HASHTAGS AND THE DEATH OF THE ENTHYMEME

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Twitter has helped people around the globe achieve rhetorical triumphs. From the Arab Spring that started, in large part, to the accessibility to Twitter in 2011 to being able to access breaking news instantly, Twitter has changed the way we receive and process news and information around us in many ways for the better. The Social Media service has also provided the world quite a few rhetorical abominations. Racism and homophobia, though sometimes temporarily suspended, have been given new and larger voices and platforms. It has helped turn complicated debates into 140 character screeds. And on a much smaller level, Twitter, with the advent of hashtags, has begun the demise of a rhetorical device that has survived for millennia: the enthymeme.

The actual function of the enthymeme has been a debated topic since Aristotle first named its role in On Rhetoric. One of the most common understandings of an enthymeme from antiquity is a truncated syllogism. Aristotle writes that the enthymeme operates much in the same way as a syllogism, the argument of formal logic, but it is “drawn from few premises and often less than those of the primary syllogism; for if one [premise] is known, it does not have to be stated, since the hearer supplies it” (1.2.13). However, the way an enthymeme operates and is understood has changed since Aristotle first wrote about it.

The most common definition of the enthymeme holds some bearing: “a logical strategic device at the sentence level, or any truncated syllogism” (Gage 38). The enthymeme as truncated syllogism allows the audience to supply a missing premise of the syllogism, almost making the rhetorical situation dialectical or dialogical. Jeffrey Walker calls the truncated syllogism definition “problematic” and “oversimplified,” but
still considers it a valid and useful definition of the enthymeme when considering the enthymeme’s quasi-dialogic nature (47). The changing conception of the enthymeme from merely a truncated syllogism to a device that allows rhetor and audience to create meaning together has gained more traction in postmodern and posthuman rhetorics. When writing about posthuman rhetorics’ impact on the enthymeme, Kristen Seas Trader writes that the enthymeme is “a collaborative, inferential dynamic in discourse that weaves relationships among what is explicitly stated and the implicit ideas, emotions, and experiences that help make sense of the message” (210). Regardless of definition, whether truncated syllogism or complex network of interactions, the enthymeme is a rhetorical tool that allows meaning to be created collaboratively.

According to Barbara Emmel, understanding how to argue enthymematically forces speakers and writers “to continually ask ‘what am I saying?’ and ‘why am I saying it?’” (148). Obviously many writers and speakers ask these questions, but asking them while thinking about an enthymematic approach to one’s audience helps ensure that the assumptions will be closer to the actual positions held by the audience. Now, enthymemes are occurring on social media to try and connect disparate audiences, and the “#” symbol is one way writers seem to subvert and change an enthymematic argument.

**History of the “#” symbol**

The symbol used at the beginning of the hashtag has meant many things over the years. It signifies pounds, and according to a Gizmodo write-up of the 99% Invisible

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1 For what I consider to be a complete discussion of the enthymeme, see Jeffrey Walker’s essay, “A Theory of the Enthymeme.” For a good counter-argument to the representation of the enthymeme in this essay, see Thomas Conley’s “The Enthymeme in Perspective.” These two articles, together, show the contested nature of the enthymeme.
podcast by Roman Mars, “Its story starts with the Latin term Libra Pondo, meaning ‘pound in weight.’ This was abbreviated to lb, which we still use. When lb became standard, it was often drawn with a little bar across the tops of both letters (℔), just to show that the l and the b were connected. As scribes started writing this sign faster and faster, lb began to morph.” The faster the scribe wrote the lb sign, the more difficult it became to distinguish between “〝lb〟” and something that looked like a version of “″#.″ After a while, it’s use became just as synonymous with the numbers after the lb sign as the designation of lb itself. It slowly morphed into a bifurcated symbol that could be used to signify pounds or numbers more generally.

The hashtag, or pound sign or number sign, has been used by technology companies long before the Internet. According to Liz Stinson in an article for Wired, “the symbol was integrated into technology in the late ‘60s by Bell Labs, inventors of the touch-tone phone, who used it in phone systems to separate between strings of numbers.” At the time, engineers were trying to find ways that touchtone phones could be more useful, and adding two new buttons seemed to be a way for more possible combinations of button sequences. Douglas A. Kerr, a longtime worker in the telecommunications field and who was there for the addition of two buttons, recollects that, “Starting in 1968, all general purpose Touch-Tone telephone sets had 12-button dials. The additional buttons were marked “*” and “#” (5). According to Kerr, Bell Laboratories was set on calling the “*” a “star” because few people could say, and fewer people could write, “asterisk.” The engineers were torn about what to call the “#,” though, because “pound sign,” and “number sign” already had specific meanings. They settled on the term “octotherp” or “octothorpe,” depending on which apocryphal word
origin story you choose to believe.\textsuperscript{2} Thankfully, neither term persisted, and we aren’t stuck saying “octothorpe Black Lives Matter” or “octothorpe Ruin a Movie in Three Words.”

The symbol has also been used in computer programming, in the computer language C, and it seems no coincidence that the hashtag works somewhat in the same way on Twitter as it does in C.\textsuperscript{3} According to my colleague Dean Stevens, C came along right around the same time as the internet and Bell labs was trying to figure out networking. Stevens told me, “the pound sign is a command to the compiler, which transfers things from the high level language to binary.” In other words, the pound sign indicates a special condition that the computer will recognize. A pound sign—which is what it’s called in C, not an octothorpe, even though this came from Bell Labs, too—can also be used to indicate to the compiler that a library, a previously written group of code, should be integrated into the new program. This reduces redundancy. As Stevens said, “if something is already defined, there’s no need to redefine it.”

The hashtag has also been used by groups on the internet to help classify groups since the early days of the internet where the # sign would be placed in front of a word to indicate the topic of conversation for a group. For example, #food would be used to

\textsuperscript{2} I was able to find many sources that say Don MacPherson invented the term because the symbol had 8 ends, so “octo” was an obvious way to describe it. According to the lore, MacPherson was part of a group trying to get Jim Thorpe’s medals returned from Sweden, so “Thorpe” was on his mind. Thus, “octothorpe.” Another theory states that Bell Laboratories employee Lauren Asplund came up with the term because “‘octo’ was the eight free ends of the four strokes in the symbol,” and “‘Therp’ did not have any logical premise, but just sounded sort of ‘Greek-ish,’ and thus might confer some scientific stature upon the name” (Kerr 7).

\textsuperscript{3} It was difficult to understand how the # worked in C just from research, so I spoke with my colleague Dean Stevens, a professor of computer science at the school where I work, and the information about the # symbol and C is from a conversation I had with him.
discuss all things food-related (Stinson). However, the hashtag first came to prominence in social media with one of the first truly social internet sites: IRC. According to Adweek, “online use of the hashtag began on IRC (Internet Relay Chat) in the late 1990s, where it was used to categorise items into groups.” And from there, it moved to Twitter in 2007 when a Twitter employee, Chris Messina, asked “how do you feel about using # (pound) for groups” (@chrismessina). After that, use of the hashtag exploded. Just like on IRC or inside a computer, the # was used to help find information. As Stevens said, “Twitter is a fire hose of unorganized information. The hash function gives you quick access to more organized information.”

**Hashtags on Social Media**

No matter how the # symbol has been used, it has always been used to set apart some sort of useful information: whether for pounds, using the “octothorpe” as a way to make the touchtone phone more useful, computer programming, and later the internet and message boards. Now, hashtags are used on all prominent social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, to name a few. And all of the different sites use hashtags similarly: to help categorize what people are talking about. On Twitter, for example, hashtags are easy ways to see how many people are talking about the same topic. The trending topics on Twitter (which help track the most popular topics in real time) are often hashtags. Sometimes the hashtags are serious, like during the Arab Spring. In 2011 when uprisings began in Tunisia and spread to many other places like Lybia and Egypt, Twitter was the main place to find news about the protests. Simple hashtags like #Egypt or #Tunisia started to let people around the world follow the goings on. Later, the #ArabSpring hashtag would emerge to help people follow the entire movement. However, hashtags can be used for much more mundane purposes.
For example, I’m writing this on a Tuesday, and one of the hashtags trending on Twitter right now is #TuesdayThoughts. People are tweeting using that hashtag and writing about what they’re thinking about on a random Tuesday in February. The tweets are so mundane that I don’t think it necessary to even quote them.

One of the best-known hashtags in the United States, #BlackLivesMatter, started a social movement. After the acquittal of George Zimmerman in 2012 (he was found not guilty of killing Trayvon Martin, an unarmed, black teenager), Alicia Garza first used the phrase Black Lives Matter on a Facebook post. Later, Patrice Cullors used that phrase as a hashtag on Twitter, and, seeing the response to the hashtag, Garza, Cullors, and Opal Tometi decided to give the hashtag an organization and structure so that it could be more than just a hashtag—it could be a movement. They rarely receive credit for their movement, however, with other, mostly male, activists receiving the majority of the attention for the movement.

DeRay McKesson, one such activist, helped a court give a legal ruling about what a hashtag is. After an unnamed officer was hurt during a Black Lives Matter rally in New Orleans, organized in part by McKesson, the officer brought a civil suit against McKesson and #BlackLivesMatter. In the dismissal of the case, Judge Brian A. Jackson, Chief Judge of the Middle District of Louisiana, ruled that:

Plaintiff therefore is attempting to sue a hashtag for damages in tort. For reasons that should be obvious, a hashtag – which is an expression that categorizes or classifies a person’s thought – is not a “juridical person” and therefore lacks the capacity to be sued. See La. Civ. Code art. 24. Amending the Complaint to add “#BlackLivesMatter” as a Defendant in this matter would be futile because such claims “would be subject to dismissal”; a hashtag is patently incapable of being sued.

This definition of a hashtag—an expression that categorizes or classifies a person’s thought—will be helpful in the next section as I argue for how hashtags undermine the possibility of
enthymematic argument.

Hashtags as stand-in for enthymemes

Hashtag use has changed over time, though. And now hashtags are as often used to punctuate a Tweet as they are to connect to a common theme or cause—like in the case with #ArabSpring or #BlackLivesMatter. Or, they can be both. At the end of 2016, comedian Patton Oswalt Tweeted, “Fuck this year. Fuck this whole sick, worthless cruel prank of a year. #RIPCarrieFisher.” Oswalt was joining in a large group of people mourning the death of actress Carrie Fisher; however, his Tweet only made complete sense with the hashtag. Without the hashtag, it would have been a broad statement about 2016. With the hashtag, it punctuated the idea and gave new meaning to the rest of what Oswalt wrote in the tweet.

At other times, though, the hashtag is used only to punctuate a thought and is not connected to a larger movement at all—except unintentionally. Another Tweet from Oswalt came right before the start of December. It included a picture of two boxes and he wrote, “Tomorrow is the start of my scotch AND short story advent calendars. #iamanoldlady.” The hashtag “I am an old lady,” while not being very generous to older women, was an attempt to tell the reader that he understands how “uncool” having two advent calendars, and those two, to boot, can be. He was attempting to get ahead of the audience by showing that he is in on the joke of how uncool he is. Another example of this type of hashtag comes from author Saladin Ahmed. He writes comics books, essays, and fantasy novels, and he is an activist for many leftist causes. During confirmation hearings for Betsy DeVos, he tweeted, “trump [sic] education appointee basically says it’s ok to bring guns to school. Dem response? ‘I look forward to working with you.’ #opposition.” Ahmed is not connecting to a larger group of people tweeting about
opposition, rather he is using the word sarcastically to show that the democrats in the senate are rolling over and not opposing someone who seemingly goes against many of the beliefs the democrats seem to hold. Examples of this type of hashtag come from all sides of the political spectrum. Blogger and activist for the right side of the political spectrum, Tomi Lahren, tweeted, “When will @KellyannePolls [Kellyanne Conway] get the credit she deserves? Feminists..talking to y’all.. #doublestandard.” Lahren is not merely asking the question about when and if Kellyanne Conway will get credit, she’s using the hashtag #doublestandard to try and show that feminists only give credit to strong women when the women align with feminist politics. A final example of this type of hashtag comes from a colleague of mine, Chris Spicer, in the math department at my school. At the beginning of a recent semester, he tweeted, “Last time I taught Real Analysis, I had 8 students in the class. This semester: 23. #progress.”⁴ Reading his tweet, it would be possible to assume that he was daunted by the task of having so many more students. However, the hashtag #progress helps complete the thought of the tweet by showing that he is excited to have more students interested in mathematics. While doing research for this project, I found many more hashtags that still attempt to connect with larger hashtag movements, but this type of hashtag that completely changes the message of the tweet (after reading the entire tweet) is still prevalent.

One of the reasons this type of hashtag is necessary is because of the limited nature of writing on Twitter. The social media service only allows users to write 140 characters per tweet,⁵ so often the argument that one wants to make must itself be

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⁴ Lahren has since deleted that tweet and Spicer has since deleted his Twitter account, so while I would love to cite these tweets, I am unable to do so.
⁵ The platform has since changed to allow 280 characters per tweet; however, the point still stands: that isn’t much room to make a nuanced argument.
truncated. Adding a hashtag at the end that changes the meaning of the tweet is a way to make sure the audience understands the message one of attempting to convey. In a short piece, written tongue in check, Benjamin Burdick writes that, “as a keystroke [a hashtag] means nothing nor adds anything, and yet the hashtag restructures all language—or what is left of it” (67). The hashtag indeed restructures the language, or at the very least, complicates the work of an enthymeme.

**Importance of an enthymeme being able to fail**

Any way you look at it, the importance of the enthymeme comes from the ability of rhetor and audience to interact. Whether this is by supplying a missing premise or a more foundational interplay and blending of values underlying an entire argument, the enthymeme allows the audience to be part of the argument. Enthymemes allow the audience to help shape the reality in which the argument is made.

The completion of an enthymeme allows the audience to be in “conversation” with the speaker, but what if the audience cannot supply the missing premise? What happens when an enthymeme fails? Why does an enthymeme fail? The answers to these questions are inextricably linked. An enthymeme fails because the audience fails to supply the missing premise, thus causing the speaker’s argument to fail. If the audience is unable to supply the missing premise, the speaker is either forced to attempt a different enthymeme to persuade the audience or accept failure and continue with the argument in hopes that further enthymemes will connect with the audience.

The question of why an enthymeme fails is similar, but a bit more difficult to tease out. Two parties are possibly at fault when an enthymeme fails: the audience or the speaker. It is possible that an enthymeme fails because the audience simply was not paying attention. More likely, however, the speaker failed to correctly gauge her usually
due to failed assumptions about the audience. Making audience assumptions is a tricky, but necessary, action when attempting to craft enthymemes—tricky because assumptions can get a speaker into big trouble, but necessary because without them, it is impossible to argue enthymematically.

Enthymemes are used in almost any written or spoken situation. And, since enthymemes attempt to be universal in their understanding, I will attempt to tease out what a failed enthymeme looks like by using a couple well-known examples of what I consider to be failed enthymemes, from the speaker’s point of view. One of my favorite failed enthymemes occurred in 2002, when former senator from Mississippi Trent Lott made some comments at former senator Strom Thurmond’s birthday party. According to a CNN report at the time:

Lott noted that in Thurmond's 1948 presidential campaign, whose centerpiece was opposition to integration, Mississippi was one of four states Thurmond carried. "We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years either," Lott said. (CNN)

We can assume Lott hoped the audience would supply this premise: We would all be better off because Strom Thurman is a great man. Instead, the audience (understandably) supplied a premise also supported by Lott’s comment: Segregation would have been beneficial for the United States. The enthymeme failed because Lott made incorrect assumptions about his audience, and possibly because the audience made incorrect assumptions about Lott. But, for whatever reason, the enthymeme failed and alienated Lott from many, if not most, of his supporters. The Washington Post quoted William Kristol, editor of a conservative news journal, Weekly Standard, as
saying, “Oh, God,’ when he learned of Lott's comments. ‘It's ludicrous. He should remember it's the party of Lincoln.” Josh Micah Marshall, the blogger who helped make the comments a national issue, wrote, “Maybe he was just trying to be nice to Strom on his birthday? That all sounds like a cop-out to me.” These comments, from opposite sides of the political spectrum, show just how badly Lott’s enthymeme failed. The enthymeme failed and Lott lost credibility as an able leader and speaker. The country was captivated by Lott’s failed enthymeme and demanded further explanation for the (seemingly) racist nature of the enthymeme. Lott firmly denied that his remarks had any racist intentions, and, if he was telling the truth, his denial is further proof that Lott assumed incorrectly about his audience, and from his point of view, his enthymeme flat-out failed.

Failed enthymemes can be found in many places, not just politics. I was tempted to use Hillary Clinton’s statement: “You know, to just be grossly generalistic, you could put half of Trump's supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables. Right? The racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamaphobic -- you name it” (Reilly, TIME) To be fair to Clinton, she attempted to immediately clarify her statement, defining the “basket of deplorables” after making her enthymematic argument. However, an even better example happened right around the time I started writing this article. On the June 3, 2017 episode of “Real Time with Bill Maher,” the eponymous host was interviewing Sen. Ben Sasse from Nebraska. In response to a comment from Sasse, Maher said “I’ve got to get to Nebraska more.” Sen. Sasse replied, “You’re welcome. We’d love to have you work in the fields with us.” Maher’s response was unexpected: “Work in the fields? Senator, I’m a house nigger” (Itzkoff). Some audience members groaned, but quite a few members of the audience clapped and laughed.
The reaction from the home audience, especially on Twitter, was much more forceful. Akila Hughes (@AkilahObviously) in a thread on Twitter, wrote,

I’ve said this before about comedy, but half of being good at it is knowing your role and audience . . . The joke Bill Maher made only works if he’s Chris Rock, Wanda Sykes, Kevin Hart, Chris Robinson, W Kamau Bell, me, etc. The problem is that none of us are lazy enough comedians to make that joke. There’s no commentary coming from it. It’s an excuse to say nigger . . . 23 and Me [DNA testing site] shows me approximately when my ggggggreat grandmother was raped by her slavemaster. Bill Maher can go fuck himself.

Hughes was not alone in condemning Maher’s words, and a large campaign was started to get Maher fired. DeRay McKesson, a political organizer who aligns himself with the Black Live Matter movement, tweeted, “But really, @BillMaher has got to go. There are no explanations that make this acceptable.” But it wasn’t just voices from the left who were criticizing Maher. Bill Mitchell, a conservative online radio host tweeted, “It wasn’t just that Maher said the N word, it's that he said ‘House N’ which is doubly offensive.” Even Jack Posobiec, a self-described conservative political operative (according to his Twitter bio), tweeted, “Bill Maher must be fired immediately for his racism and belittling the struggle of millions of black Americans.”

Maher was lambasted from left to right, and even though he was never fired, his “joke” was not well-received.

While the failed enthymeme might be fairly obvious in this case, unpacking all the ways Maher failed in this instance will help show why an enthymeme being able to fail is an important part of enthymemetic argument. Maher is a left-leaning comedian. He has worked hard over the years to court a specific audience which generally leans to the left on the political spectrum. Maher hasn’t ever been one to be accused of “political

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6 To be fair, it’s difficult to tell if Posobiec was being serious. He tweeted, less than an hour later, “Interesting. Bill Maher uses the same word for black people that Hillary does.”
correctness.” His takes on Islam and other subjects aren’t exactly what could be called progressive, but he is still seen as a liberal comedian, and liberal causes are often much more on the side of political correctness—if it can even be called that. Using racist terms is not necessarily a calling card of the left, so while Maher felt like he had enough liberal cred to make his “joke,” in the end, most of the audience didn’t follow his enthymematic reasoning in the way he had hoped. Rather, the audience (rightly) went to the conclusion that Maher’s statement was racist and out of line.

These examples of failed enthymemes show the power of the audience in an enthymematic argument. The audience is empowered to bring its knowledge and experiences to the rhetorical table when a rhetor uses an enthymeme. If the audience is taken out of the equation, and the rhetor supplies the missing piece of the enthymematic syllogism, then the rhetor assumes all the power in the rhetorical situation.

Conclusion

In communication theory there are three main models for how messages are conveyed: the linear model, the interactive model, and the transactional model. The linear model of communication is just as it sounds: communication moves in a straight line, from the communicator to the audience. This model of communication allows for the least amount of interaction between rhetor and audience. The interactive model can be though of as an email exchange. One person makes a statement and then another person replies with a statement of their own. This model shows interaction between communicators, but it doesn’t take into account all the variables that go into the interaction. The transactional model of communication, first theorized by Dean Barnlund in the 1970s, attempts to take into account all possible elements in a communicative setting. He settled on people, decoding, encoding, public cues, private
cues nonverbal behavioral cues, the message and noise (59). In short, the experiences of each person in the exchange, the body language, the way the message is sent and received, and everything that could possibly interfere with meaning are all part of the transactional model of communication. This model allows for a hearty back-and-forth between communicators.

The internet has presented unique challenges in attempting to classify communication into one of the models. While classification is not necessarily the most important thing, it can show what the communicator is attempting to do with the message: “give” knowledge, open a dialogue, or dig deep into an issue and interpret messages in new and interesting ways. Twitter is a place where dialogue is possible, but the medium restricts the amount of verbal and non-verbal cues available to participants, so at best Twitter relies on the interactive model of communication. Twitter can also be a place for the linear model of communication (if the receiver decides not to respond to a tweet). Thus, if the audience does not respond to a tweet, the only way they can be active participants with someone they follow on twitter is to supply the premises of the enthymeme. Using hashtags to take that away makes the experience completely one-sided.
@AkilahObviously. Twitter thread. 3 June 2017. https://twitter.com/AkilahObviously/status/871009063513059328


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