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Relational Agency, Networked Technology, and the Social Media Aftermath of the Boston Marathon Bombing

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Relational Agency, Networked Technology, and the Social Media Aftermath of the
Boston Marathon Bombing

by

Megan M. McIntyre

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English
with a concentration in Rhetoric and Composition
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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Dedication

For my father, who taught me how to tell a story and pursue my dreams.

For my mother, who taught me to have faith and persevere and to be kind,
stubborn, and resolute.

For my brother, who taught me everything else.

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Abstract

Agency is a foundational and ongoing concern for the field of Rhetoric and Composition. Long thought to be a product and possession of human action, rhetorical agency represents the most obvious connection between the educational and theoretical work of the field and the civic project of liberal arts and humanities education. Existing theories of anthropocentric rhetorical agency are insufficient, however, to account for the complex technological work of digitally enmeshed networks of humans and nonhumans. To better account for these complex networks, this project argues for the introduction of new materialist theories of distributed agency into conversations about agency within Rhetoric. Such theories eschew the distinction between rhetorical and material agency and instead offer a way of accounting for action and change that makes room for rhetorical and material interventions as well as human and nonhuman participants. I take as my site the social media aftermath of the 2013 bombing at the finish line of the Boston Marathon. The digital networks of human users and nonhuman spaces (especially Twitter and Reddit) produced specific tangible effects: #BostonHelp helped stranded runners and tourists find food, shelter, and ways of communicating with family and friends, and Reddit's /r/findbostonbombers forum enabled and fueled hurtful speculation about an innocent missing student. The strength, impact, and endurance of these networks leads me to three important conclusions: rhetorical/material agency must be distributed across a network of human and nonhuman participants; human intention no longer functions as an appropriate measure of the success or failure of rhetorical/material agency; and responsibility – like agency – must be distributed across networks' human and nonhuman members.

Chapter One: Introduction

Project Overview

This project focuses on intersections between new materialist approaches to rhetoric, especially those rooted in the work of Bruno Latour, and rhetorical approaches to networked technologies. In part, the goal of this work is to investigate the potential for these intersections to alter our disciplinary conceptions of rhetorical and material agency. In particular, I am interested in how new materialism might allow us to reconsider agency in ways that better reflect the complex nature of causal relationships. As a way to understand the real-world implications of this altered view of agency, I will examine a particular event: the April 15, 2013 bombing at the finish line of the Boston Marathon. Specifically, the chapters that follow discuss a number of social media responses to the bombing. This event offers a few particularly powerful examples of how “dependent” rhetorical agency – characterized by relationships between humans and nonhumans – is enacted and offers us a way of understanding the possibilities opened when we (1) conceptualize rhetorical agency as the result of relationships and (2) recognize the integral role of nonhuman actors within this network.

The social media responses to the Boston Marathon bombing provide particularly potent examples of this kind of distributed, relational agency, which depends on nonhumans as well as humans to produce agential acts with rhetorical dimensions. Consider, for example, the outpouring of grief and offers for material support extended via the hashtag #BostonHelp: Tweets about the bombing began mere seconds after the blast. Many of these used the official race hashtag (#bostonmarathon) or various personalized tags. But a few hours into the mayhem, a new hashtag appeared aimed specifically at providing material support via social media.

#BostonHelp represents a rhetorically tinged node in the agentive network, which also contained human intentions (long part of traditional anthropocentric notions of rhetorical agency) as well as nonhuman technologies, platforms, and material goods.¹ The conjunctive articulation of various elements – some material, some rhetorical, most a messy amalgamation of the two – produced a powerful agency that resulted in displaced runners and tourists finding important material and emotional support in the aftermath of the bombings. A number of other moments provide glimpses of agency as the product of a kairotic conjuncture of rhetorical, material, and rhetorical/material actants: the shift in the purpose of the official hashtag in the hours after the bombing and the troubling emergence of false accusations from the subreddit /r/findbostonbombers might both be read as examples of emergent, dependent agency. This agency is neither merely material nor merely rhetorical but its actants and the ties that bind them may be either material or rhetorical or both material and rhetorical.

This project begins with a disciplinary question: how can we reimagine agency in a way that (1) better represents rhetors' lived experience and (2) opens additional ways of understanding the role of technologies in our communicative acts? This disciplinary question, however, has broader implications for our perception/definition of agency, especially in terms of how we understand the role of the rhetor (no longer as master of the communicative situation but as a single participant among many), how we understand the need for conscious intention (does each member of that network that occupies the causal field need to understand the implications

¹ Some readers might respond that as humans were the authors of these tweets, the network is simply a human creation. I would suggest, however, that such a position fails to fully account for, at minimum, the opacity and impact of communicative mediums. Marshall McLuhan asserts that “the medium is the message,” but he also argues that our interactions with nonhuman machines alter “our relations to one another and to ourselves” (19). Additionally, I would point to Latour's discussion in *Pandora's Hope* of how gun, hand, and gun-in-hand are all distinct entities. The human and the nonhuman join to produce something that was not originally present in either the human or the nonhuman; the collective formed by adding human hand and nonhuman gun creates a wholly new entity, the gun-in-hand capable of shooting (193).

of her/his/its influence?), and how much we value the nonhuman members of these communicative networks.

We may begin to account, through the new materialist work of Latour, for the influence of one set of missing participants: the nonhumans who co-construct such an agential network. In view of Latour's project – the composition of a good common world – a reimagined, dependent view of agency makes room for unaccounted for nonhuman actors, including networked technologies. Simultaneously, an examination of such technologies, including social networking tools like Twitter, reveals the already dependent nature of agency for those who participate in the network that includes such tools. In particular, I will argue that Latourian composing – of worlds and words – offers a productive vehicle for reimagining agency as dependent and technology as lively and vital. Further, I will argue that if we could better represent the complex set of relationships and myriad actors that are necessary to exert agency or affect change, if we began to imagine that intention is not the most important factor – or may not be a factor at all – in the influence a rhetor has in his/her/its network, we might invite a whole new set of participants and questions into rhetorical studies.

Research Questions

How does understanding agency as relational and dependent alter the ways in which we described and deploy that agency? How does conceptualizing technology a lively hybrid reflect a dependent definition of rhetorical and material agency?

Site Overview

Every year, on the third Monday of April, the city of Boston shuts down. Banks and businesses close and downtown is marked off by barricades and police officers. It's Patriots Day in Boston. Inaugurated as a way to commemorate the American Revolution Battles of Lexington and Concord, the holiday features reenactments and parades, celebrations and sports: the Boston

Red Sox have played a home game on Patriots ' Day every year since 1959, with a few notable exceptions for inclement weather. The holiday is also home to the Boston Marathon.

The Boston Marathon, managed by the Boston Athletic Association since its inception in 1897, is the oldest annual marathon in the world (Boston Athletic Association). A premier event for serious runners, even qualifying for the Marathon is a huge accomplishment. The course follows a grueling twenty six plus miles through winding, hilly terrain, which culminates as the course reaches Boston College's "Heartbreak Hill." The final five miles of the marathon take runners back into the city, winding through Brighton and Brookline before runners make their way back into the city proper. And it was into this final stretch that tragedy intervened on Patriot's Day 2013. Nearly three hours after Rita Jeptoo, the women's winner, crossed the finish line and long after most of the elite runners had completed the course, two bombs, constructed in pressure cookers, filled with BBs and nails, and stashed about 200 feet apart and about 300 yards from the finish line, exploded, killing three and injuring more than 200 runners, spectators, and emergency personnel.

Watching the raw footage of the scene recalls any number of apocalyptic disaster movies. Photos and video taken at the exact moment of the blast show twin flashes of fire followed by billowing smoke, then screams and terrified, soot covered people running. A few seconds after the blasts, police officers converge on the scene, some with guns drawn searching for a hint of the perpetrator, some, with a look of disbelief and terror, tend to victims. Within minutes, all trace of non-emergency personnel has been evacuated from the immediate scene. Very soon, all that fills the frame are flashing lights and strewn paper and plaster.

In addition to the personal video and photographs that captured the explosions and their aftermath, the chaotic scene was captured and broadcast in real time by the Marathon's finish

line camera, set up by the local CBS affiliate to allow family members and loved ones to remotely witness runners' triumphs. This footage would come to figure heavily in the official law enforcement hunt for the perpetrators as well as social media sites' attempts to identify the bomber, including those by Reddit's now infamous /r/findbostonbombers group.

Social Media Responses

There are any number of fascinating avenues of rhetorical exploration opened by this tragedy, but perhaps the most surprising is the large role that social media played – for good and for ill – in the aftermath of the bombing. In particular, I'd like to examine two spaces that had a disproportionately large impact in the aftermath. Twitter, especially the hashtags #BostonHelp and the repurposed #BostonMarathon, which was initially established by race organizers to promote the event and its sponsors but took on a very different role in the aftermath of the bombing. In the same way that, in the hours and days following the bombing, Twitter became an space for Bostonians and Twitter users across the country to share help and grief, Reddit, specifically the subreddit "r/findbostonbomber" played a huge – and hugely embarrassing role – in the hunt for the bombing suspect.

Tragedy and Twitter

Originally inaugurated on Twitter as a way to encourage group identification by Chris Messina in August of 2007 and institutionalized by Twitter two years later when hashtags began to automatically generate embedded hyperlinks, hashtags have become among the most common social media marketing tools. Like many events before it, the 2013 Boston Marathon had its own hashtag: #BostonMarathon. In the days and weeks preceding the race, the official hashtag was largely used to promote race related activities and media coverage of the event. On race day, many runners and their friends and family used #BostonMarathon to communicate about race times and offer congratulations. At 2:50 pm on race day, however, the hashtag suddenly

morphed from personal and promotional to newsworthy. Just seconds after of the first bombing-related tweet (which was sent by @KristenSurman within seconds of the first blast and read “Holy Shit! Explosion!”), @MrWillRitter (press secretary to then senate candidate Gabriel Gomez) used the official race hashtag to share more specific information about the situation: “Two huge explosions just went off at #BostonMarathon finish. Cops running.” Mr. Ritter’s tweet was the first in what became an avalanche of information (and misinformation) about the bombings: false reports of a fourth casualty and seemingly well-intentioned misinformation about potential suspects coexists alongside official information from the Boston Police, the White House, and other sanctioned sources of information. As it turns out, #BostonMarathon has been the most enduring of the hashtags used in the aftermath of the bombing. More than two years after the bombing, news stories concerning the aftermath still feature the official race hashtag.

As the tragedy unfolded, however, some Twitter users found the official hashtag unsuited for their specific communicative needs. Strikingly, many of the alternative hashtags associated with the bombing grew out of cathartic shows of emotional and material support for the city. One such hashtag is #BostonHelp. About an hour into the tragedy, as it became clearer to Boston residents and tourists in the city to celebrate the Marathon and Patriot’s Day that no one would be allowed back into hotels near the bombing site, #BostonHelp emerged as a way to offer material goods: food, shelter, and charging stations for electronics. One Twitter user in particular, @mollfrey, seems largely responsible for this shift. In response to Twitter users looking for ways to help the displaced and a @BostonTweet (an account with close to 100,000 followers that focuses on news and events in Boston) missive about Google’s “People Finder” initiative, @mollfrey suggests #BostonHelp: “Can a hashtag -- maybe #bostonhelp -- be

promoted for offers of aid and housing for those displaced/stranded?” Soon enough, this tag became the accepted way to offer material support to displaced people. Indeed, @mollfrey can be seen reinforcing the purpose and use of this tag by tweeting directly to those involved in the official response with information about the hashtag: “@Boston_Police² Lots of offers of help on #bostonhelp Are people allowed back to hotels downtown tonight or are many seeking shelter?”; “@bostonmarathon Is anyone in your org coordinating response and linking runners to offers surfacing on #bostonhelp?”

Crowdsourcing Blame and Misidentification

Within hours of the bombings, while some social media users offered help to displaced runners and tourists, other users began to sift through the scores of pictures, videos, and firsthand accounts of the bombings that appeared on Twitter, Facebook, 4Chan, Reddit, and other online meeting spaces; of particular interest to these digital communities was the finish line feed, which provided real time footage of the lead up to and aftermath of the explosions, and the police scanner, which provided insight into law enforcement responses to the tragedy.

On Wednesday, April 19, one of these forums began to garner national attention. Alongside dedicated forums on 4Chan and numerous blogs, the subreddit /r/findbostonbombers fueled speculation about the identity and whereabouts of bombing suspects. From “blue robe guy,” a bearded man carrying a black backpack who appeared in numerous photographs snapped in the hours before the bombs detonated, to an unlucky eBay user who purchased two pressure cookers not long before the bombing, Reddit users speculated wildly about the identity of the bombers based on little actual evidence. Not long after Reddit user oops777 initiated the /r/findbostonbombers forum, speculation landed squarely on Sunil Tripathi, a 22-year-old Brown

² This is no longer the official Twitter feed for the Boston Police Department. On April 15-19, 2013, however, this Twitter account sent a number of updates, which are now linked from the official Boston Police Department feed (@bostonpolice). All tweets from @Boston_Police have now been deleted, but the vast majority of these tweets appear – word for word – in the newer @bostonpolice’s feed.

University student who had been missing since March 16, 2013. What happened to Tripathi (and to other innocent men, including Mike Mulugeta) is called in internet parlance “doxxing,” obtaining and posting personal information about someone already under intense public scrutiny. The wild speculation about Tripathi and the release of his family’s address, telephone number, and other personal information led to nearly twenty four hours of harassment before the FBI publically released the names of the actual suspects. Though tragic, the outpouring of harassment, like the outpouring of support offered through #BostonHelp, offers important insight into the role that networks – not just individuals – play in the performance of agentive and meaningful acts.

Technical Tools and Material Impacts

Among the most important tools in this process of misidentification was the raw feed from the Boston Marathon finish line camera, which was streaming live online before, during, and immediately after the bombs went off. Installed by Boston CBS affiliate WBZ, the finish line camera was meant to provide real time footage to those who couldn’t attend the race in person. The 2013 feed shows throngs of photographers gather and disperse as first the women’s winner and then the men’s winner cross the finish line. It shows race officials and triumphant runners, jubilant crowds and expectant spectators. At 2:50 pm on race day, however, it also shows a brilliant flash of light, raining debris, and dismayed emergency officials. Just minutes after the bombing, the formerly chaotic scene goes eerily still. Footage from the WBZ camera went on to be featured prominently in local, national, and international coverage of the event as well as the subsequent searches, by law enforcement and by amateur online sleuths, for the perpetrators. Other surveillance videos also come to play an important role for law enforcement and prosecutors. As I note in Chapter Two, video from cameras installed by the Port Authority

and local businesses provide the now iconic photographs of the Tsarnaev brothers among the Marathon spectators in the moments before the bombing.

A Note on Methodology

By in large, this work will be what Patricia Sullivan and James Porter in their 1997 treatise on postmodern research methods, *Opening Spaces*, call an interpretative work: using relevant scholarship and theory, I will make a number of arguments regarding the ways in which agency is produced. This work will also seek to utilize Sullivan and Porter's notion of postmodern mapping, that is creating tentative maps of situations that may help us see evolving connections between actors. As Sullivan and Porter note in "Postmodern Mapping and Methodological Interfaces," the value of mapping as a research tool and a methodology is that "by mapping you can get a better handle on a messy picture" (90).

Similarly, I will use maps as a way to trace, in the Latourian sense of the word, connections between actors by following the traces – in this case tweets, Reddit posts, and other discursive/technological artifacts. For my purposes, Latour's use of "trace" has two important (and related meanings). "Trace" as a verb is a methodology, a way of following an actor or actors as they connect to other actors. "Trace" as a noun is an artifact, the thing an actor leaves behind that allows us to follow it/him/her. In *Reassembling the Social*, Latour frames his work "as the tracing of associations" (5). Following Latour, then, this work represents an effort to trace (v.) by following the traces (n.) that the work of connecting leaves behind. In this way, I hope to produce maps that provide some insight into the dependent networks through which agency is produced in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombings.

Some of this tracing and mapping will be accomplished through narrative means: by retelling a particular sequence of events related to social media response to the bombings, I hope to provide insight into the networks that produced particular agentive acts and highlight

connections between actors in the network. In addition to these narrative retellings, in Chapters Three and Four, I code tweets based on a set of categories that emerged from initial examinations of the collected Tweets. This content analysis is based in Grounded Theory (Glaser; Haas & Witte; Clark) and allows me to discover and revise categories as I review the tweets with the hashtags #BostonHelp and #BostonMarathon.

Literature Review

All of these arguments, maps, and codes are informed by a few foundational assumptions about agency and subjectivity. Specifically, my arguments in the chapters that follow rely on distributed notions of agency and subjectivity. Those assumptions are explored in the literature review that follows, which attempts to lay bare the theoretical foundations that inform my thinking about agency, subjectivity, and networks.

Autonomous Agency

Individual, autonomous agency might be traced alongside the history of Western rhetoric. From the time of the Greek codification of Western rhetorical history through the work of Kenneth Burke in the 1950s and into the current work of the field of Rhetoric and Composition, rhetorical agency has been theorized almost exclusively for autonomous human agents. In Book 1, part 2 of his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle lays out three kinds of persuasion available to the rhetor: “The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself.” Of these three, the rhetor is wholly responsible for the first two and is the craftsman of the final one. Following this ancient Greek tradition, the Roman philosopher Quintilian famously defined rhetoric as a good man speaking well (2.15.34). The definitions of rhetoric offered by Aristotle and Quintilian firmly ensconce the autonomous human (in this case male) agent at the center of rhetorical acts as the final cause of persuasion. This emphasis on the

central human speaker as the sole possessor of agency is not, however, exclusive to historical rhetorics; this vision of agency continues to appear in scholarly and professional documents across the field of rhetoric and composition (See Gorzelsky and NCTE resolution on Teacher Expertise and position statement on Teacher Evaluation, as examples.)

Others, however, have complicated this humanist, individualistic rhetorical tradition while continuing to emphasize the role of the human rhetor (Burke; Cooper; Foss). Burke's dramatic pentad, for example, offers a variation on this humanistic tradition. His focus on ratios as opposed to direct human causality retains the central human agent but allows for the influence of other elements, as "the ratios are principles of determination" (15). The direct relationship between actor and action articulated by Burke, however, relies on a conscious, autonomous human agent. Burke clearly demonstrates the interdependence of the elements of the pentad, but his description of agent, and later his discussion of agency itself, reinforces a reliance upon human causality: "the agent is an author of his acts, which are descended from him, being good progeny if he is good, or bad progeny if he is bad, wise progeny if he is wise, silly progeny if he is silly" (Burke 16). Burke reinforces the dependence of the various elements of the pentad in his 1978 article "Questions and Answers about the Pentad." In that article, Burke reminds his reader that, in his discussion of the pentad, the "stress is less upon the terms themselves than upon what I would call the 'ratios' among the terms," that is their relationships to one another (332). My point here, then, is not that Burke offers us a vision of agency that relies solely on autonomous human action; rather, even within his vision of the "ratios," the human agent still remains at the center of the causal field.

More recently, however, posthumanism, new materialism, and actor network theory have opened new possibilities for rhetorical agency that further decenter the human subject and

introduces nonhuman actors into the causal field (Hallenbeck; Koerber; Latour 1999; Mara & Hawk). Rickert has embraced the metaphor of ambience and chora to account for the factors unaccounted for in many discussions of the rhetorical situation (“In the House of Doing”; *Ambient Rhetoric*); similarly, Marilyn Cooper, in her 2011 “Agency as Emergent and Enacted,” has offered “surround” as a way of accounting for the influence of nonhumans on human action. I will argue, however, that nonhumans should be seen as even more integral to agentic action than Cooper’s work implies.

Agency and New Materialism

New materialist conceptions of the relationship between nonhumans and humans offer such an integral position to nonhumans. By foregrounding the agentic potential of nonhuman actants, new materialism suggests that agency is possible only via networks of humans and nonhumans (Bennett 2010; Bogost; Coole & Frost; Cooper; Greene; Harman; Herndl & Licona; Latour 1999; Miller; Winsor). In fact, following the new materialist and posthumanist emphasis on nonhumans’ role in the causal field, I will argue that agency does not belong to any single actor, whether human or nonhuman; rather, agency is a product of the relationship between actors and exists only at their point of contact. These points of contact – and one of the things that holds these relationships together – are rhetorical acts.

Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, editors of the collection *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, argue that one of the major projects of new materialism is attributing “emergent, generative powers (or agentic capacities) even within inorganic matter” (9). These theories also “generally eschew the distinction between organic and inorganic, or animate and inanimate, at the ontological level” (Coole & Frost 9). In short, new materialism “conceives of matter itself as lively or as exhibiting agency” (Coole & Frost 7). Or as Jane Bennett puts it, “a materiality that is itself vibrant or active” (“A Vitalist Stopover...,” 49). This lively matter

associates with human actors to create agentive networks. These relationships are not fixed, however; rather the configuration of the network changes based on the motives for and kinds of action needed in a particular situation, so the result is “objects forming and emerging within relational fields, bodies composing their natural environment in ways that are corporeally meaningful for them, and subjectivities being constituted as open series of capacities or potencies that emerge hazardingly and ambiguously within a multitude of organic and social processes” (Coole & Frost 10). The flexible and fluctuating nature of the networks imagined by the new materialists suggests an expanded notion of agency and cause; no longer does the human actor stand alone as the agent of change; s/he is now joined in the position by a multitude of other actors. Further, s/he is shaped by these non-human actors as much as s/he shapes them, and it is in his/her relationships with these other actants (human and non-human) that agency is produced.

Likewise, Bruno Latour suggests, in *Pandora's Hope, On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* and elsewhere, that the product of this kind of formative relationship is more than the sum of its parts. In *Pandora's Hope*, Latour uses the example of Pasteur's experiments on fermentation to make this point: “This list of inputs [for subsequent experiments] does not have to be completed by drawing upon any stock of resources, since the stock of resources drawn upon *before* the experimental event is not the same as the one drawn upon *after* it” (126, emphasis in the original). As Rickert does with agency, Latour claims here that an interaction, in this case an experiment, produces something that cannot be accounted for by the initial actants that participated in said experiment. Instead, the combination of actants produces something wholly new. Latour makes a similar suggestion in *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*. Throughout the first chapter of this treatise on belief, Latour outlines the strange properties of the “factish,” a neologism that reflects properties of both a fact and fetish. And when these factishes

interact with other actors, Latour suggests the action produced by the encounter is not a result of either of the original actors but a unique product of their interaction: “These two idioms, that of liberty and that of alienation, blinds us to the strange positioning of factishes capable of making one do things that no one, neither they nor you can control” (56). The relationship between factishes and ourselves yields action not in the control of either actor; the ability to act or create change, what we understand as agency, is not, then, the product of either the human or the factish/object but a product of the relationship between the two (or more, depending on the size of the network).

Technology and a Relational Definition of Agency

Latour’s discussion of factishes and relational yields reflects arguments about rhetorical agency as a kind of position or product of relationships rather than a possession of a single actor/rhetor (Herndl & Licona 2007; Geisler 2004; Miller 2007). Consider, for example, Carolyn Miller’s argument about automation and the need for a relational definition of agency in “What Can Automation Tell Us about Agency?” In this article, Miller argues that agency is best understood as performative, a kind of “kinetic energy...generated through a process of mutual attribution between rhetor and audience” (137). Miller thus concludes that “agency is...a property of the rhetorical event, not of agents” (137). Miller’s emphasis here is on the performative nature of rhetorical agency and the interaction of human subjects, but her notion of dispersed/momentary agency reflects the new materialists’ emphasis on the power of lively, agentive technology.³

³ Miller’s discussion of automation recalls, in part, Heidegger’s discussion of causality in the “Question Concerning Technology.” Too often, Heidegger argues, we consider only human causality and ignore the material, social, and idealistic/formulaic dimensions of creation. Similarly, I will argue, our current understandings of how agency is produced give too little credence to the impact of nonhuman actants in the rhetorically and materially constructed networks that produce agency. Viewing agency as dependent and relational (as I will argue in the next chapter) allows us to better understand the fuller picture of causes that conspire to produce effects.

Latour's work on hybrids (see for example his 2011 essay "Love Your Monsters") offers a new way of understanding the relationship among technology, writing, and agency. No longer merely a tool or a new writing space, technological hybrids play an integral in the creation of a common world, as more than tools, as co-inhabitants of the new world (Bennett, 2010; Haraway; Latour, 2011). In view of this re-imagined vision of technology, I would argue that sites like Twitter become an important site for the performance of this new agency and a space for new kinds of writing acts, including those proposed by Rickert in *Acts of Enjoyment*. In particular, social media spaces, enabled by networked technologies, are important to this discussion of the intersections between new materialism and agency for two reasons: first, social media technologies/spaces like Twitter act as an existing example of the kind of relational, dependent agency argued above. Simultaneously, these spaces open room for new kinds of writing acts.

If new electronic spaces and divided, posthuman notions of subjectivity require a new diffuse, dependent notion of agency, it follows that new acts are opened by this new sense of agency. These new acts reveal our dependence on human others, yes, but these new acts/this new agency also points to a new space, a compositional space characterized by ephemera, connectivity, responsivity, and spontaneity. Are these not also the values/characteristics of the new agency? Are these also not the values/characteristics of new media/social media spaces, Twitter in particular? In particular, we may find that agency as defined by Latour, bound up as it is in the act of creating the network or the common world, requires spaces that both reflect the character of the network and the notion of networked agency, and allow human and nonhuman actors to engage in writing acts that mirror the values of networked agency. The Boston Marathon attacks, then, especially the social media responses and the altered purpose of the finish line camera that captured joyous images of triumph and the terror of the bombing's

aftermath, acts as a site for recognizing and enacting this altered understanding of rhetorical agency, the role of intention, and the role and value of nonhuman in this actors within the dependent relationships that characterize the agentive field.

Conclusion, Or What Do I Mean By Agency?

This work relies heavily on a broad definition of agency as the ability to have an effect on other bodies. Because of my reliance on the posthumanist work of Latour, Coole, Frost, and others, I see material agency, which attends to the work of nonhumans, as both necessary to and contributing to any production of agency. For the purposes of this work, then, I seek to conflate rhetorical and material agency; or, more precisely, I wish not to treat rhetorical agency as a special class of agency. This conflation does not negate the powerful role of rhetorical acts; indeed, I will argue that conflating material and rhetorical agency allows me to productively examine agentive networks as both material and semiotic (following Donna Haraway). Rhetoric, then, becomes part of material forces in the same way that, following Rickert's work in *Ambient Rhetoric* and Nathaniel River's "Rhetorical Theory/Bruno Latour," material forces exert their influence over rhetoric.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter Two: Nonhumans, Vitality, and Networked Agency

Following the present chapter's introduction to new materialism, Chapter Two explores the view of nonhumans that underpins that work. Using the work of Latour and Jane Bennett, Chapter Two offers a methodological foundation for this project and, in doing so, offers a view of nonhumans as lively co-participants in the construction of networks that produce rhetorical/material agency. Tracing as a methodology requires patient attention to the growth and movement of the networks under investigation and highlights the participation of nonhumans. These nonhuman objects, ideas, and technologies are not, however, the inert matter of existing theories of rhetorical agency. They are, instead vital, lively participants who restrict, enable, constrain, and invent with the human

members of the collective. I subsequently examine how this works has already been taken up in Rhetoric and Composition (Cooper; Miller), and more specifically in digital rhetoric (Hawk; Reid; Rivers). I end this discussion by briefly examining the circulation of a lively nonhuman: the surveillance video from the Forum restaurant, video that produced the iconic images of the suspects moving through the crowd and came to figure heavily in the prosecution's case against the surviving Tsarnaev brother.

Chapter Three: Relational Agency and the Emergence of #BostonHelp

Following the present chapter's review of literature, with its attention to the fragmenting of the postmodern subject and the dispersion of human agency (Bizzell; Davis) and Chapter Two's discussion of how lively, vibrant material actors (Latour; Bennett; Coole and Frost) have already made their way into rhetorical theory (Cooper; Miller; Rivers; Reid), Chapter Three will argue that agency – both rhetorical and material – is inherently relational and dependent and exists only as the product of relationships between humans and nonhumans. I will investigate earlier revisions to anthropocentric rhetorical agency within Rhetoric and Composition, including work by Carolyn Miller, Adela Licona and Carl Herndl, and Marilyn Cooper, and use this work as well as material theories of rhetoric (Latour; Rivers; Hallenbeck) to argue for relational conceptions of rhetorical/material agency. I will use the emergence of the hashtag #BostonHelp in the aftermath of the Marathon bombings to illustrate the relational nature of efficacious rhetorical acts: following the bombings, as many runners and other tourists were barred by law enforcement from retrieving their belongings and returning to their hotels, numerous Twitter users began to tweet offers for food and shelter using the aforementioned hashtag. These acts of kindness are intentionally agentive acts enabled by a network of technologies (spaces like Twitter as well as the internet itself and the hardware necessary to connect), material goods (the food and shelter they offer), and the human kindness that underlies the offers.

Chapter Four: The Question of Intention: Repurposing #BostonMarathon

Following Chapter Three's discussion of relational, dependent rhetorical agency, with its emphasis on intentional acts via #BostonHelp, Chapter Four will question the necessity of intention in establishing the relative agency of particular communicative acts. In particular, I will use the shift of the hashtag #BostonMarathon (from official race hashtag to communicative tool to search for missing loved ones, update other users, and share messages of grief and support) to argue that the original intention of an actor, whether human or nonhuman, is not necessarily relevant to the crafting of agentive acts. The shift from official hashtag/promotional tool to a tool for sharing grief and searching for lost loved ones couldn't have been foreseen by the creator of the hashtag. Rather, the intervention of events beyond the control of organizers and runners and the presence of nonhumans with their own properties allowed for the rhetorically powerful shift. This chapter, then, will argue for a move away from intention as an integral part of establishing whether a rhetorical act is agentive or successful (i.e. how closely a rhetorical act comes to producing its intended effect) and toward a distributed view of how agency is produced.

Chapter Five: Networked Responsibility and Reddit's Hunt for the Bombing Suspects

Following the discussion of lively nonhuman participants (Chapter Two), relational agency (Chapter Three) and the role of intention in rhetorically agentive acts (Chapter Four), Chapter Five will use Reddit's hunt for and eventual mis/identification of the bombing suspects to suggest that relational networked agency that includes nonhuman actors can best be seen in new, responsive communicative spaces made possible by networked technologies and the interactive web that characterizes the turn to web 2.0. Using work from Gregory Ulmer, Latour, Miller, and Cooper, I will argue that these spaces (1) typify the kind of relational agency I argue for in the first chapter, (2) demonstrate the relevance of nonhuman participation in agentive acts (Latour), and (3) illustrate a kind of networked accountability/responsibility. In particular, this

chapter will take up the question of ethical responsibility for distributed views of agency: if multiple humans and nonhumans are responsible for the eventual misidentification of an innocent young man, who is ultimately responsible for the negative consequences of their rhetorically agentive acts? Ultimately, I will argue, each member of the network bears some of the responsibility, but this distribution of blame does not lessen our societal ability to hold actors accountable for such acts.

Conclusion

Taken together, these chapters make three overarching arguments: first, the artificial division between material and rhetorical agency is less productive than a unified theory of agency; therefore, this work seeks to explore – through the social media responses to the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings – the ways in which rhetorical and material agency dovetail together. Second, agency – broadly defined – is not the purview of any single actor, whether human or nonhuman; rather, agency exists at the points of contact of multiple actors with a momentarily shared purpose. This contact between actors with a shared purpose is constructed, at least in part, through rhetorical means. Finally, technological networks and actors are fundamental to understanding practices that produce agency.

By examining the thousands of tweets sent in the hours and days following the bombings at the Boston Marathon, I hope to trace agentive networks, real world examples of the material-semiotic actor/hybrid described in the new materialist work of Latour, Donna Haraway, and their ilk. In doing so, I offer a revised sense of agency that points rhetoricians, technicians, and everyday users to the material nature of rhetorical acts and the rhetorical forces that shape matter.

Chapter Two: Nonhumans, Vitality, and Networked Agency

Chapter One lays out the specific case under consideration here as well as the theoretical rationale for revising agency to better account for the ways in which digital technologies and other material actors impact our rhetorical practices. The goal of this chapter, then, is to lay out the methodological foundation for this project and, in doing so, to account for a key assumption that underpins both the methodology and theory that invigorate this discussion, namely that nonhumans – particularly technological nonhumans – are not the passive objects many of our theories of agency imagine them to be. On the contrary, nonhumans are vibrant, vital, productive members of agentive networks.

Tracing as a Methodology

For my purposes, tracing as a methodology emerges from the work of Bruno Latour. More specifically, in *Reassembling the Social*, Latour expends a great deal of effort (and a great number of words) arguing that tracing relations, assemblages, and the movement of particular actors provides researchers with insight into how humans and nonhumans come together to form agentive networks. In fact, in the introduction to that text, Latour notes that his decades-long project is not to redefine sociology as “the ‘science of the social’, but as the tracing of associations” between human and nonhuman actors (5). This redefinition of sociology – and the broader, interdisciplinary work of solving social, environmental, legal, and other collective problems – requires us to acknowledge the vital participation of nonhumans. Latour works toward this more inclusive sociological practice by tracing (*v.*) the traces (*n.*) that actors leave behind as they join and leave networks (*Reassembling the Social*, 23). Actor-Network Theory,

Latour notes, is laborious and slow because “ANT prefers to travel slowly, on small roads, on foot, and by paying the full cost of any displacement out of its own pocket” (*Reassembling the Social*, 23). ANT, Latour acknowledges, is a painstaking process that requires adherents to follow nonhuman and human participants from network to network and trial to trial. In ANT, answers, actors, and agency emerge when we “trace connections” rather than when we work to stabilize and solve seemingly incommensurable problems by fiat. In fact, it is the connections among actors that make them durable enough to grapple with messy, complex problems: “ANT claims that it is possible to trace more sturdy relations and discover more revealing patterns by finding a way to register the links between unstable and shifting frames of reference” and by tracing members of networks as they do the meticulous labor of making and severing connections (*Reassembling the Social*, 24).

Because of the detailed work involved in tracing actors as they enroll in and disconnect from various networks, tracing as a method of investigation requires patience, for we must “follow the actors’ own ways and begin our travels by the traces left behind by their activity of forming and dismantling groups” (*Reassembling the Social*, 29). Latour’s methodology works not by recognizing already established networks but rather by highlighting the ways that networks form and change in response to stimuli or interventions from actors and problems outside the network. As Latour argues in “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications Plus More than a Few Complications,” Actor-Network Theory’s emphasis on following actors is “not about traced networks but about a network tracing activity...there is not a net and an actor laying down the net, but there is an actor whose definition of the world outlines, traces, delineate, limn, describe, shadow forth, inscroll, file, list, record, mark, or tag a trajectory that is called a network” (14). For Latour, the movements of nonhuman participants allow us to observe the

shape, size, and composition of the worlds they inhabit; following their movements allows us to give shape to the networks in which they operate. This act of tracing also reveals the silent work of nonhuman actors as they build relationships with other human and nonhuman members of the networks they join or leave.

This approach – following the provisional relationships that actors create as they enroll and are unenrolled in groups that craft networks – is particularly valuable when we examine hybrid problems. Hybrid problems – what Latour calls “matters of concern” – offer particular challenges to researchers because they are both materially and rhetorically/discursively constructed imbrolios. It is these heterogeneous networks of humans and nonhumans that require quiet, patient attention to human and nonhuman activity: “Speech acts always look comparable, compatible, contiguous, and continuous with other speech acts; writing with writing; interaction with interaction; but objects appear associable with one another and with social ties only momentarily” (Latour, *RS* 80). Objects, however, are not silent nor are they stationary. Tracing allows us to recognize and record these momentary connections in order to better understand the relationships that produce change. Tracing makes the vitality of nonhuman actors both visible and articulate.

Further, ANT’s emphasis on relationships reveals a different way of understanding research sites and questions, as tracing reveals that “sites no longer differ in shape or size, but in the direction of the movements to and fro as well as in the nature, as we shall see, of what is being transported: information, traces, goods, 204 Second Move plans, formats, templates, linkages, and so on” (Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 204-5). For Latour, then, it is the nonhuman participants – the information, the goods, the plans – that give definition and distinction to the networks they inhabit. As Blok and Jensen argue in their discussion of Latour’s

move from matters of fact to matters of concern, this new social approach to sociology insists that research becomes about “following the actors,” wherein researchers “trace the many connecting threads” – which are often networks in and of themselves – “that create, and set the scene for, any particular interaction and any particular actor.” Or, as Nathaniel Rivers argues, “to practice ANT is to trace the actors and to see the social as an emergent effect of the labors of many untold actors” (Rivers, “Tracing...”). The goal of tracing, of following the heretofore silent and seemingly stationary nonhuman members of agentive networks, then, is to enumerate and give voice to those who haven’t yet been able to speak for themselves – at least not in ways easily recognized by other methods of discovery.

This new method does not reveal a new set of circumstances, however. Rather, ANT provides a way of better recognizing, understanding, and giving voice to actors who have long been part of the production of rhetorical/material agency. Because we have assumed more direct cause and effect and because we have long privileged the rational acting human, we have missed these vital but slow moving and unspeaking participants. And so long as they are invisible, we cannot fully account for how we might actual create change in the world:

An invisible agency that makes no difference, produces no transformation, leaves no trace, and enters no account is not an agency. Period. Either it does something or it does not. If you mention an agency, you have to provide the account of its action, and to do so you need to make more or less explicit which trials have produced which observable traces—which does not mean, of course, that you have to speak about it, speech being only one of the many behaviors able to generate an account and far from the most frequent (Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 53).

Tracing makes visible the heretofore invisible activity of networks of actors, especially those actors who cannot speak for themselves in traditional ways. For nonhuman actors, this kind of tracing is revelatory, for without deliberate attention to their movements and contributions, Latour argues, the role of non-speaking, nonhuman members of agentive networks are too often left out; they remain unaccounted for, invisible, and in terms of their participation in rhetorical/material agency, imaginary. Tracing, then, leads to representation and recognition of members who, I will argue in each of the subsequent chapters of this project, often have a significant impact on the shape and purpose of any given network.

Things Matter in Philosophy and Sociology

Actor-Network Theory's emphasis on tracing as a methodological tool reinforces an important assumption that underlies this project: things – that is nonhuman actors – matter. First, it's important to note that the nonhuman in Latour's account is not a stationary, passive object but a “circulating entity” (Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 132). This sense of vibrancy and movement coincides with Jane Bennett's vibrant materiality, which emphasizes “the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii). The nonhumans Bennett enumerates here are all solidly material, but her emphasis on the productive capacity of nonhuman participants could just as easily be attributed to technological nonhumans, who sometimes lack the same weighty material presence. For Bennett, these participants don't simply act as constraining forces – as they do for rhetorical theorists like Bitzer and Burke – but have creative potential as well. Rather than a minor revision to our theories of agency production, Bennett's goal is to fundamentally alter the way we understand “the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite human

things” (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, ix). Beyond recognizing a vibrancy that might better account for how change actually happens in the world, Bennett emphasizes another important reason to recognize the vitality of material actors:

The image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies. These material powers, which can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us, in any case call for our attentiveness, or even ‘respect’ (*Vibrant Matter*, ix).

For Bennett, as for Latour, recognizing the contributions of nonhuman actors may allow us to better address a pressing, potentially fatal issue: climate change. For Bennett, in order to address messy, materially-situated matters of concern, we must move away from human exceptionalism and toward a more egalitarian representation of how human and nonhuman actors participate in networks that create change. Instead of an anthropocentric vision of agency, Bennett insists that we might combat human hubris and narcissism by embracing an anthropomorphic understanding of how nonhuman actors interact with the world: “We need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism – the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature – to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world” (xvi). This shift has implications, according to new materialist theorists Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, for researchers/theorists as they examine the connections between human and nonhuman actors because “humans, including theorists themselves, [must] be recognized as thoroughly immersed within materiality's productive contingencies” (7). The contingencies here are lively and productive potentialities present in nonhuman actors. For these theorists, it is not just human actors that animate and

invigorate the networks in which they participate; rather, nonhuman actors also have the potential to propel and/or change a network.

New Materialism in Rhetoric

The work of the new materialists under consideration in the previous section has already begun to make its way into Rhetoric and Composition. In particular, Latour and Bennett's theories of networks have been taken up by two prominent scholars in the field: Carolyn Miller and Marilyn Cooper. For her part, Miller uses Latour's and Bennett's work to consider how machines – automated scoring machines, for her purposes – might act on and with human teachers. Her investigation of how technologies undercut traditional models of rhetorical agency leads her to argue that human agency is a necessary fiction and that rather than being concerned with how agency is produced, we would be better off considering how agency is attributed and how that attribution serves wider political and social goals.

To underscore this shift from agency as a possession to agency as a series of attributions, Miller argues that agency is perhaps a fiction, but an important one, a product of a reciprocal energy exchange between rhetor and audience. Agency, she asserts, is bound up in space, time, and circumstance; it is, above all else, a performance, an exchange between rhetor and audience. Too often, "our talk about agency has tended to essentialize the temporal, condensing into a property or possession of the hypostatized agent what more productively should remain temporalized in the act or performance" (147). Instead, Miller offers a picture of agency as "the kinetic energy of performance," a product of the interaction between rhetor and audience and "positioned exactly between the agent's capacity and the effect on an audience" (147). The effect on the audience, though, is not a passive reception but an active exchange or challenge or acceptance.

Because of her emphasis on the relational exchange between audience and rhetor, the key question for Miller is not about how agency is produced or how well it represents the actual causation but rather how agency is attributed to rhetor and audience. Agency, she argues, “is a product of the inescapable ideology of the Human Barnyard” (153). Agency is first and foremost a product of humans interacting with other humans, and “if agency is an attribution,” as opposed to a possession, “our ideological concerns have been misplaced,” concerned as they are with intention, causation, empowerment, and change. Instead, says Miller, “we should be concerned less about empowering subaltern subjects and more about enabling and encouraging attributions of agency to them by those with whom they interact—and accepting such attributions from them” (153). This process of attribution matters because who gets credit – or blame, for that matter – shapes the perception of the event and marks the possibility for future engagement. This process of recognition is fundamental, Miller argues, because attribution and recognition open and foreclose particular possibilities: if I believe another actor cannot respond, my rhetorical action is likely to focus elsewhere. If however, I believe another actor possesses the capacity for action, I am much more likely to attend to her/his/its needs and concerns.

Miller is not willing, however, to invite this sort of agential attributions for the nonhuman members of any rhetorical situation, though she leaves open such a possibility: “given sufficient experience and exposure, we may accept these machines as Latourian hybrids to which we unproblematically delegate rhetorical agency” (152). Such a move is not, however, of most interest to Miller. Instead, Miller’s goal is to craft an understanding of agency that “will help us determine how and where to draw the line—between the human and the nonhuman, between the symbolic and the material—and how to make our case to others” (152). This final concern – how

best to make our case, how best to change minds, how best to effect change – is, for Miller, a largely human affair.

Like Miller, Cooper acknowledges a shifting basis for rhetorical agency. Instead of accepting rhetorical agency as a necessary fiction, though, Cooper instead argues that we might still rescue human agency from postmodernism's dismantling of the unified subject:

An insistent question that arises, then, is whether we must simply resign ourselves to modernist lamenting or postmodern rejoicing at the loss of our responsibility for the way our world turns out, or whether some notion of human agency in bringing about positive changes can be rescued. I'm for rescuing, rather than lamenting or rejoicing (420).

For Cooper, the most pressing question facing those concerned with agency has to do with human responsibility: if we cannot locate agency within self-knowing, intentional human subjects, we risk losing the ability to hold humans accountable for negative – sometimes tragic – outcomes. Human agency, Cooper asserts, must be rescued if we are to have any sense of social responsibility. For Cooper, then, human agency, takes the form of “an emergent property of embodied individuals” (421). Agents – not subjects, a term bound up in notions of simple, direct causation – are reflective, conscious, and intentional. They have “conscious intentions and goals and plans;” however, “their agency does not arise from conscious mental acts, though consciousness does play a role. Agency instead is based in individuals' lived knowledge that their actions are their own” (421). For Cooper, agents are directly impacted by the nonhumans around them – their “surround,” as she calls it – but ultimately, “all actions are embodied, including what are thought of as ‘mental’ actions—speaking, writing, reflecting” (424-5). Nonhumans, then, function as more than constraints – they can be productive, creative forces in Cooper's theory of agency – but they are not co-actors. They are, rather, somewhere between the

passive objects of traditional theories of agency but far from the lively matter from Bennett or Latour's work.

Though Miller and especially Cooper grapple with new material, networked theories of agency, their work tends to reinscribe anthropocentric rhetorical agency. Latour and Bennett, however, argue for a far more radical change, both in terms of how we see nonhuman participants and in how we account for agentic practice. Understanding nonhuman actors as vital, active, contributing members of agentic networks leads to what Bennett calls a "congregational understanding of agency" (*Vibrant Matter*, 20). This congregation (or collective, to use Latour's vocabulary) necessarily includes humans but it also includes a multitude of nonhuman actors. Agency – as a term of investigation or representation of action and change – "becomes distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human effort" (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 23). Furthermore, when we begin to account for nonhuman participation in agency, new materialists argue that we might begin to recognize "the productive, inventive capacities...[of] materiality itself" (Coole and Frost 8). This new understanding of agency (as congregational, collective, and distributed) does not represent a new kind of agency; instead, it allows theorists and researchers to better articulate the ways in which agency has always operated. As Bennett argues, "There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore" (*Vibrant Matter*, 31). As Cooper argues, our sense of ourselves as causal agentic actors has long been fundamental to our understanding of rhetorical agency in particular. Actor-Network theory, distributed agency, and Bennett's vibrant matter threaten this sense of self. Recognizing and granting agentic capacities to nonhuman participants has the potential to fundamentally alter

our sense of self-efficacy. However, whereas Cooper warns against such a move, Coole, and Frost, and Bennett suggest that this change might be a positive, even necessary one.

In particular, Coole and Frost address Cooper's argument – discussed further in Chapter Four – that one reason a fully distributed model of agency won't work is because human actors experience themselves as acting, causal subjects and, Cooper argues, any functional theory of rhetorical agency must account for this experience: "We experience ourselves as causal agents, and any theory of agency needs somehow to account for that experience. And we need to hold ourselves and others responsible for what we do." Coole and Frost suggest that instead of protecting human agents from challenges to their belief about their own role in causing change, we might be better served by even more fundamentally challenging this experience. Distributing agency across human and nonhuman actors leads to a change in how human actors experience their agency: "individuals' experiences of themselves as subjects and agents of their own lives are also transformed" (21). This transformation is one step toward Bennett's goal of moving human actors from fantasies of mastery toward cooperative, networked agentive practices. As Bennett argues, "I believe that encounters with lively matter can chasten my fantasies of human mastery, highlight the common materiality of all that is; expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests" (*Vibrant Matter*, 122). For Bennett, as for Latour, an inability to recognize the productive capacity of matter and other nonhuman participants/actors is not just short-sighted; it is dangerous. Mastery leads to destruction, but community, relationality, and responsiveness – to human and nonhuman others – might allow us to better grapple with pressing hybrid problems, including climate change.

Digital Rhetoric and a More Robust Role for Nonhuman Actors

Though Miller and Cooper do not argue for the kind of fundamental shift laid out by Coole, Frost, Bennett, and Latour, in digital rhetoric, the use of Bennett and Latour's work⁴ heralds a more foundational transformation for rhetoric. In particular, Nathaniel Rivers (especially his multimodal work in *Enculturation*) and Alex Reid argue for a prominent place for nonhuman actors within rhetorical theory and agency. Reid sees the move toward an object-oriented or at least an object-interested rhetoric as fundamental for better understanding how rhetoric impacts the world around it: "As I see it, the prospects for a digital rhetoric might begin with an investigation of the rhetorical operation of these objects so that we might understand how our democratic, scientific, and cultural discourses develop with these objects as participants." Nonhumans, then, are not surrounding, inert matter that constrains our practice but are rather productive members of the network that produces action and change. This newly recognized networked existence, Rivers argues, is not one intended to privilege the nonhuman over the human but instead to "account for humans and nonhumans in symmetrical ways: as actors acting but never alone" ("Tracing..."). For these digital rhetoricians, networked theories of agency and action allow us to decenter human actors so that we can attend to the nonhumans who shape, constrain, and participate in rhetorical practice. In fact, the field's attention to social media and multimodal composition provides a perfect opportunity to open ourselves to the nonhumans who already populate our practice. As Rivers asserts in the conclusion to his series on Latour's potential for rhetorical theory,

⁴ Latour and the other new materialists' renewed attention to the movement and vibrancy of nonhuman actors has particular salience for digital rhetoric as we begin to see digital objects and spaces as more fundamental to our rhetorical practice than we can yet imagine. Coole and Frost note that one of the cultural changes that makes this theoretical move toward a vibrant notion of material and nonhuman actors possible is "the saturation of our intimate and physical lives by digital, wireless, and virtual technologies" (5). Latour also argues that digital technologies are potent examples of the kind of lively matter with which Actor-Network Theory is most concerned: "A material infrastructure provides everyday more proof of a precise follow up of associations, as any look at the W/orld Wide Web turned World Wide Lab shows" (Latour RS 119).

Rhetoric's investment in new media composition (which is far from universal) has drawn our field's attention to a range of potentially extra-discursive skills. Rhetoric's simultaneous material turn ratchets-up this interest in the non-discursive. We are invested in both the rhetoric we can achieve through new media and the rhetorical agency of the media themselves ("Manual Rhetoric").

For Rivers, as for Reid, new media production – and the technologies and spaces required to compose in new media environments – reveal our reliance on and engagement with nonhuman actors. This dependence isn't a new development; rather the increasing integration of technology into our rhetorical practice forces us to at last grapple more fully with the ways that seemingly passive objects directly impact rhetorical work.

In fact, Rivers and Reid represent a particular strain of digital rhetoric, one concerned with understanding digital technologies as more than mere tools. Indeed, the inclusion of nonhumans in our definitions of rhetorical practice necessitates a change from viewing objects as passive, immobile, and asocial to a view of these objects as relational and, to use Bennett's terms, vibrant and vital. Rivers in particular reminds us that such move isn't aimed at disenfranchising human actors but rather encourages us to "embrace equally the nonhuman, not simply as artifacts of rhetorical production, or as vessels of cultural meaning, or even as containers for rhetorical action, but rather as active participants in what Latour calls an object-oriented democracy" ("Tracing..."). Rivers calls on rhetoric to strive for a symmetrical representation of human and nonhuman contributions to the networks that make rhetorical/material agency possible and to think more deeply about their nonhuman companions. The goal of focusing on the participation of nonhumans is to make them and the work they do visible and efficacious, for "to ignore nonhumans or to render them invisible in the analysis of

public rhetoric is to miss the important work they do” (Rivers, “Tracing...”). To put it more directly, Rivers argues, “we humans are not the only ones here, and we are far from being the only beings who matter. All matter matters, and so all matter is rhetorical” (“Tracing...”). Matter is rhetorical in two senses: first, matter is constituted by both physical and discursive work. I’m thinking here of the messy hybrids that populate Latour’s work and of Donna Haraway’s material-semiotic actors. Matter is also rhetorical because it is necessary for rhetorical production. We need wifi and word processors, microphones and stages, classrooms, courtrooms, and social media spaces.

Enrolling these vibrant nonhumans into our rhetorical practice may also allow us access to conversations and problems from which rhetoric has often been excluded. For Reid, bringing objects into rhetoric allows us to work with disciplines – like science and technology studies – and on problems – like climate change or the spread of Ebola – with firm material foundations. For too long, Reid argues, rhetoric’s emphasis on purely human agency and strictly symbolic action has separated us from colleagues and co-investigators in STEM and the social sciences:

Rhetoric has a significant role and we might investigate that role if we can manage to extricate ourselves from the anthropocentric symbolic action that has largely defined our discipline in the modern era. In my view, rhetoric, a minimal rhetoric as I have called it, operates in all relations that have a capacity to generate cognition and agency. We see these relations in house flies, slime molds, and bacterial colonies. We see them in robots and software (“Composing...”).

Reid, working from Latour and Bennett as well as from the work of Ian Bogost, calls for an inclusive, minimalist rhetoric, one that doesn’t require conscious intention or language use to be valuable members of rhetorically agentic assemblages.

This inclusion of nonhuman actors, though, seems – as noted earlier – to threaten human agency. Reid acknowledges as much: “Agency is the pinnacle of being human, but as such it is also the human quality that is most easily threatened, by technology, by government, by materiality, or perhaps even twinkies, as the apocryphal legal defense goes” (“Composing...”). The fragility of human agency – agency that can be threatened by attention to any of the multitude of things present during the exercise of such agency – opens up two possible responses. Reid argues that our reaction has largely been to acknowledge the presence and impact of nonhumans, especially technologies and especially when technologies fail us, but to deny them the productive capacities for which the new materialists argue. Too often, when confronted with the impact of nonhuman members of our network, “we mutter under our breath that some damn application doesn’t want to let us do something,” but Reid argues, “we know we don’t really mean that, don’t really mean to extend to some object some kind of agency to object” (“Composing...”). Reid, though, following Latour and Bennett, argues we might do just that, and in doing so, we might discover that “it is also possible to locate agency in a very different place, in the virtual, potential spaces that emerge within and among objects” (“Composing...”). As writing practices change, as technologies press even more deeply and inescapably into our daily lives, it becomes harder to deny the strange impact of those nonhumans on our own rhetorical practices. Too often still, Reid says, “we speak of mute tools devoid of their own agency or sensibility” when we might instead speak of technologies as collaborators with force and potentiality of their own (“Composing...”). This vitality and potential, though, doesn’t endanger human vitality and potential; it adds to it by making our practices more real (in the Latourian sense) because it allows us to account more specifically for

how and why each of the nonhumans in our networks are enrolled. We must, as Latour says, show our work.

Indeed, including nonhuman participants doesn't deny human agency but rather strengthens it, something that our colleagues in the sciences have long known. As Rivers argues, "a successful scientist or engineer keeps their rhetoric strong and their project alive and thus real by moving between the human and nonhuman securing allies and getting them to act together" ("Manual Rhetoric"). Rhetoric is made stronger as assemblages are enriched through the addition of an ever increasing number of human and nonhuman actors. For his part, Byron Hawk makes a similar argument about writing studies. In "Reassembling Post-Process," Hawk, following Thomas Kent's work on post-process pedagogy, notes that "writing is public, writing is interpretive, and writing is situated" (75). This emphasis on situational, kairotic writing theories leads Hawk to Deleuze and Guattari's – and Latour's – theory of assemblages. Viewing rhetoric and writing as a process of creating ever stronger assemblages leads to an approach based on "embodied enactions with a complex evolving world that include innumerable objects at various levels of scale" (77). This reimagining of rhetorical and writing practice is decidedly posthuman in that though it includes humans, it "decenters them in relational models of assemblage and expression" (Hawk, "Reassembling," 77). More than simply decentering the human actor, Hawk imagines a rhetorical and writing practice focused on the "disclosing of a world [through] the expression of voices, differences, and complexities [that] clearly emerge through the agency of both human and nonhuman actors" (89). The world disclosed by this mixture of human and nonhuman actors would necessarily be different than world drawn simple from human experience and might provide rhetoric with new matters of concern.

What these digital rhetoricians are arguing for, then, is a new definition of rhetorical practice, one that maintains an interest in human actors but opens itself to the productive participation of nonhuman actors as well. Instead of simple persuasion, rhetoric becomes, Rivers argues, “the glue or the work of gluing together relationships” (“Introduction”). Instead of humans acting on other humans, rhetoric might become “the art or science of living together...the work of relating” to the human and nonhuman others that populate our networks and give shape to our world (“Introduction”). For Rivers, as for Reid and Hawk, a materially invested, object-interested rhetoric takes up questions about “arranging the words and the cables, the images and the circuits” (“Manual Rhetoric”). It is not that the cables and circuits have suddenly become relevant to rhetoric; instead these authors are arguing that nonhumans have always been relevant to rhetoric but we have only now begun to take them seriously. For Rivers, Latour’s insistence that researchers slowly, painstakingly show their work is also an insistence that rhetoric “account for the nonhuman, the nonsymbolic, and nondiscursive labor of rhetoric, of identification, of persuasion, and of composition. For rhetoric to fully account for what makes things work, rhetoric must account not only for the human but nonhuman as well” (“Show Your Work”). Ultimately, Rivers is concerned with how best to effect change. Rhetoric has a fundamental role to play in the construction of Latour’s good common world, but in order to participate in such reconstruction, we must account not only for the human labor that rhetoric requires but for the nonhuman labor as well. We must make the work of our nonhuman compatriots visible and vocal.

Assembling Actors

Though this chapter focuses specifically on nonhuman actors, I don’t wish to indicate that these nonhumans act alone. For theorists inside and outside rhetoric, nonhumans participate but –

just like the humans in their networks – they do not cause or create. Instead, they are one part of a heterogeneous collective of things. Latour uses the terms “assemblage” for such collectives, a term that emphasizes the shifting and provisional nature of these groups of humans and nonhumans. These types of networks form, shift, and disintegrate in response to trials, pressures, and problems; the result of these shifting alliances and ever-changing groups is “a composite assemblage” instead of a totalizing whole (Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 208).

Assemblages that include nonhuman technologies and technological artifacts (like digital videos and images) are particularly interesting examples of this kind of “*sui generis* object: the collective thing,” which Latour notes are peculiar precisely because they are “too full of humans to look like the technology of old, but...too full of nonhumans to look like the social theory of the past. The missing masses are in our traditional social theories, not in the supposedly cold, efficient, and inhuman technologies” (“Where are the Missing Masses?” 175). For these composite networks/assemblages, strength, durability, and responsivity come not

from concentration, purity and unity, but from dissemination, heterogeneity and the careful plaiting of weak ties. This feeling that resistance, obduracy and sturdiness is more easily achieved through netting, lacing, weaving, twisting, of ties that are weak by themselves, and that each tie, no matter how strong, is itself woven out of still weaker threads (3 “On Actor-Network Theory”)

is the whole underlying argument of networked theories of action and agency: change requires a multitude of actors and artifacts and their relationships with one another make each of them stronger and better able to resist outside forces and respond to outside problems. Latour’s theory of networks and assemblages begins not with grand theories or universal laws but with “irreducible, incommensurable, unconnected localities, which then, at a great price, sometimes

end into provisionally commensurable connections” (3 “On Actor-Network Theory”). For the network I discuss for the balance of this chapter and the networks examined in the remaining chapters, these provisional connections are forged by one specific stimulus: the Boston Marathon bombings and the resulting social and legal obligations facing the community at large.

Following a Nonhuman

On Monday April 15, 2013, two bombs (one in front of the Forum, a local restaurant, and another in front of Marathon Sports) exploded near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, killing three and injuring more than two hundred others. The site of the blasts – situated in downtown Boston among restaurants, bars, and shop – was covered by a number of video cameras: in addition to the local CBS affiliate’s finish line camera, most local businesses in the area had at least one camera focused on the area of the blast, and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority installed cameras throughout the downtown area, including at least six cameras with a view of the finish line or surrounding area. A week after the blast, on Monday, April 22, 2013, the US government filed charges against alleged Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. Tsarnaev (alternately called “black hat guy” or “Suspect #2” in news reports following the bombing) faced numerous charges, including conspiring with his older brother Tamerlan to use a weapon mass destruction resulting in death, a charge whose punishment can include an indefinite prison sentence or the death penalty. Among the most important pieces of evidence against Tsarnaev was surveillance video from these local businesses and the MBTA. In particular, footage from the Forum restaurant, the site of the second of the two blasts, figures heavily into the government’s case against Tsarnaev. Politico describes the importance of this particular video like this:

At 2:45 p.m. on April 15, video taken from a surveillance camera at The Forum restaurant, near the marathon's finish line on Boylston Street and the site of the second explosion, shows a man believed to be Tsarnaev slipping his backpack off his back and onto the ground. The man stays near his bag for the next four minutes, looking at his phone and apparently taking a picture, according to the complaint.

According to Masha Gessen at the *Washington Post*, the video continues to show Tsarnaev linger in front of the restaurant until the first bomb explodes:

At 2:46 Dzhokhar Tsarnaev comes down Boylston Street. You can barely tell that he is carrying a backpack: that was visible on the other, widely circulated video taken by a different camera. He stops shortly before he would have crossed the view of the camera, and stands facing the street. He fidgets, much the way he does in the courtroom now – though there is no telling if this is a nervous habit or simply the habit of someone who can't stand still. At one point he looks down: he may be setting down the backpack, or he may be looking at his phone. At 2:49:44, everyone in the picture looks left: the first bomb has gone off. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev is the only person who doesn't look in the direction of the blast. Instead, he turns right and begins walking away – but only a second or two before other people in the picture also begin moving rightward, away from the blast. As he walks away, you can't see whether he still has a backpack – at least, that is not visible at the resolution at which the video was shown to the media and the public in court (the jurors can see a higher-resolution screen). Then the picture seems to turn black-and-white. It takes a few moments to realize that there is in fact color in it, but the amount of soot released by the second blast drastically changes the color palette. The camera kept filming as people began helping the injured: pouring beer on a man who was on fire,

taking off their belts to fashion tourniquets, and carrying the first people toward the medical tent and the ambulances that started to arrive.

I quote descriptions of the video at length here for two reasons: first, these descriptions – which require more than 350 words to communicate what occupies less than two minutes of edited footage – reinforce that words are all too often an inadequate representation of lived experience. The discrepancy between the large number of words and the time occupied by the actual video confirms an argument made by Latour, Bennett, and others: speech acts cannot replace – though they can seek to represent – the nonhumans for which they purport to speak. The decision by prosecutors to supplement survivor testimony – which most trial attendees cast as devastating and moving – with video testimony reinforces the important role of nonhuman participation (in this case the video images) in communicating the events of the day.

Second, these descriptions hint at the value of these videos for prosecutors in the trial against Tsarnaev. Video surveillance – widely discussed in media coverage of the first day of trial testimony – figures heavily into the prosecution’s case against Tsarnaev. Why does the video matter so much? Because Tsarnaev’s participation in the bombings is not at issue in the trial but his motivations and state of mind are. In her opening statement, defense lawyer Judy Clark acknowledges Tsarnaev’s culpability: “There's little that we dispute. It was him” (Quinn). The question at issue, then, the defense argues, is why? Why would a seemingly engaged, bright, young man do something so heinous? Clark claims he was forced to participate by his older – and now deceased – brother Tamerlan, brainwashed by his closest relative. In contrast, these descriptions and expert testimony about the video positions it as indicative of Tsarnaev’s calculation: in his opening statements, federal prosecutor William Weinreb noted that video evidence will show that Tsarnaev “stood next to children for four minutes before he turned and

walked away leaving the bomb” behind them (Boeri and Cullen). As David Boeri and Kevin Cullen argue in their coverage of the trial, the video (which ends with “random...and chaotic shots” of the aftermath of the bombing compiled from a variety of sources) allows the jury – and the wider public the jury represents – to bear witness to Tsarnaev “being confronted with the reality of what he did.” The “random and chaotic shots” that characterize the video shown in open court force Tsarnaev and the jury to experience some of the disorienting aftermath that the survivors describe in their testimony. The video itself – shown by prosecutors then discussed by multiple witnesses, including technical analysts for the FBI – is also a network of its own. The footage entered into evidence by the prosecution under a single exhibit number is actually a compilation of footage from multiple sources, including city-owned surveillance cameras, business-owned surveillance cameras, footage from local affiliate coverage of the race, and amateur footage shot on cellphones and other mobile devices.

By the time prosecutors showed the jury video from the camera above the Forum’s front door, the image of the younger Tsarnaev wearing a backwards white baseball cap was already well-known. On April 18, 2013, just over forty-eight hours after the twin blasts rocked the Marathon finish line, the FBI released two now iconic photographs of their primary suspects (Figures 1 and 2). Already, we can trace the path of the surveillance video from the Forum to at least three hybrid collectives or matters of concern: the FBI’s hunt for the Marathon bombing suspects, the US government’s case against Tsarnaev, and the media coverage of his trial. In each of these cases, some group of humans and nonhumans faces a problem. For the FBI, their network of facts, evidence, investigators, and victims faced an obstacle: in order to move from search and rescue to investigation to indictment, the network needed to identify perpetrators. To identify perpetrators, the network needed the help of as yet unknown actors who could provide



Figure 1: "Suspect #2," later identified as Dzhokhar Anzorovich "Johar" Tsarnaev (FBI, 18 April 2013)



Figure 2 "Suspects in Crowd," later identified as Dzhokhar (on the left) and his older brother Tamerlan Tsarnaev (on the right) (FBI, 18 April 2013)

names and locations for the suspects. These photographs are the threads that connect the FBI to those with the information they need. Without the photographic and video evidence, this connection becomes impossible or at least improbable.

This brief vignette does not, of course, accurately represent an ANT account. I have not yet done the painstaking work of tracing each of the collectives I've observed nor have I done the work of understanding how the video collage came to be as a single, blackboxed actor as opposed to the multitude of actors it once acted as. In fact, this tracing work is not yet possible: though the trial phase ended on April 9, 2015, Tsarnaev's sentencing is not yet concluded and the trial transcript, the most detailed account of how the surveillance video circulated inside the legal network of the trial, won't be available until the end of 2015, if then. Instead, this brief sketch of the ways in which the video surveillance moved within and among multiple networks offers a small glimpse into how we might recognize the productive capacity of nonhuman actors. There's no doubt that the surveillance video had an impact: it's used by law enforcement to find the suspects, by news stations to inform the public about the unfolding events surrounding the

bombing, and by lawyers to work toward an adjudication in the case within our legal system. It operates on and among human actors, but it does so with power of its own.

Conclusion

Recognizing nonhuman participation in agentive networks marks an important shift in the focus of rhetorical and material investigations of how agency is produced. Coole and Frost argue that changes proceeds from “infinitesimally small causes” which eventually “end up having massive but unanticipated effects” (14) and which “[dislocate] agency as the property of a discrete, self-knowing subject” (20). Without the unified Enlightenment subject at the center of rhetorical/material agency, the actors needed to produce agency multiply, and we may begin to recognize the participation of nonhumans alongside their long-recognized human counterparts. These nonhumans are not the stable, static objects of old; on the contrary, for the new materialists and rhetoric and composition scholars under consideration in this chapter, nonhuman participants are vibrant, vital contributors to rhetorical situations. In particular, within digital rhetoric, Rivers and Reid have adapted Latour and Bennett’s work to argue for nonhuman participants as integral and productive members of agentive networks and participants in – as opposed to simple constraints to – rhetorical practice.

The narrative that closes this chapter offers one such example: the surveillance video introduced into evidence at Tsarnaev’s trial – which is itself a network of spliced video from multiple sources – is enrolled in multiple legal networks, first in the form of stills released to the public as part of the hunt for the suspects and later as an exhibit for the prosecution in first phase of the trial. The surveillance video acts within networks, among human and nonhuman participants, in measurably agentive ways: the suspects were identified (with help from the photographs crafted from surveillance video) and the younger Tsarnaev was convicted. In the

chapters that follow, I work to trace other agentive networks, networks populated by other lively nonhumans including hashtags, photographs, digital spaces, and enumerable other spaces, objects, and rhetorical markers.

Chapter Three: Relational Agency and the Emergence of #BostonHelp

“Freedom becomes the right not to be deprived of ties that render existence possible, ties emptied of all ideals of determination, a false theology of creation ex nihilo.” – Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*⁵

“A pedagogy of laughter...invites them to hesitate, to strain to hear the noise, the static that gets drowned out by the booming call of the One. It invites them to Become *Legion*...” – Diane Davis, *Breaking (Up) at Totality*⁶

Introduction

At 4:18 pm on April 15, 2013, less than an hour and a half after two explosions rocked the finish line of the Boston Marathon, @felinline sent a tweet offering stranded runners or others displaced by the large and growing crime scene downtown a place to stay: “If you need a place to crash/water/etc. I am in the south end near back bay. message me. #bostonhelp.”

@felinline wasn’t the first to offer her help; throughout the afternoon, as it became clearer to runners and residents that hotels and other buildings near the site of the bombings were not going to reopen before nightfall, a smattering of Twitter users in and around Boston began offering food, water, charging stations, transportation, and places to stay to those wandering the city.

@felinline was the first, however, to use a specific hashtag to mark her offer.

#BostonHelp appears to have been born out of this first tweet and a number of others that appeared around the same time all using the same tag. Just two minutes after @felinline’s initial offer, another user, @mollfrey, began suggesting the hashtag to others making similar offers. At 4:20, @mollfrey replied to @rahulbot, who was offering his guest room to “stranded

⁵ Page 59

⁶ Page 252, emphasis original

runners/families from hotels by the finish line.” To his offer, @mollfrey responded, “proposed hashtag #bostonhelp for offers of this sort. You know of others?” Over the first three hours after the inauguration of the tag, @mollfrey sent a number of tweets, like hers to @rahulbot, promoting the use of #BostonHelp as a way to mark offers of material comforts for those displaced by the bombings and its investigation. @mollfrey wasn’t the only one using and promoting the tag: in the first fifteen hours after @felineline’s initial use of the hashtag, nearly 2,000 tweets bearing the tag were sent, with nearly 1,200 appearing in just the first three hours.

In what follows, I argue that the growth of this network, grounded in tangible offers of material support bound up in a rhetorically constructed latticework of users (who are themselves already hybrids, Twitter handles as opposed to embodied humans), technological tools, and material goods, provides us a way of understanding agency – broadly defined as having an effect – otherwise. For the purposes of this chapter, I will maintain a focus on the ways that humans deliberately participate in these networks and the material entities with which they engage during their participation. As I noted in Chapter 2, however, these material entities are, themselves, vibrant and lively members of the network that produces agency. In later chapters, I will begin to question the role of deliberate intention and begin to grapple more concretely with how material actants participate in networks beyond their association with human actants.

The present argument for a networked, dependent view of rhetorical/material agency will be made in two ways: first, I offer a literature review and theoretical argument for revising our notion of agency. Building on previous challenges to anthropocentric agency, including work by Carolyn Miller, Adela Licona and Carl Herndl, and Marilyn Cooper, and rejections of Kantian unified subjectivity, especially the work of Thomas Rickert and D. Diane Davis, I will use Bruno Latour’s work to argue that agency is a product of dependent relationships between human and

nonhuman actors. Secondly, and most germane to my discussion of the social media responses to the Boston Marathon bombings, I will argue that this distributed notion of agency – which I characterize as both rhetorical and material – is already at work in our interactions with technologies. As my description above of the creation and subsequent deployment of the #BostonHelp hashtag hints, having an effect in a network occupied by social media technologies already requires material and rhetorical interventions. This view is supported by a qualitative analysis of the 1,177 tweets sent in the first three hours after the instantiation of #BostonHelp: the emergence and growth of the hashtag – as well as individual tweets sent by individual users – are agential. The 2,000-plus tweets eventually sent within the #BostonHelp network and the more than 6,000 offers housed on the *Boston Globe's* Google Doc lead to real, displaced people finding food, shelter, and electricity that they desperately needed.

Revising Our Theories of Agency: Rhetoric and Materialism

Human Rhetorical Agency

As my goal is to offer an alternative to anthropocentric notions of rhetorical agency, I will begin my discussion by surveying some of the problematic assertions associated with traditional conceptions of agency as a human possession. Chief among these is that notions of rhetorical agency as the possession of a single individual yield an overly simplistic view of cause and effect (Bennett, 2010; Coole & Frost, 2010). The causal links implied by traditional notions of rhetorical agency also remove the possibility for agency from the audience of our rhetorical practice: if my actions or words are all that are needed to cause change, then all of the agency lies with me. I have denied my audience the opportunity to participate or refuse to participate in the action.

Traditional notions of causal agency are also notable for their continued reliance on the autonomous human subject. Despite postmodern and posthuman turns in philosophy and

increased attention to technological objects within rhetorical studies, in our theories of agency, humans remain the primary object of our discussions of agency, the sole possessors of agentive capacities (Cooper, 2011; Gorzelsky, 2009; NCTE, 2012; Werder, 2000). As noted in Chapter 1, the history of the human as the sole agentive force might be traced alongside the historical development of the western rhetorical tradition. From Aristotle to Burke, rhetoric has long relied on a human acting rhetor to exert or perform agency, to persuade or move the audience to action.

Some in the discipline have, of course, already worked to complicate a humanist, individualistic rhetorical tradition while continuing to emphasize the role of the human rhetor (Burke, 1969; Bizzell, 1996; Cooper, 2011; Foss, 2006; the London Feminist Salon Collective, 2004; Miller, 2007; Werder, 2000). Carmen Werder, in her 2000 article, “Rhetorical Agency: Seeing the Ethics of It All,” for example, calls for a reevaluation of the concept as it relates to writing program administration. Werder argues that agency for WPAs has long been a question of control and power rather than a question of working with multiple forces to affect change. Agency, which she defines as “the potential for effecting change based on the extent to which the collective resources, titles, and expertise of a particular situation are made available for the individual and common good,” must be reimagined to account for the role of ethics (11). For Werder, then, “an ideal ethical system is one that allows for informed choices for all participants, one that provides for individual agency at the same time that it enables others to choose freely their own courses of action” (7). Although Werder aims to create a new ethics of agency within Rhetoric and Composition, her vision of agency still relies upon an Enlightenment notion of individuality.

Patricia Bizzell, on the other hand, in her address to the 1996 Rhetoric Society of America Conference, offers a definition of rhetorical agency that accounts for the fractured

subjectivity of the postmodern subject. She contends that, through revisiting our disciplinary history, especially Lloyd Bitzer and Edwin Black's 1971 report, *The Prospect of Rhetoric*, we can envision rhetorical agency as something available even to subjects supposedly fully constituted by discourse.⁷ Bizzell begins by revisiting Lester Faigley's interrogation of the postmodern subject, which seems to have "little or no agency" (38). While she appreciates the way postmodern views of fractured subjectivity disrupt unified, homogeneous depictions of the subject, she finds the fractured, agency-less postmodern subject similarly unpalatable. Instead, she argues, the postmodern subject derives her agency from the convergence of social and historical forces that constitute structures of power and from her awareness of these forces; she knowingly acts within, among, and against the forces that constitute her subjectivity. However, Bizzell's articulation of an agentive postmodern subject, though fractured and externally constituted, still emphasizes the human subject.⁸

Revising Subjectivity

Bizzell's work does, however, question the efficacy of a unified subject and the potential for agency if no such subject exists. In fact, over the last three decades, a number of rhetorical theorists have begun to interrogate the centrality of the unified humanist subject and noted the potential impact of a shift away from unified subjectivity (Bizzell, 1997; the London Feminist Salon Collective, 2004; Mills, 1997). Postmodernism's fracturing of the Enlightenment subject meant a crisis for human agency: without a unified actor, is agency even possible? As Thomas Rickert notes, "often, poststructuralist theories of the subject are equated with a loss of agency"

⁷ Rickert, through Žižek, pays considerable attention to the fractured subjectivity of post-modern students. Using Žižek's argument about the de-oedipalization of subjectivity, Rickert suggests that students come into classrooms as "multiplicities, *technes* of the self, dispersed subjectivities, performances" (177). Others, including Patricia Bizzell, note that the post-modern subjects are created through discursive interaction and that there is no identity for the self outside of discourse. There's no kernel or essence of subjectivity, only that which is created through language. This fractured subjectivity complicates discussions of human agency because it removes the central autonomous figure necessary to most conceptions of rhetorical agency.

⁸ For further exploration of the role of the autonomous human agent in the development of historical Greek and Roman as well as more contemporary rhetorics, please see Michael Leff's 2003 "Tradition and Agency in Humanistic Rhetoric" as well as Wayne Brockriede's 1971 "Trends in the Study of Rhetoric: Toward a Blending of Criticism and Science."

(68). However, Faigley, one of the theorists who has dedicated much of his career to sketching connections between writing, subjectivity, and postmodernity, argues that even with a fractured postmodern subject, agency is still possible: “While electronic discourse explodes the belief in a stable, unified self, it offers a means of exploring how identity is multiply constructed and how agency resides in the power of connecting with others and building alliances” (199). Rickert, for one, embraces the networked, decentered vision of agency proffered by Faigley. Rickert locates agency “at the subjective point through which one’s own singular and dynamic network is threaded” (24). Though Faigley’s work displaces the unified, coherent subject and thereby troubles autonomous human agency, the human subject – however fractured it may be – remains at the center of the agentic event.

Following Faigley, then, Rickert further takes up the impossibility of unified human subjectivity. In his 2007 book *Acts of Enjoyment*, Rickert argues for a postpedagogy that emphasizes eruption and interruption of rationality and control. Among the most compelling reasons for such an alteration is the shifting, fractured nature of subjectivity. Subjects, he emphasizes throughout the book, cannot be characterized by a single identity but must rather be seen as multiple selves because they have been, to use Lacan’s (via Žižek) term, “de-oedipalized”⁹ (Rickert 162-3). This de-oedipalization results in “multiplicities, *technes* of the self, dispersed subjectivities, performances” (177). Rickert places these multiplicities in contrast with the unified subject necessary for participation in traditional notions of rhetorical agency, a position something like D. Diane Davis’ “actor-hero,” a notion he finds particularly harmful to

⁹ Drawing on work by Žižek, Rickert defines de-oedipalization as the “lack [of] libidinal, internalized attachment to authority” and as the co-existence of multiple, sometimes conflicting desires and identities (162). The prospect of an actant, to use Bruno Latour’s term (see below), with multiple “*technes* of the self” (Rickert 177) is often greeted, according to Rickert, with pedagogies of control that attempt to re-integrate the fractured subjectivities. Because an actant has not undergone the process in which conflicting desires are integrated into a single subjectivity, that actant retains multiple desires and therefore multiple avenues to enjoyment/pleasure. Postpedagogy resists the urge to integrate these multiplicities and instead offers students a space to produce, create, and perform their conflicts.

students: “What is wanted of course is a theory of agency that allows for the continued belief that the given social totality can be transcended and therefore remade” but this remaking gives rise only to violence and cynicism (89). And precisely because of this cynicism, we must begin to conceive of an agency that better represents the lived experiences of rhetors. Rickert defines agency as the “excess... [that] comes from what is other to the socially given” (90). Like Latour’s discussion of the experiment whose outcome cannot be accounted for by any of its inputs, Rickert positions agency here as external to the social/rhetorical situation that produces agency. Traditionally, following Bitzer’s articulation of rhetorical situation, for example, “the socially given” would be the autonomous acting subject in the context of the rhetorical scene. For Rickert, however, these social situations produce something unaccounted for by the various elements of the situation. Put another way, the interaction between the speaking subject and the rest of the rhetorical situation produces an excess, something that goes beyond the sum of the parts (rhetor, audience, context). This heretofore unaccounted for product is agency, no longer embodied but accessible only in the relationship between the rhetor, audience, and context.

In his most recent book, *Ambient Rhetoric*, Rickert advocates an even more radical break from notions of unified human subjectivity. In particular, Rickert uses digital spaces as powerful examples of an ambient sense of rhetoric. “Digitality,” he says, “provides new haunts, new places for...strands of communication, figuration, and affect to circulate” (101). This new sense of circulation reveals a kind of subjectivity. Following Heidegger, Rickert argues for an “I-situation,” which retains some sense of individual identity while simultaneously recognizing how “human beings are holistically involved in, individuated through, and motivated by key moments composed by an entire situation” (111). Identity, then, cannot be separated from the circumstances under which it was forged and in which it performs. Subjectivity, therefore, is

constituted, dispersed, and reformed by the ambient, material environments in which it lives and acts. The “I-situation” reading of subjectivity forces us to acknowledge our weddedness, our inextricability from material conditions to the point that changes in those conditions result in changes in ourselves (115).

Similarly, Heidegger’s discussion of the four causes in “The Question Concerning Technology” points to the importance of material causes and conditions. In a discussion that prefigures his articulation of the fourfold, Heidegger uses the example of a sacred chalice to rearticulate Aristotle’s four causes. In his discussion of the “bringing forth” of the chalice, Heidegger notes that there are four categories of causation, all of which must be present for the chalice to become a chalice: the material cause (the silver from which the chalice is made), the form (the idea of chalice that allows others to recognize the chalice as a chalice), the purpose (the sacred ends for which the chalice is used), and the effective cause (the chalice maker who molds the chalice) (3). It is this final cause – the chalice maker – with whom theories of rhetorical and material agency have largely concerned themselves. From Aristotle to Burke to Bizzell, the final human cause too often eclipses the necessity of the other causes. For Rickert and for the theorists that follow, however, there is a sense that attention to the rhetor/actor – the final human cause – is insufficient to understand how agency is produced.

Possibilities of an Agency Otherwise

What, then would an agency otherwise look like? In what follows, I will sketch an intersection between theories of response/ability (Diane Davis) and network theories (Diana Coole, Samantha Frost, Jane Bennett, and Bruno Latour) of agency that might illuminate a distributed, relational, dependent notion of agency – rhetorical and otherwise – that better explains the kinds of efficacious rhetorical and material acts that characterized the social media response to the Boston Marathon bombings. For Davis, relationship between the self and the

other determines how, why, and if the actor acts. In the case of materialist, networked agency, especially for Coole, Frost, Bennett, and Latour, the possibility of affecting other bodies depends on the connections to other nodes and actors. For Bennett, in fact, agency is “power flowing across multiple bodies” (55). Here, agency becomes not a feature of any single actant¹⁰ in the network but a product of the confluence of multiple nodes at a particular kairotic moment. Although these conceptions of agency represent different theoretical contexts (ethical philosophy, materialism), the shared notion of dependence connects them to one another and to a discussion of how networked technologies act on and with human actors. That is to say, new materialist articulations of the value of nonhuman actors and the vitality of networked subjectivities – discussed at length in Chapter Two – and Davis’ extraction of a Levinasian ethics of responsibility offer important insights into how and why networks alter human subjectivity and agency. In both theoretical frames, however, the autonomous human of Enlightenment models of agency and action is replaced by an actor completely engaged in a formative set of relationships with others. Autonomy, individual purposefulness, and freedom are displaced by dependence and shared purpose.

Assigned Agency and Dependent Action

As the interactions within #BostonHelp demonstrate, networked subjectivities and interactions necessitate an agency that attends to others. Davis’ attention to our ethical responsibility to the Other presents a way of understanding the impetus for action and encourages attention to *the act* as a response (particularly the rhetorical act but also the act of engaging, of exploring explicated by Thomas Rickert in *Acts of Enjoyment*). Thus, agency born of responsibility to the other offers a way of understanding both our impetus for agency and our

¹⁰ Actant, another of Latour’s neologisms, acts as an alternative to the humanistic “actor” and avoids the problem of referring to the “acting subject.” As Latour notes in *Pandora’s Hope*, “since in English ‘actor’ is often limited to humans... ‘actant’ is sometimes used to include nonhumans in the definition” (303).

relational dependence because, for Davis, we have no agentive possibilities apart from our pre-ontological relationship with and responsibility to the other.

In her 2000 book, *Breaking Up (at) Totality*, Davis posits that traditional notions of agency have become suspicious because of the connections to Enlightenment humanism, with its reliance on reason, and autonomy. According to Davis, human reason, as imagined in the Enlightenment, requires a single subject. However, in the face of the polyvocality of postmodern subjects, “the (saving) power of rationality and, therefore, human agency have become suspect” (Davis, *Breaking Up (at) Totality* 18). The Enlightenment notion of autonomy is so embedded in our cultural assumptions about action and change that even our grammar rules reinforce the necessity of a single actor or cause. For example, Davis contends, via Nietzsche, that “our faith in agency... is based on our faith in grammatical structure, which requires that every deed have a doer, that every action have an agent” (94). Further, Davis notes that traditional notions of human agency and autonomy rely on a sense of self-control that is often disrupted: “if human beings are routinely and unceremoniously possessed by outside forces [like laughter] or ‘rhythms’ that have little to do with social norms (*nomos*), they can hardly fancy themselves in control either of their lives or of the course of human events” (23). This lack of control suggests the presence and importance of others; in fact, the self becomes othered, separated as it is from its own conscious intention because of its lack of control.

Posthumanism, a broad term that includes the kind of vibrant, agentive materialism laid out in Chapter Two, demonstrates, according to Davis, that “*there never was any autonomous agency, intention or will...*not even within the subject positions into which we are called” (original emphasis, 44). Posthumanism’s indictment of autonomous human agency and emphasis on nonhuman, networked participation reveals an important alternative to

enlightenment notions of agency Posthumanism, like new materialism (discussed below and at length in Chapter Two), embraces the possibility of agency, even rhetorical agency, for nonhuman actors,¹¹ or, at the very least, offers nonhuman actors an important function within the causal field, a field bursting with human and lively nonhuman participants in the vein of Bennett's vibrant materialism.

Beyond a turn toward posthumanism, Davis offers another important possibility for re-envisioning rhetorical agency in her 2010 book, *Inessential Solidarity*. In this text, Davis describes a version of rhetorical agency that embraces multiplicities in terms of identity and responsibility. For Davis, agency begins with "a responsibility to respond, a preoriginary rhetorical imperative, [which] is the condition for any conscious subject rather than the other way around" (106). A rhetor doesn't create or discover a need for action; the responsibility to act on behalf of the other creates the rhetor: "This relation with and obligation to an alterity that precedes (and exceeds) any...being is antecedent... [to] any relation ego could have with self" (106). Through agency, subjects discover how to be responsible to the other(s), and Davis elaborates a "thoroughly rhetorical notion of agency" that exists only through discursive interaction with others (89).

Davis also insists that apart from a new definition, we need a new rationale for theorizing (and teaching) agency. Her work in *Inessential Solidarity* functions, in part, as a response to the "phantasm of the free and willing agent" upon which so much of the field's theoretical and pedagogical endeavors are based (87). Often, this autonomous, causal agency is our justification for existing as a discipline because agency is "the link between rhetorical practice and civic

¹¹ Because of his desire to remove himself from the subject/object discussion, Latour uses the term nonhuman to refer to any actor that is not a human one. As Latour maintains in his glossary for *Pandora's Hope*, "the pair human/nonhuman is not a way to 'overcome' the subject-object distinction but a way to bypass it entirely" (308). This term encompasses technologies, animals, and any other nonhuman that participates in network formation.

responsibility” (87). For Davis, however, we shouldn’t be creating heroes, for “‘I’ am/there is no hero...there can be no heroes. There are only hostages” (111), hostages because we are bound to the other and to respond to the call of that other (and perhaps to act on her behalf). Davis, like Rickert, cautions us against attempting to create individual heroes, but the lack of freedom to choose responsibility doesn’t free the subject from response; on the contrary, because she is responsible for the other, “the subject is nonetheless charged with acting...not [as] a free agent but an assigned agent...infinitely responsible for responding to the call of the Other(s)” (113). For Davis, theorizing rhetorical agency should not create individual heroes but rather encourage rhetors to understand their response-ability to and responsibility for the other/others.

New Materialist Networked Agency

The conception of agency that I’ve outlined above exemplifies a dependence on multiple bodies. It also hints at the need to consider the material realities of situations in which agency is enacted and the immense effect nonhuman actors have on rhetorical situations. Recently, as discussed at length in Chapter Two, there has been a revival of materialism, which I’ll refer to as “new materialism.” This new materialism attends to the matter of life and opens up possibilities for considering the role of nonhumans in changing material conditions. At the heart of networked, new materialist conceptions of agency, two foundational assertions persist: first, the comfortable binary of matter (objects), on the one hand, and human beings (subjects), on the other, becomes problematic, especially in view of how much human beings rely on “objects,” technological objects in particular. Secondly, rather than being conscious, independent agents for change, human beings exist within networks of humans and nonhumans, and human beings often operate under an “illusion of autonomous agency” (Frost 59). A new materialist conception of agency challenges both the subject/object binary and the primacy of the autonomous human agent.

The division between subject and object has long privileged the human subject as the causal agent. In his 1945 *Grammar of Motives*, for example, Kenneth Burke explicates his dramatic pentad, which contains at least three categories related to agency. Of particular interest to a materialist conception of agency is Burke's definition of "agent." In the first chapter of *Grammar of Motives*, "Ways of Placement," Burke argues, "the agent is an author of his acts, which are descended from him, being good progeny if he is good, or bad progeny if he is bad, wise progeny if he is wise, silly progeny if he is silly" (16). The direct relationship between actor and action articulated by Burke relies on a conscious, autonomous human agent. Burke clearly demonstrates the interdependence of the elements of the pentad¹², but his description of agent, and later his discussion of agency itself, reinforces a reliance upon human causality¹³.

New materialist agency, on the other hand, asserts that agency is possible only in networks of humans and nonhumans. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, editors of the collection *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, contend that one of the major projects of new materialism is attributing "emergent, generative powers (or agentic capacities) even within inorganic matter" (9). These theories also "generally eschew the distinction between organic and inorganic, or animate and inanimate, at the ontological level" (Coole & Frost 9). In short, new materialism "conceives of matter itself as lively or as exhibiting agency" (Coole & Frost 7). Or as Jane Bennett puts it, "a materiality that is itself vibrant or active" (49). This lively matter

¹² Burke reinforces the dependence of the various elements of the pentad in his 1978 article "Questions and Answers about the Pentad." In that article, Burke reminds his reader that, in his discussion of the pentad, the "stress is less upon the terms themselves than upon what I would call the 'ratios' among the terms," that is their relationships to one another (332). My point in this section, then, is not that Burke offers us a vision of agency that relies solely on autonomous human action; rather, I want to highlight that even within his vision of the "ratios," the human agent still remains at the center of the causal field.

¹³ Davis too addresses Burke's articulation of rhetorical agency: in Chapter 1 of *Inessential Solidarity*, Davis takes up Burke's theory of identification and notes that though Burke bases a great deal of his theory of identification on Freud's notions of the same concept, Burke disregards Freud's emphasis on affective attachment and identification, which prefigures rational identification (19). Instead, Burke insists that actors/agents begin their interactions as distinct, discrete individuals who are then joined through identification, which, though it may have affective elements, is ultimately ruled and adjudicated by rational examination and discourse. Davis, however, rejects this originary divide that Burke identifies as the discrete actor, opting instead for a "preoriginary rhetoricity" that disassociates identification from division (38).

associates with human actors to create agentive networks. These relationships are not fixed, however; rather the configuration of the network changes based on the motives for and kinds of action needed in a particular situation, so the result is objects and actors formed through their relationships with one another and the environment in which they emerge; further, subjectivities can be seen not as fixed or stable identities but as “capacities or potencies that emerge hazardously and ambiguously” (Coole & Frost 10). The flexible and fluctuating nature of the networks imagined by the new materialists reveals an expanded notion of agency and cause: no longer does the human actor stand alone as the agent of change; s/he is now joined in the position by a multitude of other actors. Further, s/he is shaped by these nonhuman actors as much as s/he shapes them, and within his/her relationships with these other actants (human and nonhuman), agency is produced.

Beyond influencing and shaping one another, Latour argues that the capacity of a network is more than simply the sum of its parts. In *Pandora's Hope*, Latour uses the example of Pasteur's experiments on fermentation to note that the resulting lactic acid cannot be found in any of the experiments' inputs; rather it is a product of a new actor: the network itself. The combination of chemicals, instruments, scientists, and other actors produces something wholly new. The ability to act or create change, what we understand as agency, is not, then the product of either the human or the nonhuman members of the network but a product of the relationship among the actors. Following Latour, then, I would argue that agency cannot be assigned to any lone member of the network but only to the network as a whole.

What, then, are the ramifications of conceiving of agency as a set of articulatory processes as opposed to autonomous human causation? Coole and Frost insist that viewing agency as articulation blurs the relationship between action and change to the point that “there is

no quantifiable relationship between cause and effect” (14). Simple cause and effect are replaced by “infinitesimally small causes [which] transform successive conditions for interaction among elements such that they end up having massive but unanticipated effects” (Coole & Frost 14). As a result, this change in causation “dislocates agency as the property of a discrete, self-knowing subject” (Coole & Frost 20). Like Coole and Frost, Bennett defines *entelechy*, a set of manifold possibilities for action, not as “the unique possession of each individual but rather a vitality flowing across all living bodies” (55). Although Bennett focuses on living bodies here, Chapter Two’s emphasis on vibrant nonhumans demonstrates that she does not restrict material agency only to living things; rather, this distributed, relational form of agency includes possibilities for other kinds of bodies as well. Additionally, the move away from simple cause and effect offers important alternatives for our classroom practices of rhetorical agency. Among its most problematic features, autonomous, human agency assumes a clear causal relationship between human action and verifiable change: too often in writing courses, we teach students that learning to write persuasively will allow them to change the world. When, almost inevitably, rapid change doesn’t occur, students become disillusioned. By complicating the causal field and recognizing the ecological nature of agentic practices, we may be able to offer students a more realistic view of the role their rhetorical choices can play in changing the world.

This change, though, works within (and sometimes against) particular context and must account for appropriate timing. In her article “The Inertia of Matter,” for example, Coole contends that agency is a *kairotic* conjuncture of sorts. Building on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Coole asks us to reevaluate subject centered conceptions of agency “not as an essential characteristic of the rational subject, a deity or some vital force, but as those contingent capacities for reflexivity, creative disclosure, and transformation that emerge hazardedly within

the folds and reversals of material[ity]" (113). According to Coole, therefore, networked agency is both dependent (in this case on the "folds and reversals," that is the interactions between material actors) and contingent and timely.

Coole's conception of a fluid agency does not mean, however, that agency is never embodied. Carl Herndl and Adela Licona maintain, in their 2007 article "Shifting Agency: Agency, Kairos, and the Possibilities of Social Action," that we may begin to think of agency not as a trait but rather as a position, framing agency as "the conjunction of a set of social and subjective relations that constitute the possibility of action" (135). However, for Herndl and Licona, agency is not something that can be "seized, assumed, claimed, had, possessed, or any of the many synonyms for these transitive verbs" (134); rather, agency is a "question of positioning," which means that, according to Herndl and Licona's theory of the "agent function," "agency [exists] before the agent" (149). Following Herndl and Licona, I would posit that agency might be embodied momentarily, a kind of kairotic embodiment as a response to a confluence of factors, but agency does not require embodiment. Agency must be found in the relationship between actors, in the articulation of humans to other humans or to nonhumans. Even in the embodied moments, however, the human actant remains inextricably linked to the other members of her network. S/he continues to depend as s/he continues to act.

Significantly, however, the lack of autonomy for individuals within networks does not result in a total denial of human agency. Rather, as Frost claims in "Fear and the Illusion of Autonomy," humans act as part of a complex set of effects: "in considering the causes that coalesce to produce and act, we must think of the complex of contextual passive causes as well as the complex of active causes" (161). In other words, attention to networks of causes doesn't deny the possibility of human agency; it simply positions such human agency as dependent on

other factors. Furthermore, Frost's argument suggests that conceptions of autonomous human agency actually strip human actors of their efficacy because they fail to accurately represent real-world causal fields.

The Problem of Autonomy

Some of the points above have recently been articulated by Marilyn Cooper in her CCC article "Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted," which I discussed at length in Chapter Two. In that article, Cooper argues for a conception of rhetorical agency that emphasizes individual efficacy and personal responsibility within networks of actants. She uses the work of Bruno Latour to assert that

neither conscious intention nor free will—at least as we commonly think of them—is involved in acting or bringing about change: though the world changes in response to individual action, agents are very often not aware of their intentions, they do not directly cause changes, and the choices they make are not free from influence from their inheritance, past experiences, or their surround. (421)

Much of this argument is directly in line with arguments from the new materialists discussed above. The theoretical work of Coole, Frost, and Bennett seem to support the idea that agency slips the bounds of conscious intention and free will and the assertion that choices and agency depend upon external factors (the "surround," as Cooper terms it). In fact, Frost, in the article "Fear and the Illusion of Autonomy" maintains, like Cooper, that networked, dependent agency doesn't erase the possibility of human agency.

I would suggest, however, that Cooper's attention to individuality as a key component of agentive action is problematic in view of the dependent nature of materialist agency as articulated by Coole, Frost, and Bennett. I don't mean to say that there is no possibility for human action, only that conceiving of agents as autonomous individuals and restricting agency to

“embodied beings” eschews much of the theoretical work that Coole, Frost, Bennett, and even Latour do to include nonhuman agents as an important part of the causal field (Cooper 443). Cooper doesn’t deny the dependence I have focused on; rather she emphasizes the central role of the human actor, and in doing so, doesn’t offer as prominent a place for nonhuman actors. Like Burke before her, Cooper introduces the possibility of understanding the multiple forces that constitute agency but she continues to prioritize the human actor above all else. This focus on human action and responsibility seems problematic if we consider the ways in which Latour in particular, especially in his 2009 article “Will Non-Humans Be Saved? An Argument in Ecotheology,” contends that nonhumans have the same kind of agentive potential too often reserved for human actors: “Non-humans have not been emerging for aeons just to serve as so many props to show the mastery, intelligence, and design capacities of humans or their divine creations. They have their own intelligence, their own cunning, their own design, and plenty of transcendence to go on, that is, to reproduce” (472). In fact, Latour, in his 2010 article “Coming Out as a Philosopher,” asserts that relationships between actants form the foundation for his philosophy. Unlike the moderns, who would separate nature from the social, Latour wishes to demonstrate that “relations are not what is *added* to a world of meaningless matters of fact, but what are empirically *given* in the world of experience” (604). For Latour, one cannot divorce nature from society any more than one can divorce the individual from the collective in which it acts.

Furthermore, in *Science in Action*, Latour cautions that isolation is, in fact, the weakest position for an actant. In Chapter 1, “Literature,” Latour tells the story of the “dissenter,” a skeptic intent on calling into question the work of a scientist. As the dissenter tests the scientist’s conclusions and instruments, and fails to discredit either, he becomes increasingly isolated. The

scientist, on the other hand, becomes more strongly connected to the innumerable black boxes¹⁴ with which he made and verified his discoveries. At the close of the chapter, Latour laments the fate of this poor skeptic: “we saw a dissident driven into isolation because of the number of elements the authors of scientific articles mustered on their side” (62). Despite all of his attempts to enroll supporting actors, the dissenter ends up alone and discredited. An isolated actor can only build, Latour observes, “dreams, claims and feelings, not facts” (41). If we insist on a truly autonomous agent, we force our agent into the weakest position according to Latour. Only those deeply embedded within and dependent upon the network have access to causal power; the more enmeshed an actor becomes the sturdier it becomes.

#BostonHelp and the Creation of an Agentive Network

Examining one such network might provide valuable insight into the material-semiotic nature of agentive networks. The hashtag #BostonHelp represents just such a network. As noted earlier, #BostonHelp was established in the wake of the bombings as a way for Twitter users to offer material support for displaced runners and other tourists. An analysis of the 1,177 tweets sent in the first three hours after the hashtag was established (at 4:18 pm on April 15, 2013) reveals a set of practices that supports the theoretical arguments that regard agency as produced by networks of humans and nonhumans. Specifically, analysis of #BostonHelp suggests that rhetorical acts and material goods are both necessary to the successful creation of an agentive network. The emergence of this particular network supports the notion that rhetorical and material resources depend on one another for the creation of agentive acts. In what follows, I review my qualitative analysis of the collected data (1,177 tweets spanning from 4:18 pm to 7:18

¹⁴ Latour uses the term “black box” to denote a long, uninterrupted chain of translations and a large network of actants that has become stable enough that those that interact with it no longer see it as a set of processes but as an unchanging object. In *Pandora’s Hope*, for example, Latour discusses the process by which field data (soil samples, measurements, etc.) become a graph in a scientific article. Though, to those who read the article, the data appear as an unassuming graph, the translation from field work to graph on a page actually represents a long, traceable chain of enrollment and translation. Latour notes that “we can elongate the chain [of translations that take us from data to graph]...yet we can neither cut the line nor skip a sequence, despite our capacity to summarize them all in a single ‘black box’” (70).

pm on the day of the bombing). These tweets were gathered directly from the Twitter page dedicated to the tag, though additional information, including exact times for particular tweets, was collected from individual Twitter users' pages. The categories with which I coded these tweets emerged from my initial examination of the data. Originally, I worked with 8 categories: hashtag promotion, self-promotion, policing, material support, emotional support, advice, information/resources, and other. After a preliminary pass through the tweets, I combined advice and information/resources into a single "Information and Resources" category because the content of tweets in those two categories was quite similar; I also combined policing and hashtag promotion into the category "Boundary Work" because it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between policing and promoting behaviors. Additionally, I eliminated the "self-promotion" category as only 2 tweets fit within that category. Instead, these two tweets are now classified as part of the "Other" category, which represents tweets that either didn't fit into one of the other four categories or whose purpose was difficult to identify. See Table 1 for additional information regarding these categories.

Mapping #BostonHelp

In order to better understand the network that emerges under the auspices of #BostonHelp and what this network might reveal about the production of agency in networks of humans and nonhumans, I offer two different maps. Following Sullivan and Porter's methodological models in *Opening Spaces*, I have constructed both a methodological frame map (Figure 3) and a research scene map (Figure 4).

Figure 3 is what Sullivan and Porter call a "Methodological Frame" map and captures the methodological scene in which I'm working: this chapter began with a narrative introduction, a snapshot of the creation and deployment of the #BostonHelp hashtag in the hours after the bombings. In the map below, this narrative falls in the middle space between literature based and

qualitative research based: it relies on others' accounts of the day's events, but falls short of the rigor associated with qualitative research.

Table 1: This table represents the 5 categories that emerged during the coding process as well as their relative frequencies.

| Category | Description | Example | Number of Tweets | Percentage of Total |
|----------------------------------|--|---|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| Emotional Support | Offered emotional/spiritual support and/or cathartic displays | @BergenerLaw: "Our thoughts are with Boston following today's tragic events. #BostonHelp" | 55 | 4.7% |
| Information and Resources | Provided additional information about the bombing, police activity, etc. or links to other useful resources | @HampCC: "Find who you're missing through Google's Person Finder: google.org #bostonhelp #bostonmarathon" | 115 | 9.8% |
| Material Support | Offered access to or requested lodging, food, transportation, etc. for displaced runners and other tourists | @fellineline: "If you need a place to crash/water/etc. I am in the south end near back bay. message me. #bostonhelp" | 396 | 33.6% |
| Boundary Work | Policed content, defined the purpose of the hashtag, and/or encouraged others to read the content of the tag | @mollfrey: "@BostonTweet Can a hashtag -- maybe #bostonhelp -- be promoted for offers of aid and housing for those displaced/stranded?" | 537 | 45.6% |
| Other | Did not fall into one of the other categories or did not have a clear purpose | @EstefanyMMusic: "Helping my hometown! #BostonHelp" | 74 | 6.3% |

On the vertical axis, my introductory section is wholly site specific, so I have plotted it as close as possible to "Site Specific Discussion" on the y-axis. From this narrative tracing, I move to a theoretical literature review and argument: using the work of Bruno Latour, Thomas Rickert, and others, I argue that agency might be viewed as kind of kairotic conjuncture, a product of the

interaction between multiple, dependent actors. On my methodological map, this theoretical discussion falls in the abstract/literature based quadrant, which reflects my emphasis on theoretical as opposed to site specific texts.

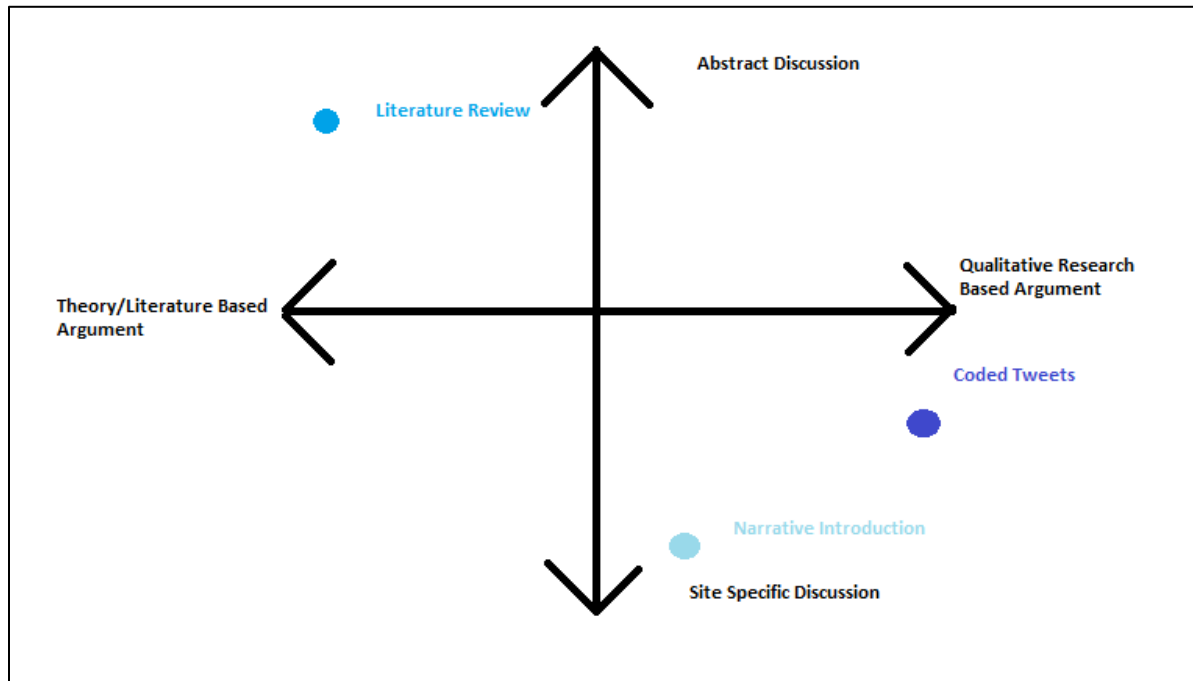


Figure 3: Methodological Frame Map

Finally, I discuss nearly 1,200 coded tweets featuring the #BostonHelp hashtag, with special attention to their varied purposes. Viewed in the context of the theoretical argument that precedes it, this qualitative data traces the networked, dependent relationships that are necessary for the production of agency. An analysis of these tweets also suggests that rhetorical and material concerns are both necessary for the production of an agency with is simultaneously both material and rhetorical. On the map above, I’ve placed these coded tweets on the qualitative end of the horizontal axis and significantly closer to the “Site Specific/Situated Discussion” than the “Abstract Discussion.” This placement accurately depicts the content of the analysis that follows: though I make some abstract conclusions about what this data tells us about agency in digital spaces, much of my analysis is specific to #BostonHelp as a site.

Returning again to the tweets themselves, as I noted a moment ago, Table 1 lists the coding categories and their relative frequency in the first three hours after the hashtag was established. I've coded only tweets from the first three hours for two reasons: first, if, as the data bears out, the primary object of the hashtag (after promoting its own existence) is to offer material support to displaced persons (mostly food, lodging, and charging stations), then the hours before dark are the most important. After sunset, which happened around 7:30 on April 15, 2013, these offers are less likely to provide needed support. Second, perhaps owing to the logic outlined above, traffic on the #BostonHelp hashtag drops off sharply after 8 pm.

The coded tweets fall into five main categories: emotional support, information and resources, material support, boundary work, and other. The network begins with an offer of material support (@fellineline's initial offer of his guest room, tweeted at 4:18 pm). This first offer is followed by a bit of boundary work: users – exemplified by @mollfrey – reached out to others on Twitter who were offering food, shelter, transportation, etc. and suggested they use the tag. Users also tweeted to popular, Boston-based accounts encouraging them to let their followers know about the hashtag. Meanwhile, some users, especially once the hashtag began to appear among the trending tags and in news stories about the digital responses to the bombing, used the tag to offer emotional support as well. These emotionally based messages, however, are a relatively small portion of the network and isolated mainly to a thirty minute period after the tag began to trend. As the above table notes, data from 4:18pm (when the first tweet was sent) to 7:18pm suggests that the vast majority of the nearly 1,200 tweets sent in the three hours after the birth of the hashtag served just two purposes: “Material Support” (tweets including offers of tangible goods and spaces) and “Boundary Work” (tweets that reinforce the material purpose of the tag and/or encourage others to use the tag to mark these kinds of offers) account for 79.2% of

the tweets bearing the #BostonHelp hashtag. Offers of nonmaterial support (represented above by the “Information and Resources” and “Emotional Support” categories) make up only 14.5% of the collected Tweets.

The prevalence of tweets coded as material support might be most easily attributed to the boundary work, the policing and promoting behaviors, exhibited by members of the #BostonHelp community that specifically defined appropriate content for tweets bearing the tag. Of the numerous users exhibiting this kind of policing and promoting behavior, the first and potentially most influential is @mollfrey. Of the fourteen tweets @mollfrey sent bearing the #BostonHelp tag in the three hours under consideration here, thirteen are coded as either material support or boundary work. In the first three hours, in fact, @mollfrey attempted to connect with three highly visible Boston focused Twitter feeds: she tweeted directly (by including their username in the text of her tweet) to @BostonMarathon (the official twitter feed for the race), which boasts more than 65,000 followers, @BostonTweet (a feed focused on, to quote their Twitter bio, “loving life in Boston and things to do of value in the city”), which has more than 97,000 followers, and @watertowntab (which tweets news about the Watertown township), with its 2,500 followers. These three accounts share two features important to the work of the #BostonHelp network: first, these accounts are local and their followers are likely to be local as well. For material offers to be useful to stranded runners, those offering the help must be close enough to actually, physically interact with those in need. Followers of these accounts are likely to fit that criterion. Second, each of these accounts represents a fairly large, already established network of users. The followers of these accounts are united by their interest in local Boston issues but are otherwise a diverse lot, ranging from local news personalities to small business owners to students. The tweets directed to these three accounts, viewed in the larger context of

boundary work, demonstrate concerted attempts to draw on established local networks to extend the reach of the hashtag based community.

Arguably, this rhetorical boundary work is necessary in order to create the most opportunities to offer material support, the second most common function of tweets in the #BostonHelp network in the first three hours of its existence. #BostonHelp's material support took two main forms. First, many users tweeted directly to those in need. The first tweet to bear the hashtag, sent by @felineline at 4:18 pm is an example of such a direct offer: "If you need a place to crash/water/etc. I am in the south end near back bay. message me. #bostonhelp." Similar messages populate the first three hours. @ElPelonTaqueria, the official Twitter feed for a Mexican restaurant near Fenway Park, sent a similar message at 5:07 pm: "open wifi, place to charge cell, or just don't want to be alone, food and drinks,- pay only if you can #bostonhelp." That one tweet was retweeted – copied word for word and sent to a progressively larger network of Twitter users – 1,264 times. This large number of retweets brings this one message and the #BostonHelp network into contact with an ever expanding group of users and potential contributors. Offers of material support also took the form of direct links to websites containing the list of available hosts and runners in need. The primary Google Doc, created and archived by the *Boston Globe*, boasted nearly 6,000 unique offers for shelter and transportation by the time they stopped accepting submissions two days after the explosions. For coding purposes, I have identified any tweets that link directly to housing and transportation resources as material support as that is the intended purpose of the *Boston Globe*'s form and of other lists that collected offers of support sent via social media.

Based on the data represented in Table 1, Figure 4 is what Sullivan and Porter call a "Research Scene" map:

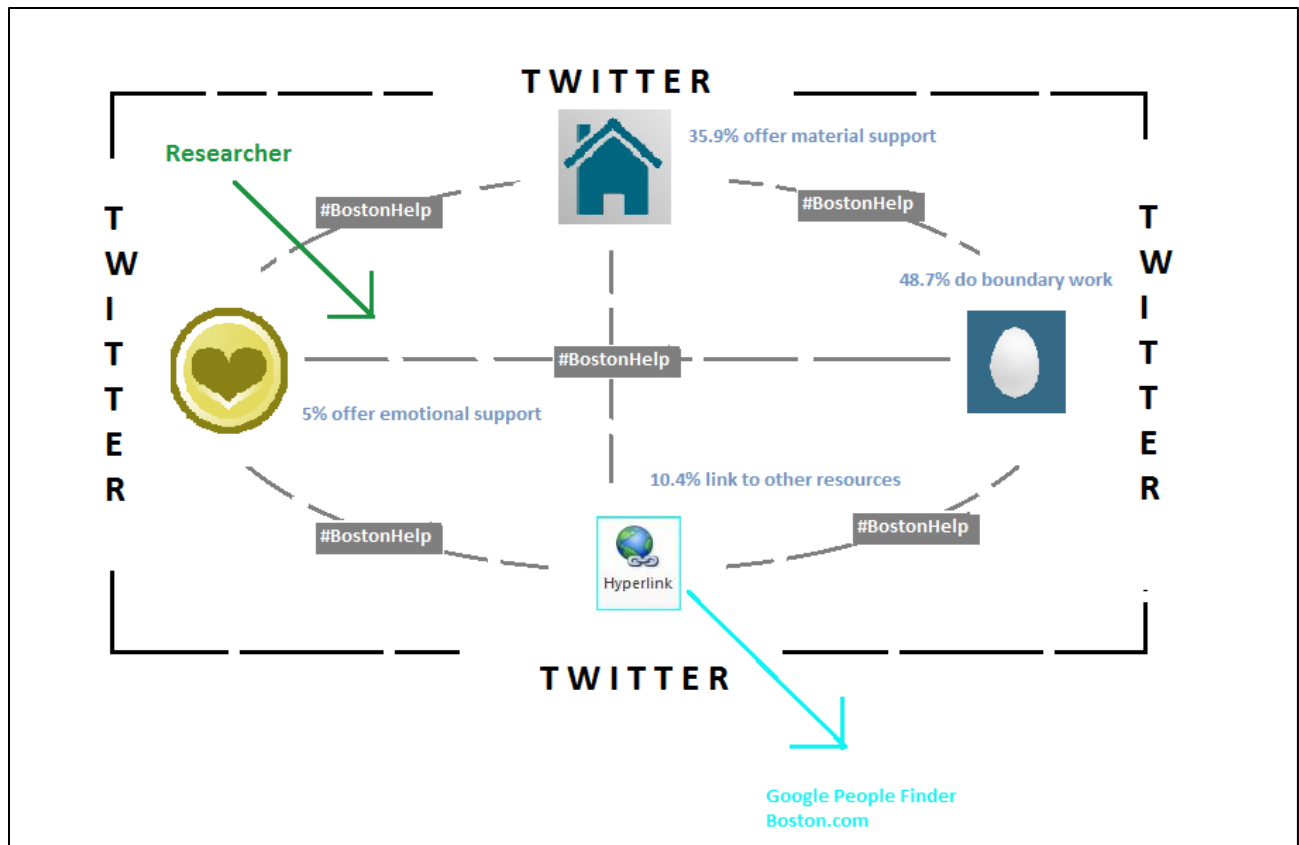


Figure 4: Research Scene Map

Because this map is an attempt to trace those parts of the network identified through my analysis of the tweets sent in the first three hours after #BostonHelp first emerged on Twitter and because this map represents one view of what we know based on those tweets, I have chosen to exclude tweets coded as “other,” as these tweets represent a set of connections, purposes, and intentions that remain a mystery. My tracing of the remaining categories produces the map shown in Figure 4. Twitter forms a porous boundary around the hashtag: though some of the same tweets that were coded as part of this project certainly ended up on Facebook (as many users choose to link the two services so that anything posted on Twitter automatically populates on the user’s Facebook profile), their primary target audience, as best I can tell, is Twitter users. As a member of the Twitter community, then, I find myself (identified in green above) within the boundaries of Twitter. Within the larger porous boundary of Twitter, we find a second porous boundary: the

hashtag itself. It is within this second boundary that we find the specific tweets, coded according to purpose. The use of hashtags is a primary characteristic of organizing groups on Twitter. Since 2009, Twitter has automatically converted a hashtag into a hyperlink, which takes users to a page that aggregates tweets bearing the same tag. The tags, then, come to mark specific conversations and communities of users who share a purpose and/or interest. Therefore, the hashtag community under consideration here includes all users and tweets that bear the tag, but those tweets also circulate in other spaces on Twitter, including the user's profile page and the timelines of the author's followers.

Material/Rhetorical Agency and #BostonHelp

Over time, the data suggests, with policing from specific users like @mollfrey and promotional tweets that identify #BostonHelp as a way to find places to stay, the hashtag comes to primarily represent material offers instead of emotional ones, though Tweets offering condolences, prayers, and other emotional missives still occupy part of the network. The balance of tweets, weighted as it is toward boundary work and offers of material support, has two important implications. First, acts that might be considered wholly (or at least largely) rhetorical are a vital part of the network. Of my five coding categories, two are obviously rhetorical: boundary work and offers of emotional support lack an obvious material component (though they certainly rely upon invisible material elements, including the technological objects necessary to participate on Twitter). The boundary work, in particular, represents an important rhetorical intervention: if we examine the network created by the #BostonHelp hashtag over time, we see that the incidences of tweets meant to offer emotional support – a purpose not supported by the promotional work of some members of the network – tapers off quickly as users begin to understand the purpose of the group as material and not emotional. Still, this seemingly

non-material boundary work is vital to the efficacy of the offers for material support. That is, the rhetorical work of policing and promoting the hashtag allows the network to expand and reach additional displaced runners and material supporters. Also, over time, we see the network expand to include actors from outside of Twitter including the Google form featuring the contact information of users seeking help and of users offering it. We also see the intervention – and accompanying publicity – of more mainstream sites including the *Boston Globe*'s *boston.com* and Google's "People Finder," deployed very quickly after the explosions as a way for stranded runners and concerned family members to connect with one another.

In terms of our theories of agency, the network map in particular offers one way of seeing the necessary components of the network, including the rhetorical traces – the tweets themselves – that connect so many of the actors. I would argue, following Rickert's assertion that situations call us into being in particular ways¹⁵, that @fellineline and @mollfrey are called into being as specific kinds of actors through material circumstances (the bombing) and through their interaction with Twitter's existing network of constraints and users. Each user who participates in the network depends on other users to respond and share, but these users are also dependent upon the logic of the service itself, how it organizes and links tweets according to hashtags, and how hashtagging and retweeting allow the initial network to expand.

Conclusion

Rhetorical agency denotes an important project in rhetorical studies and technical communication. In 2004, Cheryl Geisler commented that "balancing concern for educating students in rhetorical agency while at the same time developing a society that grants agency more broadly may be one of the major challenges for the future of rhetorical studies" (15). The

¹⁵Rickert notes that "the writer is not merely *in* a situation; instead, the writer *is* a situation" (*Ambient Rhetoric*, 128).

acts of kindness that emerged under the #BostonHelp hashtag represent a kind of gift economy and a set of networked relationships that are not adequately represented in our traditional notions of individual human agency or in Kantian views of unified human subjectivity. The conceptions I outline above share a more dependent nature. By layering dependent and networked visions of agency, we might come to a more complex vision of agency, one that privileges the relational over the autonomous and the dependent over the independent. In such a case, agency is not the property of any single actant but the product of the relationship between actants. Or, perhaps, more importantly, agency becomes a product of the work of what Latour calls mediation and translation undertaken by actants to improve the strength of their networks, which is, at its core – as I noted in Chapter Two – a rhetorical endeavor. A move toward dependent, networked agency, because of its attention to the others, human and not, who populate our spaces, might offer room for joy and surprise, for interruption and eruption, for affect, all of which are too often stifled by the impossible responsibility of autonomous agency and Enlightenment subjectivity.

These theoretical arguments in favor of a distributed and dependent notion of agency are further buttressed by an examination of the creation and expansion of #BostonHelp in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon Bombings. In the first three hours after the initiation of the tag, more than a thousand tweets marked with #BostonHelp appeared on Twitter. Taken together, these tweets form an agentive network of users, technologies, and material goods that provided numerous displaced runners with food, lodging, and other essential goods and services until they could return to their hotels. #BostonHelp is a tangible example of an agentive network, comprised of humans and nonhumans that depended upon one another to provide needed services to displaced runners. This network also demonstrates the inextricability of rhetorical and material means: the function of this dependent network of connected entities relied quite heavily

upon the rhetorical policing and promoting behavior that characterized nearly half the coded tweets. This rhetorical work, however, depended on external material conditions (the horrifying events of the day), network technologies (a material-semiotic actor comprised of physical interfaces and linguistic code), and physical goods (the beds, goods, and power cords that figure so heavily in the tweets offering material support).

Chapter Four: The Question of Intention: Repurposing #BostonMarathon

Following Chapter Two's discussion of relational, dependent rhetorical agency, with its emphasis on intentional acts via #BostonHelp, Chapter Three will question the necessity of intention in establishing the relative agency of particular communicative acts. In particular, I will use the shift of the hashtag #BostonMarathon (from official race hashtag to communicative tool to search for missing loved ones, update other users, and share messages of grief and support) to argue that the original intention of an actor, whether human or nonhuman, is not particularly relevant to the crafting of rhetorically agentive acts. The shift from official hashtag to a tool for sharing grief and news couldn't have been foreseen by the creator of the hashtag. Rather, the intervention of events beyond the control of organizers and runners and the presence of nonhumans with their own properties allowed for the rhetorically powerful shift. This chapter, then, will argue for a move away from intention as necessary for establishing a rhetorical act as agentive and toward a distributed, messy view of how agency is produced.

In what follows, I will make two connected arguments: first, the successful instantiation of a predetermined intention or purpose is not necessary to classify an act as rhetorically agentive. Thus rhetorical agency does not require the purposeful intention of a human rhetor. While most theories of rhetorical agency measure the success of a particular rhetorical act against the intentions or purposes of the rhetor, such a model doesn't work when we decenter rhetorical agency and distribute it across multiple actors. Second, because of the participation of this multitude of actors, purpose and outcome, cause and effect, cannot be conflated. This decoupling of purpose and outcome, cause and effect, leads to the "slight surprise of [rhetorical]

action” (Latour, *Pandora’s Hope*, 266). In order to support this argument, I will discuss the implementation and subsequent shift in the use of #BostonMarathon. For my purposes, the creation of this tag is in and of itself a specific rhetorical act. The tag is a rhetorical marker and activity that allows @BostonMarathon to reach a specific audience of runners and digital spectators.

To better understand the hashtag’s original purpose, I first offer an overview of corporate uses of Twitter as way of connecting with potential consumer or participants. Next, I discuss the initial uses of the #BostonMarathon hashtag by the official Twitter account of the Boston Marathon, @BostonMarathon, as a specific example of the kind of corporate uses encouraged by the service. Finally, I will examine the ways in which the hashtag was repurposed in the aftermath of the bombing for rhetorical purposes that cannot be accounted for by the intentions of the original creators of the tag. In fact, multiple users take up the hashtag for a variety of sometimes conflicting purposes in such a way that original intention seems wholly inadequate and disconnected from the subsequent invocation of the hashtag.

“Twitter for Business”

2010 was a good year for Twitter. Following its sudden relevance to emerging protests, like those in Iran in 2009, Twitter was poised to become a massively important part of the social media surge that has characterized the last decade, and the first few months of 2010 featured enormous increases in traffic to the service. In February of that year, Twitter surpassed the 50 million tweets per day mark; by May, that number was more than 65 million, with 190 million unique visitors per month. These numbers are impressive, and even for those in the tech community who had been paying attention to the service since it gained national attention at SXSW in 2007, the scale of Twitter’s user base was a surprise. In fact, in many ways, 2010

seems to have been the tipping point for Twitter, not just in sheer numbers of users but in the amount of personal data those users were willing to share. End of year data from 2010 shows significant increases in users sharing their personal information with the service: 69% of users provided a specific bio, more than double the percentage that had done so only a year before. Twitter users were also more forthcoming with information about their names (73% in 2010 vs. 33% in 2009), locations (82% in 2010 vs. 44% in 2009), and links to their professional or personal websites/blogs (44% in 2010 vs. 22% in 2009). This surge in information sharing suggested to many observers that users were beginning to trust and integrate the service into their regular social media routines as well as their personal and professional digital identities. This increase in user information also made Twitter particularly attractive to corporate actors, who rely on personal information to better target digital advertising and inform their engagement with current and potential customers.

Not surprisingly, given the surge in the number of users and the amount of information they shared, 2010 also marks a shift in the corporate use of Twitter. Through 2009, organizational use of Twitter focused largely on “listening in” for customer feedback (Crawford) and crowdsourcing content (Ehrlich and Shami), though some companies had begun to realize the marketing potential of the service (Asur and Huberman; Jansen). In December 2009, however, Twitter launched the first of its organizationally focused features, “Contributors,” which allowed multiple authorized users to contribute to a business’s account. A year later, Twitter officially launched its “Twitter for Business” page. These new business features along with the growing number of users and the increasing amount of specific user data made Twitter particularly attractive to businesses and organizations looking to connect more directly to consumers and to those looking to expand their existing customer base.

@BostonMarathon Joins Twitter

It was into this new, more organization-friendly Twitter that the Boston Athletic Association emerged when it joined Twitter in January 2010. The Boston Athletic Association, tweeting under the @BostonMarathon username, largely followed Twitter's advice to organizations: the BAA used their linked Twitter and Facebook pages to share photos, trivia, and milestones as a way to promote interest in the Marathon; like many organizations, they also used social media to connect directly to their base of runners and volunteers. These two traditional organizational purposes are also reflected in @BostonMarathon's use of their eponymous hashtag, which until the tragic events at the 2013 Boston Marathon, was primarily used to promote the race and connect with interested parties. (An example of such a tweet can be found in Figure 5 below.)

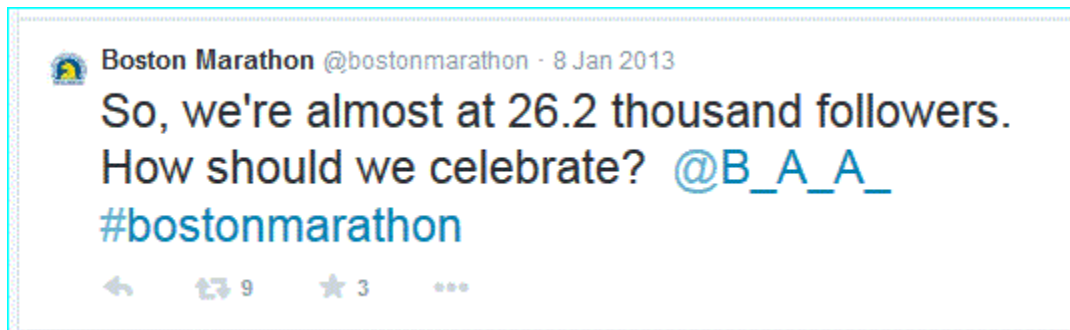


Figure 5: Sample @BostonMarathon tweet featuring #BostonMarathon hashtag

The longstanding use of the tag to promote and connect suggests a fairly stable purpose. With the intervention of the bombing, however, the purpose of the tag fractures and shifts. Instead of exclusively marking conversations about running the marathon, the tag was enrolled into networks with a variety of rhetorical purposes, including sharing disbelief, grief, and blame in the aftermath of the blasts. This shift also calls attention to the ways that networked discursive groups trouble the efficacy of purpose and intention as measures of the relative success of particular agentive acts. This fracturing of purpose reveals an important feature of rhetorical

agency as deployed in this network: purpose, long an integral facet of rhetorical production, is complicated by the fact that the same rhetorical act (the inclusion of the #BostonMarathon hashtag) serves multiple, sometimes contradictory purposes.

Theoretical Background

The viral spread of #BostonMarathon in the hours and days after the bombings raises any number of questions about agentive networks and highlights, as I discussed in Chapter Two, the networked and dispersed nature of agency. It also calls us to question a number of existing assumptions about how agency is produced and adjudicated. Most vitally for the current discussion, the growth of the network associated with #BostonMarathon challenges the long established relationship between intention and agency: to what extent does the intention of an actor or actors matter to the production of agency? The efficacy of particular material and rhetorical interventions has long been measured by how closely the results match the intentions or purpose of the rhetor/actor. In a distributed model of agency, in which no single participant can be considered the possessor or wielder of agency, what is the role of intention or purpose in producing agency? And how might we think about “efficacy” among this expanded field of participants? By and large, I will argue, unified purposes and/or intentions are not requisite for the production of networked agency. In fact, I will argue, intention and purpose cannot determine outcome if we – following Rickert, Cooper, and Latour – recognize agency as a product of a distributed, dependent rhetorical/material network that emerges from the fluctuating intersections of humans, nonhumans, time, and space. As evidence, I will offer first a theoretical overview of Aristotelian and Burkean articulations of the relationship between purpose and rhetoric. In addition to this foundational work in rhetorical theory, I will also discuss Lloyd Bitzer’s articulation of the rhetorical situation, which similarly emphasizes the role of purpose in the

production of efficacious rhetorical acts. I will then offer a brief discussion of Hegel's theories of action and agency, in which intention and agency are inextricably linked. As an alternative to these anthropocentric, intentional models of agency, I will discuss new materialist theories of cause and effect and Latour's discussion of mediation, both of which better fit the networked model of agency discussed in Chapter Two.

Following this theoretical discussion, I will map some parts of the #BostonMarathon network and suggest that the variety of purposes at work in the various networks bearing the tag demonstrate that though questions of purpose and intention might be valuable as forensic tools for understanding the growth of agentive networks, purpose and intention are in no way prescriptive, and they are of depreciating value as measures for rhetorical success. Instead, we might recognize that the success of the network, its reach and agentive power, are best measured by effects, whether or not those effects reflect the intended rhetorical or material purpose of any one of the members of the collective.

I'd like to begin, then, by discussing the role of purpose in conceptions of rhetoric and rhetorical agency (Aristotle; Burke). I begin where much of rhetorical theory does: with Aristotle. For my purposes Aristotle's codification of rhetoric is both deliberative (Lord; Hauser) and didactic (Poster; McAdon). As Poster and McAdon argue, Aristotle's *On Rhetoric* is a textbook of sorts that codifies rhetorical practice in teachable segments and divides rhetorical practices by inventive strategy (*topoi*), by setting, and by purpose. It is the last of these that I wish to focus on for the moment. In Book 1 of *On Rhetoric*, speaking of the value of epideictic rhetoric, Aristotle asserts that "deliberate choice" marks all rhetorical action, whether that activity is personal, civic, or divine (99). In the same section, Aristotle notes that the ends of rhetoric, the final outcomes and effects, are the predominant focus: "And if one thing is an 'end'

and another is not [the 'end' is a greater good]" (67). For Aristotle, the connection between purpose or intention and ends/effects is the focus of rhetorical education, and these ends reflect the nature of their creator and his/her purpose: "And where the vices and virtues are greater, the actions are greater too, since these [vices and virtues] are like causes and first principles, and the results [are greater]; and in proportion to the results so also the causes and the first principles" (68). The purpose or intention of the rhetor, then, matches or determines the nature of the effect s/he creates. In fact, Aristotle argues that deliberate intentions infuse all successful rhetorical action even when such in intention isn't immediately apparent: "it is absurd to suppose that purpose is not present because we do not observe the agent deliberating" (104).

This focus on final causation and purpose infuses Aristotle's work and the work of those that follow. Most notably, Kenneth Burke's dramatistic pentad reinforces the importance of purpose as it relates to rhetoric. In *Grammar of Motives*, for example, Burke treats each of the first three elements of the pentad separately, but when his discussion turns to agency and purpose, Burke discusses them only in relation to one another. For Burke the means, the ability to have an effect, is directly related to purpose (xv); it is "Agency and Purpose that draw together in the means-ends relationship" (Burke 274). Arabella Lyon argues in her discussion of purpose, intention, and agency in Burke's work that Burkean purpose is fundamentally linked to outcome and effect: "Agency is then connected to planning and usefulness. Purpose, in contrast, is connected to desire and end outcome or action." (Lyon 99). For Burke, Lyon argues, purpose is both desire and outcome. Agency is the cause, the means by which some end is achieved, and purpose encompasses the desired effect and the actual result of rhetorical action. Further, Daniel O'Keefe notes that Burke's notions of agency and action assume that actions are only of rhetorical interest when they include/match particular intentions (11). For both Burke and

Aristotle before him, then, the purpose of an action is fulfilled in its outcome; put another way: for Aristotle and Burke (as for Hegel, as I will note later), when considering the success of a particular rhetorical action, the only appropriate measure is how well the intention of the act matches the ends/effect.

The preoccupation with purpose as intrinsic to agentive rhetorical action is, of course, not isolated to Aristotle and Burke. Subsequent articulations of rhetorical scene and situation (Bitzer; Vatz) further reify the position of the human rhetor and the important place of purpose qua intention in the rhetorical situation. For Bitzer, rhetoric is situational and “comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world” (3). It follows, then, that the success or failure of a rhetorical endeavor is judged by how closely the outcome matches the intended purpose, action, or change. Bitzer, like Burke, positions purpose as central to agentive action. A discursive intervention or creation can only be judged as rhetorical if it includes a particular purpose (7). Bitzer’s theory of rhetorical utterance relies on a discernable purpose and judges the success of a particular rhetorical instantiation by how closely the purpose of the rhetorical work matches its outcome.

Rhetoric is, of course, not alone in its linking of agency and purpose/intention; philosophy, too, connects the concepts. In Philosophy, this connection is most clearly articulated by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Hegel’s discussions of the connections between agency and intention fall into a philosophical subfield – action theory – which takes as its subject the connections between agent, action, and intention as foundational to human agency. Hegel’s articulation of the links between intention and agency further highlights the ways in which purpose/intention and outcome are conflated in relation to the production of agency. While there is much debate among Hegelians as to whether, for Hegel, intention is prospective or

retrospective (Deligiorgi, 2010; Speight, 2001), most critics agree that Hegelian agency and intention are inextricably linked to one another in an evaluative relationship (Deligiorgi, 2010).

Hegel articulates, first in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and later in *Philosophy of Right*, a causal connection between intention and agency. In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel argues from a forensic perspective that action/effect is more indicative of inner nature than stated intentions. In fact, he says,

when a human being's performance and his inner possibility, capacity or intention are contrasted, it is the former alone which is to be regarded as his true actuality, even if he deceives himself on the point and, turning away from his action into himself, fancies that in his inner self he is something else than what he is in the deed. (322)

Here, Hegel positions external action ("performance") against internal attributes (including intention) and argues that is the former – the demonstrable, perceivable action – that defines the human. That is to say, a human being's nature should be attributed to her action, the results of her agency. Furthermore, in *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argues the actions are constitutive of the inner subject as well as the external environment:

What the subject is, is the series of his actions. If these are a series of worthless productions, then the subjectivity of volition is likewise worthless; and conversely, if the series of the individual's deeds are of a substantial nature, then so also is his inner will (124).

For Hegel, then, the very subjectivity of a human being is based on the results achieved by her action. As we saw in Aristotle's and Burke's articulations of purpose, for Hegel, there is a causal connection between purpose/intention and results: the nature and intention of the actor are imprinted on the action. Furthermore, because intention is necessary for every act and intention

is an attribute of a rational subject, agency is only possible as a possession of a conscious, rational human. However, Hegel also argues that agency should be understood as the “right of the subjective will” to create actions “inwardly determined by me as my purpose and intention” (*Philosophy of Right*, 107, 110). Intentions, therefore, constitute the subject at the same time the subject asserts its intentions. In this way, intentions are not simply a forensic tool by which we judge the success of a particular agentive act; rather, intention also serves a productive function in that it helps form the act undertaken by the subject.

Burke, Bitzer, and Hegel’s conceptions of agency share a number of traits that act as points of response for materialist rhetorics. First, Bitzer argues that some situations are not rhetorical. For Bitzer, exigence, a deterministic element of his rhetorical situation, is not always rhetorical: “an exigence which can be modified only by means other than discourse is not rhetorical; thus, an exigence is not rhetorical when its modification requires merely one’s own action or the application of a tool, but neither requires nor invites the assistance of discourse” (7). New materialism in rhetoric follows theorists like Donna Haraway who posit that actors/networks/situations are material and semiotic pastiches; all situations, then, have material and rhetorical dimensions. Secondly, all three of these theorists privilege the human actor as the central figure in the production of agency. Though Burke and Bitzer acknowledge the power of situational/nonhuman elements, they continue to privilege the human actor. As I noted in Chapter 1, Burke’s emphasis on ratios does not displace the human as the center of rhetorical action. However, the impact and value of nonhuman actors is a key point of departure for materialist and Latourian conceptions of agency.

New Materialism: Rewriting Cause and Effect

Indeed, though Burke, Bitzer, and Hegel offer complex pictures of agentive production, all three position rational human actors as the possessors of agentive capacities and the ultimate causes of agentive interventions. As noted earlier, new materialists, especially Bennett, Coole, and Frost, question the efficacy of human causation¹⁶ and posit instead sprawling networks of humans and nonhumans in which “infinitesimally small causes...transform successive conditions for interaction among elements such that they end up having massive but unanticipated effects” (Coole & Frost 14). As Coole and Frost suggest, new materialism does not erase or negate questions of cause and effect; rather, new materialists wish to complicate such questions by extending the list of causal participants and highlighting the strings of causes and effects necessary to produce agency. For Coole and Frost, nonhuman participants should be viewed as “something more than ‘mere’ matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable” (9). The unpredictability inherent in these nonhumans contributes to the unpredictability of the network more generally and allows us to better understand why actual outcomes rarely match human intentions. For these writers, then, reliance on simple cause and effect and human intention should be supplanted by chains of cause and effect and an awareness of the role that nonhuman actants play in the production of agency.

Among the new materialists, the work of Bruno Latour on cause and effect is particularly useful as an alternative to simple human causation. Latour, in his discussion of the sociology of science in *Reassembling the Social*, positions mediation as an appropriate successor to simple cause and effect. In traditional conceptions of causality, he suggests, “inputs predict outputs

¹⁶ For my purposes, intention, purpose, and cause/causation are equivalent terms as all three terms reference the practices through which action is undertaken.

fairly well: nothing will be present in the effect that has not been in the cause” (58). However, Latour argues that such a simplistic picture undercuts the importance of effects, for if outputs match inputs, we might as well focus simply on the inputs; there is no longer any reason to examine the effects or outcomes of an action or experiment. Realistically, however, experience tells us that outputs can surprise us: any number of valuable scientific discoveries (including penicillin and theories of gravity) happen serendipitously. In order to account for these sometimes unexpected outcomes, Latour offers his concept of mediation. In *Pandora’s Hope*, Latour defines mediation as “an occurrence that is neither altogether a cause nor altogether a consequence, neither completely a means nor completely an end” (153). This move from causation to mediation allows Latour to escape from theories of simple cause and effect and instead focus on events, moments, and trajectories that defy such oversimplification. Mediation reminds us that change is a complex process marked by events rather than “effects to be deduced”; instead, complex networks of humans and nonhumans “are simply offering occasions, circumstances, and precedents. As a result, lots of surprising aliens may pop up in between” (58). Latour’s theory of mediation seeks to account for those situations in which particular actions “make things do other things than what was expected” (59). Latour notes that this distinction “might look like hair-splitting,” but he notes that

the differences in the type of cartography are immense. The first solution draws maps of the world which are composed of a few agencies, followed by trails of consequences which are never much more than effects, expressions, or reflections of something else. The second solution, the one preferred by ANT, pictures a world made of concatenations of mediators where each point can be said to fully act (*RS* 59).

Instead of delineating causes from effects, then, we might understand all participants as forces, and “when a force manipulates another, it does not mean that it is a cause generating effects; it can also be an occasion for other things to start acting” (*RS* 60). These forces bump up against other forces and in doing so eventually cause successive changes, some small and some large. What we call effects, then, are simply snapshots of these networks at particular moments.¹⁷

Mapping #BostonMarathon

New materialist conceptions of distributed agency and intricately related, infinitesimally small sets of causes and effects offer one way of reading the landscape created by tracing a snapshot of the network associated with #BostonMarathon. To understand the deployment of this network and how it was affected by the intervention of the bombing, I will use the remaining space to sketch a series of moments in the continuing life of the hashtag. In doing so, I hope to illustrate the sometimes conflicting intentions of the members of the network and suggest that no single set of intentions adequately explains the impact of #BostonMarathon.

To begin, it might be useful to understand the size, scope, and purpose of the network in the days leading up to the marathon. During the weekend before (from Friday, April 12, 2013 at 6 pm EST to Sunday, April 14, 2013 at 10 pm EST), 7,942 tweets bearing the tag #BostonMarathon were sent. The vast majority of these missives was sent by those with a first or secondhand connection to the race, and featured well wishes for racers and excitement about participation in the event. That is to say, prior to the intervention of the bombing, the hashtag primarily represented those already tied to, or at the very least interested in, the marathon. As

¹⁷ As I will note in Chapter 4, questions of responsibility and accountability become even more pressing if we distribute agency across multiple actors – both human and nonhuman. How might do we hold humans responsible for negative outcomes if we deny that humans are final causes for those outcomes? The answer, I will argue, is that blame and responsibility (like agency) are distributed throughout the network. Human actors may still be held accountable by moral, social, and legal institutions; nonhumans are held accountable by designers. This state of affairs, I will argue, is not new: we have always held nonhuman actors responsible for the bad outcomes in which they participate. Instead of calling it responsibility, however, we have instead called this process redesign.

with most events promoted via Twitter hashtags (like those for academic conferences, award shows, and other sporting events, including the Superbowl), the primary purpose of the tag appears to be to unite those already invested or looking to invest in the event. The space created by the tag, then, is one of shared affinity and fairly homogenous intentions to promote, critique, or otherwise comment upon the race.

Though this understanding of the tag's/tag creators' intentions is fairly broad, the homogenous nature of the human participants results in a finite number of goals for communicators within the network and a few specific ways to enter and impact the discussion. This original set of purposes and intentions might be best exemplified by @BostonMarathon, the official Twitter handle for race organizers. @BostonMarathon sent thirteen tweets on race day; all these tweets were sent before the bombing for only two purposes: to share race trivia and runners' names, progress, and official times, as seen in Figure 6.

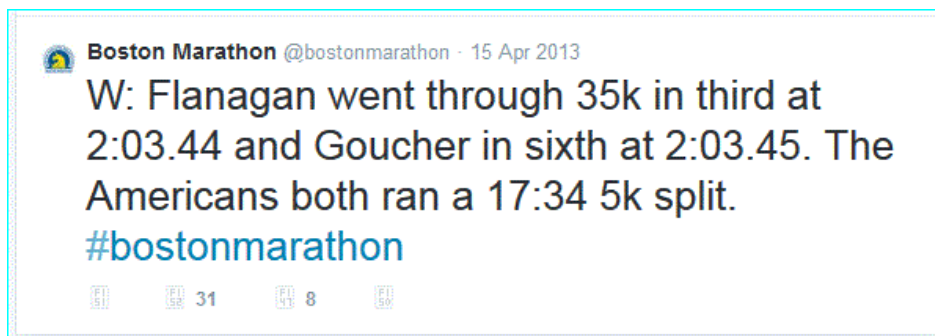


Figure 6: @BostonMarathon uses #BostonMarathon on Race Day 2013

Once the bombs detonated, however, it was days before @BostonMarathon again used its eponymous hashtag.

After the bombing, however, others repurposed the tag for their own ends, including major news organizations who used the tag to report breaking news, political officials who used the tag to offer condolences and denunciations of the attack, regular Twitter users who shared links to information, condolences for the victims, political jabs and conspiracy theories, and for

other sometimes difficult to discern purposes. In order to better understand the composition of the network in the immediate aftermath of the explosions, I have coded a sample¹⁸ (10% or 253 tweets) of the 2,500+ “Top Tweets” in the four hours following the explosion. Table 2 offers an overview of the kinds of users who participated in the #BostonMarathon network in the immediate aftermath of the bombings.

As we can see from Table 2, news organizations/journalists and public figures account for more than half (64%) of the participants examined in this random sampling of “Top Tweets” from the first four hours after the bombing. The prevalence of these kinds of actants might be explained in a number of ways: first, because the sample examines “Top Tweets,” it skews toward users with larger networks of followers. Second, news organizations and journalists, who account for over a third (38%) of the participants in this snapshot of the #BostonMarathon network, are considered more reliable sources of information and therefore are more likely to be retweeted/replied to, and these interactions factor into Twitter’s algorithm for identifying “Top Tweets.” Most salient to the discussions of agency under consideration in this chapter, however, we might account for the prevalence of these public actors – as well as the use of the hashtag by politicians/leaders (2 % of coded actors) and organizations (12% of coded actors) – by considering that #BostonMarathon was initially inaugurated as a more official digital space through its association with Boston Athletic Association’s @BostonMarathon in the days and hours leading up the race. This original actor lends a sense of credibility to the tag, and though the tag’s original purpose is supplanted by a number of competing purposes after the intervention

¹⁸ My sample consists of a PDF screen capture of “Top Tweets” from the first four hours after the bombs detonated. The PDF of screen captures is 240 pages long, with a maximum of 11 tweets per page. To create a random sample (approximately 10%), I used a random number generator; the generator first produced a page number (1-240) followed by a Tweet number (1-11). I focused on “Top Tweets” for 2 reasons: first, these tweets represent the most connected, enmeshed members of the network. Second, there were 113, 913 tweets sent on April 15, 2013. The sheer volume of data along with the lack of access to Twitter’s complete database made gathering all tweets from this 24 hour period prohibitively challenging.

of the bombing, all of the purposes and intentions that follow depend on the established credibility of the tag to build their own.

Table 2: #BostonMarathon participants from the first four hours after the bombing coded by user type

| Participant | Description | Example | Number of Tweets | Percentage of Total |
|------------------|---|--|------------------|---------------------|
| News | Newscaster, journalist, or official twitter profile for a news station, site, or organization | @USAToday: USA Today's official Twitter account | 95 | 38% |
| Public Figure | Individuals well-known outside of Twitter, including athletes, actors, musicians, business people, etc. | @KingJames: Lebron James, star forward for the Miami Heat | 65 | 26% |
| Corporate Entity | Organizations and business not affiliated with news organizations | @UNCWomensSoccer: official Twitter account for the UNC Division 1 Women's Soccer Team | 31 | 12% |
| Official Account | Accounts for government officials | @UN_Spokesperson: the official Twitter account of the public relations arm of the United Nations | 6 | 2% |
| Regular User | Normal Twitter Users | @Dan_Bubbles: a "Bahston" | 54 | 21% |
| Other | Trolls and parody accounts | @CharlieACN: Parody account purporting to be the fictional character Charlie Skinner from Aaron Sorkin's <i>Newsroom</i> | 2 | <1% |

The continued efficacy of the original network surrounding #BostonHelp can be seen in the ways in which other credible sources of information – government entities, law enforcement

agencies, and new services in particular – utilize #BostonMarathon. Unlike other hashtag networks, most notably #BostonHelp, discussed in Chapter Two, #BostonMarathon hosts all sorts of official statements from celebrities, news networks, and law enforcement agencies, a point reinforced by aggregating the findings from Table 2 into a simple pie chart. How much of the network is inhabited by public figures, news organizations, and corporate entities? Nearly 80%. In fact, as demonstrated in Figure 7 below, public users outnumber private users almost 4:1.

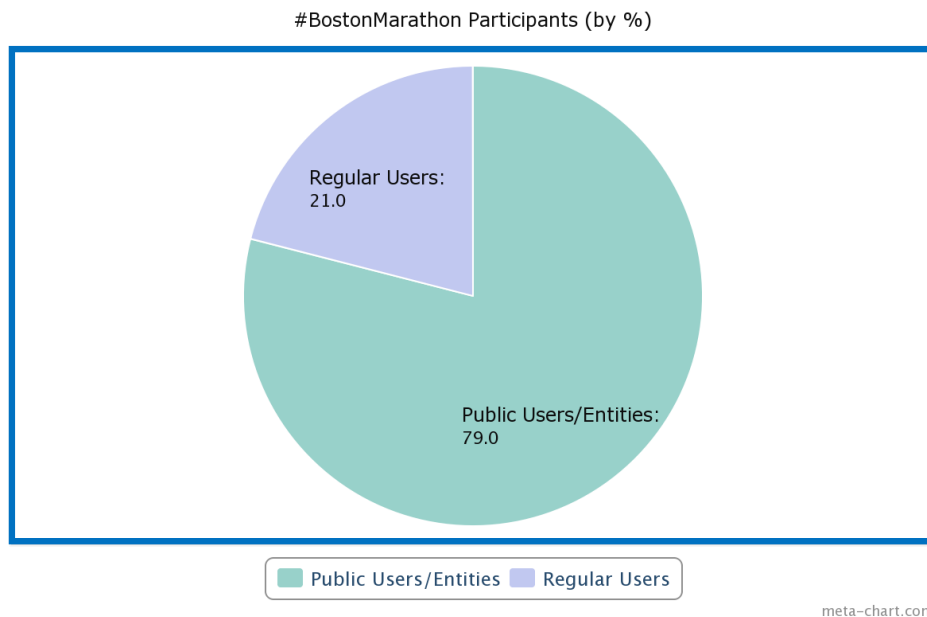


Figure 7: #BostonMarathon Participants in the first four hours after the bombing (by percentage)

Why does this “publicness” matter? The large number of officially endorsed/Twitter “verified” users suggests that this network represents Twitter’s version of an official, public deliberation/conversation. The official nature of this conversation begins with early uses of the tag by @BostonMarathon and the longstanding connection between the tag and the race. The tag participated in the rhetorical acts of @BostonMarathon, whose purpose was to engage with members of the social media community about the race. The tag also participates in subsequent rhetorical acts by news organizations, celebrities, and government entities, each of whom had a

purpose different from @BostonMarathon but each of whom was well served by their use of the tag.

This notion – that networks that repurpose the tag rely on the credibility built by the originators of the tag – has important implications for theories of networked agency. Namely, despite a fundamental shift in the purpose of the tag (from corporate promotion to public commentary, information sharing, and a number of other purposes identified in Table 2), the work of the original actors (@BostonMarathon and the users discussing the race in the lead up to race day) still figures into the networks that emerge after the bombing. However, though they participate – via the credibility built through the long-term use of the tag before the April 2013 bombings – in these networks, their original intentions for the tag do not dictate the networks that emerge later. Latour reminds us in *Pandora's Hope* to “think of technology as *congealed* labor” (189; original emphasis). Intention, then, is one of a multitude of forces at work in the construction of the original network, but the original network eventually congeals (to use Latour's verb) into a black box, a term that refers to the ways in which complex systems are eventually simplified to inputs and outputs rather than numerous actors characterized by “locality, particularity, multiplicity, and continuity” (PH 70). The resulting simple black box becomes a single actor among many in subsequent networks. Still, the sense of the #BostonMarathon as a sanctioned space of sorts remains, a trace left behind by the original #BostonMarathon network.

This sense of the network as Twitter's version of an official channel is reinforced by an examination of the tweets according to their purposes. As I noted in my discussion of participants above, news organizations and journalists are the most commonly seen members of the network. An examination of the tweets according to their purpose reinforces this emphasis on

news: more than a third (37%) of tweets coded according to purpose provide news or information about the events of the day. This space also becomes a venue for support from regular and celebrity users of the network, as emotional responses to the bombings account for 29% of the tweets coded. The sharing of resources (including links to Google’s “Person Finder”) occupies another sizable section of the map, with 13% of tweets coded as resources. The rest of the coded tweets (21% or 60 tweets) are fairly evenly divided between a number of other purposes: meta commentary, information about police activity in Boston and other metropolises, speculation about the suspects, links to or quotes from official responses, including President Obama’s press conference on the bombing, personal stories, and material support. (See Table 3 below for more information.)

Table 3: #BostonMarathon tweets from the first four hours after the bombing coded according to purpose

| Purpose | Description | Example | Number of Tweets | Percentage of Total ¹⁹ |
|-------------------|---|--|------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Emotional Support | Offered emotional/spiritual support and/or cathartic displays | @CherylDouglasNN: “My thoughts and prayers go out to everyone affected by the senseless tragedy at the #BostonMarathon today. So incredibly sad!” | 73 | 29% |
| Resources | Provided links to resources | @ClaireRPorter: “Google Person Finder helps you tracked (sic) down loved ones in Boston: news.com.au/technology/goo... #BostonMarathon #Marathon @newscomauHQ” | 34 | 13% |
| News | Provided information or links to information about the ongoing investigation of the bombing | @MandyWiener: “#CNN now reporting one of the dead in #BostonMarathon blasts is an eight-year-old child.” | 93 | 37% |

¹⁹ These percentages are based on the total number of tweets coded in this section (N=253); eight of the coded tweets clearly demonstrated multiple purposes, so the percentages in this column add up to more than 100%.

Table 3 Continued

| | | | | |
|--|--|---|----|----|
| Information about Police Activity | Provided information about police presence/activity in Boston and in other metropolitan areas in response to the bombing | @SocialMediaMo: “Boston Police shutting down cell service & saying DO NOT USE your cell phones! May trigger other devices #BostonMarathon” | 13 | 5% |
| Meta Commentary on Coverage of the Bombing | Discussed appropriate and inappropriate coverage of the events | @Yehudachababo: “NY Post false claim about Saudi suspect in custody is what's called a racial hoax, which has serious consequences. #bostonmarathon” | 17 | 7% |
| Discussion/ Speculation about Suspects | Discussed or speculated about potential suspects | @Suntimes: “UPDATE: Boston police commissioner says no suspect is in custody in marathon explosions, despite reports #BostonMarathon” | 5 | 2% |
| Links to Official Responses | Repeated or linked to official governmental responses to the bombing | @nicoleperlroth: “Obama's statement on #BostonMarathon coming shortly: whitehouse.gov/live/president... ” | 10 | 4% |
| Personal Stories | Related personal or familial experiences with the bombing | @14Ram: “Glad to hear my uncle and cousin were safe and sound following the #bostonmarathon Finished just half an hour prior to explosion.” | 3 | 1% |
| Material Support | Offered access to or requested lodging, food, transportation, etc. for displaced runners and other tourists | @RWW: “MT @davidhoang: If you know a stranded #BostonMarathon runner who needs a place to stay, @AirBNB will waive the fee w.readwrite.com/10YtA7z ” | 5 | 2% |
| Other | Did not fit into the other coded categories | | 7 | 3% |

As noted in Table 3, a plurality of tweets was aimed at sharing or linking to developing news about the bombings. The tweets from the hours immediately following the bombing also include a large number of missives aimed at offering or asking for prayers or comfort (coded as “emotional support”). These “Top Tweets” also include a small but notable percentage of meta-commentary on the coverage (both on Twitter and via traditional publishing venues) of the bombing, most of which is critical of impolitic comments and those who might rush to judgment regarding the identity and ethnicity of any responsible parties.

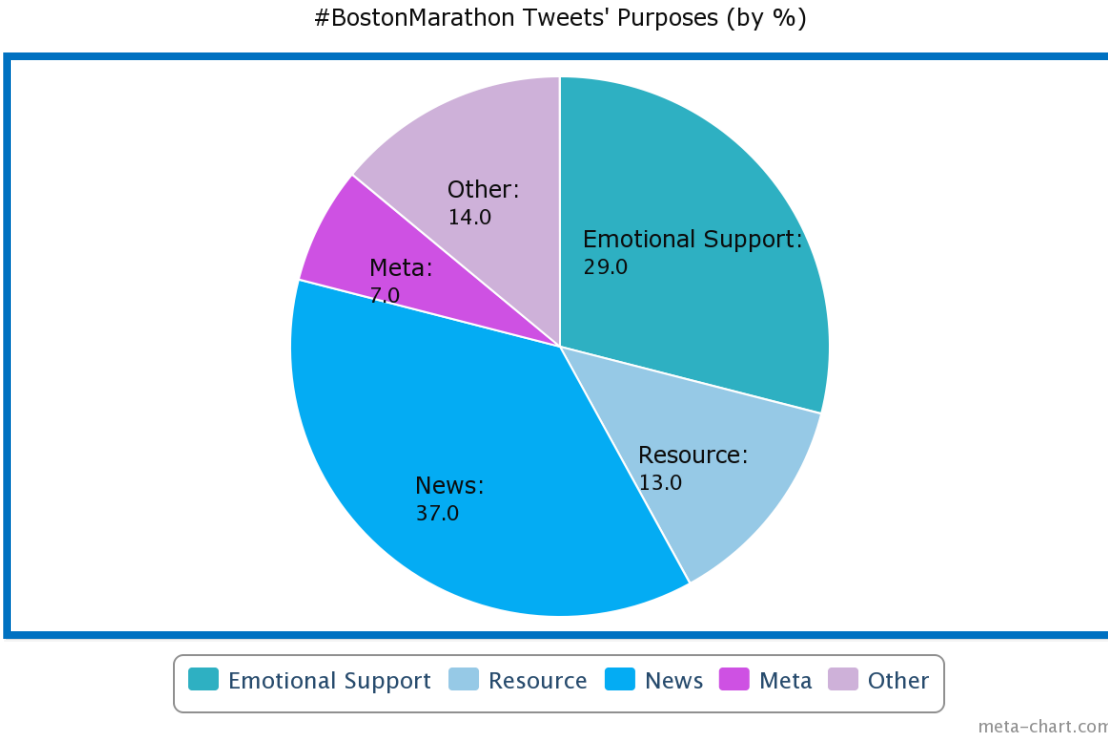


Figure 8: #BostonMarathon tweets from the first four hours after the bombing coded according to purpose

These results and the corresponding networks that they allow us to trace reveal a number of interesting developments: First, @BostonMarathon, the official Twitter account of Marathon organizers does not participate in the hashtag's network in the immediate aftermath of the explosions. On race day, @BostonMarathon sent thirteen tweets bearing the tag. None of these occurred after 2:50 pm. Whatever their reason for not continuing to use the tag after the intervention of the bombing, the absence of this official voice from the evolving conversation occurring via #BostonMarathon marks the foreclosure of one set of intentions for the tag and the opening of another more dispersed and conflicted set of intentions and purposes.

Second, by examining the "Top Tweets" in the four hours following the bombing, we discover two broad categories for the participants in this network: those participating in the conversation via Twitter and those implicated by that conversation. Unlike those users participating in the #BostonHelp conversations, the vast majority of users associated with

#BostonMarathon had no physical connection to the bombing or its aftermath. Rather, this diverse network of users acts as sort of digital punditry, commenting, speculating and offering emotional support, resources, and news to others following the developing story via Twitter. The content of these tweets, then, implicates a second set of participants. We might call these the objects of the conversation, and they include victims, political officials, and potential, as yet unnamed suspects.

These subjects of conversation take on particular importance when we examine the continued use of the tag in the days, weeks, and months following the bombings. On April 19, 2013, four days after the bombing, #BostonMarathon roared back to life: around 5 pm on April 18, 2013, the FBI released the first officially confirmed video and photographic evidence of the suspects. The grainy video and photographs showed two men with dark hair and clothes in and around the area the bombs had been planted. Within a few hours, the FBI received thousands of tips, and as FBI agents began focusing their search on the area between Cambridge and Watertown, MA on Boston's northwestern edge, the suspects allegedly mounted another series of attacks. In quick succession, they murdered an MIT campus police officer, carjacked a driver in the Allston-Brighton section of Boston, and finally exchanged gunfire with police officers in Watertown. The firefight and the suspects' subsequent attempts to flee the scene resulted in the death of one of the suspects; the other suspect escaped in the stolen vehicle and was eventually captured just miles from the site of the first firefight with police. Not surprisingly, given the events of the day, the overwhelming majority of tweets sent bearing the #BostonMarathon tag discussed the police pursuit of the suspects. In fact, of the top twenty five most retweeted messages from April 19, 2013, twenty four are explicitly related to the bombing suspects. The one tweet not explicitly related to the suspects commends law enforcement for their work in the

aftermath of the blasts, presumably including the capture of one the suspects just a few hours earlier.²⁰

The tag experienced a similar resurgence on May 1, 2013, when 3 additional suspects were arrested on obstruction of justice charges. Once again, we find that, predictably, the hashtag's predominant purpose reflects the events of the day: all but three of the top twenty-five tweets from May 1 focus on the arrest of additional suspects. Of these twenty-two suspect-focused tweets, eighteen were sent from the twitter feeds of official news sources, including the BBC and MSNBC.

We see another shift of the tag on November 2, 2013, when the Boston Red Sox, as part of their World Series victory parade, paused for a moment of silence at the marathon finish line. Once again the traffic on #BostonMarathon mirrors the events of the day, with all twenty-five of the "Top Tweets" focused on the Red Sox victory parade's stop at the Boston Marathon finish line. Though the purpose for this particular day is fairly homogenous, the participants from November 2nd are not: unlike the participants on May 1st, the November 2nd tweets feature a number of "regular users" (seven of twenty-five) in addition to accounts local to Boston (sixteen of twenty-five) and few from the national sports media (two of twenty-five).

The endurance of the tag, as demonstrated by the tweets from April 19, 2013 (the day the bombing suspects were killed/captured by police), May 1, 2013 (when three additional suspects were arrested on obstruction of justice charges), and November 2, 2013 (when the Boston Red Sox's World Series victory parade stopped for a moment of silence at the finish line), suggests an expanding pool of participants and competing and evolving agendas/intentions. The diversity of

²⁰ It's important to note that 3 of the top 25 tweets from April 19, 2013 also perpetuate misinformation about the supposed guilt of Sunil Tripathi. Tripathi, a missing Brown student, was repeatedly identified on Reddit and Twitter – and later by news organizations using those sites as sources – as a suspect in the bombings. Tripathi's misidentification will be the main issue under consideration in chapter 4 as I examine the role of responsibility in distributed agentive networks.

purposes coded for the tweets under consideration here suggests a number of competing intentions represented by the same rhetorical marker. What, then, is the net result of these purposes? That depends on which section of the network we examine, which is precisely the point here: despite its inauguration for a very specific purpose (the promotion of the race and its runners – seen most strikingly in the tweets sent the weekend before the race and those sent by @BostonMarathon on race day), the intentions of race organizers mean little in the aftermath of the bombings. The intervention of an unforeseen actant (the bombing) supersedes the original purpose of the tag. This intervention, we might say, fractures the purpose of the tag and opens it, allowing it to service any number of agendas and intentions.

And some of these agendas are well served by their use of the tag. Let us consider, for example, the top five most retweeted/replied to messages²¹ bearing the hashtag. Table 4 lists the top five messages in the #BostonHelp network. These “Top Tweets” reflect the findings from the larger sample: LeBron James, a public figure, offers emotional support; the official Twitter handle for an organization (in this case a drug company) provides news and information; a journalist provides up-to-date information about victims. There is, however, one notable deviation from this pattern in the form of the most retweeted missive bearing the hashtag: “For every retweet we receive we will donate \$1 to the #BostonMarathon victims #PrayForBoston.” This message was sent by @_bostonmarathon, a fake account established less than 45 minutes after the explosion.

²¹ The information regarding retweets and replies was gathered on May 27, 2014.

Table 4: Most retweeted/replied to messages in #BostonMarathon as of May 27, 2014

| Twitter User | User's Identity | Message | Number of Retweets and Replies |
|------------------|---|---|--------------------------------|
| @_bostonmarathon | Fake twitter page meant to be confused with official Boston Marathon Twitter feed | "For every retweet we receive we will donate \$1 to the #BostonMarathon victims #PrayForBoston" | 68,694 |
| @kingjames | Verified Twitter feed of LeBron James | "Prayers goes out to those involved/hurt in #BostonMarathon. WTF is wrong with people man. Just sad" | 33,811 |
| @fenvirantiviral | Official Twitter feed for the drug Fenvir, an antiviral treatment for herpes, cold sores and shingles | "Doctors: bombs contained pellets, shrapnel and nails that hit victims #BostonMarathon @NBC6" | 23,628 |
| @redcross | Official Twitter feed of the American Red Cross | "Thanks to generosity of volunteer blood donors there is currently enough blood on the shelves to meet demand. #BostonMarathon" | 15,169 |
| @piersmorgan | Verified Twitter feed of CNN host Piers Morgan | "BREAKING: One of the 2 confirmed dead is an 8yr old child. Just appalling. #BostonMarathon" | 9,337 |

The account sent only a few tweets, all of which were aimed at engendering some sort of support, usually in the form of retweets.



Figure 9: Tweets sent by fake account prior to Twitter closing the account

The purpose of the account – and its widely shared message – is unclear. What did the author(s) have to gain by asking for retweets? No money changed hands; no traffic was directed to a particular website. Despite this mystery, however, this tweet participates in rhetorical agency: the tweet circulated widely, particularly on Twitter and Facebook, and brought any number of actors (via responses to the message and retweets) into the #BostonMarathon network. In doing so, the tweet expanded the audience and the pool of potential participants in all the other purposes represented by the tag.

Conclusion

In view of the expansive and complex material-semiotic linkages sketched above, simple notions of cause and effect seem insufficient to explain the growth and impact of the network. Even by Bitzer's rather anthropocentric definition of rhetorical situation²², the explosions at the finish line of the Boston Marathon represent an opportunity for rhetorical action: linguistic interventions were necessary to provide information and emotional support to those affected by

²² "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" (Bitzer 3).

the events of the day. This group of participants, however, cannot be adequately understood if we use purpose or intention as a way of measuring rhetorical effects.

Latourian mediation and new materialism's emphasis on chains of causes and effects provides a more useful alternative. The kind of mapping made possible by new materialist approaches allows us to consider a much wider variety of participants and purposes. Though this discussion has focused largely on the human participants in the network (users) and their purposes, the nonhuman members of the network (made visible by a materialist tracing of the ever-expanding latticework of contributors) play a vital part in the creation and continuation of the system. By recognizing the intervention of the bombing (and understanding that the event itself is not just an exigence but a hugely important participant in the #BostonMarathon network), we might be better able to understand the effects produced by the network. These effects (individual users' catharsis, the spread of information – and misinformation – about suspects and motives, the connection between Twitter, its users, and other sites and resources – including Google's Person Finder) are best understood not as simple results/outputs but as a set of messy forces that may act as both causes and effects depending on one's position in the network.

The networks created on Twitter using #BostonMarathon reveal purpose as an unreliable measure of rhetorical success because (1) purpose is not always discernable (as evidenced by the tweets categorized in Table 3 as "other") and (2) because in an ecological situation (like the one under examination here) all participants contribute to the work and reach of the network regardless of individual users' intentions. Though a user might be drawn to the #BostonMarathon network because of a tweet sharing news or information about the bombing, s/he does not only encounter tweets with that purpose. Instead, once a user enters the network, s/he is exposed to all

tweets bearing the tag. S/he also becomes part of the network, another of the multitude of causes and effects, forces and participants that constitute a responsive, material-rhetorical network like #BostonMarathon.

Chapter Five: Networked Responsibility and Reddit's Hunt for the Bombing Suspects

On March 16, 2013, Brown University philosophy major Sunil Tripathi vanished. In the months leading up to his disappearance, Tripathi had taken a leave of absence from school citing depression, but he'd stayed in daily contact with family and his few close friends. Then, in the early morning hours, Tripathi simply vanished. Last seen on grainy video leaving a convenience store, Tripathi disappeared into the night, leaving his wallet, ID, cell phone and all his personal possessions in his off campus apartment. His family would never hear from him again.

In the weeks that followed, Tripathi's family used local news media and social media in a desperate attempt to find the missing student. In fact, as a way to crowdsource the search, the family created a Facebook page dedicated to their search. The page – still live under the name “Help Us Find Sunil Tripathi” – was a monument of sorts to the young man's life, an outpouring of love in the form of pictures and notes of devotion and grief from his mother and sister and other loved ones and friends. There, among notes of support from friends and well-wishers, the family pleaded for information about the missing man. They received few promisingly leads, even as the FBI joined the search.

Nearly a month later, a strange confluence of mistakes and malice would intertwine this desperate family and their unspeakable tragedy with a national one. Within hours of the Boston Marathon bombings, while some social media users offered help to displaced runners and tourists, other users began to sift through the scores of pictures, videos, and firsthand accounts of the bombings that appeared on Twitter, Facebook, 4Chan, Reddit, and other online meeting spaces; of particular interest to these digital communities was the finish line feed and the hours

upon hours of amateur video uploaded to social media sites including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, which provided real time footage of the lead up to and aftermath of the explosions. Amateur investigators also paid close attention to the police scanner, which provided insight into law enforcement responses to the tragedy. This amateur sleuthing wasn't new, especially on Reddit. After the deadly Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012, Redditors began linking to the Facebook page of Ryan Lanza, who unfortunately shared a last name with shooter Adam Lanza. As they did in the case of Sunil Tripathi, Redditors eventually corrected their mistakes and deleted the erroneous information, but for Lanza – as for the Tripathi family – significant damage had already been done.

In the Tripathi case, it was more than a month after Sunil vanished and three days after the tragic events at the Marathon finish line when his heartbreaking disappearance intersected with a digital hunt for clues about the identity of the bombers. On Wednesday, April 19, one forum dedicated to crowdsourcing the manhunt began to garner national attention. Alongside forums on 4Chan and numerous blogs, the subreddit /r/findbostonbombers fueled speculation about the identity and whereabouts of bombing suspects. From “blue robe guy,” a bearded man carrying a black backpack who appeared in numerous photographs snapped in the hours before the bombs detonated, to an unlucky eBay user who purchased two pressure cookers not long before the bombing, Reddit users speculated wildly about the identity of the bombers based on little actual evidence. Not long after Reddit user oops777 initiated the /r/findbostonbombers forum, speculation landed squarely on Tripathi. What happened to Tripathi (and to other innocent men, including Mike Mulugeta) is called, in internet parlance, “doxing,” posting personal information about someone in the news. The wild speculation about Tripathi and the release of his family's address, telephone number, and other personal information led to hours of

harassment before the FBI publically released the names of the actual suspects. By then, though, the damage had been done. Erik Martin, Reddit's General Manager, apologized to the family:

When the stakes are high we must strive to show good judgment and solidarity... We have apologized privately to the family of missing college student Sunil Tripathi, as have various users and moderators. We want to take this opportunity to apologize publicly for the pain they have had to endure. We hope that this painful event will be channeled into something positive and the increased awareness will lead to Sunil's quick and safe return home.

Unfortunately, Tripathi would never return home. On April 23, 2013, Sunil's body was found in the waters off India Point Park in Providence. He'd died of an apparent suicide, likely on the same night he disappeared.

Though tragic, the outpouring of harassment, like the outpouring of support offered through #BostonHelp, offers important insight into the role that networks – not just individuals – play in the performance of agentive and meaningful acts. The harassment of the Tripathi family also illuminates a particularly vexing question about distributed agency: if no one human generates a particular agentive act, if, as I argued in Chapters Three and Four, agency is distributed across a network of humans and lively, vital nonhumans and if agency is the product not necessarily of human intention but of confluence and Kairos, then how do we hold actors accountable for the consequences of their agentive work? To answer that question – along with questions about the power of spaces like Reddit – this chapter will discuss the history of Reddit, the emergence of Tripathi as a suspect, his eventual exoneration, and the possibility that humans and nonhumans can all be held accountable for the consequences of the agency of the networks they inhabit.

A Brief Primer on Reddit

Founded in 2005 by recent University of Virginia graduates Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian, for much of its history, Reddit billed itself as an aggregator – but not an arbiter – for user generated content. Instead, Reddit positioned itself (and still does to some extent) as “content agnostic.” Reddit’s corporate ethos is decidedly libertarian: users are expected to police themselves and each other; the role of the organization, then, is to enable participation and creation not to constrain it, except (perhaps) in the direst of circumstances.

On Reddit, users, not paid writers, editors, or administrators, find/create and manage the site’s many subreddits – message boards organized around shared interests, questions, events, etc. Topics for subreddits (marked by “/r/”) range from horrifying (like /r/creepshots, where users posted sexualized – though not explicit – pictures of women taken without their knowledge) to humorous (like /r/adviceanimals, where members create and post “advice animal” memes, a particular strain of meme-making that features a picture of an animal or animals and three lines of text that represent a particular “stock character” and connects to some facet of the poster’s life) to informative (like /r/worldnews, which features links to the news stories from around the world). In order to manage such a variety – both in terms of topic and quality – of content, Reddit utilizes two main systems by which users reward “good” content and discourage the “bad.” First, Reddit operates on a scoring system for individual posts: any registered user who wishes to can “upvote” a post they like or find valuable and “downvote” a post they dislike, find objectionable, etc. The higher a post’s score (the upvotes minus the downvotes), the more likely a post is to show up on Reddit’s homepage, which can provide invaluable publicity for a post and its author. Reddit also operates on a “Karma” system based on “how much good the user has done for the reddit community” (“Frequently Asked Questions”). Most Karma is earned

from posting content that receives more upvotes than downvotes and by participating (moderating, volunteering, etc.) in the Reddit community.

Reddit's emphasis on participation and cooperation and their decision to position users as the ultimate authority regarding the site's content makes Reddit more than simply a space for affinity groups to share funny pictures or discuss current events. Instead, Reddit's community operates a bit like a liberal democracy with moderators and users voting on decisions about site policies and content. Alongside this civic governing model, Redditors have their own kind of ethos, and the community has official standards of behavior – some of which are articulated as subreddit specific rules but most of which are housed in the canonical “Reddiquette” document. Reddiquette begins with respect for other users: “Remember the human. When you communicate online, all you see is a computer screen. When talking to someone you might want to ask yourself ‘Would I say it to the person's face?’ or ‘Would I get jumped if I said this to a buddy?’” The document also reminds users to vote and comment, especially on the “New Submissions Page.” These community standards, then, are meant to encourage a kind of Reddit-centered civic participation. As Farhad Manjoo of *Slate* notes, the rules – and the fervor with which Redditors enforce the rules – have created a “real, vibrant community, one of the few big websites where the users have constructed an unmistakable moral and political philosophy.” The Reddiquette rules reveal something else, too: the emphasis on being a good citizen is limited almost exclusively to being a good citizen on Reddit. All twenty-two “dos” pertain to respecting other Redditors and the content they create or curate. Though discussions of how to treat those offsite and those who may be the subject of a post show up on the document – Reddiquette directly addresses sharing personal information – these discussions are far outweighed by the document's focus on being a good Reddit-zen.

This lack of concern for the subjects of posts/pictures on Reddit is reflected in the conduct of one of Reddit's most notorious authors: Violentacrez. Violentacrez – whose real name we now know is Michael Brutsch – was the progenitor of many of Reddit's most offensive subreddits, including the aforementioned /r/creepshots as well as /r/beatngwomen – where users posted images of battered women – and /r/jailbait – which featured pictures sexualized though not explicit pictures of underage girls. Despite the horrifying content of the subreddits he managed, Brutsch was well-known and widely beloved on the site. His standing on Reddit had much to do with his reputation as a contributing member of the community; in fact, despite the horrifying nature of his contributions, site administrators believed he was doing as much good as bad for the site:

Violentacrez's privileged position came from the fact that for years he had helped administrators deal with the massive seedy side of Reddit, acting almost as an unpaid staff member. Reddit administrators essentially handed off the oversight of the site's NSFW [not safe for work] side to Violentacrez, according to former Reddit lead programmer Chris Slowe (a.k.a. Keysersosa)...For all his unpleasantness, they realized that Violentacrez was an excellent community moderator and could be counted on to keep the administrators abreast of any illegal content he came across. "Once we came to terms he was actually pretty helpful. He would come to us with things that we hadn't noticed," said Slowe. "At the time there was only four of us working so that was a great resource for us to have" (Chen).

Though somewhat startling for outsiders, the alliance between Brutsch and paid staffers fits the libertarian, laissez faire philosophy of the site: because Brutsch's posts weren't illegal and didn't negatively affect the Reddit community directly, his work in weeding out illegal content made

him a valuable member of the community. The human subjects of his posts weren't part of Reddit and therefore weren't of concern to the site's administrators, not because Reddit's staff felt any sort of ill-will toward the subjects of the photos displayed in Brutsch's forums nor because they necessarily agreed with his worldview or the content of his posts but because their fundamental concern centers on the community itself; the humans of concern in the admonishment to "remember the human" are the humans that participate in the Reddit community.

Of course, Brutsch's forums are far from the only problematic ones on Reddit. More recently, Reddit forums played host to photos from "The Fappening," the moniker ascribed to the huge (and hugely illegal) hacking and posting of nude celebrity photographs from Apple iCloud accounts. Unlike Brutsch's content, these photos represented illegal activity and were almost immediately deleted from the site. In responding to questions about the differences between Reddit's response to the Tripathi debacle, /r/jailbait, and the forums that hosted these hacked photos, CEO Yishin Wong, offered valuable insight into what he sees as the primary purpose of the Reddit community: "We consider ourselves not just a company running a website where one can post links and discuss them, but the government of a new type of community. The role and responsibility of a government differs from that of a private corporation, in that it exercises restraint in the usage of its powers" (Jeong). Reddit, Wong claimed, is not simply a space; it's a digital nation-state run by redditors, one governed by the philosophy and guidance of Reddit's founders, moderators, and employees. Though seemingly grandiose, Wong's claim resonates with how many users experience the web. Writing for *Forbes*, Sarah Jeong argues that "the web is increasingly experienced through a handful of centralized platforms, and the rules those centralized platforms impose are non-trivial to public life and community." The rules established

by Reddit, the choices made about what to allow, what to delete, and whose voices to amplify and silence have real consequences for those users, for the web more generally, and for the ways that agency develops in these spaces.

Tripathi's Name Goes Viral

Reddit's tangible effect on those outside the space was, of course, obvious in the aftermath of the misidentification of Sunil Tripathi, when Reddit's massive power combined with little to no editorial oversight led to a harrowing experience for an already grieving family. A few days into the massive manhunt for the Boston Bombing suspects, speculation began that one of the grainy photos of the suspects looked like the missing student. On Reddit, the speculation ran rampant: using the headshot profile picture from the Facebook page set up by his family to find him, Redditor AuDBallBag asserted, "I'm having a hard time unseeing [the resemblance] when I look at this profile pic on the facebook page and then the profile pics of the suspect. Also, in the face-on photo with the suspect on a phone, the features seem to fit." Redditors' speculation about Tripathi's involvement was bolstered by tweets from a high school acquaintance, Kim Mattioli known on Twitter as @kmattio, who posted a side by side comparison photo of Tripathi and the first grainy photo of the "Suspect #2" and concluded that "I don't think his disappearance and the FBI/his family's inability to find him is a coincidence. Let's say that." Over the course of an hour, Mattioli exchanged more than three dozen tweets with a dozen other users defending her identification. Back on Reddit, those that cautioned that naming Tripathi and offering wild speculation without evidence might be ethically problematic were met with outrage: "Get off your high horses. His name and information is now being discussed on hundreds of websites. Your high and mighty, misguided moral fiber doesn't carry any weight. This is a news site (among other things) and this is FUCKING NEWS."

The connection also seemed to be supported by tweeted transcripts of Boston Police scanner chatter. Around 2:40 am, a Redditor and Twitter user, Greg Hughes, claimed to hear Tripathi's name – along with the name Mike Mulugeta – over the Boston Police scanner. When pressed for the source of his information, Hughes pointed to the police scanner frequency (which many were livestreaming through the site *Broadcastify*) and the Reddit transcript of the scanner. There was only one problem: though the name Mulugeta had indeed been mentioned by Boston Police, Tripathi's name appears nowhere in the transcript nor in the recording from that night; Boston Police and FBI would later confirm that Tripathi had never been a suspect in the bombings. Despite the fact that law enforcement never mentioned Tripathi's name, Hughes tweet (“BPD has identified the names: Suspect 1: Mike Mulugeta. Suspect 2: Sunil Tripathi.”) served as the basis for the nightmare the Tripathi family was about to endure. Writing for the *Atlantic* a few days after the manhunt ended, Alexis Madrigal described the aftermath of Hughes' claim like this:

There was a full-on frenzy as thousands upon thousands of tweets poured out, many celebrating new media's victory in trouncing old media. It was all so shockingly new and the pitch was so high and it was so late at night on one of the craziest days in memory. That Redditors might have identified the bomber hours before anyone but law enforcement seemed like amazing redemption for people who'd supported Reddit's crowdsourcing efforts.

This congratulatory tone – combined with the smug certainty in the face of questions about the ethics of sharing unverified information about potential suspects and fueled by increasing speculation on Twitter and Reddit – produced an avalanche of nasty messages on the Facebook page the family set up as part of their search for Tripathi. The misidentification of Tripathi in

these digital spaces also had real-life consequences for the family after someone posted personal contact information, including their addresses and private phone. Though the personal contact information was quickly deleted from Reddit – and in fact, Reddit denies that personal phone numbers were posted in the /r/findbostonbombers thread – links to the Tripathi’s Facebook page remained on Reddit even after the /r/findbostonbombers thread itself was removed from the site.

In the wake of the devastating misinformation about Tripathi, Erik Martin defended the intentions of the /r/findbostonbombers group, but he acknowledged that things had somehow gone terribly wrong: “though started with noble intentions, some of the activity on Reddit fueled online witch hunts and dangerous speculation which spiraled into very negative consequences for innocent parties.” Though Twitter users – especially @kmattio and those that reported hearing Tripathi’s name on the police scanner – had a hand in this terrible case of mistaken identity, it was Reddit where the real damage was done. Unencumbered by the 140 character limit of Twitter and bolstered by a growing sense of righteous anger at the terrible events at the finish line of the Boston Marathon, Redditors unleashed a torrent of anger and vileness on Tripathi and his family. What is it about Reddit, though, that makes such practices possible and – up to this point – seemingly permissible? As Will Oremus, a senior technology writer at *Slate*, argues regarding the role of Reddit and Twitter in the misidentification of Sunil Tripathi as a suspect in the Boston Marathon bombings, “the truth is that the platform does matter. From Twitter’s 140 characters to Reddit’s upvote system to cable news’ relentless pressure to fill airtime, the medium shapes the message.” The answer to the questions about the role and culpability of this nonhuman – the space itself – seemingly governed by human actors has ramifications for our assertions about responsibility.²³

²³ As Marilyn Cooper noted in her discussion of Latour’s vision of an agency that includes a more robust role for nonhumans, the most pressing question facing those who would advocate a distributed sense of agency and cause

Reddit and the Tripathi Family

The “witch hunt” to which Martin referred in his statement produced tangible consequences for Tripathi’s family: according to a spokesperson for the family, in early morning hours of April 19th, as speculation ran rampant of Facebook and Twitter that Sunil was one of those responsible for the horrific events at the Boston Marathon finish line a few days earlier, they received threatening emails via information shared (though quickly deleted) on Reddit and 4Chan as well as hateful messages posted to family’s public Facebook page. The harassment reached such a point, in fact, that the family took the page down, a decision that seemed to increase speculation about Sunil’s guilt.²⁴ Further, between 3 and 4:15 am, Sunil’s sister Sanjeeta received 58 voice messages, many from journalists asking for her reaction to her brother’s status as a suspect; the family also woke up to more than a dozen news vans parked on their street and in front of their house. When interviewed days after Sunil’s name was cleared by the FBI, Sanjeeta said that the family never believed Sunil played any role in the bombings but the onslaught of hateful missives was devastating. Though she appreciated Martin’s apology, she said, “The costs to somebody who is in a fragile state are immense and not undone by a casual apology” (Kang).

Reddit, Electracy, and Distributed Agency

I pause here, then, after articulating the tangible harm created by this strange confluence of events and users to call attention to the power of these digital spaces. This powerful network of humans and nonhumans represents a particularly potent example of the kind of agentive technological network discussed by Latour and others. For my purposes here, the work of Gregory Ulmer seems particularly prescient. Ulmer’s work on electracy – his term of the new

and effect is who and how to hold actors responsible when we can no longer claim one rhetor as the sole author of an agentive act.

²⁴ *BuzzFeed*’s Erik Malinowski tweeted about the “missing” Facebook page and speculated that the removal of the page indicated Tripathi must indeed be a suspect.

epoch typified by electronic communication and digital identity – identifies digital technologies and spaces as co-equal participants in the creation of our new digitally centered world. As Marc Santos, et al. argue in their article on Ulmer’s mystory genre, “For Ulmer, communicative technologies are not merely tools we use, but powerful ideological agents that influence (though not necessarily determine) who we are, shaping our identities, desires, and the horizons of what we consider possible.” Ulmer’s electracy encompasses not just a new way of gathering information, but a new way of thinking, one that supplements the logocentric focus of literacy to create a more robust decision-making apparatus: “Electronic thinking does not abandon, exclude, or replace analytic thinking; it puts it in its place in a larger system of reasoning” (Ulmer, 1989, 66). This larger system, then, includes relationships with others – both humans and nonhumans – to the extent that “for Ulmer, there is no sense of a self apart from others. There is no self uninhibited from the influence of networks” (Santos, et al.). Networks then become the primary vehicle for agentic action because human and nonhuman alike are created in concert with the networks to which they belong. It is the process of making and unmaking networks – of, to use Latour’s vocabulary, enrolling and un-enrolling participants – that creates the conditions for agency.

This emphasis on agency as an event closely mirrors Carolyn Miller’s argument in “What Can Automation Tell Us about Agency?” In that piece, as I noted in Chapter Two, Miller argues that agency is a product of an event as opposed to a possession of the rhetor or audience. Agency, Miller, notes is of particular importance to rhetoric because of its connection to political change. This insistence on personal agency to produce political change also creates a “metonymy between agent and agency” (144). However, the death of the Enlightenment subject and the rise of the fractured postmodern subject (Bizzell; Faigley) reveals the problematic nature of this

metonymic assumption. Instead of being a possession, then, Miller argues that agency is a product (though perhaps an illusory product) of interactions between rhetor and audience:

Agency thus could not exist prior to or as a result of the evanescent act. Our talk about agency has tended to essentialize the temporal, condensing into a property or possession of the hypostatized agent what more productively should remain temporalized in the act or performance. As the kinetic energy of performance, agency resolves its doubleness, positioned exactly between the agent's capacity and the effect on an audience (147).

This insistence on rhetorical agency as performative emphasizes the relational nature of rhetorical agency. As Miller argues, “performance requires a relationship,” revealing that “interaction is necessary for agency” (149). Miller reminds us, however, that this argument is not a new one: Karlyn Kohrs Campbell locates a similar argument – that agency is “communal, social, cooperative, participatory” (5) – in ancient Greek rhetorical and civic practice. Miller also points to John Louis Lucaites and Celeste Michelle Condit's 1999 textbook/reader on contemporary rhetorical theory, in which they remind the reader that rhetorical agency has always been “bound in relationship” between rhetor and audience (612).

This final argument – that agency requires relationships – lines up with Marilyn Cooper's argument in “Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted,” which have previously examined in Chapters Two and Three. In Chapter Three in particular, I noted that Cooper argues for a kind of relational and distributed agency. More specifically, Cooper relies on the work of Bruno Latour to argue that

neither conscious intention nor free will—at least as we commonly think of them—is involved in acting or bringing about change: though the world changes in response to individual action, agents are very often not aware of their intentions, they do not directly

cause changes, and the choices they make are not free from influence from their inheritance, past experiences, or their surround. (421)

In Chapter Three, I focused largely on Cooper's emphasis on embodiment and independence, which I argue are not part of Latour's discussion of networked action and agency. Here, however, I'd like to emphasize Cooper's discussion of process and reciprocity. Despite her insistence on independent agents, Cooper also argues that change is a result of interactions between rhetors and other human and nonhuman participants: "order (and change) results from an ongoing process in which a multitude of agents interact frequently and in which the results of interactions feed back into the process" (421). Furthermore, she notes that agency is always "responsive" (422) and that it "function[s] as part of the systems in which [it] originate[s]" (421). These systems – as well as the kind of circular causation that characterizes such complex systems – exist in a state of "ongoing perturbation and response" (437).

Placing these two arguments side-by-side reveals significant overlap between Miller's and Cooper's arguments. However, Cooper notes one important distinction: while Miller recognizes agency as a disembodied property of the interaction between rhetor and audience, Cooper insists upon an independent, embodied rhetor who can be held responsible for the consequences of his or her actions: "In contrast [to Miller's argument that agency is analogous to kinetic energy], I argue that deeds are always done by someone, and replacing the doer of the action, the agent, with an amorphous force like kinetic energy leaves us with no basis for assigning responsibility for actions" (438). Cooper's primary concern here, as it is throughout her essay, is ensuring that theories of rhetorical agency attend to the question of responsibility.

Cooper's Critique of Distributed Agency

In fact, Cooper's preoccupation with responsibility is, I would argue, her primary point of departure from Latour's more sweeping revision to agency: for Latour, all action occurs via

networks of humans and nonhumans. Latour doesn't offer his readers a way to identify a singular responsible member of the network; instead, the network itself is the entity with the power to create change. Cooper, however, argues that it is not enough to hold a network accountable; we must be able to hold an individual human accountable. Cooper relies heavily on work by neuroscientist Walter Freeman to make this argument. Of particular importance, Cooper says, is crafting a theory of agency that recognizes that we "experience ourselves as causal agents." Freemans work further emphasizes that "the attribution of causal agency by humans to other humans is essential for social organization and control, because it is the basis for assigning responsibility, with credit and reward or blame and punishment, individually and collectively" (430). Responsible agents, then, are those who are capable of recognizing the agentive potential in the others they encounter:

Recognition of an other as someone capable of agency, someone capable of making a difference, is important in persuasion, but rather than creating agency, it is how a rhetor becomes responsible, how a rhetor enables real persuasion. Agency is inescapable: rhetors are agents by virtue of their addressing an audience. They become responsible rhetors by recognizing the audience not only as agents, but as concrete others who have opinions and beliefs grounded in the experiences and perceptions and meanings constructed in their brains (Cooper 442).

This sense of responsibility and agency is undeniably human. Cooper urges us to recognize the potential for agency in other humans and, in doing so, become more responsible rhetors ourselves. I would agree with Cooper here: we must recognize the agentive potential of the other members of our networks. I would not, however, restrict this recognition to humans; instead, as I note in Chapter Two and as I will argue in the remaining pages of this chapter, I wish to use the

misidentification of Sunil Tripathi as a case study in how we might recognize the potential in both human and nonhuman participants and discuss how human and nonhuman members of this agentive network were held accountable.

Holding Humans Accountable

Cooper's argument about the need for human accountability is compelling, and in the case of the misidentification of Tripathi as one of the Boston Marathon bombing suspects, there are certainly humans who are culpable for the damage done to the Tripathi family. Among the most high profile of these might be Reddit General Manager Erik Martin. As the *Verge* noted after Martin's departure in October 2014, Martin's primary role was as spokesperson for the site, not just for "Reddit as a forum, but for Reddit as a freewheeling intentional community" (Robertson). Martin's role as spokesperson placed him firmly in the crosshairs of criticism regarding Reddit's role in the Tripathi family's harassment, and in response to pressure from those in the national news media, Martin eventually apologized: "We want to take this opportunity to apologize publicly for the pain they have had to endure. We hope that this painful event will be channeled into something positive and the increased awareness will lead to Sunil's quick and safe return home." As noted earlier, however, Sunil would never return home. Martin's apology, though, follows the expected script for human accountability: as a participant in agentive action with negative consequences, other members of the wider community – in this case members of the national new media – pressured Martin to admit wrong doing and provide some sort of promised change in behavior.

We see a similar pattern in the case of the oops777, the user who created /r/findbostonbomber. For oops777, it was the Reddit community itself to which he was forced to answer: on April 22, 2013, just days after the disastrous accusations against Tripathi appeared on Reddit, oops777 hosted an AMA – Ask Me Anything. On Reddit, the AMA is a particularly

important part of the site's ethos and history. On forums like /r/AMA and /r/IAmA, regular users and celebrities alike create threads in which other users can – as the name implies – ask them anything. Notable AMAs include those from President Barack Obama, Bill Gates, and Louis C.K. While these AMAs usually focus on the notable accomplishments of the original poster (OP), oops777's AMA experience was quite different: dozens of users took the opportunity to question oops777's motives and decision making. Though some posters were obviously trolling oops777 (that is, using the forum to make deliberately offensive or provocative comments in order to provoke a reaction), others seemed genuinely dismayed: "Why, after it was proven time and again that /r/findbostonbombers was a magnet for false accusations and cyberstalking didn't you close the subreddit?" (thirtydegrees). Whatever their motives, however, the users who challenged oops777 in the AMA were using the tools of the Reddit community to hold a fellow Redditor accountable for his role in the harassment of the Tripathi family.

Reddit users' focus on Tripathi – amplified by users on oops777's /r/findbostonbombers forum – found support for their claims from a user of a different social media site. Over on Twitter, among the most frequently cited sources of claims and confirmations about Tripathi's involvement in the bombings was Kami Mattioli, a high school classmate of Sunil's. Though she hadn't seen Tripathi in at least three years, Mattioli openly speculated that he bore a striking resemblance to suspect #2; Mattioli went so far as to post a photo collage that included pictures from the family's Facebook page on Sunil's disappearance alongside pictures of the suspects released by the FBI. Mattioli's speculation turned out to be misguided if not malevolent, and other users told her so: on each of her tweets regarding Sunil's possible involvement in the bombings, other users (some of whom seemed to know Mattioli personally and some who

appeared to only know her via social media) cautioned restraint and encouraged her to contact the FBI directly if she believed she had pertinent information.

Though this feedback didn't necessarily alter Mattioli's behavior – she continued to defend her assertions and let other users know she “hope[d]...to be wrong” about Sunil's involvement – the feedback she received from other users makes clear that the Twitter community held her responsible for the information she was sharing. Eventually – about twelve hours after posting her belief that suspect #2 might be Tripathi and thirty minutes after the FBI confirmed that suspect #2 was, in fact, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev – Mattioli took to Twitter to apologize: “I want to issue a formal & public apology to the Tripathi family for any undue stress my Tweet about possible resemblance may have caused.” Still, the Twitter community was not so forgiving. Though some users replied with support and justifications for Mattioli's tweets, others, especially Jodhbir Sachdeva, a management consultant with strong ties to the Indian community in the Northeast, pushed Mattioli and those who supported her to understand the damage she'd done: “Maligning someone on twitter as a terrorist instead of going to the police is pretty wrong... But you do realize such irresponsible behavior would have brought immense pain to an already suffering family?” This sort of feedback and conversation represents the primary way that responsibility and reflection happen: via users holding other users accountable for the consequences of their actions.

Lessons from the Challenger Disaster: Nonhuman Responsibility

Human accountability in case of Tripathi's misidentification took expected forms: media and community pressure to apologize to those harmed. But how might the space itself be held accountable? After all, representatives of the site – General Manager Erik Martin and forum creator oops777 – were held accountable for their actions. Isn't that enough? In what follows, I will argue that holding human participants is not enough. Instead, a more complete picture of

responsibility includes both the human and nonhuman – in this case Reddit itself. In the case of nonhuman spaces, technologies, etc., responsibility takes the form of redesign.

Perhaps the easiest way to understand nonhuman accountability is to examine another disaster that involves humans and technology: the loss of the Space Shuttle Challenger. Challenger has long served as one of primary cases supporting the need for technical communication and rhetoric of science research and practice (Dombrowski; Jabs; Christine Miller; Moore; Winsor). In “When Politeness is Fatal: Technical Communication and the Challenger Accident,” Patrick Moore reviews the numerous communication failures that led to the tragic decision to launch Challenger. Moore – like many in technical communication scholars who have written about the Challenger disaster – focuses specifically on the communication breakdowns that characterize the decision to launch despite the engineers’ warnings about potentially catastrophic equipment failure. Specifically, Moore argues that a misplaced sense of politeness resulted in miscommunication that was “blurred and muffled” by fear and outside political pressures. Like Moore, Dombrowski (1995) sees problematic – even unethical – communication practices at the center of the disaster and argues that neither additional data nor advances in technology could have prevented the disaster; rather, he says, that the failure to prevent the launch was ultimately an ethical one and that, in order to prevent future tragedies, ethical choices should be foregrounded and “deliberated among people in an interminate way” (146).

Despite this emphasis on the role of communication in the Challenger disaster, these authors also acknowledge that the human breakdown exacerbated a material one. As Moore notes, “O-rings, low temperatures, and managers who ignored the warnings of engineers were key contributors to the disaster” (Moore, 270). Similarly, Dorothy Winsor, in her argument that

questions about miscommunication between engineers and decision makers had been – to that point – insufficiently nuanced, suggests that the disaster can be attributed both to the “O-rings’ flaws...[and the] evidence which clearly demonstrated the flaws” as well as to communication about those flaws (8).

Like these authors, the Rogers Commission Report, the product of months of Congressional inquiry, discusses both human and material causes for the disaster. In fact, the Commission recommended procedural, technical, and communicative changes to NASA’s launch procedures. Most recommendations, in fact, are a hybrid of at least two of these; that is to say, most of the committee’s recommendations have both a material and rhetorical component. Consider, for example, the recommendation that “NASA should consider reinstating full X-ray inspection of the propellant and insulation for all motors used on succeeding flights... [and] in conjunction with the appropriate contractors, should investigate the development of new, more accurate inspection techniques” (18). In order to address the potential for undetected leaks, the commission recommends a procedural fix (the reimplementation of x-ray inspections) with rhetorical and material dimensions and a technical/communicative one (consulting with contractors and developing a better way of inspecting the propellant and insulation). The Commission also suggests other hybrid – that is both material and rhetorically constructed – recommendations, including designating “the manufacture of critical items, such as the O-rings” as ‘critical’ processes,” a semantic shift that signifies a change to the material process by which those items are made (18).

Reddit’s Rules Changes

Like the Rogers Commission’s hybrid recommendations, Reddit’s revisions to their site policies and governing philosophy following the tragic misidentification of Tripathi involve changes both to human behavior and technological capacity. Despite pronouncements throughout

the scandal surrounding Violentacrez and his /r/creepshots and /r/jailbait forums that the site remained committed to their libertarian approach to content, in the weeks and months following the misidentification of Tripathi, Reddit signaled it was ready move beyond its content agnostic position to a more interventionist one. This new governing philosophy can be seen most easily in the site administrators' responses to a subsequent tragedy: the nearly immediate deletion of /r/findnavyyardshooters, a crowdsourced search for the perpetrators of the September 2013 shooting at the Naval Sea Systems command inside the Washington Naval Yard. About five hours after the deadly shooting that killed thirteen including the shooter and injured eight more, it looked like Reddit was about to wade back into the treacherous waters surrounding a crowdsourced manhunt: between 1:00 and 1:15 pm EST, Redditor uglyredditors created the /r/findnavyyardshooters and included just one subreddit specific rule: "no personal information about leads unless you are really sure." By 3:15 EST, though, the subreddit had been deleted. According to Erik Martin, administrators deleted the forum because "it violated site rules by encouraging the posting of personal information. The quote from the side bar that subreddit that was banned said 'no personal information about leads unless you are really sure.' We do not allow the posting of personal information under any circumstances." News outlet covering the deletion – including the *Washington Post*, *Huffington Post*, and technologically oriented *Mashable* – noted that the deletion seemed to be a direct implementation of Reddit's promised reforms following the Tripathi ordeal.

Conclusion: Networked Responsibility

Despite the distribution of agency and responsibility across all members of the agentive network, human responsibility remains integral to human and nonhuman agency. The argument that redesign represents a way of holding nonhuman participants accountable for the part in these disasters (Challenger, the misidentification of Tripathi) actually strengthens human

responsibility: as I noted at the end of the last section, Reddit's rules changes and redesigns are the result of human intervention. The nonhumans, in Reddit's case at least, are held accountable by human designers and moderators who recognized the destructive power of the space and intervened. The redesign of the site, however, did not prevent human members of the agentive network from being held accountable by those inside and outside the Reddit community: General Manager Erik Martin, forum creator oops777, and Tripathi classmate Kami Mattioli are all held accountable by various communities to which they belong and/or must respond. In the case of Sunil Tripathi, then, all members of the network can be held accountable without diluting the responsibility of any of the actors. Humans and nonhumans alike changed their behavior as a way to take responsibility for the harm caused to the Tripathi family.

Afterword: Why New Materialism, Why Agency, Why Now

“We tell the humanists that *the more nonhumans share existence with humans, the more humane a collective is*” – Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope*²⁵

Jane Bennett argues that illusions of mastery lead to the casual destruction of the planet. Human mastery and notions of human exceptionalism and autonomous agency allow us to blame those who do not succeed for their lack. For too many advocates of this kind of independence and autonomy, it’s not that there are powerful, as yet unaccounted for networks of humans and nonhumans that reinforce and strengthen existing structures of power. It’s not that systems, laws, technologies, corporations, even educational institutions, are complex systems with histories and inheritances that influence – even determine – outcomes. It’s that a single individual must be responsible for her/his success or lack of success. Bootstraps and all that. What the new materialists offer us is something quite different. Instead of pinning success on a single human actor, new materialists sketch a world in which nonhumans and humans must work together, must recruit allies and persuade advocates in order to affect change.

I don’t advocate a new materialist position in this project simply for theories’ sake. The theory itself is intricate and important, but it is not an end in and of itself. Rather, like Latour, like Bennett, I offer a new materialist reading of this complex situation precisely because such an approach makes my understanding of the aftermath all the more human. And hopefully all the more humane. Such a reading of the social media aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombings multiplies the bodies and hybrids that I must account for and answer to. There is no lone cause for

²⁵ Page 18, emphasis original

the good – the material support, the shared resources, the care and comfort for victims and fellow citizens – or the bad – the irreparable, unimaginable pain caused to an already grieving family or the hate directed at those already judged for the color of their skin or religious affiliation. Instead, the good and the bad are products of overlapping networks of humans and nonhumans. The network must be held responsible for these outcomes, and in order to do that kind of work, we must slowly, carefully trace the connections.

The forensic and political work required to shift our focus from single, human, actor-heroes to complex systems is immense. It's messy. But it is also an advantageous shift, for if we are successful in more fully accounting for the networks that create change, we might, first, better understand the kinds of small and systematic changes that might actual matter to others lived experience. We might also begin to represent – rhetorically and politically – the causes of complex social problems. We might begin to talk about, finally, in concrete ways, the inequalities built into our systems. If we can – if only in momentary, provisional ways – escape the fiction of the independent, self-made citizen, if we can begin to multiply responsibilities so that poverty and disadvantage are no longer products of (a lack of) personal responsibility but are instead social products of shared responsibilities, perhaps we can also change the political conversations about who and how to help the poorest among us.

Latour exhorts the staunch humanist to see that the addition of multitudes of lively nonhumans makes our collectives more human and more humane. Indeed, the addition of nonhumans forces us to recognize our weddedness to them and to each other. It forces us to acknowledge our dependence on one another. Only then, perhaps, might we treat those nonhumans – the animals, the technologies, the microbes, the ideas – with some care. Only then, perhaps, might we treat one another with more care.

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