civic significance.

Defining social media platforms as virtual communities positions hashtag performance as public arguments. Moreover, in specific settings and contexts, the public arguments formed by hashtags can be further elevated to writing as social action. Before hashtags as public arguments can be discussed, however, social media platforms must be solidified as communities. Using a Classical framework, social media platforms have the ability to operate as an ideological successor to the *polis*, forming both a discourse and rhetorical community that can be used to facilitate civic engagement and dialectical epistemology.

Much like cyberspace, the *polis* did not exist in the physical, concrete notions of reality. Rather, it was an abstraction, an ideal overarching practice that governed civic practices and societal communication. Social media platforms have several attributes that are reflective of the model of a *polis*, particularly in regard to how the *polis* has been adapted into a rhetorical community. Carolyn Miller discusses and synthesizes the nature of community as it appears through different lenses of political theorists, mainly Plato, Isocrates, and sophists such as Protagoras. Miller removes the *polis* from an actualized state to one existing only in the realms of possibilities, “not so much a geo-demographic entity as an ideological projection, [but as] a conception necessitated by the desire to discuss rhetorical and political relations” (Miller 236). By situating the concept of *polis* within a rhetorical spectrum, the nature of human language as it interacts with culture becomes a vital building block for the creation of a discourse community. Discussing the various attributes of the *polis* in classical

rhetoric also allows a workable framework for contextualizing social media as an updated successor to this figurative rhetorical community.

One attribute that Miller strongly emphasizes with the *polis* is its dependency on participation. In imagining the *polis*, rhetoric and community exist interdependently within it, though the nature of their relationship within the *polis* can have a variety of interpretations depending on the Classical framework it is based upon; that is “[the Greeks had] various beliefs about the role of rhetoric in forming communities and the role of community in shaping rhetoric” (Miller 216). Miller discusses a few potential frameworks by providing three models of the *polis*: Protagoras’s model, which was situated within sophistic and anthropological ideology; Plato’s model, which was based on authoritarian epistemology; and Aristotle’s model, which synthesized aspects from both. In relation to hashtags and social media as a civic space, the models set forth by Protagoras and Aristotle hold the most relevance in positioning social media as a rhetorical community. However, despite the multitudes of definitions of the rhetorical *polis*, it is never in question that the community at large is situated by its constituents and that the participation and engagement of the citizen has an impact on the discourse found within said community regardless of framework.

In Miller’s interpretation, both Protagoras and Aristotle place a higher importance on the democratic contribution to the direction of society. The sophistic approach to the formation of a community seems most applicable to a new definition of a virtually-based *polis*. As Miller states in reference to the Protagorean conceptualization of the *polis*, “participation here can only be rhetorical; it takes place through debate and deliberation. Through speech the virtues of justice and respect are tested, enacted, and developed, and

through speech the community itself is created and recreated” (Miller 222). Social media platforms are an easy outlet to view the shifts ideologies undergo within communal spaces.

As discussed within the history, the purpose of the hashtag has evolved, with modifications contingent upon user necessity. In all of the major changes to the device, the implementation of the hashtag was a direct result of social exigency, such as its use to report (#sandiegofire) and to promote awareness (#IranElection). In its contemporary use, the hashtag is an active method of redirecting social exigency through promoting awareness to subjects in the cyber community that are not typically covered in mainstream media. This fits the model of the sophistic *polis* by highlighting the plurality of experience and places significance on the development of cultural values based upon cultural participation (Miller 224). As such, the formation of the content which earns attention is facilitated not just by the individual user but by the community of the user which supports and enhances the content being distributed. Therefore, the role of community takes on a far more nuanced role than audience in virtual communication.

Similarly to how hashtag production and distribution does not fit easily into either category of Agency, Act, or Actor, community is also not so easily positioned within the rhetorical situation. Miller makes a critical distinction between community and audience that suits the positioning of hashtags as performance:

[A] community, then, defines a horizon of possibilities for any given audience that realizes it; community includes the rhetor as well as the audience, and it includes prior specific audiences and any number of potential audiences, as well as what it is they have in common—experiences, beliefs, stories, and other ways of using language—that allows for intellectual (as well as emotional) contact. (Miller 212)

The inclusion of the rhetor, or author, in the same sphere as the audience makes communication within the *polis* an embedded process. In other words, the authors of a text, in whatever incarnation that may take, is unable to be removed from their position that holds the same philosophical constraints as their audience. Because of the author and audience's proximity, texts produced within a community are made accessible to that particular social territory.

The symbiotic relationship between author and audience is noticeable within social media platforms. Successful authors, or those whose hashtags gain traction and presence, must be able to understand the specific needs of the audience in order to communicate effectively. Considering the participant-dependent quality of hashtags being legitimized through processes like trending, the jargon and codifiers must exist within the social constraints that define audience needs. Looking at the visible success of politically themed hashtags, such as #HeForShe, #BringBackOurGirls, and #BlackLivesMatter, the initial composer of these hashtags was required to draw upon an already-established knowledge base in order for the tag to become an accepted method of dispersing content previously established with former context.

To look at my initial example #YesAllWomen, a community knowledge was already ingrained within author and audience of the hashtag through a familiarity with both #NotAllMen and the political context of the Isla Vista Killings. Hashtags capitalize on community values or tropes by playing upon the conventions assumed by the audience. While the expression "Not all men..." originated outside of the virtual realm by first appearing in a book, it was the cyber community that transformed it into a colloquial saying. Therefore, by

going off of a community trope (#NotAllMen's applications in techno-feminist conversations), the original authors of #YesAllWomen were able to use contextual knowledge found only within the cyber social territory to their advantage.

#YesAllWomen is a digital response to a digital statement. Without the author and audience having reached an understanding about the purpose of #YesAllWomen as subversion, the subversion would not be successful and would be ultimately rejected or forgotten, as it would not have merit within the social territory of social media and, more specifically, within techno-feminist conversations. Most importantly, without the contextual positioning of both hashtags, an element of the rhetorical significance is missing: the subtle critique of the original hashtag #NotAllMen. While someone could garner a general understanding of the motive and purpose behind #YesAllWomen simply by reading the content attached to it, the full understanding and the realization of a subverted trope can be realized only upon a pre-existing acknowledgement of #NotAllMen and the stigma attached to it.

With the immersion of author and audience in the production of original content, the distinction between community and audience is necessary when examining the nature of ownership regarding a retweeted or reblogged post. Through the reproduction of content without contributing original messages, the function of recycling posts positions social media users to exist in a place between audience and author. While average users are not responsible for the initial creation of the hashtag, user contribution, and therefore audience contribution, can exist in two principle ways. First, users contribute by tagging a hashtag with new associations, such as taking #YesAllWomen and adding a new tweet that encapsulates a

user's own, personal experience to it. And secondly, users also contribute by supporting or endorsing a tweet through recycling the originating content, such as reblogging someone else's narrative with #YesAllWomen. Both processes are a direct result of audience engagement, and while the first adds a more dynamic element of authorial authenticity, the second is just as necessary to the perpetuation and livelihood of the originating content. Both also have the ability to broaden the channel of content, the first by expanding the mosaic with new perspectives and growing the rhetorical situation and the second by reaching new audiences. If authorship is defined by communicating a message to an audience, both of these contributing actions fulfill that role. This new, complicated concept of authorship is integral to the facilitation of the virtual *polis* as a rhetorical space.

Hashtag composition is uniquely suited to the framework of the sophistic *polis* in that it is entirely democratic. The main quality a hashtag needs to be successful is popularity, with most social media algorithms depending on the overall traffic flow of the hashtag. The trending process straddles a line of paradox, as hashtags need attention to be viewed, but political hashtags are often a reflection of topics that are not receiving notice. Creating hashtags is then a practice of rhetorical strategy, as the authors and then members of the community must thoroughly understand the audience they are producing for. As the number of users in cyber-culture is theoretically limitless, the number of hashtags generated with the purpose of garnering virtual attention is also a number that cannot be confined. As such, the hashtags implemented with the motive of acceptance from the community undergo a process similar to political voting: the hashtags that are compelling enough to perpetuate survive and expand; the ones that are not fail.

This dependency on democratic approval relates to Protagoras's favorite adage of men being the measure of all things. As in cyberspaces it is user-acceptance that allows for discussion "if humans are the measure, our understanding of the relative strength of alternative arguments will depend upon who we are and how an argument has been presented to us" (Miller 224). In its practice of an epistemological survival of the fittest, trending indicates community by the exigent shifts that occur as a result of reblogging or retagging content. The *polis* exists in the channels found within contingents who manage to agree, without face to face contact, on what hashtags are worthy of epistemological success. That unspoken coercion fits the principles of the sophistic *polis* as a virtual dialectic to establish social exigency.

The Aristotelian notion of the *polis* has the same coercion at the heart of its definition. Like the sophistic emphasis on a more anthropologic approach to rhetoric, Aristotle's *polis* has a heavy reliance on the civic aspects of community formation, integrating activism and virtue:

another feature of the ideal Aristotelian *polis* is that it is participatory... Aristotle shows some impatience with definitions of the citizen that rely on parentage or residence and preferences a definition based on participation... the whole purpose of association is to achieve 'the best life possible,' which requires an 'active exercise of virtue and a complete employment of it'—that is, engagement in the activities and issues and with the people in the community. (Miller 232)

In this respect, social media and the active contributions of content reblogging and boosting ascribe to this idealized concept of citizenry. When users employ specific hashtags to communicate their own message or direct the attention regarding civic affairs using political soundbytes in the virtual community, they are accessing the conversation of the metaphysical acropolis.

Aristotle also emphasized the importance of the community in the shaping of discourse and the importance of discourse in connection to politics, arguing that rhetoric was a branch of both the dialectic and ethics (Miller 233). In an Aristotelian perspective, politics overhangs all three, and while social media is not in existence solely for political discussion, it is an avenue by which political action takes place. In particular, the emphasis on exigency is prevalent in hashtag trending, as “the *polis* provides exigencies, forums for addressing those exigencies, and topical resources by which those exigencies can be mitigated” (Miller 233). Social media platforms serve all three of these proposed functions. First, exigencies are established through the use of trending or featured topics. Second, forums are made accessible through communicating within channels formed by hashtags. And third, as social media exists in real time with constantly redefined boundaries, topical resources are accessible on a massive level by all members within the virtual spaces.

Using Miller’s Classical frameworks for the rhetorical community depending upon participation and the author also belonging to the audience, social media serves as a modern-day *polis* by operating as a site of contention. The production of content is complicated by the constant real-time contributions to the overall message, with the owner of the hashtag being near impossible to discern after significant traction. Knowledge, or perhaps more accurately *meaning*, is formed and maintained by the collective attention. Much like Burke’s notions of consubstantiality and transformation, identification is both necessary and compelling in the longevity of the hashtag but also in the development of the content attached to the hashtag. At a base level, rhetoric exists as an invitation to understanding. As such, social relations must be

functional and discourse must be an invention of the community that uses it in order to access these understandings.

Cyberspace is a discourse community unto itself, with its own norms, methods of regulation, tropes, and rhetorical strategies. The hashtag is therefore a genre in this community, a means to deliver content and promote digital conversation that is truly owned by a community rather than a solitary author. Social media allows for instant discussion and synthesis of information, and with its accessibility and participant-dependent functionality, these platforms fit the model of a rhetorical *polis*, as Miller states “understanding the *polis* as a specifically rhetorical community, it is helpful to see it not as primarily an empirical social structure (however imperfect) but as the framework for an event: as the continuing opportunity—the forum—for debate, discussion, dialogue, dispute” (239). Unlike mass media, news outlets, or even, to an extent, classrooms, social media does not have the strict “empirical” presence in the majority of its incarnations. Information gathered and discussed is delivered only by users, the cybercitizens, through the construction of discursive channels. Social channels re-form and self-regulate through the use of hashtags, giving hashtag campaigns the possibility to serve as a mode for engaging in civic discourse within a virtual forum.

#SecretAgencyMan: Hashtags and the Cybercitizen

Political hashtags are often used to establish social exigency, and, with control of social exigency, comes the possibility of directing attention. However, in making the eventual claim that hashtags have the potential to be public arguments, it’s important to return to Burke and make the distinction between Agency and Act. In conveying information within a

community, hashtags are more accurately positioned as the Agency—a means of forming a space for discourse, and distributing content. But there is a crucial, rhetorical difference between hashtags as a transporter of communication and hashtags as a method of communication unto themselves. When hashtags (in the scope of this study, specifically *political* hashtags) are used with the express intention of establishing their own message, they become composition in their own right. The next three sections discuss political hashtags when they are positioned as Act, first by breaking down the rhetorical merit of hashtags when evaluating them as genre and second by seeing how hashtags are used to form movements, puncturing the social space between cyber and physical communities through rhetorical maneuver, strategy, and tactic.

Beyond the formation of discussion channels, hashtags carry their own meaning as civic discourse. Returning to Classical rhetoric, sophistic framing of civic discourse is grounded in discourse's relationship to participation in political action and that participation being accessible to citizens. Rhetoric becomes intrinsically linked to civic engagement through the use of active participation in the construction of knowledge. Susan Jarratt also contextualizes the sophistic notions of meaning-making by categorizing rhetorical strategy into three categories: analytic, performative, and anthropological. Knowledge and the construction of meaning are based anthropologically—that is, relative to cultural norms—in social media, taking in influence from the community and, most importantly, responding to the needs and situation of the community. The sophistic construction of values, in particular, has a heavy dependency on the movement of such social exigencies in public forums as it relates to meaning-making. By positioning the creation of knowledge as a product of

communitarian and social need, understanding argument becomes a matter of civic participation. Social awareness, then, becomes a critical component of civic discourse.

Much like the bumper sticker, hashtags with a political component are intended to draw attention. As such, some hashtags have rhetorical meaning unto themselves; political hashtags, however, can be modes for displaying and facilitating the creation of a civic identity in social media. Identification emerges through the interplay of hashtag formation, transformation, display, and recitation, and the personas that are adopted inside digital spaces have their own manner of rhetorical self-regulation. As hashtags have to be actively attached to a persona to self-perpetuate (through the use of retweets, shares, re-blogs, etc.), there has to be something identifiably appealing about the hashtag to attract users.

Recognition often begins when the user identifies with a problem, revealing the social urgency and its social implications. Each time a user reposts, the user becomes part of a political machine. Exigency through reposting becomes a process of both subjectivity and civic identity with user contributions in discursive channels. When civic discourse perpetuates exigency, rhetorical analysis and rhetorical deliberation operate as forces beneath surface ideologies, silent but nevertheless powerful. Looking at the success of political hashtags such as #BringBackOurGirls and the success of the hashtag's visibility dependent on identification with celebrity users (such as Michelle Obama, Blake Lively, Sean "P Diddy" Combs, and others), it is easy to see a connection between what gets attention and what inspires recognition with users operating with civic movements.

When virtual discourse is used for political and social exigency, it can be taken a final step further: hashtags as writing and writing as social action. As mentioned previously, the

construction of meaning within the mostly unregulated realm of cyberspace lacks an empirical authority. Because of the absence of a centralized gatekeeper, hashtag formation and ascriptions render a unique method of agency (in the non-Burkean sense) to its users. Thus, users are able to contribute freely outside of a dominant discourse traditionally controlled by a centralized or hierarchical author(ity). Social media brings an accessibility and fluidity to the traditional forum, giving opportunities for rhetorical maneuvers and resistance. Users who typically employ these strategies may form their own social exigency and write hashtags to achieve social action.

With political hashtags, viral exigency is formed by a multitude of contributions, aimed at establishing a single statement to direct attention, cultivate awareness, and inspire movement. When users create political hashtags, they are drawing from their position within the community to establish their footing in an already-established social territory, carving a niche for new information and exigency to take root. Because these users may operate as subjects holding less institutionalized power in socio-economic hierarchies, they must create deregulated space in which to hold dialectical conversation with other users. Such a virtual environment provides the opportunity to challenge institutional frameworks in place for epistemology, reporting, and data-sourcing. These challenges are possible to understand by critically examining how agency is enacted in cyberspace, defining how attention and awareness function as an extension of agency, how resistance against dominant discourse can be enacted by employing awareness, how subject positioning and rhetorical maneuvers operate within social media platforms (specifically via hashtag composition) to perform

resistance, and how all of these concepts fuse to ultimately use hashtags as a method cultivating social exigency for social action.

When we examine the processes of hashtags becoming a mode for social action, the definition of virtual agency, or the ability to act in a general sense, must first be established. Agency, as it relates to power relations, will refer to users performing as social agents. Social agents, as defined by Carl Herndl, are individuals with “self-reflexive awareness” who have “an understanding of the ways in which social reality is connected to material conditions and has been constituted to serve specific interests” (459). According to Herndl, in nonacademic writing, “social agents should be thought of as ‘consumers of culture,’” and because writing is being conducted in cultural settings, it is unregulated as writers often “work at cross purposes to the dominant position legitimized by discourse” (Herndl 456). Social agents, therefore, are persons operating within a community with the agenda to enact social change or implement social action. When writers are placed outside of a hierarchical power structure, such as the academy, alternative discourse to the empirical authority is possible by exploring the cross purposes of the social agents.

The question then becomes how effective these social agents can be within the realm of social media. In a big-picture sense, embodying any solidified form of agency may seem fruitless considering the actions of one social agent within a media platform such as Twitter, which has nearly 300 million users. Countless political hashtags go ignored every day, going to obscurity and therefore being rendered obsolete, placed into a figurative hashtag graveyard. A single user making a single hashtag is not always successful in making monumental social impact. However, on an individual level, and *also* in regard to the development of community

literacy as whole, performing writing with social media has value in being able to establish a space for both a self-reflective process for the user and the interaction of a user with a variety of discourse communities in achieving social action.

One element of performative social change that is potentially undervalued but nevertheless important is the personal development that can result from participating in a virtual community. As discussed earlier, users within a community can have the desire both to merge identity with consubstantiality as well as to overtake identity with transformation. However, what has not been discussed is the potential for *creating* a civic identity by engaging in the performance of virtual civic spaces. When considering the formation of a civic identity in a public arena, social media gives a unique advantage to construction of self with its dynamic, active nature as opposed to more passive and static forums of mass communication. Looking at the concept of *epimeleia heautou* (“an activity of the self on the self”), developed by Michel Foucault (360), identity and self-understanding are most fruitfully cultivated by wanting to understand the “contingencies of existence” (Swiencicki 341) rather than the choices prescribed to them by an authoritative power.

If users are subjects and subjects are “constructed by practices” (Swiencicki 341), there is currently no avenue as accessible and embedded in user culture that allows for active, engaged writing than social media. Every day, countless users employ action that cultivates civic identity, whether it be from retweeting news headlines or engaging in comment wars in the section of a One Direction music video. Hashtags, then, are potential components to that facilitation of self-reflexive writing practices. Returning to the individual benefits, exposure to ideas through social media writing and the perpetuation of these ideas are small channels

through which honest dialogue and reflective mental processes may occur, enabling that crucial transformation from user-subject to social agent. Individuals actively applying hashtags allow for establishing that social territory incorporating their own interests.

Besides allowing a space for users to transition into cybercitizens, as an example of community writing, social media can be an effective platform for agency for community interests outside of dominant standards of discourse. Hashtags, in particular, can be effective when they are employed with the proper amount of rhetorical savvy. Herndl recalls the work of Michel De Certeau when he references the importance of strategy and tactic within the frames of social agent performance, stating “Strategies belong to institutions and subjects who occupy a recognized place in the social...tactics, by contrast, are calculated actions that are ‘determined by the absence of power’ and which ‘play on and with the terrain imposed’ by the dominant discourse” (Herndl 461). In situations where transformation has occurred, such as #NotAllMen to #YesAllWomen, a single social agent was able to recognize an already dominant discourse and rhetoric (#NotAllMen) and use tactic in order to redirect the message to a more marginalized message (#YesAllWomen). Individual users have agency in being able to enact social change through subversive rhetorical moves, while the social media community as a whole has potential for social agency by being able to support these movements in areas of garnering awareness of less popular information through trending.

Trending, when it is used for political action, has another name within social media communities. Occasionally, when a message is passed along for the express purpose of gathering attention or promoting awareness, said message is tagged with a variation of #signalboost. Signal boosting, as its name implies, is an action taken by users to further take

advantage of the hashtag as a terministic screen. Likewise, tagging content with #important or #staywoke has similar effects upon the followers reading the material. #signalboost is typically employed for calling attention to specific news or petitions, and users employ it to frame content in a manner that is generally seen as active. Boosting alone is a word that implies some sort of action or performance, taking a piece of communication and elevating it in popularity, recognition, and rank in order to achieve trending status and therefore cultivate awareness. When hashtags formed with rhetorical tactic, such as #YesAllWomen, are connected with this proposed movement of social action, the lens through which the communication is viewed changes. Placing the two hashtags with each other (#signalboost and #YesAllWomen) then not only draws on the identification and transformation of #NotAllMen, it also indicates further performance by a user saying they believe this content is *especially* deserving of attention. By attempting to create a draw of attention, awareness in social movements may be achieved.

#SignalBoost!: Attention and Awareness as Motive

Awareness in digital spaces happens when cybercitizens use the connections between identification, discourse, power, and rhetorical tactic. When positioning hashtags as a method of social action, awareness is a critical advantage to the discursive practices of writing for a virtual community. Hashtags are unique in cultivating awareness in that they are, once again, easily digestible. Like the bumper sticker mentioned previously, hashtags are able to draw attention with catchy slogans or briefly articulated commentary on social content. However, there is a distinction to be made between attention and awareness. Attention is a far more obtainable goal when constructing hashtags in order to reach an audience, achieved with

something as simple as attaching #signalboost or #important to a post. Attention is the initial appeal of the content, such as the draw of #YOLO or #swag—both popular tags, and therefore both receiving an adequate amount of attention from users within social media. Awareness in this context is the cultivation of attention in order to achieve a goal of social justice or critique; therefore, awareness is a far more difficult aim than just winning attention in that it necessitates a call to action to its users.

The question then becomes a discussion on how awareness forms that call in social media. In the case of hashtags, to articulate this phenomenon, I am going to use an informal case study of a hashtag that garnered both attention and awareness, going as far as to puncture the boundary between digital communities and mass media communication:

#BringBackOurGirls. #BringBackOurGirls is significant in this conversation as it was created with the express intention of gathering attention, transforming that attention into awareness, and eventually transitioning that awareness into action.

To completely understand the action of #BringBackOurGirls, it is first important to position it contextually. On April 15, 2014, over 270 girls between the ages of 15-18 were kidnapped in northern Nigeria by a terrorist group named Boko Haram in order to be auctioned off as wives for their combatants (Kristof). On an international circuit, this event was barely covered by mass media reporting, similar to the Iranian elections of 2009. However, once a Nigerian lawyer named Ibrahim Abdullahi created the campaign #BringBackOurGirls, response surged in the virtual community (again, similar to the Iran elections), going viral and creating at least 4 million uses of the hashtag within three months of the girls' kidnapping (Kirkland).

It is important to note that this was not the first hashtag campaign Abdullahi attempted to generate awareness for this issue. Several previous hashtags created by Abdullahi (among them #ChibokGirls, #BornoGirls, and #AbductedBornoGirls) failed to generate the traction of #BringBackOurGirls across social media platforms. Like #pman, former incarnations failed possibly because their rhetoric didn't cause a meaningful identification with a broader audience (Chibok and Borno being unfamiliar locations much like Piata Marii Adunari Nationale). However, with the more inclusive language of the new campaign (#BringBack**Our**Girls), the call for social change was more effective. The viral popularity of the hashtag gained even more attention following its use by famous celebrities and public figures, such as the example tweet shown in Figure 7.



Figure 7: Michelle Obama participating in the #BringBackOurGirls campaign (Kirkland)

By having prominent public figures contributing to the campaign, particularly the First Lady of the United States, the attention garnered from users was able to transform into political awareness on a more massive scale.

Because of the attention earned by traction and what we can call a name-brand recognition across global politics (such as Michelle Obama and activist Malala Yousafzai, among others), the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls transitioned into more mass-media coverage, being discussed by CNN, Fox, *The New York Post*, and other major publications. The campaign (and phrasing it as a *campaign* has its own political and rhetorical connotations) also extended to protests outside of the media circuit, with ground-up demonstrations taking place internationally in physical spaces as Figure 8 demonstrates.



Figure 8: Protests outside the Nigerian embassy in Washington D.C., May 2014 (AFP Photo, sourced from 1389blog)

Rhetorically, it is then a matter of whether or not attention, transitioning into awareness, is an effective enough movement for social action. Such discussion is a heavy area

of contention among both the mass-media and the social media circuits, but ultimately, to understand the production and translation of texts, it is important to return to the Burkean notion of motive.

Abdullahi has admitted he created the tag with the intention of inducing a viral pressure on the Nigerian government (Kirkland). With over four million tweets in three months, countless physical protests, and international coverage on major news outlets, it appears to have succeeded in inciting viral response. But whether the awareness can be fully transitioned into social change is still unclear, as the campaign is still an on-going performance. The *Bring Back Our Girls* official website (generated, of course, from its namesake hashtag and its popular success) is still inciting movements that invite the puncture between digital communities and solidified activism, such as the scheduled Global School Girl March on April 14, 2015, to mark one year since the mass kidnapping by Boko Haram (*Bring Back Our Girls*). Despite the uncertainty regarding the ultimate effectiveness of the campaign in achieving its main goal (pressuring the Nigerian government to take more direct action against Boko Haram and return the missing girls), #BringBackOurGirls was undeniably successful in achieving its secondary goal: gathering attention and turning that attention into political awareness on a global scale, creating social exigency where none existed before.

In a manner similar to #IranElection, #BringBackOurGirls demonstrated a movement which challenged hierarchical reporting established by mass-media circuits. By bringing attention to an issue that was either marginalized or unknown to Western media, the hashtags

and their subsequent campaigns for awareness employed a method of rhetorical resistance.

When conceptualizing resistance, I will be using De Certeau's applicable definition:

The actual order of things is precisely what “popular” tactics turn to their own ends...though elsewhere it is exploited by a dominant power or simply denied by an ideological discourse, here order is *tricked* by an art. Into the institution to be served are thus insinuated styles of social exchange, technical invention, and moral resistance. (De Certeau 29)

In the frame of De Certeau's resistance, the art in question would be the crafting of hashtags that gain traction and thereby form social exigency where none existed before. Resistance, as social action, must be positioned against a dominant status quo and thereby implies a usually (institutionally) powerless state by its performers. However, in order for resistance to be effective beyond specialized groups, it needs to be inclusive—to have an element of trickery to be accessible to a dominant discourse audience and therefore garner enough attention, awareness, and social exigency for social agents to achieve a rhetorical maneuver.

#ThisMachine: Subjectivity and Rhetorical Maneuvers

Movements like #IranElection, #YesAllWomen, and #BringBackOurGirls are examples of resistance, as their critiques or social movements run counter to the discussions in the mass-media. The value, then, in performing rhetorical resistance is found in positioning the users and creators of these hashtags as “semi-autonomous producers” or “people [who] reappropriate dominate culture in producing their own alternative culture...small, everyday actions of social agents deny the kind of totalizing order invoked by theories of structure and discourse” (Herndl 460-1). In having opportunities for resistance, user-subjects are able to still acquire the agency necessary for social action by subtly challenging what Herndl calls “dominate culture.” With #IranElection and #BringBackOurGirls, dominant culture is found

in the news outlets who failed to cover non-Western political affairs. In #YesAllWomen, dominant culture is the discussion of defending men in favor of ignoring the systemic violence committed against women every day. Resistance becomes a vital component for undergoing social action as it is what calls attention to the need for action in the first place. Resistance is an act that is dependent on social contexts forming social exigencies. Social media and the use of hashtag campaigns to form social exigency is a site for dialectical discussion between the groups performing resistance and a more mass digital culture. The scene in which such discussions take place provides evidence of subject-positioning and rhetorical maneuvers that solidify discussion into awareness, which leads to exigency and then, ideally, to action.

In social media campaigns, resistance first stems from the conceptualization of the cybercitizen. Garoian and Gaudelius assert that the disembodied persona present in digital spaces, what they call the “cyborg,” is resistance in itself as it “creates a conceptual space for performing embodied subjectivity” (Garoian and Gaudelius 337). By positioning a user-subject as a cyborg, Gaorian and Gaudelius make the distinction that the separation of the digital persona from the legible body is not a dichotomy of mind/body but more along the more fluid lines of inscription/embodiment concerning the cultures of the user-subject’s. If we view the cyborg body (what I call the persona) as a product of culture and the actions of engaging in subversive campaigns like #YesAllWomen as resistance, the performative writing of hashtags as rhetorical maneuver becomes more substantiated. Rhetorical maneuvers, as defined by Kendall Phillips, are the action of combining De Certeau’s strategy and tactics

with an additional consideration for the multitudes of subject identification and how they interact with the dominant discourse.

To establish where rhetorical maneuvers are taking place, subject and subject-positioning must be further refined in their application to political performativity in hashtag composition and recycling. Much in line with Garoian and Gaudelius's cyborg and Herndl's alternative cultures, Phillips takes issue with the multitudes of individuals filling only one generic position of subject. The variety of subjects and therefore the variety of subjective messages is especially visualized and demonstrated in social media platforms. Returning to the examples #IranElection, #YesAllWomen, and #BringBackOurGirls, each campaign was initiated by individuals performing the role of subject. Within a larger, institutionalized, and empirical rhetorical framework, these subject roles all lack dominant power, but the identification of subjects differ. Subjects from positions outside of the digital community stem from different social groups, from politics, to gender, to economic disparity, to race, to any other marginalized category. Users within these hashtag movements are subjects, but by synthesizing the cyborg conception of identity with Burke's active identification through consubstantiality and transformation, the self (and therefore the user-subject) becomes a fluid, dynamic presence, which is, as Bradford Vivian states, "a rhetorical form—that exists only in its continual and aesthetic creation, in its infinite becoming" (Vivian 304). Cybercitizenship, therefore, produces not only an active performance to recreate identity but also a place where subjects may begin to challenge the limitations of the subject-position by continuously redefining the frameworks for what makes a subject in digital spaces, earning subjects in their multiplicities a rhetorical resource. This resource takes shape in the latticing of subjects

managing to identify within their own niche spaces (channels) but also by extending their identification to other subject spaces with an understanding of dominant discursive strategy.

Rhetorical maneuvers, then, are a result of this redefinition and the fruition of subjects building their own rhetorical resources through an adaptation of strategy and subsequent implementation of tactic. When subjects have enough savvy to discern the strategy and tactics of their rhetorical situation, parameters may be challenged from someone in the subject-position to transcend traditional roles (to reiterate, rhetorical strategy would be the status quo received from a dominant culture or authority, whereas tactics are methods of resistance from alternative cultures). Consequentially, a subject is the pattern of performance whereas the subject-position is its ideological place of performance. The fluidity of subjectivity within social media is able to be unpacked using these concepts of performance. Social media culture by and large is an unstable culture—the performative quality of communication mixed with an ever-changing and expanding userbase prevents topics or interests stagnating. It is the instability, or fluidity, of social media as a discourse community that allows for radical upheavals in social exigency by subjects. Or, as Phillips poses, a change in the pattern of performance by the subject allows for *disruption*. Such disruptions are reflective of De Certeau's *trickery*, small movements that allow for a form of ideological Trojan Horse—communication, content, and message is developed in niche channels of subject performance and then redistributed to a mass audience through reconstituting those specialized performances into one that is digestible by the community at large.

Hashtag creation and use is both a method of composition and a means to conduct a performance, and by participating in the performance users establish a form of cyborg identity

through their personas. By challenging frameworks of identity and performance and then adapting them to a dominant discourse, subjects may cause rhetorical disruption and make movements against the empirical. However, in order for the tactics to succeed, strategy must first be recognized. Less successful social hashtag campaigns, such as #pman or the numerous predecessors to #BringBackOurGirls, indicate that while a solidified authority might not be ruling over social media discussion, the user-subjects are not divorced from the dominant culture outside of it. In essence, hashtags are used more when they are accepted, meaning they have to, in some respects, reflect a certain amount of appropriateness. Demonstrating appropriateness lends itself to more successful movements as “performing within the bounds of one’s social position provides for certain levels of social rewards” (Phillips 316). However, because there is a multitude of arenas for subjectivity, windows for rhetorical resistance are established when a subject is aware of both the acceptable boundaries of social performance and opportunities for the exploitation of *kairos* in the unstable social territory provided by social media platforms.

The rhetorical maneuver is dependent upon an understanding of identity’s role in performance as well as opportune moments to subvert the traditional patterns of social norms. Recognizing these opportune moments is then dependent upon understanding *kairos*—finding the right moment in time. This is most easily applicable to the hashtag campaign of #YesAllWomen, where *kairos* was established by both the Isla Vista Killings and the resurgence of #NotAllMen. Phillips expands upon De Certeau’s formula for resistance by saying that, in addition to understanding the proper moment in time, one must also understand the fluidity of identity across subject roles, called subject-multitudes by Phillips (322). When

subjects realize that they can alter their performance of subjectivity, rhetorical shifts may occur. To contextualize this theory within hashtag use, I use a personal example of interacting with a hashtag campaign.

When I wrote my narrative to contribute to the #YesAllWomen movement, I did so while fulfilling one subject role: that as a woman experiencing oppression from the dominant, patriarchal culture. However, the space, or subject-position, of my contribution complicated the typical power dynamic found outside of the digital community. My Tumblr account is a position that has been created by my identity and performance as both a woman and feminist—I regularly post about feminism, reproductive rights, and critique of female characters and their portrayals in popular culture. Because of the shape of my civic identity as a result of my performance, my followers (and therefore the users who would read my narrative) are mostly women. But in addition to this, I also operate as a subject by participating in “geek” culture and frequently post about science fiction or astronomy. Because of that performance, my civic identity takes on another facet that attracts a different audience base. Therefore, when I post with the identity of one subject (woman), my subject-position as a user also has an audience of subjects holding a different identity (geeks).

When audiences that do not belong to one subject role (say a male user who follows me for my *Star Wars* posts) are exposed to alternative ideologies (when the male follower comments on a post I make describing my experiences of harassment) dialectic conversations can occur that otherwise would not have been possible without that similar element of subject identification (the initial mutual love of *Star Wars*). When consubstantiality (the male user empathizes with me) instead of transformation (the male user tries to discredit my

experiences, or decides his own are more important) occurs as a result of identification, the content communicated in these virtual spaces gains traction that extends beyond the limited role of one subject. To further exemplify the rhetorical power of encountering different performances of identification, my subject role as a woman has led me to be more exposed to issues of racism, homophobia, and classism by my decision to follow intersectional feminist blogs. By expanding performance across multiple identities, movements from marginalized groups gain exigency and, through exigency, power.

Social exigency is made possible by hashtags when they are able to connect across a multitude of performative identities (typically by employing strategies recognized by the dominant discourse) and can serve as a method of resistance. While social media platforms are not outside of dominant culture, they provide different subject-positions to operate from. Hashtag use is extremely effective in providing these spaces for subject-multitude performance by narrowing the scope of internet chatter via the creation of conversational channels. Effective political hashtags take advantage of *kairos*, user performances of identity, and an understanding of what it takes to gain wider accessibility and attention outside of those not performing within that subject role. When resistance to dominant culture occurs and new exigency and dialectical conversations are created as a result, the future face of civic discourse and meaning-making becomes an important area of study for researchers, teachers, and students.

Chapter 3: #BigPicture: Hashtags, Public Argument, and Pedagogy

Much like the transformation of the hashtag from a method of delivery to a unit of composition and agency, so too is the reception of political information undergoing a significant shift. No longer is news just being reported through social media, such as #sandiegofire, but news is also being created with the cooperation and competition of hashtags. From delivery to formation, as time passes and accessibility to digital platforms becomes steadily more available to the general public, it is essential to evaluate and consider social media outlets as the next mode in the ever-developing dynamic between culture and technology. From print, to telegraph, to radio, to television, to the Internet, how we receive and frame our information has a significant impact on how we reach epistemological conclusions, communicate with one another, and conduct our lives in terms of general citizenship.

As more members subscribe to Twitter accounts or upload Instagram photos for public display, social media gradually drifts away from its taboo, lowbrow reputation into something that has been adapted as a more commonplace tool. A study conducted over a decade ago by the Pew Research Center for People and the Press sets the precedent for the current path of emerging culture with virtual communities. More and more, citizens gain their news through digital means as “the number of Americans citing the Internet as their first source of presidential election campaign news has increased by 23 percent since 2004, while at the same time the number relying on television has declined by 4 percent” (Pew 2008). Looking at the trajectory of the hashtag alone from 2007 to 2010, the integration of individuals with technology and the reliance on technology as a source for information have made significant

leaps since this 2004 study was conducted, rendering the 23% increase understated in hindsight. Audiences are not only receiving information, but are also now communicating, interacting, and producing information, establishing themselves as both author and audience for their virtual communities. In simplest terms, the landscape for how political learning takes place is undeniably moving towards one where news is assimilated with new media and, by extension, social media.

As traditional political communication powerhouses gradually become secondary to trending movements, younger people (in specific focus for this thesis: newly enrolled college students) are generally more familiar with the typing of a hashtag than the turning of a newspaper page. This paradigmatic shift in how information is gathered and distributed marks a new social territory that students are more familiar with than traditional news sources. As such, I believe it is important to look at how the common practice of hashtags might be used to identify pedagogical practices such as the instruction of public writing or civic discourse, re-envisioning the traditional essay by having hashtags stand as argumentative thesis statements, evaluating *ethos* in public domains, locating potential avenues for research literacy in a digital age, and understanding the processes for self-reflection and critical thinking as they relate to civic identity and performance. This final chapter will further establish the exigency of moving towards a compositional pedagogy inclusive of new media conventions (for now, specifically hashtags and trending), as well as locate potential areas where this proposed pedagogy will be applied.

#FirstYearProblems: Defining General Education Goals for First-Year Composition

Setting the parameters for a compositional pedagogy inclusive of new media devices (specifically hashtags) allows for a more concrete assessment of the possibilities found in that pedagogy. While hashtags as rhetorical artifact could easily be integrated into most civic writing or technical communication courses, I feel it is most relevant to position this new pedagogy as it is aimed at first-year composition. The reasoning behind this is based primarily on the educational goals and objectives set by the university but also the widely accessible nature of hashtags, as well as their provision of an easily-located access point for students to engage with their communities at large.

As the educational goals and outcomes for first-year composition can often be contentious, I will position them as they relate to the standard of St. Cloud State University's introductory rhetoric course, English 191: Introduction to Rhetorical and Analytical Writing. According to the Department of English at St. Cloud State University, the core areas of student development for English 191 are as follows:

- Improving rhetorical sophistication by learning to make choices as writers and by developing students' abilities
- Developing students' abilities to engage critically with various kinds of discourses, texts, and information learning
- Learning how written language informs or affects the understanding of human values and cultural perspectives

Student improvement of rhetorical sophistication results not only from making new choices as a writer but by questioning the decisions that they already make in composing with an intrinsic sense of purpose. As stated previously, social media is becoming a predominant method for students to communicate in a public sphere, and often that form of communication comes in the recycling of information. As more students create social media accounts on

websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, or Instagram, they willingly expose themselves to digital conversation and culture. Often, they participate. By facilitating a rhetorical awareness to the unvoiced strategy and argument students employ when they use hashtags, students may become more mindful of their approaches to interaction with cyberculture through critical reflection and articulation of values.

Interacting with hashtags also gives students an opportunity to see how rhetoric serves a purpose beyond the traditional conception of text. The integration of first-year composition curriculum with emergent media allows for a multi-modal approach to composition that is experiential and interactive. Evaluating hashtags from the perspective of argument provides a window for students to assess *ethos* and information literacy by critically examining trends and the relationship they have to factual accuracy and agenda-oriented interpretation. As hashtags can be attributed to text, images, video, and audio genres, there is also potential to see how arguments can be made outside of the traditional format of the essay.

Finally, hashtags and trends are undeniably a product of popular culture. Some hashtags, like the infamous #YOLO, have even spawned entire personas. Looking at hashtags has the potential to be an accessible method for students to engage with cultural values through the use of language and composition. Through the analysis and composition of hashtags, students can evaluate and apply concepts of civic engagement and writing for a public audience in a practical, concrete, and socially relevant manner.

In the possible areas of curricula I will introduce more concretely, the overall goal is to synthesize the rhetorical value of hashtags with pedagogical applications to establish an alternative, multi-modal curriculum. As the curriculum will ideally be centered on an artifact

students are well-acquainted with, the locations of education should combine the everyday compositional practices of social media with the reflective processes of critical thinking, with an end result being students with more reflective practices regarding their civic identities in virtual communities and a more in-depth appreciation for the rhetorical movements of trending as they relate to public writing.

#GoingRogue: Public Writing and Pedagogy

Public writing as an exercise is often difficult to integrate into a first-year writing course. Mainly due to the fact that in a classroom setting, where texts are produced for evaluation, there is an inherent sense of fabrication. Educators may tell their students to write for an external audience, but ultimately an element of students performing for the classroom environment will be present in most composition. Public writing as a term has its own limitations, as the *public* in public writing can often be ambiguous. Civic discourse, in turn, is writing aimed at producing for the public or community, but often those spaces lack in clarity, or, at the very least, context. As an imagined forum outside of the academy, the public is usually envisioned as a discourse community divorced from the traditional classroom.

In reality, *public* as it relates to composition exercises or practices is a fluid dimension. Public writing, ideally, should be a reflection of contemporary context, a counter to the static preconception of a fixed location. Susan Wells offers a new imagining of public discourse and *the public* as “questions, rather than answers” (327), attempting to reconcile the idealized public with the pragmatic applications of composition by positioning the public as something with “its own history, its own vexed construction, its own possibilities for growth and decay” (328). Wells argues for new developments in the construction of pedagogy for the

public, critiquing the standardized writing assignments for first-year composition students. This new pedagogy will revitalize the often stale perception of writing for an audience, as “we do not do justice to this history, this set of possibilities, when we assign students generic public writing, such as an essay on gun control, or a letter to a nonexistent editor. In such assignments, students inscribe their positions in a vacuum” (Wells 328). To break from this vacuum, I believe it is more productive to apply writing pedagogy almost retroactively, having assignments for the public focused on the civic writing (divorced from the classroom) that students are already performing. In this vein, I will be addressing Wells’ four strategies for introducing a public writing pedagogy and applying them to the use of hashtags in first-year composition.

Wells first positions her theoretical pedagogy by stating that the classroom cannot be seen as a public space. While there are certain pedagogical values to having the classroom be a place of civic participation (discussions, the classroom as a contact zone, collaboration, etc.), Wells argues that “the writing classroom has no public exigency: the writing classroom does important cultural work for the million and a half students it serves each year, but it does not carry out that work through the texts” (338). By introducing a new media element with first-year compositional pedagogy, an exigency can be established by how it relates to students’ daily civic participation. Hashtags are exemplary vehicles for the communication of social exigency, as trending is a physical manifestation of exigent shifts as they pertain to the virtual community. Assuming that most, if not all, students within a first-year composition course are at least familiar with emergent technologies (a safe assumption), demonstrating the nature of forming a public audience based on exigency can be communicated through the

tracking and analysis of political hashtags. Additionally, evaluating the content associated with the hashtags and the contributions made by a variety of users performing in the roles of Phillips' subject-multitudes, adds a socio-cultural component to the analysis of digital rhetoric. As artifacts, hashtags are well positioned for rhetorical analysis pertaining to exigency. This analysis also holds a compositional value as well by providing an avenue for students to be critically reflective of their own civic personas in social media communities.

The second strategy Wells posits is centered on the analysis of public discourse. Wells argues that a more effective pedagogy would "include an orientation to performance rather than disclosure, and a broadened appreciation of performance made inside and outside of texts" (339). Political hashtag campaigns *are* performance and not only are effective as an artifact for analysis but demonstrate the integration between culture and produced text, persona and exigency. By introducing the analysis of trending political campaigns, especially ones with direct correlation to matters of exigency for contemporary contexts, students would be able to see the rhetorical strategy employed to communicate motive through multi-modal presentations of information. As hashtag campaigns have no direct author once they have transitioned to a mode of community writing, an outside, contextual analysis of the hashtag is required in order to conduct a textual analysis of the content. The text itself is a performance through trending and channel formation, and the cultural performance outside of the text is visible with the association of persona to political messages.

The third strategy for public writing in a composition classroom is producing student writing that will enter some form of public space. My addendum to this strategy is that students are *already* writing for public spaces when they engage in social media and establish

their “cyborg” personas. With the educational goals for first-year composition in mind, I find it valuable to evaluate and employ self-reflective practices to texts that students have already produced. Doing so reinstates an organic element to civic writing from the classroom, introducing elements of sophistic analysis to the students’ compositional processes. Similarly to how a mechanic more thoroughly understands an automobile after breaking it apart, the goal is to have students look at their own contributions to the civic space of virtual communities with a more thorough understanding of why they make the rhetorical choices they make when they perform in these communities. The pedagogical value of introducing social media through a rhetorical perspective is then positioned performatively, anthropologically, and reflectively by having students consider their own, nonacademic, compositional processes.

The final strategy given by Wells is working with the discourses of the disciplines as they interact with the public. In essence, this strategy centers around organization: of publics, of information, and of social issues and topics. The separation of these categories allows for a heightened understanding of the contemporary public “Habermas uses the notion of differentiation to analyze the disjunctions among mature disciplines, the professions in which they organize knowledges, and the complex public issues that face modern societies” (Wells 339). In the original purpose of hashtags there is undeniably an organizational and categorical component to their construction. In their initial use in social spaces (like IRC channels), hashtags had a sole purpose of providing a venue for the discussion of specialized topics by specialized audiences. In contemporary use, hashtags are still used to direct these niche audiences, carving out channels in the social territory for access to issues that may not be as

visible in the dominant culture. Examining how content is attached to specific political hashtags helps students look at how issues and events are categorically situated within virtual spaces. As an example, in 2014 multiple hashtags arose contextually discussing the same event: the shooting of civilian Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson and the subsequent protests arising in Ferguson, Missouri. The use of #ferguson was used as a location for real-time reports generated by Twitter users, whereas #BlackLivesMatter was formed to provide a conversational space for critique and awareness of institutional racism. Different hashtags convey different rhetorical tones and are used to channel different content and perspectives of events. Discursive disciplines are important in the organization and filtration of news in social media, especially as more community members (and potentially students themselves) become active participants in ground-level reporting and civic activism.

Cohesively, political hashtags and social media campaigns fit multiple applications of integrating public writing with the composition classroom. As performative writing, they fit the nature of an ever-changing and fluid public, evoking the author-as-audience model set forth by Miller's community writing framework, which, to reiterate, was dependent on the participation of members of the community in order to facilitate better social progress. Additionally, examining how hashtags are organized according to tone gives students potential insight into the categorization of discursive writing integrating a variety of motives or contexts. Finally, and most importantly, rhetorically looking at hashtags as an artifact gives a place for students to reflect on their own composition formed outside of an academic environment, promoting the facilitation of reaching educational goals and outcomes for an introductory writing course. Hashtags are a new form of text, incorporating cultural values,

technical communication, and performance. Analyzing them rhetorically provides potential for students to develop their critical thinking and communication skills in an accessible way. Additionally, I believe that with further development, hashtags can also be integrated into a first-year writing course as a method of instructional composition.

#5paragraphs: Hashtags and Argument Composition

With further development, I believe that hashtag composition can be taught as a method of public argumentation. As terministic screens, hashtags frame the content with which they are associated. For instance, a photograph of a young woman with a hashtag of #YesAllWomen poses an argument based on the combination of digital and visual rhetoric. However, when looking at failed campaigns such as #pman against successful campaigns like #BringBackOurGirls, there is an apparent rhetorical value ascribed to the hashtags themselves. Even non-political hashtags have some degree of content-strategy associations, such as the popularity of #tbt (throw back Thursday) or #yolo (you only live once). When we evaluate the construction of hashtags as articulators, some hashtags are more successful than others in persuasion, the heart of argument in a Classical sense. With further research, I see potential for developing a new way of identifying and constructing the traditional essay for students as they continue to interact with new media.

I preface this new proposal by stating that, while I believe hashtags are capable of articulating an argument, by themselves they are not capable of providing grounds or evidence in support of their claims. In *A Little Argument*, an instructional textbook written by Lester Faigley and Jack Selzer directed toward first-year composition courses, a critique of bumper stickers (an artifact I earlier compared with hashtags) as a method of argumentation is

offered: “bumper stickers usually consist of unilateral statements...but provide no supporting evidence or reasons for why anyone should assume what they say” (Faigley and Selzer 1). However, hashtags have an added element that is absent from bumper stickers—the ability to have content dynamically assigned to them. With this extra dimension, hashtags with their content contain an element of metacognition, that is, an externalization of how we form meaning. Truth, in a subjective and therefore argumentative sense, is created through social media in mosaic, through overlapping subject-positions in constrained channels, but it is also able to be analyzed by evaluating these contributions individually. I therefore posit that hashtags function in the same capacity as argumentative thesis statements.

While educational definitions of writing pedagogy can be ambiguous, the basic function of a thesis statement is unilaterally accepted as the articulation of claim. Positioning thesis statements in a more specific context, I will use the methods of argumentation as they relate to the Stasis Model (Ramage). To apply Stasis Model to first-year composition, I return to *A Little Argument*, where five argumentation styles are explored: definition, causal, evaluation, rebuttal, and proposal (Faigley and Selzer). Without an in-depth investigation, I was easily able to find several hashtags that articulated four of the five styles:

- Definition: #art, #fashion, #criminal, #thug, #natural
- Evaluation: #beautiful, #important, #BlackLivesMatter
- Proposal: #BringBackOurGirls, #BlackOutFriday, #SignalBoost
- Rebuttal: #NotAllMen, #YesAllWomen, #AllLivesMatter

The argument is simple but undeniably present when applied with careful rhetorical framing. Much like a thesis statement, hashtags perform as a lens through which to position and structure body content.

An area for further research is the assessment and potential validity of hashtags operating as thesis statements to promote the grounds and warrants that are demonstrated through the use of tagged content. If we conceptualize hashtags as implicit claims without substance, the pictures, text, videos, and audio files they are attributed to formulate the evidence for their claim. A genuine argument is then constituted through the active performance of a community, owned by no singular user. Argumentative writing in the classroom, then, can be repositioned from the typical dynamic of author-to-audience, from Actor-to-community. In a manner similar to the sophists' proposal of anti-logos to further comprehend an argument, the analysis of a claim (or a movement) offers a (pardon the pun) sophisticated understanding of how an argument comes to be established. Hashtags and the channels they create for a variety of unmediated content offers a concrete point of focus to culturally observe how communities arrive at conclusive arguments—how does #BringBackOurGirls become an argument worthy of mass social attention? It's accepted as important, and spread.

Looking at how trending impacts dominant culture is also a location to examine how *ethos* is formed in public discourse, as well as providing an area to assess research literacy in popular culture. Returning to campaigns where the ultimate goal was a facilitation of awareness, such as #BringBackOurGirls or the recent #ferguson, a question as to how these movements gain validity arises. In questioning that validity, another undercurrent maneuver is present: do people trust social media over the authoritative (mass) news sources? And if so, why? Looking at how some movements (such as #IranElection) prompted direct critique of an

authority (CNN, #CNNFail) is a direct way to determine how *ethos* is garnered outside of the often limiting constraints of “peer-reviewed.”

Ultimately, the peer-review or the validation of data or concepts is confined to academic resources. However, often when students get their news, receive information, or perform in virtual spaces, they do so divorced of the academy. Simply put, students who want to quickly review the climate of Texas are not going to look up an academic, meteorological journal—instead, they are going to Google, Wikipedia, or their dashboards. Additionally, students (and the populace at large) do not often receive information in this filtrated, reviewed manner. Student attention is gained far more quickly through social media, newspapers, or broadcasting. As studies like the aforementioned Pew Research Center for People and the Press have shown, the number of Americans receiving their information mainly through social media is rising. If the end goal of a liberal arts education is to develop better citizens, it’s vital to sophisticate how students are performing in communities outside of the classroom.

Therefore, the question is then how source evaluation transitions beyond the walls of the classroom. Successful political hashtag campaigns can serve as a visible articulation of *ethos* as it relates to the public audience. By looking at noticeable endorsements—such as Michelle Obama’s contribution to #BringBackOurGirls—students can see how *ethos* is developed through popularity—as well as the possible dangers that poses to credible argument. By identifying where claims fail to authenticate information, there is a potential to facilitate critical, reflective skepticism in why students believe what they believe. For instance, looking at movements that generated and reported information in real time, such as the use of #ferguson in August 2014, students can see where inconsistencies exist in the

production of community reporting (such as the false photographs used to identify Michael Brown, photographs from 2011 being used to perpetuate hysteria in regard to looting, contradictory evidence submitted in the Twittersphere, and the way state authorities such as the courts or police disregarded real time reporting). Fact-checking as applied to social media could be a useful avenue for promoting research literacy in students on a day-to-day, accessible level.

There will no doubt be several limitations in developing pedagogical practices involving the use of hashtags in the composition classroom. I have identified five primary areas of limitation. First among them being the performative qualities of hashtag campaigns, rendering the movements difficult to cement in archival research and to discover cohesive narratives. Second, as community-owned writing, the content attached to hashtags has no manner of filtration, no overarching message that is constructed prematurely, as the contributions of the cybercitizen negate the initial authorial intent. Third, a composition instructor implementing such pedagogical practices needs familiarity with social media platforms as well as an awareness of contemporary political issues being discussed in cyberspace. Fourth, students themselves must be able to access social media platforms and have a base knowledge of their practices. Fifth, there is the possibility of students failing to grasp the rhetorical significance of these applications when applied to popular culture. However, I believe that with further research, structuring, and observation, these limitations can be used in a manner that is still enriching to current curricula.

I wish to emphasize that the pedagogy would be implemented *alongside* standard educational practices of the field. At this time, I envision the proposed strategies of

integrating performative writing with first-year composition as a supplement to current curriculum, not a replacement. I believe that teaching composition on an accessible platform in conjunction with the more rigorous standards set forth by first-year composition learning goals will contribute an added level of nuance and applicative potential to the course's learning objectives.

#HeiligOut: Final Thoughts for Hashtags in First-Year Composition

Political hashtags as both rhetorical artifact and as a compositional exercise are well-suited to the pedagogical frameworks of public writing and the construction of argument. With their inherently performative nature, the integration of hashtags into pedagogy is an active, dynamic location for students to engage with multiple identities, civic responsibility, critical thinking, and skepticism in regard to motive and the use of persuasion found in social media communication. Furthermore, hashtags also provide an avenue for students to challenge the traditional assumptions of what a text is by taking a mundane artifact and applying real, rhetorical merit to it. Rhetorical engagement with hashtags also encourages an added element to common civic participation through portraying civic engagement in a positive light. Returning to the goals originally set forth by the objectives of the St. Cloud State University English Department, the future implicated values of hashtags are readily apparent.

Analyzing and understanding hashtags as a text improves the rhetorical sophistication of students by exposing the choices they make in a public forum (social media) as actual decisions. If the creation and recitation of hashtags are positioned as a public performance, the conscious choices made to tag content offers students a new dynamic towards processing

civic identification. Additionally, a re-examination of what it means to author a text is posed when considering how hashtags challenge the straightforward dynamic of author and audience to Actor and community. If a pedagogy could be developed, that includes the active decision-making processes that are apparent in hashtag performance, students would leave their first-year composition courses exposed to a new framework within which to apply critical thinking to their everyday recitals of identity.

Using hashtags in a first-year composition curriculum also exposes students to critically engaging with various types of discourses, texts, and information learning. Looking at social media as a discourse community opens up new opportunities for instructing a reconceptualization of *text*. Opportunity for instructing voice modulation in the production of composition is also present by instructing social media in tandem with the traditional styles of essay. Constructing texts on a variety of platforms is becoming an instrumental part of English education, as well as being able to adopt external writing styles beyond a narrative or research paper. This skill cultivates a greater understanding of how language operates in the world. Additionally, realizing how we arrive at meaning through identification and consensus is also important, and has the potential to be evaluated through studying specific political movements as they are unfolding within virtual spaces. With movements reliant upon ground-level reporting and data-mining such as #sandiegofire and #ferguson, information is being learned in a new, community-oriented manner when received through social media. Understanding how exigency and information are intertwined also sets an example to understand how what we value as a community influences the manner by which we produce and perpetuate the sharing of knowledge.

Lastly, studying hashtag campaigns in a first-year composition course presents a possibility where students can learn about how written language informs or affects the understanding of human values and cultural perspectives. Hashtags are undeniably a reflection of the community that forms them and, as such, are directly indicative of the cultural perspectives valued by members of that community—the users, or cybercitizens. Social media also presents an important window to human values through trending, which allows the viewing of the formation of social exigency via community cooperation or competition. Social media in and of itself is a manifestation of the way written language, values, and cultures interact with one another. The engagement of performances between users in positions of disparate subject-multitudes allows an integration and contact between different identities that would have never converged without the interconnectivity provided by digital communities. Hashtags are blunt articulations of overarching issues or identities, emitting fast and digestible statements that nevertheless provide insight into how cultures outside of cyberspace as well as differing cultures within those spaces interact with one another. The cyborg identity is a body that encompasses both a metaphysical space in a digital community but is also an outlet for the voicing of values beyond that virtual presence. Hashtags, then, function by delivering messages between these two platforms and societies, serving as a bridge between attention and awareness, product and performance. The written language found in hashtags creates, voices, and perpetuates value and perspectives from a wide array of users, establishing a digital *polis* which propagates the dialectic between different user groups, all of which are maintaining their own performances of identification.

The creation of hashtags may appear to be a lowbrow compositional product and is usually overlooked as a thoughtless or rudimentary process. But the ordinariness of the hashtag belies its ability to function as an articulator of human value, a method by which written language can be assessed as it pertains to how we are informed, constructed, and presented within community spaces. The presence of hashtags within digital, accessible spaces does not negate the rhetorical merit or potential pedagogical value of these devices as methods of delivery. On the contrary, in its accessibility is the potential to instigate reflective-thinking processes in regards to everyday practices, a place to facilitate critical thinking in public performances that are often discredited by authoritative clout. The application of traditional academic values into the production of digital text, I feel, strongly repudiates any potential reservation regarding a levelling process in higher education. The reason for my own lack of skepticism is the inherent value in being able to take a common practice—tweeting, blogging, liking, posting—and give its actions more thorough consideration. It is important to implement new skills and processes within higher education, but it is also just as significant to ascribe a higher rationality to actions constantly undertaken in order to establish an identity, receive information, or contribute to a community conversation.

Existing as citizens, whether it be in digital or physical spaces, is an ever-evolving process, one that is bound to change as the methods and modes of delivery adapt and progress in the face of emergent technologies. In higher education, I believe there is an implicit responsibility to implement a curriculum that can offer students accessible locations to engage and relate with complex ideas and rhetorical strategies. Identifying areas of transitioning communication in regard to such emergent technologies as hashtag campaigns within social

media scenes is the first step in identifying broader areas of application in which students may be able to more fully explore their epistemological behaviors, performances of identity, subject-positions, and places and occasions for civic activism. Critical thinking and civic discourse must have applications outside of the classroom, and the active, performative nature of hashtag composition and reproduction effectively allows for these applications.

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