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## Twitter as Limited Digital Rhetorical Forum – The Reproductive Rights Discourse Online

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### Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to LMU's Professor K.J. Peters for his instruction in Contemporary Rhetorical Theory.

Twitter as Limited Digital Rhetorical Forum – The Reproductive Rights  
Discourse Online

“Rhetoric, as I have tried to express it here, is more than the practice; it is the entire process of forming, expressing, and judging public thought in real life” -  
Thomas Farrell

Last December, Nate Cohn of The New York Times wrote, “The Supreme Court seems all but certain to rewrite the country’s abortion laws when it rules in coming months ... But the real-world effects of that ruling will differ enormously depending on how far the justices go” (*The Morning Newsletter Dec. 14*, Leonhardt). In April, Oklahoma joined the ranks of state senates that have passed abortion bans (*NYT Evening Briefing Apr. 5*). We’ve since seen other rulings take effect, emphasizing the importance of the reproductive rights discourse to our national consciousness. Given the complexity of the reproductive rights issue, and its relevance to our contemporary moment, it is essential to understand how people are discussing this monumental debate.

One place for us to look is online. By using Thomas Farrell’s notion of “rhetorical forum” and James P. Zappen’s outline for digital rhetorical theory, one can account for the current state of such discourses on Twitter. These scholars’ frameworks are useful in fostering more productive conversations in the oft-too-polarized communities of social media. I will examine specifically how women’s rights discourses emerge, operate, and succeed or fail within the context of rhetoric on Twitter. Using Farrell’s idea of “forum” and Zappen’s digital rhetorical framework, I delineate the characteristics of Twitter as a digital rhetorical forum. I then go on to identify some shortcomings of the reproductive rights discourse as it exists on Twitter by applying these ideas to the online space. I will conclude with suggestions for more positive Twitter discourse.

I recognize my inability to solve the complex issues surrounding these debates, and I wouldn’t presume to claim to have the answers. Developing these answers may be outside the scope of my paper and my position as a scholar. However, it is my hope that by elevating the work of these existing rhetoricians and identifying some of the shortcomings of Twitter, further avenues of research can be discovered. This further research could provide valuable insights into how communities of women’s rights discourse are developed, fostered, and interpreted in online spaces, and it could also help reveal issues of access, platform, and voice in digital rhetoric. All these topics, while developed under a rhetorical theory lens, are very relevant to the understanding of community and communication in women’s and gender studies at large, made especially relevant in the hybrid context of our present.

It is important to note that this study took place before Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter. Several months ago, our world was still in the hybrid aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, and Twitter was still under control of Jack Dorsey. The platform was struggling to balance free speech with censorship of hate speech and misinformation, especially as a result of the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection. Additionally, this research was conducted before the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by the Supreme Court, so the content of the dialogue reflects a different reality. Any points in this paper that are no longer relevant to the current state of Twitter are due to this timing and should be viewed in the context of early 2022. As such, I've provided some footnotes identifying points complicated by the post-Roe, Musk present. As Twitter evolves in the present and coming months, and our world reaches post-pandemic normalcy, work will have to be done to adapt our understanding of digital rhetorical forums.

### **Breaking Down the Beast**

To begin dissecting the nature of Twitter as a rhetorical forum, we first need to understand what a forum is. Thomas Farrell writes,

A rhetorical forum is any encounter setting sufficiently durable to serve as a recurring 'gathering place' for discourse. As such, the forum provides a space for multiple expressed positions to encounter one another ... a rhetorical forum provides a potential normative horizon, an avenue of mediation among discourses that might otherwise be self-confirming, incommensurable or perhaps not even heard at all. (67)

So, when analyzing rhetorical discourses on Twitter, one must examine how the platform operates as a "gathering place" that allows for differing opinions to engage with one another under certain normative, mediating guidelines. When set up correctly, "[t]he normalized rhetorical forum's persistence in time, its durability, provides a place stable enough for the normative expectation of integrity to emerge ... Once a forum has been acknowledged, it becomes very difficult to ignore" (Farrell 70). So, the forum must provide not only a space, but some sense of mediation, equal access, and integrity of content.<sup>1</sup>

Does Twitter fit this description? On the surface, yes. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's thoughts on rhetorical community, Farrell discusses how rhetorical forums emerge "whenever there is the potential for resistance, the third-party standpoint which might emerge at any time in any ongoing conversation" (68). This is where the *process* and *product* of rhetoric occurs and is situated. Twitter provides a space in which opinions can be expressed with the potential for audience response and resistance. Furthermore, Farrell states, "More important ... than the actual physical

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<sup>1</sup> This is, of course, further complicated by Musk's regulatory changes to Twitter.

presence of persons in each other's public space is the conscious awareness of each other's presence in the symbolic landscape of prospective thought and decision..." (68). This implies that rhetorical forums, far from needing a physical location, can be simply perceived. This allows for online spaces such as Twitter to fall under the definition of a rhetorical forum.

Under closer scrutiny, however, Twitter discourses do not fit Farrell's definition of rhetorical forums flawlessly. Twitter does indeed seem to provide a space for the expression of opinions and the allowance of debate amongst those opinions, but it seems to lack normative mediation and integrity. The way the Twitter algorithm pitches content to its users is tailored down strikingly partisan and ideological lines. Opposing opinions are often only encountered within the context of an agreeable one. While there are some conduct guidelines on the site, cross-position discourse often devolves into exclusionary and hateful verbiage. While it is undoubtedly a recognized and durable "gathering place," Twitter must be seen as a lesser form of Farrell's rhetorical forum, as it lacks the meaningful encounters with opposing positions that would make it a rhetorical forum in its "most developed condition" (Farrell 67).<sup>2</sup> So, as we approach a discourse on Twitter for analytical criticism, we must keep it in mind as a *limited* rhetorical forum – one that possesses many of the strengths of Farrell's definition but also many weaknesses not delineated in his scholarship.

### **Establishing the Approach**

Given our working understanding of Twitter discourses as limited digital rhetorical forums, we can now establish an approach to studying the parts at play within these spaces. In "Digital Rhetoric: Toward an Integrated Theory", James P. Zappen attempts to gather the existing research on digital rhetoric and synthesize it into a unified theory, one which will serve as a useful method for approaching Twitter forums as we have defined them above. He writes, "digital rhetoric ... is exciting because it holds promise of opening new vistas of opportunity for rhetorical studies and troublesome because it reveals the difficulties and the challenges of adapting a rhetorical tradition more than 2,000 years old to the conditions and constraints of the new digital media" (Zappen 90). In this attempt to adapt the rhetorical tradition for modern, digital use, Zappen groups the existing digital rhetorical scholarship into three categories: studies of self-expression and collaboration, the positive and negative effects of digital characteristics, and the way online spaces foster identity and community. The second and third of these categories will be the most useful for the focus of this paper.

In the second section of his paper, Zappen examines how the basic characteristics of digital media are beneficial or limiting to the rhetorical, discursive

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<sup>2</sup> The durability of the platform has recently come under question.

process. He argues that the “speed, reach, anonymity, and interactivity” can function as both affordances and constraints (91). All these function to widen discursive practices, but some of this widening has unintended drawbacks. He also questions how the relationship between the author/speaker and the reader/audience is affected as rhetoric operates in a digital space. By focusing on the “characteristics, affordances, and constraints” of Twitter as Zappen did for digital rhetoric more broadly, we will be able to dissect our chosen Twitter discourses with more precision (91). In Zappen’s third section, he summarizes digital rhetorical scholarship on creative participation to examine how digital spaces are used “not only for the purpose of moving audiences to action and belief” (persuasion) but also “for the purpose of exploring individual and group identities and participation and creative collaboration for the purpose of building communities...” (92).

Zappen acknowledges that at the time of his writing, the scholarship on digital rhetoric is still “an amalgam of more-or-less discrete components rather than a complete and integrated theory in its own right” (93). So, if our approach is to be effective, we must adapt it to handle the modern characteristics of Twitter discourses. Therefore, adapting Zappen’s work to conceive of Twitter discourses as limited digital rhetorical forums (à la Farrell) is essential for our work.

### **Applying the Approach**

The benefits and limits of Twitter as a forum viewed through the lens of digital rhetorical theory explain what role each participant plays in the rhetorical exchange and where power comes into play in reproductive rights posts on the site. To get a clear cross-section of the most popular posts, I will examine the “top” section of results when “abortion” is entered into the site search (Twitter, various users). This page fits our idea of a forum as it displays the most widely engaged-with posts across differing positions on the reproductive rights issue. It allows for opposite opinions to encounter one another in a stable and enduring space. Additionally, it falls prey to the shortcomings we have identified as limits on the rhetorical forum, as this space provides little mediation or verification.<sup>3</sup>

Of the first few pages of “top” posts, every post fell into one of two opposing viewpoints: pro-life or pro-choice. In the first 35 posts, 8 were posted by men, 14 by women, 11 by organizations, and 2 by individuals who didn’t specify their gender identity or affiliation. Out of posts by individuals who stated their gender, 63.6% were by women. However, when the 31.4% of all top posts that were submitted by organizations are included, the percentage of posts by individual

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<sup>3</sup> The algorithm that populates this page has no doubt changed in the last few years. At the time of my research, the page displayed posts based simply on high levels of engagement, with seemingly little to no mediation/verification of harmful or inaccurate posts. Censorship of misinformation increased shortly after this time, and has since decreased under Elon Musk’s leadership, changing the posts displayed.

women drops to 40%. No posts were by expressly gender nonbinary users. Nearly all posts used divisive, otherizing rhetoric, and almost all likes on posts were by accounts that expressed the same ideological positions on the issue. Disagreeing comments and hateful rhetoric were always levied across the ideological aisle, and there was little to no evidence of discourse that influenced users of the opposite opinion to adapt their position. The dominant majority of posts resorted to otherizing labels such as “pro-lifer” or “pro-choicer” to homogenize the opposing users, and there was little effort to engage in back-and-forth discourse with the aim of persuasion instead of insult or “owning”/“roasting”. Pro-choice posts relied heavily on scientific rhetoric whereas pro-life posts relied on religious messaging. Neither ideological category employed the opposite rhetoric to make their points.

Drawing first upon our definition of Twitter as a limited digital rhetorical forum, the limits we have identified with the operation of Twitter as a forum are effective in pointing out the failings of reproductive rights debates on the site. The lack of persuasive engagement between opposing viewpoints is a failure of the rhetorical goal (persuasion). While a kind of forum for reproductive rights opinions exists on Twitter, this forum does not have space for constructive dialogues in which positions are allowed to influence one another. Instead of community decision-making and generative rhetoric, Twitter creates a space for self-confirming messaging that amplifies divisiveness and promotes exclusivity. Looking at who makes up the participants in this space through the lens of forum is revealing. There was a clear lack of nonbinary, transgender, and other LGBTQIA+ voices represented on the page. Women’s voices made up less of a share than one would expect; if women’s majority share of the dialogue (women make up over half of the population) is hindered by the dominance of organization-run accounts, then the forum lacks the inclusivity necessary to foster beneficial rhetorical discourses. The power in the discursive space is not shared equally but is disproportionately controlled by organizations with political agendas, excluding and disempowering individuals with ideological stakes in the reproductive rights issue.

Similar insights arise when viewed through our adapted digital rhetorical theory. The “speed, reach, anonymity, and interactivity” (91) which Zappen considered both positive and negative characteristics of digital rhetoric seem to skew toward the negative in reproductive rights discourses on Twitter. Dangerously divisive and hateful rhetoric reaches the “top” posts page with little consequence to the user, allowing for a rhetorical forum that is the opposite of the integrity-assuring space that Farrell advocates for. What Zappen saw as “characteristics”, “affordances”, or “constraints” seems to be mostly made up of the latter. Even in his notions of identity and community formation, Twitter comes up short as a positive rhetorical resource.

While the online Twitter forum allows for identity expression and the finding of like-minded peers (community), these movements are at the expense of critical rhetorical work. The individual is not challenged to form their identity after careful consideration – the Twitter algorithm feeds them content that they already agree with and only posits opposing viewpoints as bile from destructive “others”. Therefore, communities of self-confirming rhetoric form along ideological and partisan lines, which further divides individuals who could benefit from rhetorical discourse with proponents of differing views. These unintended consequences of identity and community formation paint a far more negative picture of online digital rhetoric than the one Zappen categorized.

### **Conclusions**

Approaching Twitter as a limited digital rhetorical forum through a lens of digital rhetorical theory helps describe the state of reproductive rights discourses on the website, as well as in identifying the power structures at play in these spaces. Over the last several months, the reproductive rights situation in this country has changed in ways that meaningfully shifts this discourse. Additionally, the state of Twitter as a company and platform has also substantially evolved. Clearly, the flaws identified by my approach suggest that there was already much progress to be made in improving discursive spaces on Twitter so that they might become places of positive rhetorical activity instead of insular, divisive platforms. Given the events of the last few months, developing actionable steps towards this improvement is more important than ever. While the answers are beyond the scope of this paper, I would like to conclude with some suggestions as to where such scholarship could begin.

If given greater scope, time, and resources, I would go deeper into the statistical analysis of Twitter metrics, and adapt them to reflect the current state of the website and this country. This study was just the tip of the iceberg as far as identifying how the discourses on women rights issues operated on the site. More work could be done to categorize rhetorical posts across different websites, including developing organizational methods that allow one to measure post engagement and outcomes with more accuracy.

Additionally, work must be done to see how we can make Twitter and other social media sites less divisive and more constructive. The current moment of upheaval may be just the opportunity to make meaningful changes. Farrell himself seems to predict this issue as he writes, “rhetoric ... must take another reflective turn: to ask what proofs and possible modes of conviction might best adjudicate conflicts among partisan positions in a world lacking full dialectical closure for practical questions” (72). Employing and adapting alternative rhetorical theories will provide the answers that Farrell and I seek. The unconventional form of Twitter



as a rhetorical forum calls for unconventional systems of rhetorical theory and practice.

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