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Introduction

On the 20th of June 2008, the first presidential campaign debate to be held on Twitter was launched. For five days, Liz Mair and Michael Nelson, standing for each of the two major candidates to the US presidential election, have used their Twitter account in order to engage in a debate on technology and government. This initiative, called "#pdfdebate", has had no real posterity to this day and has generally been considered as a failure. Many commenters have linked this failure to the fact that Twitter and its interface are not suited for an extended conversation such as a debate.

This study does not focus on the failure itself, but on what #pdfdebate was meant to be: a discursive experiment. The organizers had indeed conceived it as a "freewheeling" experiment meant to try and see what debating on Twitter would be like. In this respect, it constitutes a promising dataset for any discourse analyst interested in computer-mediated discourse. Using the tools of discourse analysis and computer-mediated discourse analysis, this study then aims at taking a closer look at rhetoric, in the original Latin meaning of « art of public speaking », in the specific context of Twitter. It looks at how language is used by the debaters and technics of argumentation used on Twitter, both specific and not specific to Twitter. Ultimately, the research question is to find out whether there is such a thing as a Twitter rhetoric. Even though this debate is now seven years old and the format of tweets and Twitter interface might have changed, #pdfdebate still proves to be a good starting point to answer those questions.

1. pdfdebate: A "2.0" debate?

1.1. #pdfdebate: dataset

The debate was officially opened by the moderator on the 20th June, at 3.56pm and ended on the 24th of June, at 3.59pm. It thus spanned over five days. There are three participants:
-The moderator, Ana Marie Cox, who is a political blogger.
-Liz Mair, who represents John McCain. At the time, she was the Republican National Committee's director of online communication.
-Michael Nelson who represents Barack Obama. He was a technology advisor for the Democrats at the time and had previously worked as a communication strategist for IBM and Microsoft and was a Visiting Professor of Communication and Technology at Georgetown University.
The dataset of the debate is made of all the tweets posted by any of the three participants between the official start and end of the debate, which bear the official hashtag #pdfdebate. The total number of tweets corresponding to this description is 140.

1.2. #pdfdebate vs traditional political debate

Neither of the two debaters could be considered as a Twitter expert or as an intensive user at the time. A commenter on Twitter even calls them seemingly "twitter newbies". However, that is precisely what is interesting in this debate: observing what two political communication advisers, who may well be accustomed to face-to-face political debate, can do with and of the new media they are supposed to use. How do they adapt to this new technology? Can they transfer rhetorical strategies to this new medium? Or, to say it differently, does Twitter allow them to "do different things, or to do old things in different ways" (Jones *et al.* 2005: 10).

To answer those questions, one has to start from traditional face-to face political debate and examine how #pdfdebate relates to it. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a debate is "a formal discussion on a particular matter". However, French linguist Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni opposes debate and discussion, in that for her, a debate is more organized and formal than a discussion. Moreover, it is set in a "pre-fixed" framework, which is not the case of a discussion: it spans over a pre-determined length of time, involves a pre-determined number of participants and revolves around a pre-determined topic which the participants discuss. A debate also normally involves the presence of an audience and of a moderator, who presides over the debate and makes sure it goes smoothly (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1990 : 118). All those defining parameters are present in #pdfdebate: there is a moderator, an audience (potentially any Twitter user), a predefined topic (technology and government), a pre-determined set of participants, and an official beginning and end. What is more, the ultimate goal of the debaters is the same: sway the audience to one's point of view. All in all, on the face of it, #pdfdebate is a pretty traditional political debate. As a result, the main differences between a more traditional debate on TV, on the radio or in a public meeting on the one hand, and a debate on Twitter on the other hand, amount to the differences between spoken discourse between two co-present speaker and computer-mediated discourse between two persons that are distant in space and possibly time.

2. Rhetoric and the format of the tweet

2.1. Language in the "Twi-bate"

A debate is a discursive object, i.e., something made of words. The first thing to look at to characterise #pdfdebate is therefore language. As it has been written above, a debate is a formal exchange: a political debate constitutes a formal context, which in turn implies formal discourse. On the opposite, language on Twitter is generally less formal. In *Internet Linguistics* David Crystal studies a randomly selected sample of 200 tweets, which turn out to have a "generally informal tone" (2011: 46). Tweets generally present many linguistic features traditionally attached to informal discourse that are often perceived as typical of computer-mediated discourse (even though there is no such thing as a language specific to computer-mediated communication, see Bieswanger 2013, Herring 2007 and 2012, Bieswanger and Intermann, 2011). Barton and Lee (2013, 5) provide a useful synthetic list of those main perceived features:

    -the use of acronyms and initialism (GTG for "got to go", LOL)
    -Word reductions ("gd" for good)
    -the use of letter / number homophones (U for "you")
    -stylized spelling (I'm sooooo happy).

        -the use of emoticons
        -unconventional / stylized punctuation (for example multiple exclamation marks)

Interestingly enough, the two debaters of #pdfdebate indeed use some of those linguistic features but not systematically, not to an equal amount, and not all of them. In fact, Liz Mair uses one or more of the features listed above in 27 of her 45 tweets in the debate, while Michael Nelson only uses them in 12 of his 58 tweets. What is more, only Liz Mair uses emoticons, one of the most salient features of computer-mediated discourse, and only twice. Maybe this is because the use of emoticons, though helpful to reflect one's emotions or attitude, is still considered as too informal and reserved to private conversations or conversations with friends and family. Same goes for stylized punctuation, stylized spelling and some popular acronyms and initialisms typical of online discourse such as LOL or OMG, which neither Mair nor Nelson uses. Apart from their informality, they may also be deemed too typical of teen language, and hence not appropriate for adults taking part in a political debate (see Tagliamonte and Denis 2008 for a detailed study). The most recurring features are acronyms (e.g., NN for net neutrality, JSM for John McCain, R&D), none of which belong to the ones typically encountered in computer-mediated discourse, word reductions (gov't, repubs) and letter number homophones (4 used instead of "for"). This is not surprising since all of them are shortening techniques, which are often needed in Twitter because of the very format of tweets at the time, that enables to use 140 characters only.

Apart from those micro-linguistics features, this limiting format also has an influence on the construction of discourse. This is particularly interesting in the context of a political debate, where argumentative structures are specifically important.

2.2. Discourse construction

On Twitter, the debaters have to work within the notoriously limiting format of the tweet, which allows using up to 140 characters in a single tweet. The first question that comes to mind is then whether this very restrictive texting format is compatible with the type of discourse expected to be used and produced in a political debate. In his 2011 study Crystal remarks that series of sentential fragments (portions of discourse whose syntactic structure is fragmented or incomplete) are often encountered on Twitter. Such fragments are also found in #pdfdebate:

<div align="center">Figure 1: sentential fragments in tweets</div>
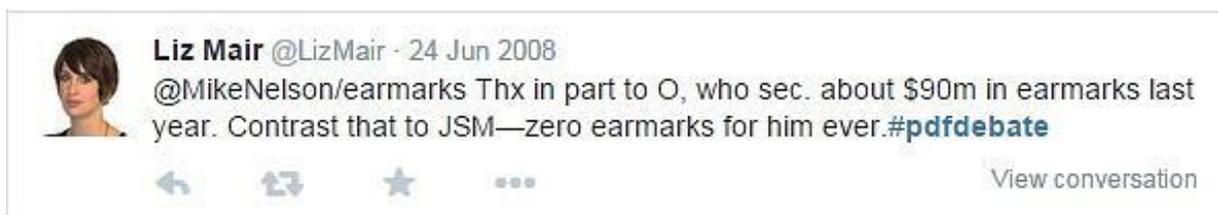
Liz Mair @LizMair · 21 Jun 2008
@anamariecox: Plus more bus. investment incentives and reduced corp. taxes. Obama wants higher taxes.#pdfdebate

View conversation

Michael Nelson @MikeNelson · 21 Jun 2008
To make gov. decision making more transparent, post more budget details, minutes of meetings, analyses, draft rec., etc. #pdfdebate

In this case, it is often impossible to understand what was meant without contextualization and without reading the message a few times. In such tweets, as Crystal writes, even when there is a "coherent structure at phrase of clause level", "words are sometimes juxtaposed in a way which makes immediate interpretation impossible" (Crystal 2011: 45). In #pdfdebate, 28 out of 140 tweets (20%) can be labelled as presenting sentential fragments, which is a bit less than in Crystal's sample (35%). The main reason why those sentential fragments are difficult to understand is that most of the time they are not self-contained and / or are too distant from the initial tweet or question they reply too. Their context is then lost and the tweet, on its own, becomes impossible to understand.

It is a logical enough problem on Twitter because response tweets are very often distant, in time and space (on screen) from the tweet they respond to. However, producing cryptic tweets is problematic in the context of a debate, which is meant to be followed and read by people who have to be convinced and swayed into voting for a candidate. One can see that the debaters sometimes try to implement techniques in order to deal with this problem. For example, the "sentential fragment" effect may sometimes be avoided thanks to a recap word saying what the tweet is about, most of the time in the form of "re" + keyword:

Figure 2: tweet beginning with re + recap word

Michael Nelson @MikeNelson · 22 Jun 2008
Re: Net Neutrality. Barack has set clear goal of NN and an open Internet: http://www.barackobama.com/issues/technology/ #pdfdebate

Another, more Twitter-friendly, strategy consists in using the "reply" function that appears at the bottom of a tweet. It is one of the primitive functions of Twitter, and one of the few functions conceived for interaction between users. It enables users to reply directly to a tweet and to make their reply appear directly under the initial tweet in what is called a "conversation".

However, it is to be noted this function is very often awkwardly used by the debaters. For example, Liz Mair often uses the reply function on the last tweet that has been posted in the debate instead of the tweet that she wants to respond to. As a result, her reply appears in a conversation with a tweet which has nothing to do with:

Figure 3: reply posted on wrong tweet

In this case, faulty contextualization makes it even more difficult to understand the tweet. Generally speaking, #pdfdebate tweets tend to be long. The dataset comprises no "minor sentences" (Crystal 2011: 46) such as "yeah" or "wow", although Crystal takes them to be "a noticeable feature of Twitter data". There is only one one-word sentence in the whole debate, and no one-word tweet. On the contrary, sentences are long and quite complex. In #pdfdebate, the average number of sentences per tweet is 1.6 and the average number of words per sentence is 11.5. This means tweets are by no means simplistic or not developed. It also means that despite its limiting format, Twitter still leaves room for grammatical complexity.

This naturally goes hand in hand with an expected high average number of characters per tweet. Only twelve tweets, 8.5% of all tweets, count less than a hundred characters. In fact, most tweets approach the maximum character limit: 53% of tweets are 135 characters long or more and 14,2% of tweets use the upper limit of Twitter texting and are precisely 140 characters long. The average length of tweets in the debate is 129,9 characters.

The debaters and the moderator are often tempted to get around the character limit by producing multiple tweets in a row, most of the time developing a single point in a few tweets. Liz Mair does it a few times in the form of lists that span over two or three tweets:

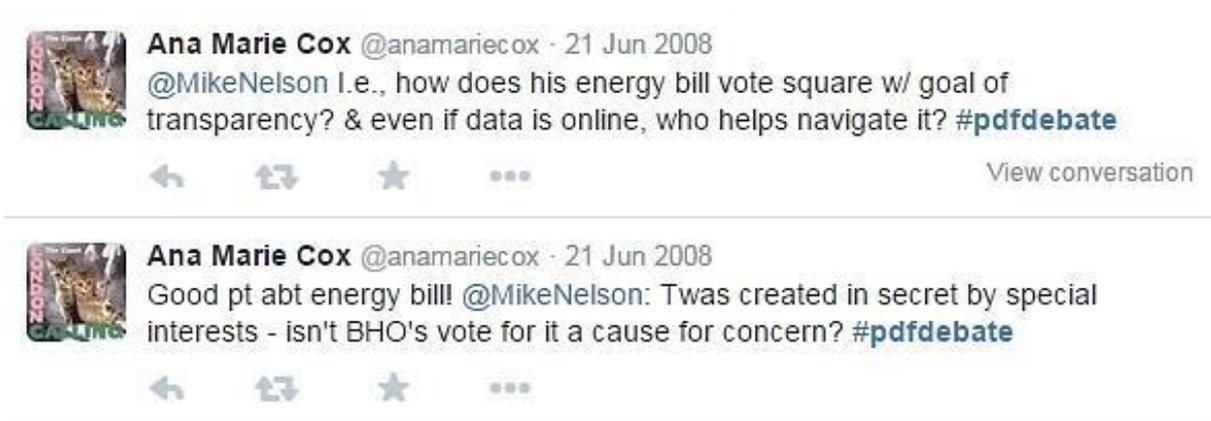Figure 4: multiple tweets posted by Liz Mair in a row
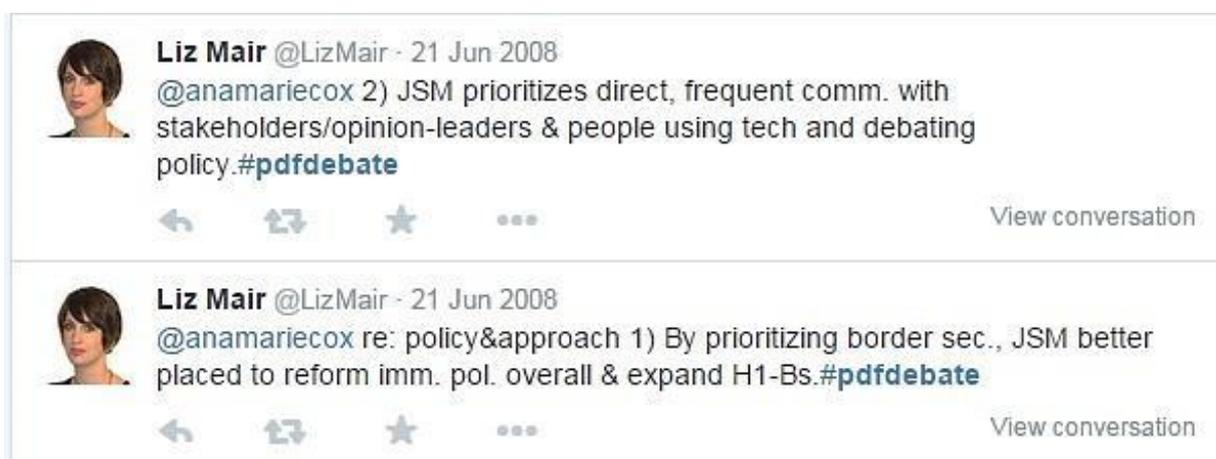
Michael Nelson does it too but in a less obvious way, not marking links between tweets:

Figure 5: multiple tweets posted by Michael Nelson in a row
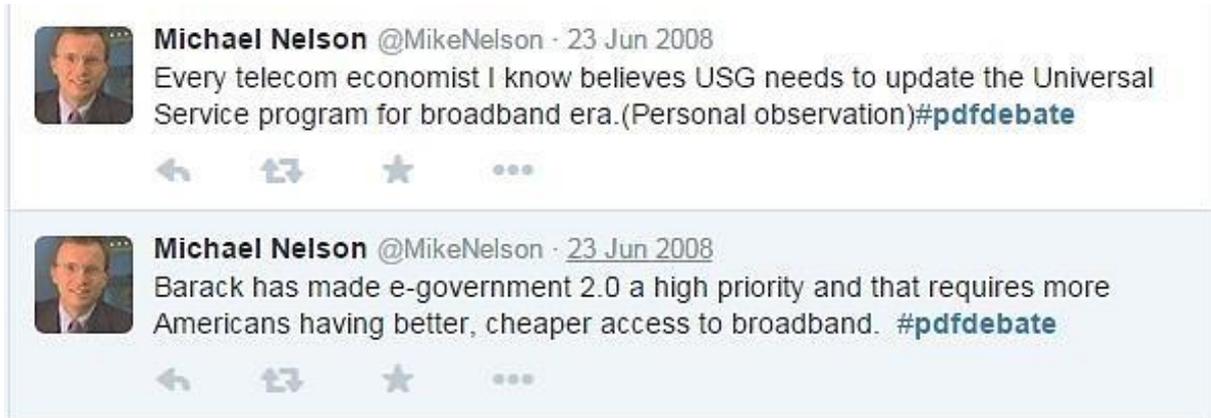
As for the moderator, Ana Marie Cox, she sometimes asks questions in two parts corresponding to two tweets:

Figure 6: questions in two parts / two tweets

On the one hand, this tendency could suggest that argumentation often requires more than 140 characters to develop properly. But on the other hand, it also shows that Twitter still leaves ways to counterbalance the brevity imposed by the format of the tweet and develop and refine argumentation to a certain extent.

2.3. Argumentation

After the micro-level of word selection and form, the macro-level of discourse structure, a last point needs to be examined in order to give a thorough account of discourse in #pdfdebate. This last element, argumentative markers, has a pivotal role between the two preceding levels (word and structure) of discourse.
Discourse, in a debate, is typically argumentative. It seeks to prove a point and has to be highly structured to be successful. A typical expected feature of argumentative discourse is the presence of argumentative markers. They enable to mark explicitly the logical relationship between different parts of a discourse. They may, for example, mark opposition (with "but"), concession, ("though"), cause ("because"), or signal the conclusion of an argumentation ("so") (Riegel *et al*. 1994 : 1053-1057). In the whole of the debate, 88 of the

140 tweets posted by the two debaters have a direct argumentative goal (i.e., stating, developing or proving a point). Out of those 88 tweets, only 22 use explicit argumentative markers, such as "so", "since", "but", "because", "though", or "despite". This means that logical links between parts of a same argumentative point often remain implicit. This shows in the pairs of tweets posted in a row by Mair (figure 4 above) and by Nelson (figure 5 above), where there are no argumentative markers. In Mair's pair of tweets, apart from the use of numbers indicating the existence of a listing, there are not logical links and no argumentative markers. In Nelson's pair of tweets, the two parts of the argumentative point are merely stacked even though argumentative markers could have been inserted to mark logical links.

Again, this striking feature of #pdfdebate may well be linked to the constraints imposed by the format of the tweet and the ensuing need to pack discourse and form elliptical statements. Just as well, in order to save space, debaters do not often use personal pronouns and first-person pronouns, and positioning is rarely explicit or explicitly linked to a first person singular, contrary to what would be expected in a debate. This sometimes gives a curious impression that the debaters are not committed or at least involved in what they discuss.

All in all, most of the characteristic features of #pdfdebate may be linked to technological constraints imposed by the medium of the debate. It means that argumentation in a Twitter debate is shaped by affordances.

3. Affordances and argumentative techniques

"Affordances" is a term coined by James J. Gibson in his 1966 book, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual System*. To make it simple, it means the potential for action offered by one's environment. Affordances, in the case of #pdfdebate, is the set of tools offered by Twitter, its interface and functionalities, and what they enable or let the user to do, and in turn what the user ultimately does with it in the debate.

3.1. Arobase and addressing

A first affordance is the arobase, which automatically turns into a link to another user's profile on Twitter. As Herring and Honeycutt point out, "Twitter users have innovated a novel use" of the arobase "as a marker of addressivity" that makes interacting easier on Twitter (Honeycutt & Herring 2009 : 2). "Addressivity", which is a notion borrowed from Christopher C. Werry's article about IRC (Werry 1996), consists in using the block arobase + username to "indicate that a tweet is addressed to the user in question" (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009 : 1). This block automatically turns into a direct link to the user's page where it also appears. In this respect, addressivity more or less corresponds to the vocative expressions used in a face-to-face debates, i.e., expressions of direct address in which the person spoken to is named explicitly. In everyday interaction, they are used to call someone and attract their attention. In a more typical way in a debate, they are used to create a rhetorical effect in which the hearer is directly targeted and forced to hear the arguments of the speaker and, but not necessarily, answer. In the « noisy » environment of Twitter, where many tweets are produced at the same time, they enable to attract the attention of the addressee (Boyd *et al*. 2010 : 2). Moreover, addressing is also sometimes used to make it easier for readers to understand the identity of the addressee or person referred to. In such

an environment, a simple second person "you" could be too ambiguous, but addressing disambiguates who is being referred to, as can be seen in the tweet above:

Figure 7: addressing used to disambiguate addressee identity
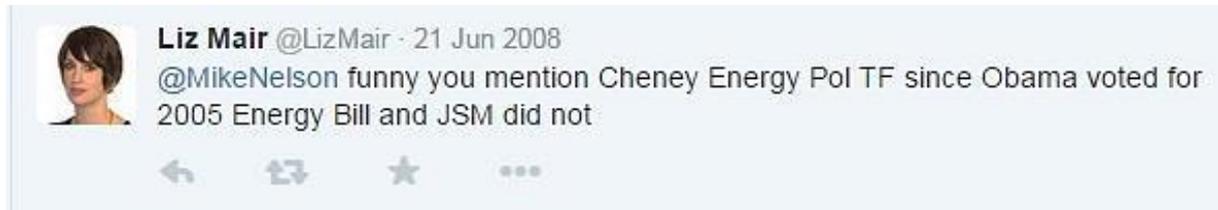
In this tweet, both functions of addressivity are fulfilled at the same time: the identity of the addressee is made clearer for readers than if "you" alone had been used and the tweet will appear on Michael Nelson's account, which will bring his attention to it.
In the course of #pdfdebate, the debaters still keep on using vocative expression. Michael Nelson sometimes uses vocatives alone to address his opponent, in a fashion similar to what would have happened in a face-to-face debate:

Figure 8: use of vocative expression instead of addressing

However, this tweet will not appear on Liz Mair's profile, at the risk of going unnoticed of her. In another tweet, Michael Nelson uses both addressivity and a vocative expression, as if the two were complementary and as if addressivity alone was not enough to address the opponent and make her identity clear:

Figure 9: use of vocative expression and addressing

In this case, the vocative expression seems to retain the rhetorical function of targeting directly the opponent in a manner typical of face-to-face debates, while addressivity is a way to "tag" the opponent in a manner typical of online interaction. Using both may be a sign that Nelson is still attached to the habits and customs of traditional debate between two copresent speakers, and not yet used to the habits of digital interaction.

3.2. Use of hyperlinks

A second affordance used in #pdfdebate is hyperlinks. Contrary to addressivity, this feature has no equivalent in a face-to-face debate.

Most of the time, links are used to avoid devoting too much space to details or to illustrations of the main point mentioned in a tweet. As a result, they enable to either replace or complete / extend discourse. In the following tweet for instance, the hyperlink is used as a way to replace a portion of discourse:

Figure 10: use of hyperlink to replace a portion of discourse 1

In this tweet, Michael Nelson answers the moderator's question about the Bush administration tech policies that need to be changed thanks to a hyperlink. The link therefore replaces discourse (the list in question). The reader has to click on the link and read the content of a page posted on another website in order to get the answer to the moderator's question posted in the debate on Twitter. Liz Mair follows the same strategy in the following tweet:

Figure 11: use of hyperlink to replace a portion of discourse 2

She is talking about John McCain's plans concerning net neutrality. In the next tweet, she provides a link to an interview of McCain concerning this question. Not only is the link a replacement for a whole portion of discourse, but what the interview is about and what point McCain makes in the interview is not even summed up. As a result, the reader really has to click if he or she wants to know more and understand the point.

Hyperlinks may also be used as an extension of a portion of discourse:

Figure 12: use of hyperlink to extend a portion of discourse 1
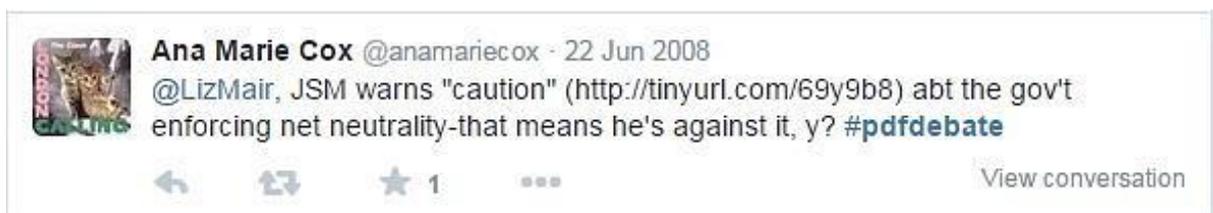
Contrary to Michael Nelson and Liz Mair in figure 10 and 11, the hyperlink is just used as a potential development (or proof) of what Ana Marie Cox is saying. She sums up in a few

words the point that is made in the article which is linked. Therefore, the hyperlink merely enables her not to quote precisely from the text and prevents her from giving up precious characters. However, it does not replace any portion of discourse, it is just an extension of it. Michael Nelson also uses hyperlinks in a similar way, this time in two consecutive tweets:

Figure 13 : use of hyperlink to extend a portion of discourse 2

In the first tweet to be posted (the one at the bottom), Nelson makes his point and posts a hyperlink to complete it. However, he develops the content of this hyperlink in a second tweet, in a short list of keywords. The hyperlink thus simply offers a possibility of developing the ideas in question but the user does not really have to click and read its content.

Hyperlinks provide a convenient continuation of argumentation by other means. Debaters try to mention only the core of the argument in the tweet. The details, ideas, sources, statistics or figures are to be found in articles, interviews or any documents to which the reader has immediate access thanks to a hyperlink. Of course this is a convenient way to save space, which in the context of Twitter is crucial. However, from the point of view of argumentation, the impact remains unclear. Do they really belong to the debate? Do people really click and read the articles and interviews in question? In the culture of "tldr", too long didn't read, it not so sure all readers do. Moreover, as convenient as they are, the debaters of #pdfdebate don't use hyperlinks that much. Nelson does only six times and Mair four times (while Cox, the moderator uses a hyperlink just once).

3.3. Hashtags

A last noteworthy affordance could have been hashtags, but they are not much used in #pdfdebate. The only hashtag used by the three participants is the official hashtag for the debate, « #pdfdebate », that was aimed at marking tweets officially belonging to the debate. Hashtags may also be used for rhetorical purposes, for examples to express feelings or make a self-reflexive comment about one's tweet, but it is never the case in #pdfdebate, where hashtags are limited to a practical function of indexing.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, rhetoric in #pdfdebate serves the same purpose as in any political debate: proving one's point, contradicting the opponent, trying to convince the audience. However, its materialization is largely dependent on the affordances of Twitter, particularly its main constraint, which is the length of the message. Concerning argumentation itself, despite its

limiting format, Twitter leaves enough room to build coherent and reasonably developed argumentation. Twitter, and digital discourse in general, offers plenty of ways to pack information into 140 characters, such as links and shortening technics, without necessarily sacrificing content altogether. This is the essence of Twitter rhetoric, and what makes it different from argumentation in a face-to-face debate: packing information and argumentation in a very limited format. Nonetheless, much has to remain implicit because of this very character limitation and because of the need to produce tweets which are as self-contained as possible to remain understandable.

It is difficult to judge how efficient Twitter rhetoric is and to compare it to rhetoric in a-face-to-face debate. In terms of efficiency Some Twitter users commenting during the debate have lamented that there are "2many vague answers" or that it is "hard to get depth". But on the other hand, other commenter have found brevity a good point. For instance, one user writes that he "would that every political debate was as succinct". Those mixed reactions are not that bad on a platform that is not particularly suited for long interactions.

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