**#Time**

Perhaps the most important distinction between Twitter and other social network sites has been the idea that Twitter offers access to real time communication. This begs a prior question: what is real time? There is nothing real about the construction of time on Twitter. As time moves forward old Tweets are displaced by new Tweets at the top of the screen. Depending on how many people one follows, time may move at a dramatically different rate. To say something is trending now is a misnomer, there is no unified now, only a collection of page alignments linked by gossamer tissues of PHP and AJAX calls to an SQL database. Acronyms are the building blocks of the social now. Now is only created when hailed into existence by a call to the database. If anything, the procession of signifiers on Twitter and through a hashtag public is neither real nor time, which is not to say that it is unreal or unimportant, but that the investment of a machine process with the creation of real time is a powerful affective move.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Analysis of the formation of publics at the level of the Tweet is difficult if not impossible because of this tenuous machine logic. The relations between these writers and readers are not distinguished spatially, but temporally. Aside from the isolation of locally trending Tweets (this can be changed) Twitter is spatially ambivalent. After a short time Tweets are no longer accessible. Tweets vanish. Time is everything on Twitter. Products like Buffer, HootSuite, and Tweetdeck promise Tweeters the ability to plan their Tweets in advance and to manage multiple flows of activity. Nothing is quite as important for marketers as building an effective sense of cadence, expressed as a particular rhythm for inserting messages into other people’s social media lives. Cadence theory offers strategic communicators the promise of transcending the momentary bounds of Twitter by preparing content well in advance that might be automatically circulated to users during high traffic times. The dream of strategy is to escape from the bounds of conversation and intersubjective engagement to manipulate the stream of time. The great selling point of Twitter, real time, is only intended for persons who are consumers, not the power users of enhanced versions of the platform.

Fanout, the process by which tweets are populated into readers feeds draws attention to the problem of time in a very concrete way as Tweets can arrive out of order.[[2]](#endnote-2) This tends to happen when users have asymmetric follower lists or just through the random chance of location and web traffic. For all the emphasis on the production of a stable timeline and a real-interactive moment, even the seemingly sacrosanct flow of real time can be out of order.

Temporality (the phenomenological experience of time) is distinct from an attention to history, or to time itself. Or to use rhetorical terminology, Kairos (the rhetorical moment or situation) is distinct from chronos (the sequence of events). Kairos cannot be constituted on the level of the individual, unread Tweet, it is after all a production of the attention of at least several people and mechanical processes. Although one might read a stream of Tweets and recognize their interconnectivity, this sort of deep reading would require an attention to context cues that may simply be unavailable in the stream. Users often use a combination of addressivity through the @ and .@ signs as well as the hashtag to provide a lateral link between signs. Overt signifiers make the connections visible with even fleeting attention. Our concern should not be for the properties of the lateral links themselves or even for the content of the communications, but for the contexts created and destroyed through the temporality of Twitter. In this essay I argue that the temporal features of networks organized by hashtags call for a particular attention to the time in which networks operate, and further that the temporality of circulation of discourses on these networks is presented in manifold forms, with particular attention to two: fleeting and simulated publics. This essay is concerned foremost with a consideration of the when of a public rather than the why, how, or where.

**Time and Space Binding Media**

Harold Innis’ distinction between time-binding and space-binding media has informed a great deal of work in media studies, particularly James Carey’s *Communication and Culture*.[[3]](#endnote-3) Time-binding media persist across time, carrying messages to future generations. Space-binding media overcome the limits of place to reach many people at the same time such as radio. These conceptions of media and culture tend to trade-off. Cultures that privilege space binding media become increasingly oriented toward the present, and those that emphasize continuity across time are tied to a particular place. Although these biases are dialectical, as time binding media require a form of storage to transmit to the future, and space binding media tell stories that exist in a particular time.

Social media technologies seem to be space-binding, they transmit to large publics quickly, and are seemingly impermanent. A Tweet seems more like a radio broadcast than a sculpture. As it has become clear that the memory of the Internet is functionally unlimited the time-binding character of social networks has become a point of anxiety. Unlike other space-binding media the default for social media items is long-term storage. Anxiety about social media is understandable as these technologies skew established categories. This takes a number of forms, perhaps most curiously in calls for forgetting.

Snapchat’s rapid rise in popularity attests to the idea that time and space-binding affordances should be kept separate from time-binding affordances. Or, the kind of communication that a platform facilitates should be clear. Snapchat restores this balance through nothing less than the logistical media of the ticking clock – once opened a Snap exists for the next ten seconds before permanent deletion. Visible countdown technologies are a powerful cultural resource marking anterior of a future event, be that the erasure of an image, the victory of James T. Kirk, or the conclusion of a sporting event. Running out of time, and the cultural practice of watching the clock become a performative enactment of preservation and the shared experience of the moment.

Time keeping devices are as John Durham Peters writes a form of logistical media – they organize the distribution of people and things, they are the media that organize all others.[[4]](#endnote-4) The experience of the flow of time must be considered by in the history of logistical media, but also through the interplay of those mechanisms with linguistic codes and phenomenological experiences. Returning to the question of the introduction it is important to note that absent attention, time keeping technologies have little impact on a society. In *A Plea for Time*, Innis cautions media scholars not to overplay the idea of the moment in all its romance, “We must somehow escape on the one hand from our obsession with the moment and on the other hand from our obsession with history. In freeing ourselves from time and attempting a balance between the demands of time and space we can develop conditions favourable to an interest in cultural activity.”[[5]](#endnote-5) An attention to time is thus distinct from an attention to either history, by stabilizing an archive of things that might be cataloged, or the moment itself, at least as that moment is understood in an exclusively phenomenological register. The study of time and of the logistical media that organize publics should be distinct from either the study of history or the feeling of the moment.

John Durham Peters noted that communication scholarship has also considered time as a point, or Kairos.[[6]](#endnote-6) This view has informed work on the side of Rhetorical Studies through the question of the rhetorical situation. As a theory of time, it appears far less frequently than a discussion of context, creativity, or materiality. This debate offered a way of viewing the seemingly objective procession of the historical moment for Lloyd Bitzer.[[7]](#endnote-7) Speakers and publics formation was facilitated by the procession of historical and material causes. Instead of speakers imaging situations to respond to, the exigency exists before the speaker. Richard Vatz responded to this in 1973, arguing that speakers may produce the situation to which they respond.[[8]](#endnote-8) One can argue about the benefits of war with a country without actually resting a finger on a missile launch control. This is not to say that all rhetorical situations offer equal possibilities for persuasion or the legitimation of a policy proposal.

Shifting this debate, Barbara Biesecker’s turn toward Derridian deconstruction offered a way to see the positions as dialectically tied aspects of the same metaphysical sense of time.[[9]](#endnote-9) Instead of seeing the production of the rhetorical situation as being related to the character of the moment or of the speaker Biesecker argued that the persuasive moment exists because of potential of language itself. This use of Derrida offers the prospect of finding the identity and temporality of the public and the rhetorical situation not on the act of making a single hashtag itself, but in the possibility of attention to the moment of being with a hashtag. For William Trapani, Biesecker’s use of Derrida is an important development in the argumentative understanding of the moment, an opportunity to introduce Derrida’s later work on media technologies that produce these new forms of meaning at work in the flow of the online rhetorical situation in the interplay between multiple, divergent, out of phase temporalities.[[10]](#endnote-10) Trapani argues that Derrida’s conception of the event-machine offers three key ideas: the iterability of speech acts, the dissemination of them in unexpected ways between mechanical and performative processes, and the plasticity of temporality. As a description of the ongoing process of public formation and articulation through social network systems this is particularly apt. A like or a retweet is nothing if not a speech act that depending on the peculiarities of the interaction of many servers and other flows of attention might flow unpredictably from person to person and feed to feed.

This extension of the deconstruction of the rhetorical situation offers an apt description of the sense of the formation of publics through hashtags as the condition of their existence depends on the possibility of différance existent in the iteration, citation, and circulation of discourses in at simultaneous times, yet in divergent, if even singular, experiences. Derrida makes this argument well in the context of the temporal dimension of e-mail:

But the example of E-mail is privileged in my opinion for a more important and obvious reason: because electronic mail today, even more than the fax, is on the way to transforming the entire public and private space of humanity, and first of all the limit between the private, the secret (public or private), and the public or the phenomenal. It is not only a technique, in the ordinary and limited sense of the term: at an unprecedented rhythm, in quasi-instantaneous fashion, this instrumental possibility of production, of printing, of conservation, and of destruction of the archive must be inevitably be accompanied by juridical and thus political transformations.[[11]](#endnote-11)

In the context of Derrida’s study of the archive and the meaning of the event the interplay between the technical capacity of the inscription system and the meaning of the event come full circle. The connection of these two distinct accounts of the production of argumentative time can be productive as it emphasizes the slippage between media forms and the composition of publics. Logistical media theories provide the basis for understanding the literal physical time keeping machines that orchestrate social networks. The deconstructed rhetorical situation provides insights into the texts coordinated by those machines. For some these conceptions of an attention to logistical media and the event machine may be mutually exclusive, I would contend that they are both necessary for understanding the ways in which uneven, seemingly random space-binding network machines interact with the affective potential of different, laterally linked, hashtagged publics. The idea of phase can be particularly useful for understanding the relationship between different forms of power. It is this attention to both the logistical means by which social network publics are coordinated and to the potential of their textual unfolding that might offer contribution to understanding the operation of publics through social networks. In the next sections, I will call attention to two important ideas in public sphere theory that call for a different understanding of time.

**Fleeting Publics**

Transient contact points appear in a number of contexts. Fleeting expletives may allow a broadcaster to avoid a fine. An ostensibly deliberate obscene act draws sanctions if only to enforce a certain set of notions about time on the airwaves. Coordinating communications and small talk organize social life. Televised political attacks do their work in a matter of seconds. Clickbait headlines delivered through social media make a two-sentence Hollywood-style pitch for reading what may be a longer article. This video is a game changer. Television news has devolved into sound bites for a good reason: attention is fleeting.

Michael Warner argues that participation in the life of a public or counter public need not include address and response, “mere attention” is enough to constitute engagement.[[12]](#endnote-12) This is profoundly important for understanding what it means to constitute a public on Twitter. The idea is not that everyone is engaged and responding, this would become a cacophony, but that large numbers of individuals might read and recirculate particular ideas. Signal is easily lost to noise. Sometimes one can almost hear extras in a film scene saying, rutabaga, rutabaga, rutabaga: a verbal mess that simulates meaningful speech. A right to read or listen is the necessary corollary of the right to speak or write. The example of the woman vacuuming at a hotel near a keynote address is powerful in this context as she is proximal to the communication and present for a transient moment.[[13]](#endnote-13) Instead of offering a permanent theory of the public, Warner’s publics exist in moments that are often unstable, constituted on an interment basis. This distinction is important as the institutional logic of the publics of the system depends on a strict regulation of who may have access and how they may behave. This is not the publicity process of a demand on the state, but the publicity of the lifeworld.

For Warner, publics form only in as much as they are addressed by discourse in circulation. A public is not an historical form, but a literal, present tense thing that is created through attention. It is this condition of publicness that allows the formation of accidental, covert, fleeting, and involuntary publics. If we take those who argue that public sphere is a poor translation of Öffentlichkeit as a guide, it is important to recognize that this form of ongoing publicness in a situated moment is what Habermas was attempting to describe – publicity as a process is not dependent on spaces, but on the time of attention and readiness.[[14]](#endnote-14) It is surely possible that not all people addressed by the discourse of a public would become active recirculators of it. Not all Tweets are Retweeted. Many may never read by anyone, scrolled past like so many advertisements. This would lend to the impression of the feed as nonsense as well as making the platform commercially useless. Without some kind of distinction between valuable, re-circulable information and the information that will pass without further activation it would be difficult to sell an advertising product.

Twitter was made for Warner’s public. Hashtag publics exist only because of the possibility of attention and recirculation. They, as Warner describes, “crave attention like a child,” and yet can be formed by people who merely “wandered by.”[[15]](#endnote-15) Instead of provisional publics formed in kinky clubs or street corner ministries the time of the public is found in that curious relation of the time of the server and the time of the profile, made stable by the echoes of retweets and the time of those who read the tweets or at least those who are ready to understand what they might mean.

**Simulated Publicness or Sockpuppet Publics**

Fleeting publics constituted on Twitter tempt strategic communications professionals. Without sustained reflection ersatz publics might court the benefits of publicity, without the need for an audience. Habermas arged in *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, that the techniques of the publicity would be deployed for purposes other than the actualization of democratic will. The tendency for the capacity of the logic of the system: be that the public system or the government, or the private system, the market, to liquidate debate is quite real, as Habermas wrote:

The immediate effect of publicity is not exhausted by the decommercialized wooing effect of an aura of good will that produces a readiness to assent. Beyond influencing consumer decisions this publicity is now also useful for exerting political pressure because it mobilizes a potential of inarticulate readiness to asset, that, if need be, can be translated into a plebiscaitarily defined acclamation.[[16]](#endnote-16)

As a preemptive description of the interaction of “inarticulate readiness” with institutions of power, Habermas dreams Twitter into existence. The key idea here is that possibility of engaging a public of a rapidly refreshing social network is contingent on the idea of the public being in a position to recognize that they are in fact in public. Advertising and other processes for cultivating attention are greeted with suspicion as the aura they produce is strategically designed to depend on less than rational and critical deliberation. In may cases the sorts of publics that advertisers and public relations professionals wish to cultivate are synthetic. In an attempt to harness the political will of activist publics Pepsico curtailed many its advertising efforts, redirecting money into various grants for good causes.[[17]](#endnote-17) Showering money on good people was supposed to engender good will by articulating the product, Pepsi, to a more robust sense of civic engagement. By the end of the campaign, Pepsi had fallen to third in the soft drink market. The Pepsi Refresh Project did little to keep their brand from going flat.

Synthetic publics are not particularly satisfying. Sockpuppets are the stuff f the synthetic campaign. Although verification is difficult, the swell of followers of New Gingrich’s Twitter account during the 2012 Republican primary process is an important example.[[18]](#endnote-18) Gingrich’s sudden surge in followers was not intended to persuade those followers (assuming we can call them followers), but to create the conditions where by the locus of his campaign energy could be valued, to create the logic of intelligibility that would say that it was a Twitter handle worth following.

Paul Virillio’s dromology offers an important insight into the diffusion of information through Twitter. Instead of the millisecond culture of Twitter facilitating even faster processes of dialectical judgment and resolution these same techniques and velocities magnify the accidents and distortions of the publicity process. False information and well-positioned conspiracy theories find increased reach while previously insulated institutions of information validation are drowned out by noise. The accident of the simulated public is the misrecognition of the nature of the formation of publics. One who is purchasing sock-puppets misapprehends that some affinity, some desire seeds the hub of a network. A laugh track can only make a poorly written sitcom so funny. Like a rose, a social network needs a trellis to climb, and then the mere presence of a plant and lathe is not enough to build a garden.

It is not the raw number of followers that make the celebrity, yet one cannot be a celebrity without followers. Copying a follower list or purchasing fake accounts takes a decidedly historical and mechanical approach to the formation of a public. Publics are not collected and curated. The connections and networks that a user might have cannot be read outside of the time in which they were made. Time leaves an impression on a social public that cannot be ignored through a preference for the simulation. Yet, the public only formed because of a simulation of time in the first place. In this way, the creation of a synthetic world of public impression, publics forming on Twitter and their archives are of a curious character that moves beyond e-mail and other technologies. They call the basic idea of the impression, the public, and the archive to the fore to be read through new historical, technical, and political categories.

**Theorizing the time of the #public**

The time of Twitter is measured in gigahertz. This is not the time of the hashtag public, something decidedly slower. Publics exist in the temporality of their circulation, and in the case of a system that auto-poetically produces circulations, those times will always be uneven. For some users the flow of status updates from a large number of people and machines will make it almost impossible to read or listen to incoming messages. Meaning will wash away because it comes in too much, and too fast. This essay has argued that the stability across time provided by hashtags is an artifact of those that trend, and that the experience of a laterally organized temporal social network is an operation of an event-machine that produces opportunities for political engagement and rhetorical critique both through the possibility of difference inherent in communication and through the differential action of server mechanisms.

Hashtag publics offer a chance for fleeting connections to become forms of attention that constitute publics. Yet, the technologies that might afford publics the chance to form are also all too easily appropriated for forms of system logic. The temporalities of publics to be formed are synthesized through cadence software, sock-puppets, and trends. Entire pedagogies are devoted to the manipulation of the time of Twitter life.

Studies of the circulation of hashtags need to pay particular attention to the temporality of their circulation, as they are part of an unpredictable flow of messages is both tightly controlled and beyond control all at the same time. This practice of reading, thinking, and engaging must take place in the real time of the researcher in as much as the traces left by the hashtag are a poor substitute for the phenomena itself. The practice of data management at Twitter underscores this reality. The firehose, the raw stream of data flowing through the Twitter system is carefully controlled, very few parties have access to the firehose, much less the storehouse of old Twitter data. With good reason, that database and the operations and transformations to be done to it are the heart of the Twitter’s business plan. Further, providing unlimited search access to all of that data would be cost and technology prohibitive. Twitter is in this sense very human. It is a machine with a memory, and limits. In that moment of circulation and iteration, between data handlers, people and text, there is a possibility for persuasion and public formation that is in that moment alone.

#Time requires an attention and a form of research that is situated in the feeling of that moment, practiced within the time of the hashtag, and committed to the difference of that very second. This calls us back to Innis: researching the hashtag public requires an attention both to the moment of possibility in which one tweets and to the history of the mechanism, if only for the fact that this attention might create a moment for a consideration of the time of the hashtag public itself.

**End Notes**

1. Although this essay is not first and foremost a reading of Lacan, it is worth noting that the idea of a strong of signifiers substituting for the Real is an important theme. Paul Verhaeghe, “Causality in science and psychoanalysis,” in Yannis Stavrakakis and Jayson Glynos eds., *Lacan and Science*, (CITY:PUBLISHER), p. 126 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. High Scalability, The Architecture Twitter Uses To Deal With 150M Active Users, 300K QPS, A 22 MB/S Firehose, And Send Tweets In Under 5 Seconds, July 8, 2013. <http://highscalability.com/blog/2013/7/8/the-architecture-twitter-uses-to-deal-with-150m-active-users.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. James Carey, *Communication and Culture*, (University of Illinois Press: Urbana, Il): 1989. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. John Durham Peters, “Calendar, Clock, Tower,” paper at MiT6, Cambridge, MA, 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Harold Innis, *A Plea for Time*, (New Brunswick: University of New Brunswick Press): 1950. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Peters, 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Lloyd Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric,* 1(1), January 1968. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Richard E. Vatz, “The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric,* 1973. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Barbara Biesecker, “Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation from Within the Thematic of Difference,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 22(2), 1989. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. William Trapani, “Materiality’s Time Rethinking the Event from the Derridian *espirit d’ a-propos*,” in Rhetoric, Materiality, and Politics*,* eds. Biesecker and Lucaties, (New York: Peter Lang): 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Feaver*, trans. Prenowitz, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press): 1998, p. 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counter Publics,* (New York: Zone Books): 2000. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. PAGE [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. This is clear in the translator’s introduction to STPS and is an important note, this translational problem has been at play in many theories and approaches to publicity. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Warner, 89 and [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. McCarthy, (Cambridge: MIT Press): 1989. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Craig Bida, “Why Pepsi Canned the Refresh Project,” *MediaPost*, 2012. http://www.mediapost.com/publications/article/186127/why-pepsi-canned-the-refresh-project.html [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. John Cook, “Update: Only 92% of Newt Gingrich’s Twitter Followers Are Fake,” *Gawker*, August 2, 2011. http://gawker.com/5826960/update-only-92-of-newt-gingrichs-twitter-followers-are-fake [↑](#endnote-ref-18)