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# AT&T vs. T-Mobile on Twitter: A rhetorical situation of participatory culture in public relations

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## Abstract

*This article explores the AT&T vs. T-Mobile Twitter conflict to illuminate the implications of social media and participatory culture for public relations in corporate communication contexts. The article draws upon theories of the rhetorical situation to provide a framework for a case study that examines the conflict between the two corporate giants over a customer. It argues that social media, driven by our increasingly participatory culture, enables the public to talk back to power, and in doing so, creates challenges and opportunities for public relations professionals and others responsible for communicating on behalf of organisations. The article also asserts that fandom scholarship offers rich theoretical and practical insights to enhance contemporary public relations research and practice.*

## Introduction

Many people are accustomed to celebrity Twitter wars. However, it is quite unusual to see major U.S. corporations engaged in a Twitter feud. But that is precisely what happened after an AT&T customer posted a tweet questioning the value of his service. The single tweet sparked a very public conflict between AT&T and T-Mobile, with T-Mobile president and CEO John Legere personally joining the conversation, which reached a combined audience of 600,000 (Whittaker, 2013).

The AT&T vs. T-Mobile Twitter conflict is an interesting situation because it is rare for multi-billion dollar corporations to engage in public battles on Twitter. This novel conflict is compelling because of its implications for public relations in the digital era. Public relations professionals work in an increasingly participatory culture, where average citizens have global publishing power (Elliot, 2011) in

the palms of their hands and can publicly voice opinions anytime and anywhere just like powerful corporations (Phillips & Brabham, 2012). These circumstances initiate several questions for public relations professionals, corporate communicators, executive leaders, and anyone who speaks for an organisation or who is interested in these topics.

While Twitter is often used as a technology of media fandom, frequently functioning to support televised shows and media events (Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns, 2013), what are its implications for contemporary public relations practices in a participatory culture? In what ways does Twitter function as a technology for good public relations practice? How should corporate rhetors engage their constituencies in a world defined by the expectations of participatory culture, where people expect to talk back to power and expect power to listen, or better yet, oblige? What lessons can public relations learn from fandom, given that the participatory culture that characterises today's society emerged from fandom practices that originate, "at least in part, as a response to the relative powerlessness of the consumer in relation to powerful institutions" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 278)? How can the teachings of fandom help public relations professionals to more effectively manage their organisation's relationships with publics? As a result of the new media technologies that define our contemporary digitised communication landscape, the business of public relations has changed significantly and will continue to change. Those responsible for the public relations efforts of major corporations must help their organisations thrive in highly competitive marketplaces where communicating effectively with the public is a vital part of the corporation's image, the credibility of its brands, and is just as important to a company's success as the quality of its products and services. This article explores the

conflict that occurred between AT&T and T-Mobile on Twitter as a case study in order to address the questions and issues raised above.

To examine the AT&T vs. T-Mobile Twitter conflict, this article turns to the theoretical foundation of persuasive communication—rhetorical theory—as rhetoric is essentially dialogic (Heath, 2009), and facilitates the analysis of multiple voices and perspectives involved in a discursive exchange. Specifically, theories of the rhetorical situation (Biesecker, 1989; Bitzer, 1968, 1980; Vatz, 1973) guide this exploration into the conflict’s exigence, the audience and publics constituted through the digital dialogue unfolding on Twitter, the corporations’ responses, the constraints of the situation, and the context in which the conflict emerged. The rhetorical situation provides a fruitful framework to explore key aspects of the AT&T vs. T-Mobile Twitter conflict, as well as integrate other useful explanatory theories such as dialogic theory (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Park & Reber, 2008), social media theory (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010), theories of public relations and power (Phillips & Brabham, 2012), and theories of participatory culture and fandom (Gray, 2003; Highfield et al., 2013; Jenkins, 1992; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Pearson, 2010).

While theories of rhetoric, dialogue, social media, and power have been integrated into public relations research, fandom has yet to be addressed in detail. There may, however, be much that the public relations field can learn from fandom research. For example, fandom has a tradition of exploring the tensions between corporations, individuals, and audiences. Fandom literature also recognises the similarities between fans and publics. In addition, fandom emphasises participatory culture and its implications. For these reasons, theories of fandom may be a rich resource for public relations researchers and practitioners to gain theoretical and practical inspiration.

This article begins with an overview of rhetorical situation theory used to guide the case study. The case study comes next, beginning with a brief description of the corporations’ background and a discussion of participatory culture as key contextual factors surrounding the AT&T vs. T-Mobile Twitter

conflict. The conflict’s exigence (the AT&T customer’s tweet), the audience (those following the conflict on Twitter), and the constraints (the social media savvy of the corporate rhetors) that constitute this rhetorical situation are presented next. A brief discussion section about the case study follows, including five principles of practice for public relations professionals and corporate communicators managing rhetorical situations on social media. The article concludes by addressing how the lessons learned from the rhetorical situation of AT&T vs. T-Mobile, along with the theoretical offerings of fandom, can help public relations professionals more effectively manage communications in a digital world where participatory culture is the dominant paradigm.

### **An overview of rhetorical situation theory**

An exploration into the AT&T vs. T-Mobile Twitter conflict and its implications for public relations is enhanced with the incorporation of rhetorical theory. In corporate contexts, public relations and rhetoric share a close and symbiotic relationship. As Ihlen (2010) explains,

The rhetorical tradition offers public relations scholars, managers, and practitioners a resource that helps them understand organizational discourse, its effects, and its role in society. Rhetoric helps to explain the ways in which organizations attempt to achieve specific political or economic goals, or build relationships with their stakeholders. (p. 59)

The relationship between language, meaning and human action is of vital importance, especially for corporate rhetors.

Bitzer (1968) contributed the theory of the rhetorical situation to the rhetorical tradition. The purpose was to emphasise the significance of the situation as a precursor for rhetorical discourse, provide rhetorical critics with a way to approach the analysis of rhetorical discourse, and to explicate the relationship between the situation, rhetoric, and the meanings that could arise from their interplay. Bitzer most notably argued, “It is the situation that calls the discourse into existence” (p. 2). For Bitzer, the

situation is a priori in the rhetorical exchange and is the unequivocal catalyst that impels rhetorical discourse. He wrote:

Rhetorical situation may be defined as a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence, which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence. (p. 6)

The rhetorical situation is comprised of several key elements, including exigence, audience, and constraints occurring in a context. An exigence is “an imperfection marked by an urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6). In order to qualify as an exigence of a rhetorical situation, the problem must be able to be relieved or modified rhetorically through discourse.

The audience in a rhetorical situation, according to Bitzer (1968), includes people who are “capable of being influenced by discourse and being mediators of change” (p. 8). Those who are too closed-minded to consider the rhetor’s perspective would not fit Bitzer’s definition of a rhetorical audience. Additionally, the capacity to engage in two-way symmetrical (Grunig, 1989, 2001) or dialogic communication (Kent & Taylor, 2002) is not a prerequisite for Bitzer’s audience. The focus here is on the audience’s capacity to be moved by the rhetor’s persuasive discourse.

Constraints, like exigencies, consist of “persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 8). Constraints are divided into two main types: 1) constraints of the rhetor and his or her method, and 2) constraints of the situation. While these three components—exigence, audience, and constraints—comprise essential elements of the rhetorical situation, rhetorical situations must also offer the opportunity for a fitting response. This response is one that “meets the requirements established by the situation”

(Bitzer, 1968 p. 10). In other words, a fitting response meets the need of the situation in the same way that, theoretically, the appropriate answer would meet the needs of its question (Bitzer, 1968).

While Bitzer’s (1968) seminal essay contributed a useful way to think about rhetorical discourse, it also inspired scholarly debate and criticism (Consigny, 1974; Young, 2001). After Bitzer declared that the situation was the controlling factor in rhetorical discourse, Vatz (1973) countered: “Meaning is not discovered in situations but created by rhetors” (p. 157). He declared:

If one accepts Bitzer’s position that ‘the presence of rhetorical discourse obviously indicates the presence of a rhetorical situation’, then we ascribe little responsibility to the rhetor with respect to what he has chosen to give salience. On the other hand, if we view the communication of an event as a choice, interpretation, and translation, the rhetor’s responsibility is of supreme concern. (p. 158).

Vatz’s point is evidenced within the contexts of corporate discourse and public relations. For example, executives often initiate rhetorical situations by announcing new policies, projects or programmes. Thus, contrary to Bitzer, Vatz claims that the rhetor is the catalyst for rhetorical discourse, not the situation. For Vatz, the situation is a by-product of discourse. Vatz accentuated this point, writing, “Rhetors choose or do not choose to make salient situations, facts, events, etc.” (p. 160). When public relations professionals write news releases for the media or talking points for executives to use, they carefully select which topics to make salient and which to downplay or omit, exemplifying Vatz’s point.

“Is Bitzer right or is Vatz right? Is situation or speaker the origin of rhetorical discourse?” Biesecker (1989) next asked. Moving beyond this ‘chicken vs. egg’ argument, Biesecker takes a postmodern approach to the rhetorical situation, and draws upon Derrida’s (1973, 1997) theory of deconstruction to argue that neither the situation nor the rhetor is a priori, originary, or privileged in the meaning making

process. Meaning has no intrinsic origin or catalyst because meaning emerges through the play of differences operating within the discursive circumstances in which the constituent elements of a rhetorical situation are present. “That is to say, neither the text’s immediate rhetorical situation nor its author can be taken as a simple origin or generative agent since both are underwritten by a series of historically produced displacements” (Biesecker, 1989, p. 121).

Scholars of organisational communication and public relations use the rhetorical situation to analyse a variety of circumstances (Ihlen, 2011). Hoffman & Ford (2010) discussed both Bitzer’s (1968) and Vatz’s (1973) approaches to the rhetorical situation. They employed rhetorical situation theory to explore issue management, organisational risk, and crisis situations, and offered several case studies describing how rhetorical situations arise and are managed. Cheney, Christensen, Conrad, and Lair (2004) described how Bitzer’s (1968) theory of the rhetorical situation applies to a variety of organisational issues. Their essay outlines a four-part categorisation scheme of the types of rhetorical situations organisational rhetors may encounter including

- Responding to existing rhetorical situations
  - Anticipating future rhetorical situations
  - Shaping or framing projected rhetorical situations
- Shaping organizational images and identities (p. 87)

They explain, “Organizations also anticipate and plan for the development of rhetorical situations and employ discourse strategically to influence the situations they face” (p. 87).

The present article joins these scholarly conversations about rhetorical situations by exploring Twitter as an exigence and participatory culture as a contextual factor influencing organisation–public relationships and public relations practice in corporate contexts. This overview recognises the rhetorical significance of both the situation and the rhetor, while at the same time showing how the meaning of rhetorical utterance and action can gain meaning from the play of differences unfolding between various elements within a

rhetorical situation (Biesecker, 1989; Bitzer, 1968; Vatz, 1973). While there are different theoretical conceptualisations of the rhetorical situation, this overview provides a framework for identifying the main elements involved in any rhetorical situation: exigence, audience, response, constraints, and context; and, the overview offers a variety of ways to understand their relation to one another and to the construction of meaning.

Using the rhetorical situation as an explanatory framework to analyse the AT&T vs. T-Mobile Twitter conflict, I will now turn to the case study, beginning with a discussion of context. While studies of corporations’ social media usage have analysed multiple organisations (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010), this article takes the single case study approach because it allows for deep analysis of one particular situation (Batchelor & Krister, 2012).

### **Case study: The rhetorical situation of AT&T vs. T-Mobile on Twitter**

*Context: Participatory culture and social media*

It is helpful to begin the case study by first addressing key contextual factors including background information about the two corporations and a discussion of the rising influence of participatory culture. AT&T, based in Dallas, Texas, has approximately 234,000 employees, 116.6 million customers, approximately \$128 billion in revenue, and has been in business for 138 years (AT&T Company Information, 2014). Bellevue, Washington-based T-Mobile, USA Inc., is a subsidiary of Deutsche Telekom and was created in 2002. T-Mobile has approximately 40,000 employees, 50 million customers and \$26.1 billion in revenue (History of T-Mobile, n.d.; TMUS Fact Sheet, 2014).

AT&T and T-Mobile were not always enemies. There was a time when the two were working towards a merger. The U.S. Government, however, blocked the merger claiming that it was not in the public interest (Rogowsky, 2014). At present, both companies remain among the top players in the mobile wireless service provider industry. While Verizon is currently ranked number one, AT&T

is not far behind in the number two position. Sprint is ranked third with T-Mobile ranked fourth (Lawson, 2013). Recently, AT&T and T-Mobile have shared an acrimonious relationship, and their war of words on Twitter exemplifies their animosity. Their Twitter feud garnered the attention of the business and technology communities (Bushey, 2013; Whittaker, 2013). This feud also has significance for public relations professionals and others who must evolve with the ever-changing digitised communication landscape and the new situations it brings. One of the main issues to be addressed is the influence of social media in corporate communicative contexts in an increasingly participatory culture. The concept of 'participatory culture' was introduced by Jenkins (1992) and describes

the cultural production and social interactions of fan communities, initially seeking a way to differentiate the activities of fans from other forms of spectatorship. As the concept has evolved, it now refers to a range of different groups deploying media production and distribution to serve their collective interests, as various scholars have linked considerations of fandom into a broader discourse about participation in and through media. (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 2)

The present article extends Jenkins' concepts of fandom and participatory culture into the realm of public relations.

On the one hand, participatory culture enabled by new digital technologies has opened up new dialogic possibilities for communication between organisations and publics, especially in the realm of social networking (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). "The rapid diffusion of 'microblogging' services such as Twitter is ushering a new era of possibilities for organisations to communicate and engage with their core stakeholders and the general public" (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012, p. 337). The popularity of Twitter has compelled corporate organisations to join the platform, while the platform's capacity to function as a space for the exchange of ideas, opinions, and discourse

positions it to be one of the most effective tools for digital dialogic communication in a corporate communicator's toolbox (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010).

On the other hand, there are also challenges. As Jenkins et al. (2013) observed, "Corporate communicators and professionals in the media industries regularly write about how new platforms are destabilising their business (and perhaps causing them to 'lose control')" (p. xiii). Moreover, "the public relations literature, which has struggled to thoroughly address social media, has largely seen this kind of online user interaction as either a potential threat to an organisation or as a phenomenon to be controlled" (Phillips & Brabham, 2012, p. 5); although more recently public relations literature has explored social media from a variety of angles (DiStaso & Bortree, 2014; Sung & Kim, 2014). Nevertheless, the loss of control Phillips and Brabham (2012) describe is evidenced in the organisational shift in focus from one-way communication to two-way communication, and from two-way asymmetrical communication to two-way symmetrical communication (Dickerson, 2012; Grunig, 1989, 2001).

In fandom studies this loss of control manifests itself in the shift from a distribution-focused paradigm to a circulation-focused paradigm. This shift is marked by the "movement toward a more participatory model of culture, one which sees the public not simply as consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been imagined" (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 2). These alterations are creating new content which the corporate owners of intellectual media property and the producers of corporate messages may not authorise or appreciate (Pearson, 2010).

This transition to a participatory culture presents a challenge to the traditional relations of power between natural persons and corporate persons, between organisations and publics (Holtzhausen, 2000), with average citizens gaining the ability to speak to and challenge corporate power in dynamic, highly visible, and meaningful ways. For example, media fandoms

frequently force television shows to make changes. As Jenkins (1992) reminds, “Fans know how to organize to lobby on behalf of endangered series, be they *Twin Peaks* fans exploiting computer networks to rally support for a show on the verge of cancelation or *Beauty and the Beast* fans directing anger against a producer who violated their basic assumptions about the program” (p. 278). More recently, when Brian, the beloved dog from *Family Guy* (an animated sitcom) was killed off in the fall of 2013, fans forced his return with an online petition containing more than 100,000 signatures (Day, 2013; Sacks, 2013).

Customers of corporations have much in common with fans of television shows. Customers also take advantage of the power of participatory culture by turning to social media when they are frustrated, as in the case of the cable customer who found that his Comcast technician had fallen asleep in his home while on hold and awaiting instructions from the company (Yellin, 2009). Customers take to social media to seek justice as in the case of the man who made the *United breaks guitars* YouTube video after claiming his guitar was broken during a flight on United Airlines. Both

situations rapidly spread via social media, embarrassed the corporations, and led those organisations to take action. Astute public relations practitioners and corporate communicators are aware that within a participatory culture and socially networked world, customer service concerns can quickly become public relations problems (Jenkins, et al., 2013), as the AT&T vs. T-Mobile conflict indicates.

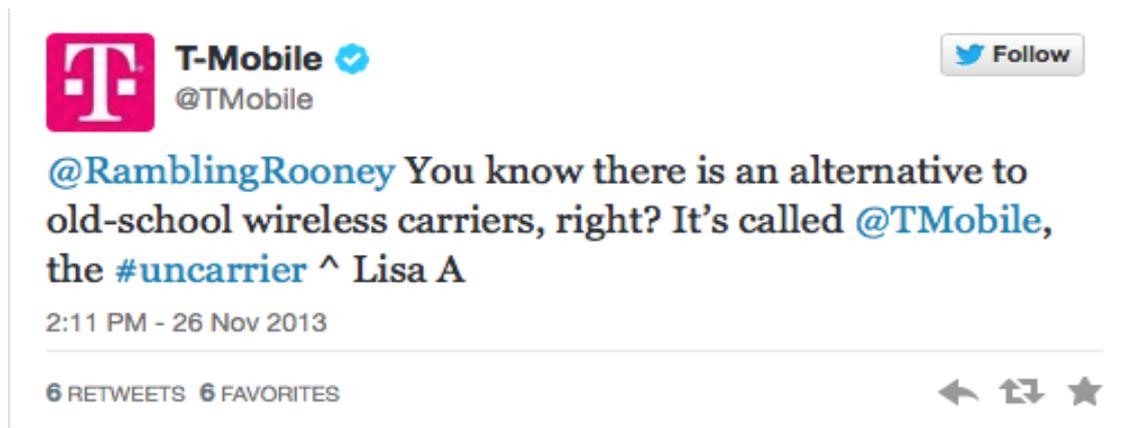
### **Tweet as exigence**

The exigence of a rhetorical situation is a problem or an issue able to be ameliorated through rhetorical discourse (Bitzer, 1968). For AT&T and T-Mobile, that exigence emerged on November 26, 2013 when AT&T customer, Jay Rooney (2013a), sent a tweet questioning the value of his AT&T service while comparing it with T-Mobile’s offerings. For AT&T, the exigence was a problem—a dissatisfied customer. For T-Mobile, the exigence of a competitor’s unhappy customer was an opportunity. The following section offers a rhetorical analysis of the Twitter conversation featured in the media, and it begins with the shared exigence of Rooney’s initial tweet (Whittaker, 2013).



(Rooney, 2013a)

T-Mobile (2013a) responded within minutes.



T-Mobile immediately positioned their brand as the clear remedy to the AT&T customer's problem. They called AT&T 'old-school' within the context of a highly competitive technological industry where being 'old-school' is rarely considered a virtue (Ruddock, 2013; Whittaker, 2013). T-Mobile also incorporated a dialogic communication technique with their question to Rooney. While the question may have been a rhetorical one, and while T-Mobile provided the answer to its own question, its mere utterance kept the conversation going and initiated a positive response from Rooney.



(Rooney, 2013b).

Approximately an hour and a half later, AT&T joined the conversation with a tweet.



(ATT, 2013a).

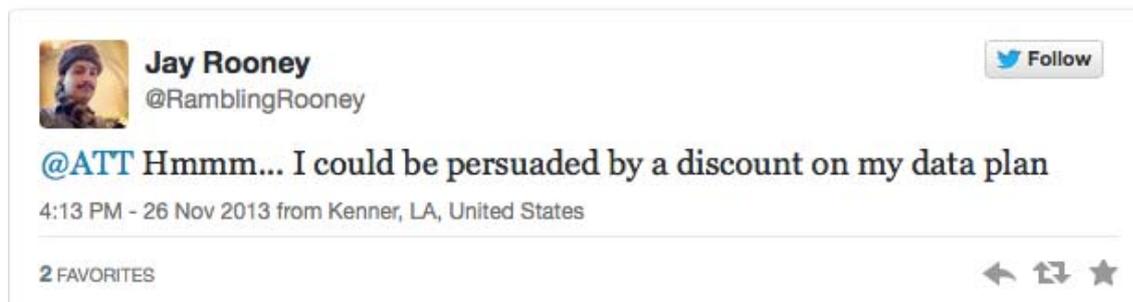
AT&T's response could possibly be perceived as displaying an air of confidence, or perhaps even arrogance, because AT&T did not demonstrate concern over Rooney's dissatisfaction, show appreciation for his business, or ask him to remain a customer. When compared with the speed of T-Mobile's response time, AT&T's response time could be considered tardy. In addition, AT&T's response did not directly address the concerns expressed in Rooney's initial tweet. Instead, AT&T

characterises T-Mobile's service as an inferior alternative, relying on this slight to convince their customer of their service's superiority.



(Rooney, 2013c).

Though pleased with the attention his tweet generated from the two service providers, Rooney quickly redirected his focus to more practical matters, like the kind that inspired his initial tweet.



(Rooney, 2013d).

AT&T did not respond to Rooney's suggestion, but his tweet prompted a response from T-Mobile. They continued the aggressive attack on AT&T, while remaining focused on wooing Rooney into the T-Mobile fold.



(T-Mobile, 2013b).

Rooney responded:



(Rooney, 2013e).

Then AT&T offered a tweet more civil in tone than their earlier message.



(ATT, 2013b).

This tweet from AT&T could have been the peaceful end to this Twitter dispute, with each corporation, the #uncarrier and the #HappyCarrier, returning to their respective corners. But T-Mobile was not yet finished. Its president and CEO, John Legere raised the stakes by joining the conversation.



(Legere, 2013a).

Legere's tweet seemingly attempts to bait AT&T's CEO, Randall L. Stephenson, to join the conversation. Legere's suggestion that AT&T's CEO will not join the conversation functions rhetorically to differentiate the two leaders, the two companies, and perhaps, most importantly, their treatment of customers. The personal invitation from T-Mobile's chief executive is contrasted by the silence of AT&T's CEO. Arguably, Legere's tweet not only enhanced his credibility, it framed T-Mobile's corporate image as caring and engaged as well as bolstered the persuasive efficacy of T-Mobile's overall communicative presence during the Twitter exchange.



(Rooney, 2013f).

Impressed with Legere’s personal invitation, Rooney reiterates his intention to join T-Mobile. In doing so, he fulfils one of the key organisational communication functions of Twitter identified by Lovejoy and Saxton’s (2012) study—action. This function induces the organisation’s “followers to ‘do something’ for the organization” (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012, p. 245). In this case, the action is Rooney leaving his existing carrier, AT&T, to join T-Mobile. By employing the principles of dialogic communication, T-Mobile potentially lured a customer from its competitor in front of a combined Twitter audience of 600,000 people – including its own customers and the customers of other wireless carriers as subsequent tweets demonstrated.



(Hallock, 2013).

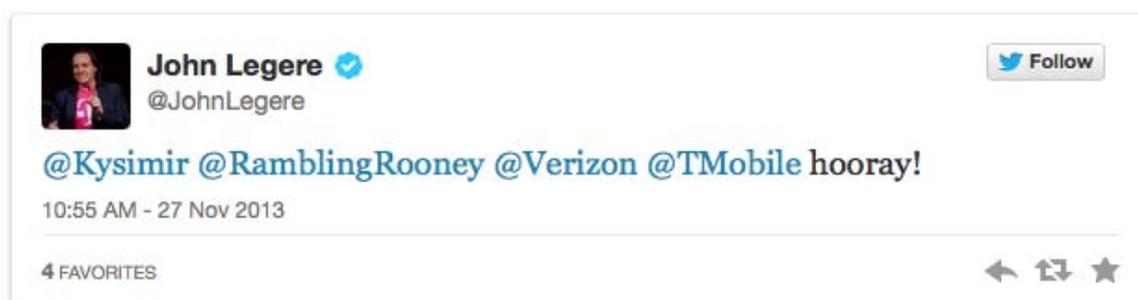
This Verizon customer’s positive reaction to T-Mobile also exemplifies Lovejoy & Saxton’s (2012) action function of organisational communication via Twitter, and demonstrates Twitter’s use as a tool to enhance the persuasive efficacy of corporate rhetors in competitive, communicative contexts.

The next Tweet from a T-Mobile customer shows how customers can also function as advocates and brand fans (Blanchard & Bowles, 1993).



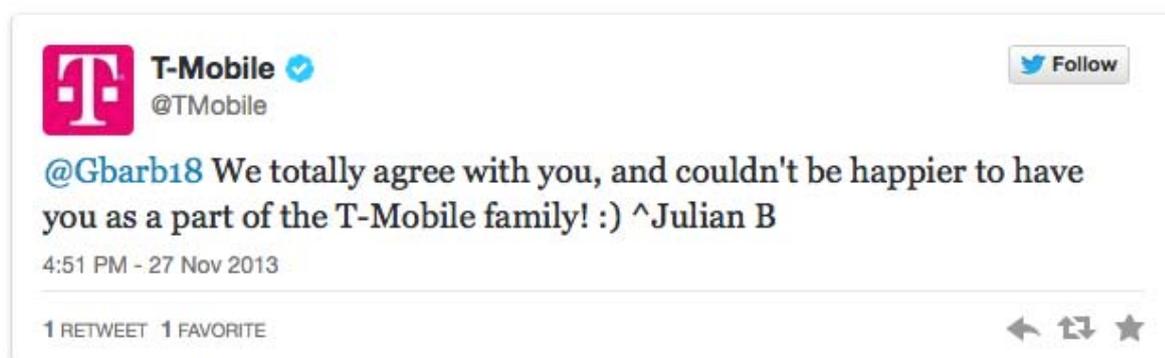
(Ahronheim, 2013).

The benefits of the T-Mobile brand literally speak for themselves in the most credible way possible—through a customer’s testimonial.



(Legere, 2013b)

Legere’s simple tweet expresses his delight. More important, however, the one-word response shows that he is still a part of the conversation. This reinforces the perception that Legere is an engaged leader and that T-Mobile is a company that genuinely cares about customers. AT&T did not respond.



(T-Mobile, 2013c).

Whittaker (2013) observed, “T-Mobile’s official Twitter account, the social face of the company, tweets out so others following the cellular company are shown what good public relations looks like.”

This review and analysis of the Twitter conversation shows how two corporations handled the shared exigence of Rooney’s tweet

in this rhetorical situation. As Heath (2009) explains,

Rhetoric is employed when matters of various kinds are to be decided, when they are unsettled, when differences of opinion prevail, and when people are uncertain as to which of several decisions is best. It assists managements

as they decide what strategies are available to promote and publicize a product or service, and even to shape an organization's image. It guides how they engage in issue debate, manage risks, and respond during crisis. The rationale for rhetorical theory is that it helps us understand the process of decision making..." (p. 23)

Many of the characteristics of rhetoric that Heath (2009) describes are evidenced in the rhetorical analysis of the tweets constituting the AT&T vs. T-Mobile Twitter conflict. Rooney began the conversation from a point of indecision. Because the conflict occurred on social media, the types of rhetorical strategies each corporation employed to sway Rooney's decision-making process, as well the types of strategies Rooney employed to advocate on his own behalf, were visible. Because the conflict occurred on social media, it is possible to see how participatory culture can shape organisational decision making and communication, as well as how corporate communications can influence the decision-making process of members of the public. By the end of the Twitter conflict the audience was likely left with very different impressions of AT&T and T-Mobile.

The rules of the rhetorical situation, according to (Bitzer, 1968), require that the rhetor have an opportunity to provide a fitting response. If a fitting response is similar to the right answer offered in response to a particular question, what would constitute a fitting response from the corporate rhetors involved in the AT&T vs. T-Mobile Twitter conflict? There were some similarities and differences in the ways that both corporations responded to the exigence. Both corporations made snide comments about the other in their tweets. Both, to varying degrees, attempted to convince Rooney to select their service. While AT&T eventually adopted a more diplomatic tone, T-Mobile tweeted more frequently than AT&T. T-Mobile also incorporated dialogic principles into their communications and provided tweets from the CEO. In a highly competitive industry, the most fitting response is likely the one that wins customers, creates brand

advocates, fosters increased engagement with the corporation, and enhances the positive image of the corporation to its customers and other constituents. Given those criteria, T-Mobile appeared to provide the most fitting response to the exigence.

### **Audience and fluidity in participatory culture**

This social media battle had a combined audience of 600,000 members of the Twittersphere (Whittaker, 2013). Before the conflict ended, others following the conversation tweeted that they, like Rooney, would leave or consider leaving their wireless carriers to join T-Mobile. This situation is an exemplar of how, with the rise of participatory culture and the advent of social media, audience members, including customers, are able to exercise their agency more publicly and more effectively than ever before.

There are many ways in which the audience of the AT&T vs. T-Mobile Twitter conflict can be theoretically contextualised. For example, the audience exemplifies Bitzer's (1968) definition of a rhetorical audience as individuals able to be persuaded through discourse and function as mediators of change. The people following the Twitter conflict were exposed to messages from both corporate rhetors, and they were able to evaluate the arguments from each organisation to decide what, if any, changes they would make to their service, with some audience members declaring they would abandon their existing carrier to join T-Mobile as Rooney did.

Bitzer (1968) offers a modern conceptualisation of the audience as a stable, cohesive group of rational people able to be persuaded by rhetorical discourse. His theory of the audience does in many ways account for the audience activity occurring in the AT&T vs. T-Mobile Twitter conflict. Biesecker's (1989) postmodern theory of the audience of the rhetorical situation also provides a useful way to comprehend the relationship between rhetoric and the audience in this scenario. Following Derrida (1973, 1997), Biesecker locates the subjectivity of audience members (not in relation to the effects of rhetorical

discourse as Bitzer does), but as constituted through an economy of difference. Thus Rooney's subjectivity as an AT&T customer has no stable essence. It continuously evolves during and through the play of differences that constitute the rhetorical situation of the Twitter conflict between AT&T and T-Mobile. This means Rooney's subjectivity as a T-Mobile customer will also remain fluid because it too will continue to exist in an economy of difference, and therefore be perpetually subject to change. The fluidity of subjectivity has particular relevance for understanding the relationship between audiences and publics.

Jenkins et al. (2013) addressed some of the similarities and differences between audiences and publics. Drawing upon the work of (Dayan, 2005) to help differentiate between audiences and publics they wrote, "*Audiences* are produced through acts of measurement and surveillance, usually unaware of how the traces they leave can be calibrated by the media industries. Meanwhile, *publics* often actively direct attention onto the messages they value" (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 166). In public relations contexts, a public is usefully conceived of as people with the ability to affect or be affected by the organisation. Publics are also usefully viewed as self-organised collectivities constituted merely through attention to an issue that emerges from the reflexive circulation of text among individuals who become a social entity through the circulation of text, which sustains them (Warner, 2005). Like publics, audiences can also be defined through their relationships to, and interactions with, a text (Gray, 2003).

There are a variety of theoretical conceptualisations of audiences and publics. No matter how publics or audiences are described, and defined, public relations professionals and corporate communicators must know how to effectively engage and manage these collectivities and, perhaps most importantly, be aware of their fluidity. As the AT&T vs. T-Mobile Twitter conflict illustrates, the relationship among customers, audiences, and publics can be quite fluid, because customers may participate as audience members and then evolve into publics through their attention to discourse and the circulation of text.

Essentially, one individual can traverse all three subjectivities (i.e. customer, audience, member of a public).

Jenkins et al. (2013) recognised this fluidity of subjectivity in the context of fandom, writing, "Thinking about audiences as publics may give us a new lens through which to understand media fandom" (p. 167). Given the increasingly participatory culture environment that characterises organisation-public relations, it may also be useful for public relations practitioners and corporate communicators to consider the lessons of fandom as they think about their publics. As Jenkins (1992) wrote, "Fandom constitutes a base for consumer activism. Fans are viewers who speak back to the networks and the producers, who assert their right to make judgments and to express opinions about the development of favorite programs" (p. 278). As this case study demonstrates, the constituents who make up the publics of public relations, be they customers or audience members, are similarly empowered and increasingly taking to social media. They are doing so to voice their pleasures and pains to their peers and to strangers, as they speak back to corporate power and exercise individual and collective agency.

#### *The social media savvy of corporate rhetors as constraint and capacity*

The case of AT&T vs. T-Mobile on Twitter calls attention to a key constraint within this rhetorical situation. Constraints are things with the power to compromise the decision-making process and the capacity to take action (Bitzer, 1968). This section focuses on one key constraint, the social media savvy of corporate rhetors.

Corporate rhetors, defined as those responsible for communicating as, or on behalf of, the corporation, must be able to communicate effectively in a variety of scenarios and contexts. Now more than ever, this includes communicating effectively on social networking platforms such as Twitter. Public relations professionals are expected to be social media savvy. However, the capacity of C-suite executives to communicate effectively on social networking platforms like Twitter may be an important variable affecting the persuasive efficacy of corporate discourse.

In other words, executives are an important part of the public relations process, but if they do not participate in social media conversations, or if they do not participate well, they may hamper the corporation's ability to persuade its constituents and diminish their company's capacity to compete effectively in the marketplace.

CEOs of major corporations clearly have numerous important responsibilities, many of which may seem to be more pressing than responding to a customer's tweet. Nevertheless, when competitors are responding and the situation is unfolding on social media, a lack of response from the CEO or another comparable company representative will certainly shape public perceptions. No one will know for sure what difference it would have made for AT&T's CEO to join the conversation, respond to the T-Mobile CEO's challenge, and compete for his customer. However, making the choice not to participate in the conversation is not without consequence, because silence also sends a message.

Of course one customer, or even a few customers, changing service providers is not likely to directly impact a company's bottom line, but that is not the point. The more salient issue is that the symbolic significance of winning or losing a battle on social media should not be underestimated, because its implications are unknown and unpredictable. We should not forget that in politics, business, and in society generally speaking, many material victories first begin as symbolic ones.

While social media savvy may have constrained AT&T's communicative efficacy in this situation, it arguably enhanced T-Mobile's. T-Mobile's communications demonstrate that Twitter can indeed serve as a technology of good public relations practice, differentiating a company from its competitors and building meaningful relationships with publics through dialogic engagement. Does this mean that the job requirements of today's CEOs need to include 'must be social media savvy?' or 'must have exceptional Twitter skills; able to communicate effectively in 140 characters or less?' Perhaps so, perhaps not. But at the very least, the case study supports arguments for tighter alignment between public relations

professionals and the C-suite to help achieve the most fitting response to the rhetorical situations that will inevitably arise via social media as a result of our increasingly participatory culture. Such alignment could help corporate rhetors, especially C-suite executives, become more sophisticated in their social media communications so that instead of being a constraint, social media could function as a capacity, just as it did for T-Mobile in this rhetorical situation.

## Discussion

This case study examined the AT&T vs. T-Mobile Twitter conflict as a rhetorical situation. A customer's tweet was contextualised as an exigence. The audience consisted of customers and others who also functioned as a public through their attention to, and circulation of, text on Twitter. The social media savvy of corporate rhetors was described as a constraint compromising a corporate rhetor's capacity to influence the audience, and in this case, persuade a customer to stay with their brand. At the same time, the case study revealed how social media savvy can serve as a capacity, enabling corporate rhetors to engage in dialogic communication with customers in important moments during a customer's decision-making process. Finally, a rhetorical situation must have the opportunity for a fitting response to remedy the problem. While AT&T offered a response, the response provided by T-Mobile was fast, empathetic, dialogic, directly acknowledged the customer's concerns, and ultimately enabled the company to win a symbolic social media victory. Thus, the constraint of social media for AT&T became an important organisational capacity for T-Mobile.

Scholars clearly have different perspectives on the origins of rhetorical situations. Bitzer (1968) correctly asserts that exigencies do engender rhetorical situations. Vatz's (1973) characterisations are also reasonable because there are agents who engage in rhetorical action and in doing so create rhetorical situations. At the same time, Biesecker (1989) is also correct to assert that neither the situation nor the rhetor is necessarily originary to rhetorical situations because people, organisations and institutions

are not stable. They are constituted through the play of differences occurring within the discourses in which they participate. The situation is always fluid, allowing for the emergence of rhetorical situations anytime, anywhere and in any way. When all of this is taken into account, there is no need to solve the chicken vs. egg dilemma or choose between Bitzer (1968), Vatz (1973) and Biesecker (1989). Their theoretical conceptualisations are valid because each one describes a particular type of rhetorical situation.

The diversity inherent in rhetorical situation theory offers rich theoretical grounding to frame, analyse and respond to a variety of issues that may arise over the course of organisational life. The important thing for public relations professionals and corporate communicators to recognise, however, is that social media will continue to be a dynamic force, functioning as exigence for conflicts, as communication mechanisms for customers, audiences and publics, and as a powerful tool for corporate rhetors who are ready to embrace the new communication challenges and opportunities emanating from our digitised society. The ongoing responsibility of public relations professionals and corporate communicators is to provide the most artful and fitting responses to these situations. To that end, five principles of practice for rhetorical situations occurring on social media are offered:

- Respond quickly – Within a participatory culture, where people talk back to power publicly on social media, an important part of providing a fitting response is providing a speedy response. The speed of a company's response is important because response time, just like the actual content of the message, can be interpreted as a sign of respect; it can reinforce the perception that the organisation takes the exigence seriously. In absence of a timely response, constituents may start online petitions, make embarrassing YouTube videos about your brand and engage in a whole host of creative endeavours that are bad for business.

- Acknowledge the issue – Directly acknowledging the concerns raised by the customer, audience, or public seems simple, but can easily be overlooked. In high-pressure

situations, there can be a tendency to resort to safe, talking point-type language that acknowledges the organisation's position, but fails to address the concerns of the customer, audience or public.

- Show empathy and appreciation – An empathetic response demonstrates that a company cares about its constituents and appreciates their support or patronage. Often an empathetic response will mean communicating dialogically instead of issuing answers designed to curtail dialogue.

- Embrace participatory culture – With society becoming increasingly participatory through the use of new media technologies, an organisation's dialogic communication with its constituents is becoming an expectation as well as an important part of a company's informal licence to operate in the communities it serves.

- Treat social media issues as rhetorical situations – Incidents that occur on social media are rhetorical situations where the artful use of language and reasoning can intervene to shape meaning and outcomes in productive ways. Incidents that occur on social media may be threats, but they are also important opportunities for public relations professionals and corporate communicators to show how they add tangible value to the organisation by satisfying the needs of constituents, mitigating crises, and positioning their brand as superior to competitors.

These five principles do not guarantee a corporation will never receive negative attention. They can, however, help guide public relations professionals and corporate communicators in productively navigating participatory culture and effectively managing the rhetorical situations that will inevitably arise on social media.

## Conclusion

Today, people have unprecedented access to brands, along with the ability to create their own audiences or publics by communicating on their personal social networking sites. This creates conditions where corporations are not always the primary producers of information about their organisations, nor do they have the same level of control over messages related to

their organisations and its actions (Logan & Tindall, 2014). The participatory nature of our current cultural milieu can often serve as a constraint on corporate discourse, presenting many communicative challenges. As Jenkins et al. (2013) wrote, “Brands and entertainment properties cannot return to the one-directional communication flows of the broadcast era, when they had the perception of control, so companies must listen to and learn from their audiences if they want to enjoy long-term success” (p. 24). Public relations professionals and others responsible for the corporate voice cannot return to the days when information dissemination was enough, and corporations had tremendous control over the decisions to communicate, not to communicate, and what to communicate.

Public relations practitioners and corporate communicators today confront 24/7 news cycles within a participatory culture driven by a socially networked society where people often talk back to power and expect a response to their concerns now, not when a corporation finds it convenient to respond. Those who are attuned to the theoretical principles of fandom will readily embrace an environment of participatory culture, using social media platforms such as Twitter as a communicative capacity to create productive relationships. This is the work of twenty-first century public relations.

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