

Rejuvenating the public sphere – The rhetorical arenas of social media

Eirik Vatnøy

Abstract

Social media has become a central research arena within political communication research. However, few qualitative studies have explored the nature of discourse in social media. In this chapter I argue that a rhetorical approach can give us a better understanding of the nature of political discourse in these arenas. By combining rhetorical theory with elements of Anthony Giddens' structuration theory I suggest that the rhetorical arenas of social media can be understood as "social systems" surrounding issues, institutions, physical locations or media platforms in which rhetorical action is structured in a particular way. To illustrate the usefulness of this approach the chapter also presents some insights from a study of the Norwegian "Tweeocracy", the well-established voices from the media, politics and academia using Twitter as an arena for public debate. The case study shows that the rhetorical arena-approach can open new understandings of particular public spheres within new media and give us a better understanding of what kind of activities people are engaged in on social media.

Keywords: rhetoric; political rhetoric; social media; structuration theory; network politics

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1 Introduction

It is safe to say that social media has become a major buzzword in media and communication research. As social media's presence is growing, so is debate about its democratic value. Some have saluted social media as an upgrade from the limits of broadcasting and an opportunity to establish direct lines of communication between voters and politicians. Others have suggested that the revolutionary potential will be normalized by the socio-political reality, and even that online networks fragment and polarize public opinion, rendering it irrelevant to the real decision-making.

However, few qualitative studies have explored the *nature of discourse* in social media forums. In a field dominated by new technical possibilities for quantitative research and big data-studies the need for qualitative studies is growing. Also, as Scott Wright (Wright, 2012b) points out, research on social media is plagued by an old schism between the "revolution-school" and the "normalization school" in communication research. This tendency to reduce new phenomena to a narrow either-or-debate has rendered much of online deliberation research with a narrow understanding of politics and deliberation that may not be particularly suited for the new logic of social media. Consequently, we still need more elaborated analyses of the complex potential role of social media in the public sphere.

In this chapter I argue that a *rhetorical approach* to social media and the public sphere offers a fruitful way towards this kind of anti-reductionist analysis. By combining rhetorical theory with elements of Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, I suggest that the rhetorical arenas of social media can be understood as "social systems" surrounding issues, institutions, physical locations or media platforms in which rhetorical action is structured in a particular way.

In what follows, I will develop this approach by first underscoring the contribution of rhetorical studies to the rethinking of what we mean by the "public sphere". I will then combine this perspective with structuration theory and its insights into structure, agency and institutionalization. Finally, I will briefly illustrate the usefulness of this approach by drawing some insights from a study of the Norwegian "Tweetocracy".

2 Social media, rhetorical studies and the public sphere

In brief, rhetoric refers to the domain of "purposive and effective communication" (Kjeldsen, 2004). As this definition suggests, a defining feature of rhetoric is to see communication as *intentional* activity. The speaker is thought to adjust her communication to the audience and the situation to best achieve her

communicative goals. From a rhetorical perspective communication is always seen as *contingent* and *situated* (Kjeldsen, 2014). Not only the outcome of the communication in question but the best or most efficient rhetorical choice of action will depend on the particular circumstances. This way, rhetorical communication is always inextricably linked to the *entire situation* in which it occurs.

How we understand situations has thus major importance for a rhetorical approach. Depending on whether the emphasis is placed on the structuring properties of the context or the acting agent, rhetorical research has either seen the speaker as reacting to a set of situational demands (Bitzer, 1968), or viewed the speaker as creator of a situation by defining and drawing attention to certain issues (Vatz, 1973). Without dismissing the analytical usefulness of these approaches, contemporary rhetorical theory has increasingly turned to an understanding of rhetorical situations as *inter-subjectively defined social constructions* (Miller, 1984), emphasizing rhetorical communication as a co-operative two-way process that requires mutual understanding and trust.

When we understand situations this way, it becomes clear how important it is to grasp the social and institutional conditions under which the rhetorical situation is constructed. In our present media environment this task is increasingly challenging (Kjeldsen, 2008; McGee, 1990). In a digital media-environment the speaker engages in a multitude of potential situations and with an audience that is dispersed in both time and space. Thus, studies of rhetoric in digital environments are concerned not only with persuasion in a traditional sense but also with formations of individual and collective identities and constructions of new relations and encounter settings (Eyman, 2015; Zappen, 2005). It is this wider concern with the complexity of the communication *from the perspective of the speaker (or rhetor)* that makes a rhetorical approach potentially useful in capturing the new dynamics of public sphere in the era of social media.

Social media has different boundaries and affordances than traditional mass media in terms of interactivity, uptake and identity. As a form of public sphere, often described as a networked public (boyd, 2010), the new social media are shaped by the blurring of public and private, the loss of imagined common context, high degree of circulation and lesser control of the message (Warnick/Heineman, 2012). Social media is also to a much greater extent than traditional media formed by users' content and participation. This emphasizes the participatory role of citizens as active rhetorical agents, but it also increases the much-described complexity, fragmentation, and changeability of the contemporary public sphere.

From the perspective of rhetorical studies our new digital public sphere is perhaps best described, in line with rhetorical scholar Gerard Hauser, as a *reticulate public sphere*, consisting of a network of discursive arenas in which the

norms that govern the communication are derived from local practices rather than an any idea of universal reasonableness or other criteria traditionally associated with public deliberation. Such an approach offers a better understanding of the multitude of informal conversations and symbolic actions through which ordinary citizens engage in public opinion. These diverse discursive arenas are not addressing a general audience, nor are they fulfilling an institutionalized civic task. Rather, they consist of *vernacular exchanges*, the voices of average citizens engaged in everyday communication. People interact differently in different spheres, Hauser argues, and therefore we should be more open to the diversity of rhetorical norms that arise within different arenas (Hauser, 1999).

Hauser's approach can be a way to take the field of social media research forward and to broaden our definition of politics online. If we consider social media solely as new means of communication between politicians and voters, we run the risk of overlooking significant aspects of how these sites might influence political values, attitudes and identities.

This point has also been made by Scott Wright (Wright, 2012a). To overcome the limitations of the "revolution/normalization" divide in social media research, he has suggested that we look for politically relevant communication in "third spaces": "formally non-political online discussion space(s) where political talk can emerge" (Wright, 2012a). This is based on Ray Oldenburg's concept of "third places" as sites outside of the home ("first place") and the workplace ("second place") that constitute the gathering places of informal public life (Oldenburg, 1989).

I follow Wright in claiming that major social network sites like Facebook and Twitter can accommodate such "third spaces", or contingent *rhetorical arenas*, as I will refer to them.¹ In order to better understand how these arenas can be what Hauser calls a "locus of emergence for rhetorically salient meaning" (Hauser, 1999), we must understand how rhetorical practice is structured in a way that makes the arena recognizable as such in the first place. This we can do by approaching rhetorical arenas through Anthony Giddens' theorization of "social systems".

3 A new theoretical approach to rhetorical arenas

The conception of "rhetorical arena" can be developed to provide a more comprehensive approach to rhetorical practice by linking it to Anthony Giddens' structuration theory.

¹ Several rhetorical scholars have developed similar approaches focusing on „mid-level“ rhetorical spaces (see for instance, Miller), however, they do not place much emphasis on media's impact on rhetorical practice. Neither do they give any detailed description of how arenas of particular practice are upheld over time.

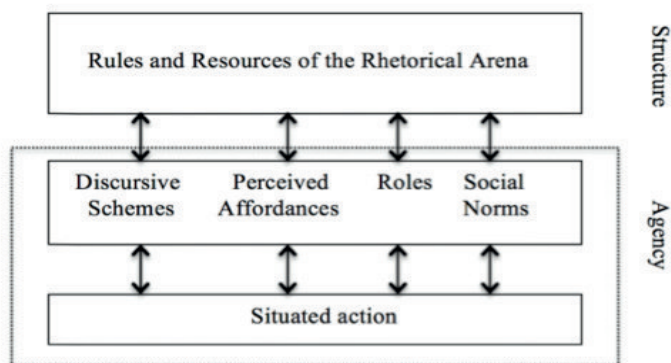
In his theory, Giddens attempts to bridge the dualisms between individual and society by replacing them with a single concept: the *duality of structure*. According to Giddens, agency and structure should not be regarded as opposing or even separate phenomenon. "Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices", Giddens argues, "and 'exists' in the generating moments of this constitution" (Giddens, 1979). Structures should be understood as both rules and resources, meaning that they will not only limit the agents' action-possibilities but also empower the agents. In acting, and in interpreting the acts of others, actors draw upon their knowledge of these rules and resources, reproducing them in the process. It is this reflexive reproduction that gives form to social systems, "the patterning of social relations across time-space, understood as reproduced practices" (Giddens, 1979, p. 5)

This process of reciprocity between agency and structure is what Giddens refers to as the *process of structuration*. As structure only "exists" in action, a theoretical possibility of change is inherent in all moments of social reproduction. Stability, a necessity for social systems, is therefore understood not as the absence of change but as the continuation of action in accordance with the structural properties of the social system. Structuration, then, is the process governing the continuity or transformation of structures, and -- through this -- the reproduction of systems. As this process is variable, different social systems will have different degrees of "systemness" depending on the level of interdependence of action. The defining feature is that systems reproduce action that is recognizable as *regularized social behaviour*.

Giddens' formulations offer a chance to think of rhetorical arenas as social systems situated in time-space and organised as encounter settings for rhetorical practice. Rhetorical arenas create more or less stable contexts of interaction through the actors' inter-subjective construction of rhetorical situations and their fitting responses to these situations. When they act and interpret the acts of others, actors draw on their knowledge of the rules and resources of the arena. By doing so, they recreate the rules and resources in the process. Through this structuration process the arenas provide and reproduce the structural properties necessary for rhetorical practice.

Viewing rhetorical arenas as social systems upheld by processes of structuration allows us to analyse rhetorical practice through the modalities of structuration. These are analytical concepts identified by Giddens as the enabling and constraining elements of structure. He identifies three modalities: *facilities*, *interpretive schemes* and *norms*. On the structural level these modalities relate to structures of *signification*, *domination* and *legitimation*. Since we are not here concerned with social action in general, but rhetorical practice in particular, these modalities can be more sharply defined to capture the specific rules and resources of rhetorical practice. Here I will modify these modalities

to *discursive schemes*, *perceived affordances*, *roles*, and *social norms*. These are analytically separated as *four* dimensions, as the dimension of domination is divided into the *perceived affordances* of the material facilities of the medium (allocative resources) and the *roles* of the actors (authoritative resources).



Discursive schemes describe the constitutive and qualitative norms of discourse that the actors draw upon when interacting. These include the classification of utterances in genres and what constitutes as quality within the genres. *Perceived affordances* describe the action possibilities made available for the actors by the technological and physical resources of the arena. The concept of perceived affordances should be understood in line with Donald A. Norman as the combination of the actual and perceived properties of the environment (Norman, 1999). These are determined by the physical and technological resources and the actors' access to, and knowledge of, these resources. *Roles* describe expectations and opportunities attached to the actors as speakers and audience within the arena. These are the social resources available for the different actors due to their position in the arena. *Social norms* describe the rules shared by the actors in the arena of what is proper and what is not proper to do. Failure to follow these rules may lead to sanctioning by other actors.

These will always be overlapping and interdependent, as is the case with the structural dimensions they mediate. Enforcement of social norms depends on the different roles of the actors; the perceived affordances of the arena are intertwined with the dominating discursive schemes, and so on. The separation between different modalities can only be made analytically.

As the duality of agents and structures affects how the actors interpret what happens around them, the modalities are not only relevant to how the actors react to situations, but also to how they perceive and interpret situations and how their actions recreate them. Similarly, even though different arenas

will have different thematic orientations, what are recreated are not the topics of interest or the issues discussed, but the structuring properties, the rules and resources of the particular arena, which makes these issues salient.

This way, Giddens' analytic vocabulary allows us to start translating the complex nature of our new media reality and its consequences for the public sphere into theoretical language. Major social media sites like Twitter and Facebook support a multitude of different social configurations and practices that are not adequately described in terms of genre (micro-level) or public sphere (macro-level). The "rhetorical arena" approach is a way to study these mid-level practices by seeing technological change and social and discursive norms as joint preconditions for rhetorical practice.

5 The Norwegian Tweetocracy

Twitter is often described as the social media that is most closely attached to the political debate (Aalen, 2015). At the same time, Twitter use is more differentiated than other, traditional forms of political participation. In Norway the press has coined the phrase "Tweetocracy" to refer to the well-established voices from the media, politics and academia using Twitter as an arena for public debate.

This study explores how opinion-makers perceive the rules and resources of political and civic debate on Twitter. The study is based on 18 in-depth interviews (1h), structured around questions about the modalities of Twitter as a political rhetorical arena. The informants were selected using a snowball-method, having the interviewees identify other "insiders" in the arena of *political commentary* on Twitter. The actors' own description of this sphere circles around their *professional and public roles*, the *form of interaction* they are engaged in, and their understanding of what "*Twitter-friendly*" issues are.

Professional and public roles. The actors are people with a lot of access to the public and traditional media, often described as "the chattering classes", "talking heads" or "the punditocracy", who use Twitter to comment on current affairs in close relation to the news agenda. But while the offline roles are thus brought into the Twitter-sphere, the *nature of activity on Twitter* builds particular kinds of social relations. According to the respondents, interaction in Twitter is seemingly more open, casual and egalitarian than debates in traditional media. This form of interaction also helps separate the inside-actors from the outsiders who, although they may hold similar roles in off-Twitter public life, are not able or willing to participate in the same rhetorical activity.

The form of interaction. The respondents emphasise the specific quality of Twitter communication as “chatter” or a *continuing flow of comments and discussion on current events*. This conversation has a unique tone and style. An editor in a major publishing house offers a description:

IE: Easiness is a good word for it. (...). It's a feeling that Twitter is the people on the backbench (at)on a political meeting. We're definitely present and got our own opinions, but we crack jokes about what's going on (on)at the podium. That doesn't mean we're not there, or that we don't take the discussion seriously. On the contrary. It's like the guy on Saturday Night Live, Jon Stewart (sic), said: “We're the ones throwing paper balls (at)on the speakers”. Twitter is like that.

Thus, while the off-line punditocracy are perceived as taking themselves too seriously, the “tweetocracy” is clearly more self-ironic. The respondents identify themselves as part of an elitist “chattering” class, but feel no need to reply to the criticism this originally derogative term implies.

The Twitter-sphere follows closely the mainstream political, academic, and cultural debate, and the respondents see the Norwegian public divided between those who are interested in political debates and those who are not. This categorization makes strong assumptions regarding social class and cultural capital based on assumed interest in political, academic, and cultural debate. The respondents, also those whose entry into the public sphere is primarily based on social media-activity, place themselves at the high end of this intellectual dimension.

A metaphor the respondents frequently use to describe the communicative situation in Twitter is “pub-talk” or “a discussion at a party”. Many of the informants are highly educated and display much knowledge about political history and their description of Twitter bears a striking resemblance to academic analyses of the 18th and 19th century public sphere, suggesting not only that such an analogy can be made, but also that the actors themselves perhaps see themselves as a revived bourgeoisie public.

The description of the form of interaction also tells us something important about what sort of public the actors perceive themselves to be part of. The interpretive schemas of Twitter provide the opportunity for the respondents to act in public and discuss serious issues in a more casual and somewhat informal way. Discussing with a politician “at a party” is not the same as debating with him in the newspaper. The discussion at a party is seemingly open and egalitarian. It differs from a political debate not because the actors are more likely to modify or change their initial perspectives, but because the conversation is carried out as if they were. In the same way, the egalitarianism is not a result of people being ascribed the same weight, but that the conversation is carried out as if they were. An actor in Twitter must grasp this regulative fiction to be recognized as a competent participant. While some politicians obviously

do, the attitude among the respondents is that a “common” politician does not. This is not because of their public role, but because they do not engage in this form of “chatter”. In other words, the question of politicians’ roles in the rhetorical arena is not so much about their formal public roles (whether they hold an office or not) as it is about their rhetorical and social practice, and willingness to accept the rules of the Twitter-sphere. The respondents often mention overtly strategic communication, infusing the communication with an agenda, as an obstruction of the sort of interaction they themselves participate in. It is described as “dishonest” and “false”, or, more frequently, as “boring”.

Twitter-friendly issues. The political Twitter-sphere is also defined by *what* the actors talk about. If the form of interaction separates the arena from mainstream politics, the topics of interest separate it from other areas of Twitter that revolve around topics like soccer, music or teen culture. The respondents most frequently describe their topical interests as *current political and civic matters that are high on the news agenda*. This also implies that Twitter rarely sets its own agenda but feeds on the general news agenda.

Some political issues the respondents describe as particularly “Twitter-friendly”: the arena generates more attention for what it calls “value politics” or “culture wars”. These sorts of issues involve immigration, religion, gender roles, prostitution, sexuality, abortion, and freedom of speech. The respondents describe them as “hot button issues”, articulating “principles”, “moral aspects”, and “an element of something private”. They are seen as involving “personal and collective identity”, and being “controversial”, “touchy” or “flammable”. Thus Twitter-talk insists on a strong connection between person and belief, challenging the separation of the public and private realms. A journalist working with online debate forums reflects on this:

IE: Well, I think they’re about identity and the relation to the collective. Who am I as a person? Who am I as a body? What is my identity, and how do I relate to the collective identity? For instance, the Islamic debate is about how I as a person collide with a society that’s rapidly changing. It’s the same thing with the questions about health and sexuality. Who am I? And how do others perceive me? How do I get recognition?

One thing the “value politics”-themes have in common is that they are easy to personalize. The recurring issues of the Twitter-sphere are often approached as personal opinions and beliefs, something that is enforced by the affordance of Twitter as being the users’ *own* account. Value politics implies a strong linkage between opinions and personal beliefs. They concern issues about which the average citizen can be assumed to have an opinion, without depending on expert knowledge.

6 Concluding remarks

The case study of the Norwegian “Tweetocracy” shows that the rhetorical arena-approach can open new understandings of particular public spheres within new media. The interviewees clearly identify themselves with a particular Twitter-sphere based on *who* is active in the arena, how they interact with each other, and *what* kind of issues they are engaged in. The interviews suggest that the structures of signification, legitimation, and domination that give systemic form to the arena connect the Twitter-sphere rather closely to traditional media. But as we have seen, these structures are mediated in new ways, as Twitter reflects different rules and resources for rhetorical practice.

Identifying these arena-specific rules and resources gives us a better understanding of what kind of activities people are engaged in on social media. It also brings new interesting questions to the fore, like how structures of signification, legitimation, and domination in the public sphere will be mediated differently in different spheres? Ultimately, they help us pose the question: What kind of change might new rhetorical arenas bring to the public sphere at large? In order to answer these questions, we need a variety of methods and theoretical approaches. This chapter has argued and demonstrated that rhetoric can play an important role in this task.

7 References

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Biography

Eirik Vatnøy is a PhD Candidate at the Department of Information Science and Media Studies at the University of Bergen, Norway. He is associated with the research group for rhetoric and is supervised by prof. Jens E. Kjeldsen and prof. Hallvard Moe. Vatnøy investigates political rhetoric in online environments.

Contact: eirik.vatnoy@uib.no