Viral Advocacy: Networking Labor Organizing in Higher Education

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The emergence of blogs and social networking sites open new areas of study in composition and rhetoric, adding literate spaces and foregrounding multimodal communication. While assessments of these technologies range from celebratory to ominous, their ubiquity and their integration into our rhetorical situation is undeniable. I suggest that labor activists in higher education have new opportunities to organize, communicate, and campaign utilizing these new rhetorical networks. I argue for a notion of "viral advocacy" for organizing in new digital spaces. Based on an on-going project using social media in my faculty union's advocacy work, I demonstrate some possibilities for using social media for rhetorical advocacy.

I n spring 2001, I was one of the throngs of contingent teachers—adjuncts—at The George Washington University in Washington, DC. As adjuncts, we were paid $1500 per class, given no health insurance, and had no job security beyond the semester in which we were teaching. The story is a familiar one for thousands of teachers in our field and increasingly across the disciplines. It was not surprising why we were working to unionize graduate teaching assistants and adjuncts. The previous semester, our group of would be union organizers affiliated with the UAW (later picked up by SEIU). With that affiliation came some limited resources and with some of those resources we organized a "teach-in" on one of the university's quads. Our two keynote speakers were Cary Nelson and Stanley Aronowitz. As a vocal—you could say loud—member of our organizing committee, I was also slated to speak.

I don't remember exactly what I said; but, I know I wanted to balance a "call-to-organize" with direct attacks upon the GW administration. As I walked from one end of the gathering crowd to the other with the microphone, there stood Stanley Aronowitz in the center of it all. When I finished speaking, Aronowitz was yelling in support, clapping his hands, and pointing at me saying "You're an agitator! You're an agitator!!" I remember saying back into the mic, "No, I'm an organizer." Aronowitz would have none of it. He yelled back, "No you're not! You're an agitator, I know one when I see one!" He was adamant and he clearly meant it as a complement.

It's taken me several years to get my head around the distinction Aronowitz was making between an organizer and an agitator. At the time, I was just beginning to wrap my head around the difference between being a political activist and a union organizer—no, those are not the same thing either. Union organizing requires a critical patience to engage individuals one-on-one in a conversation about joining a union. You learn pretty quickly that your job is not to convince people of your political ideology unless of course you are committed to being a failed organizer. The practical ideology for a union organizer is a simple one: you unionize to gain a say in your everyday working environment; and, you do it collectively because it is collectively that you have power. There is a difference between one's political/ideological commitments and how one engages unorganized workers and, once organized, union members. In a very concrete way, this is where all good rhetors begin: know your audience and know your context.

Being an agitator is a different kind of rhetorical work. Agitators provoke, make people uncomfortable, push, cajole, raise questions, call out hypocrisy, break rules, draw distinctions, point fingers, act before "all the facts are in," and, in general, agitate. Agitators do not limit themselves to the rules of the game. The rules of the game are often one of the targets. As long-time Texas agitator, Jim Hightower, puts it, an "agitator is the center post in the washing machine that gets the dirt out" (Hightower).

Agitators put cracks in hegemony, actively creating *kairotic* moments. Agitators are also creatures of *ethos*: an agitator with poor *ethos* is just an annoying pain-in-the-ass. I think of the legacy of Mother Jones and the hellfire radicality of John Brown. An agitator also tends to rely upon "more than the discursive means of persuasion" (Bowers, et.al. 4). That is, the "available means" for the agitator includes street protest, guerrilla theater, blockades, and giant puppets that mock those in power in a 21st century version of Bakhtin's carnival.

And yet, the distinction I am making between an organizer and an agitator is admittedly too neat. It would be better to speak of two different types of rhetoric: a rhetoric of organizing and a rhetoric of agitating and even then acknowledging that we're speaking more about a continuum than we are a distinction. Nonetheless, I want to make the distinction in order to draw attention to agitation as that aspect of rhetorical work that is relatively absent from our composition and rhetoric classrooms and a kind of uncomfortable dinner guest at the table of academic, persuasive discourse. I think we need to pay special attention to a rhetoric of agitating if we can speak of an effective use of digital spaces for activist work. The more I've worked in these digital spaces as part of our local chapter of APSCUF (Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculties), the more I am convinced I should have replaced the word "organizing" with "agitating" in the title of this text.

Rhetoric in a Viral World

Probably the most critical thing to understand about activist work in a socially networked world is that if you try to move centralized communication practices into digital environments you will, for the most part, fail. Messages circulate differently. The center does not have control—at least in the ways that it used to. It is perhaps this loss of control of the message—or, more to the point, the means of circulation— that makes many organizations balk at making full use of digital environments. Consider a central metaphor of digital social networks—

"viruses." The notion of a video or blog post "going viral" is at once enticing (in the same way the *Twilight* series or *I am Legend,* the remake of *The Omega Man*, starring Will Smith is enticing) and threatening—H1N1, HIV, and Ebola. We use the same network of cultural meanings when we speak of "computer viruses." Indeed, the rhetorical transfer of the biological to the digital has infected the very way we use (and protect ourselves against) technology.

It should not be surprising, then, why any celebration of a "viral rhetoric" is met with a bit of caution. People "cover their mouths" so to speak. But the viral nature of digital communication is, in many ways, little more than a sped-up version of our real-life social networks. We talk to friends, family, and casual acquaintances and share what's on our mind. When I tell someone a juicy story, that person may pass it on, with or without my blessing. Since I do not control the other person and that other person is connected to a whole other social network to which I do not have direct access, I also do not have control over the circulation of my story. The "virus" metaphor reads my *story* as the virus. A story that can "infect" others, a story that is "dangerous," an act of communication that has the potential to become "pandemic." Viral communication is enticing because it is as common as the common cold, yet as difficult to control or manage. Viral rhetoric seeks to do an end around the centers of control and become communicable. Studying what is persuasive and effective in digital, social network environments is an attempt to understand how persuasion happens when it's let out of the cage of the rhetorical canon. We are no longer talking about a one-to-many or a center-to-periphery form of communication, but a "one-to-five-to-thirty-to-one hundred-to-one thousand" form of communication.

Using social networks has been a serious part of my union activist work since the spring of 2008 when I launched a blog as part of a campaign of "no confidence" in our university president, Javier Cevallos. My first post, "Considering No Confidence," was a declaration. It began with what we expected from Cevallos when he was hired in 2002: We "thought

he was going to help increase the quality of education at Kutztown and help transition into a 21st Century university" (Mahoney). The post lists a series of failures (accompanied by an 18 point "Bill of Particulars") and calls for a vote of no confidence in our president. There had been discussions about a vote of no confidence in our union's Representative Council, but our move to actually call for a vote caught some faculty off guard. More so, *the blog* and the blog as *a form of communication* took several faculty aback. The fact that the blog was public and not simply an email sent to our faculty listserv, made some faculty very uncomfortable. And the more quickly the blog gained traction, the greater that discomfort grew. One faculty member called the launch of the *No Confidence in Cevallos* blog right before the start of the semester a strategic move to "shock and awe" the campus. The blog was "slick" and "too public." Less than a week after the *No Confidence…* blog was launched, all the major local media in Pennsylvania (Allentown, Reading, Harrisburg, and Philadelphia) had run stories on our push for no confidence. Not only were the stories run, the union's perspective—the arguments posted on the blog in particular—shaped *every single story*. We were out in front of each development adding more fuel while the university struggled to get its PR machine up-and-running. Despite the attacks on the "slickness" of the blog and how it represented to some an "attack on one man," the university could not get out in front of the story—"no confidence" was the lead.

I had been using blogs in my classrooms for about three years before the launch of the *No Confidence…* blog. In 2003, a colleague of mine, Aaron Barlow, and I earned a $2,000 university "Teachnology" grant to study pedagogically sound uses of blogs in composition classrooms. I had been significantly influenced by the 2004 article "Moving to the Public: Weblogs in the Writing Classroom," by Charles Lowe and Terra Williams. Lowe and Williams argued that using blogs in the composition classroom instead of the more gated communities of Blackboard of WebCT, brings "public" writing much more into the public—with all the very real concerns of public-ness. Blogs demanded that students

consider the real challenges, possibilities, and risks of writing in public. Our project was fairly modest, aiming to provide other faculty with some concrete examples of how we used blogs in our writing classrooms and some of the questions and concerns that emerged during our study. I had not expected that my use of blogs in the classroom would give me an avalanche of ideas for using blogs as part of my union work. The *No Confidence…* blog was, in a very real sense, a public experiment in using blogs for advocacy that put me in a position similar to the one I had put my students in for several semesters: whatever I wrote, would be public and subject to comment and scrutiny.

Since the success of the *No Confidence…* blog, I have deepened and expanded my use of social networks for advocacy work. My current project, APSCUF-KU XChange is intended to be a more sustained experiment; it is currently focused on a recent announcement by our university president (same guy) that our university would begin retrenching faculty, programs, and possibly departments in response to their "budget crisis." In the 2010-2011 academic year, APSCUF will enter into contract negotiations with PASSHE and I expect the XChange to be an active part of my advocacy work through the negotiations. In spring 2010, the Kutztown University administration announced its intention to retrench (that is, layoff) a number of faculty and eliminate or restructure several programs in response to the "budget crisis." Once the president announced the administration's intention to retrench, the XChange began averaging about 250 hits per day. The XChange has been cited in news articles and is being read by faculty across our State System, and, I am told, by our university president and State System administrators. I heard anecdotally that one State System administrator brought a print-out of several pages from the XChange to a recent meeting for reference—the site had the most up-to-date information available.

This kind of work is no panacea, however. Using social networks for advocacy work, viral advocacy, needs to be approached fairly rigorously and with no pretenses about its limitations. Viral advocacy does not

replace face-to-face organizing. It does not replace more traditional one-to-many, center-to-periphery communication. It is, very frankly, simply one of our *available means*. What I contend, however, is that *at this particular historical conjuncture*, it provides several key tactical advantages to the activist, organizer, and agitator. In the tradition of American grassroots (and now also netroots) organizing, I want to share a few "rules for agitators" interested in using social networks. These "rules" are not set in stone, nor are they comprehensive. Rather, they represent some of the key lessons I've learned in the process of using social networks in my union activist work:

Understand and use the crisis in newspapers and journalism to your advantage:
The point here is not that the crisis in print journalism is good or that it is somehow not a crisis. I *am* arguing, however, that the crisis is a very real part of our current rhetorical situation and that this crisis is complex—and that within that complex rhetorical situation, there are opportunities for rhetorical action. The better we understand the real impacts this crisis has, especially on *local* newspapers, the better able we are to intervene in that context. Frankly, I think activists spend too much time decrying poor coverage of their actions or pointing out that the mainstream media is not fulfilling its critical role in a democracy. Instead, I think we need to devote more time to thinking through how best to intervene and take the advantage given what we know about the mainstream media.

The crisis in print journalism has meant cuts in the number of reporters covering any given story or beat. Practically speaking, local reporters *do not have the time or resources* to effectively cover many stories. This is especially true for stories for which the mainstream media is not covering in any substantive way. Stories that are not being covered by the mainstream media generally do not have the public's attention. In my local union example, when we post critiques of the university president's decision to retrench faculty, we can expect reporters to call the

university's PR wing and ask for comment. The reporter may also call a faculty representative for comment. The story will then read predictably: the university constructs itself as the rational institution trying to make the best out of a difficult situation; the faculty representative is upset that faculty jobs are being cut. What will be absent is any substantive investigation of the issue—NOT because the reporter disagrees with you, but because that reporter simply does not have the time to do the research. So, *do the research for them and make it easily accessible*. Blogs can provide overworked and under-resourced reporters *easy access* to detailed information—arguments, documents, commentaries, or interviews that require little more than an Internet connection to read. A reporter does not have to call you or sift through piles of notes to determine which quote to use. In our case, we have had reporters quote verbatim from our blogs.

Openness trumps confidentiality: don't fear publicness

One of the first concerns many organizations have when considering viral advocacy is the issue of privacy and security. I cannot tell you how many times I've been told that "you need to be careful, because the other side is reading everything you say," or "I don't think it's a good idea that we have these discussions in public," or "those discussions should be going on in private." In the following email sent from State APSCUF president, Steve Hicks, to all APSCUF members about preparing for the 2010-2011 contract negotiations, we can see the tension between openness and confidentiality play out. Hicks addressed the concern over the confidentiality of digital communications this way:

as we look at 2011, we need to recognize that "union" means unity— we need to be united in supporting the positions we ultimately put on the table. Our strength and bargaining power ultimately comes from this unity. Part of that unity is our being able to share information without fear of sharing with management; although experience tells us that management knows much of our business as quickly as we

decide it, we will continue to ask for your cooperation in holding these communications confidential (Hicks).

Hicks tries to hold on to the importance of having secure lines of communication, while acknowledging that "experience tells us that management knows much of our business as quickly as we decide it." It seems fair to ask: then why bother ask for "cooperation in holding these communications confidential"? What would it look like instead to embrace the publicness of union communications? In my work on the XChange, concerns regarding "going public" generally fall into two categories: 1) fear of surveillance; and, 2) fear of discursive messiness.

My response to the fear of surveillance is simple: THEY ALREADY KNOW. Frankly, the amount of time organizations spend trying to ensure that no one is watching is generally wasted energy. It tends to build distrust, suspicion, and a constant concern of vulnerability. I would argue that when "security" becomes a key concern for activists, it tends to invoke an entire discourse that can inhibit movement building. Activists start talking about "leaks" and "moles" and grow suspicious of their comrades. They may start feeling like they always need to be checking over their shoulder. But, most importantly, they can become overly concerned about "watching what they say." Now, there are times when you DO need to keep something confidential—I don't argue with that. However, I think that activist organizations need to limit their efforts to those things that NEED to be kept confidential. We need to learn not to be afraid of the public and to be accountable to that public.

My response to a fear of discursive messiness goes right to the reason why I am interested in using blogs in my composition classrooms. As I suggested above, we need to learn how to write, speak, *and deliberate* in public. I'm not just talking about writing for public audiences. I mean, learning the rhetorics of public communication so that *our processes of communication* are as public as our final statements. Yes, this means that we will say things that are incomplete, potentially wrong, and that we'll

regret. But if you think about it, "private" spaces of communication are subject to these very same problems. The only difference is that the privatized discussion "stays in the family" so-to-speak. All too often, however, those "private" spaces become cover for people to engage in personal invective and unaccountable behavior. We need to practice publicly engaging each other in principled ways. Most people do not have a reference point for what a principled, public conversation over issues that matter looks like; all the more reason to practice in the public.

In *Beyond the Echo Chamber: Reshaping Politics through Networked Progressive Media*, Jessica Clark and Tracy Van Slyke make a similar point when it comes shifting notions of journalism:

> Shifting from a top-down, report-and-broadcast model to a multiplatform conversational mode can feel like a sacrifice. For traditional journalists, reaching out to networked individuals once again seems like a loss of control. But at this point, let's be honest: who's got control anyway? To stay relevant, media outlets need to rethink their core functions and shift from just producing content to building communities that join and foster online conversations whenever they can (39).

Part of the rethinking that Clark and Van Slyke are calling for requires participants to become more comfortable "practicing in the public" by giving up a more established voice of "authority." From their perspective, doing so marks a shift in values from "producing content" to "building communities." I will return to this shift in the conclusion of this text, because I think it represents one of the most critical aspects of viral advocacy.

Direct communication and explicit, rational argumentation are not, necessarily, your friends

In general, I am convinced that most people can recognize when someone is advocating for a position and that people, for the most part,

are already "immunized" against direct, rational appeals because they assume that such appeals are biased and, by extension, manipulative. Advertisers know this, which is why there has been such an explosion of self-effacing, cynical, tongue-in-cheek advertising campaigns. They know their audience is already cynical and distrusting of advertisers. So they try to find a way around. I don't, however, think that activists can afford to go down the path of the advertisers. Unlike advertisers, *we need rational discourse and research* in our campaigns. Yet, *how* we connect to our audiences needs to shift in a viral environment.

Social networks can provide a way of side-stepping audience cynicism if there is an understanding of the role the "voyeur" or "spectator" plays in social networks. Digital social networks are characterized by "invitations" and "suggestions." They ask people to join if they want to, but do not chastise them if they just want to check in and see what's going on. This is where it can be useful to construct on-line discussions in such way that the reader feels like you are writing to the person sitting next to him or her. They get space to consider the discussion without feeling like they are going to be forced to decide something *at that very moment*. What will stay with them is, in Burke's words, the *tenor of the conversation*. And, I would argue, part of the battle activists face is gaining the initiative in setting the tenor of the conversation.

You're a *personae*, not an institution
One of the mistakes that leaders of organizations such as unions make that drives me crazy is that they assume the tone they use in their official communications will carry over into a social networked environment. It doesn't. Official communications can be quoted, linked, or discussed, but *the writers* need to be people. So, code-switch, people. You need to read like a flesh-and-blood person (or people) who actually cares about the issues you're writing about. People have emotions. People don't refer to themselves in the third person. People ask other people questions. People are thoughtful and don't always know all the answers. You are a flawed, beautiful person. Act like one.

Pick a fight and keep up the pressure

If you want to use social networks to advocate and agitate, then you need to do more than simply distribute information. You need to be active in blogging in-real-time (that is, before you have ALL the information together) and you need to put pressure upon the opposition to respond— and when they do, stay on them. If you think about it, TV has helped reinforce an approach to story that is serialized and character driven (even when it's bad TV). Blogs and other social networking sites are also serialized sites—what keeps them active is that the story is unfinished and readers are looking forward to what happens next. All stories have characters. While it's true that there are specialized blogs that readers join or follow because they want to know what the blogger thinks, I find it's much more effective to include other characters.

The bigger point, however, is that you need to be able to identify people with the choices that are being made. In our case, it was not enough to say "Kutztown University" is cutting faculty positions. Frankly, despite the Supreme Court's recent ruling on First Amendment protection for corporations, *institutions don't make decisions*, people do. And part of your task as an agitator is *to name names*. I am not advocating character assassination here. I am, however, arguing that people in positions of power make decisions and they should be asked to account for those decisions—PUBLICLY. So, for example, our campaign of no confidence in our university president and, more recently, putting public pressure on him for his decision to retrench faculty, put the university president in the spotlight. In the institutional chain-of-command, the university president is at the top, so according to the institution's own rules, the president is accountable. If he or she says "It was not my decision," then you can raise questions as to the president's competence or question why the president is cashing a paycheck of over $200,000 a year if he is merely a spokesperson. Or, you might even decide to frame the president as "irrelevant," since the real power structure lies elsewhere. Every response is another opportunity for engagement. The more people from the opposition engage you and remain in the position of the responder,

the less time and opportunity they have to take the initiative. And, the more you make public, the more your own position gains credibility.

Redundancy is good. Network your Networks

One of the most interesting developments in social networks is the ability to link your networks and to post messages in multiple networks at once. For example, my XChange blog is written in the popular blogging software, WordPress, and is hosted at Wordpress.com. In addition to the official blog, I also set up a KU XChange Facebook fan page. This tool allows me to "push" my blog posts to the XChange Facebook fan page. In other words, every time I post to the XChange that post automatically appears on the XChange fan page. Similar tools are available for Twitter and other social networking sites. The ability to link multiple social networking sites is incredibly important for viral advocacy projects for a couple of reasons. First, it saves you the trouble, time, and work of having to constantly manage several different sites or having to choose one site among many. The second reason has more to do with the some of the issues about audience I discussed above. While it is true that some people will seek out your blog or will be turned on to it by friends, you need to actively seek out readers in different digital spaces. The fact of the matter is different digital spaces attract different social groups. While I can count on some actively involved union members to make the effort to check in on the XChange on a semi-daily basis, I don't sit around and wait for them to come to me. Plus, Facebook makes it possible open lines of communication with students who might otherwise not be all that interested in the trials and tribulations of their faculty's union. Networking your networks is a key component in the kind of "community building" that Clark and Van Slyke emphasize.

Closing Thoughts

One of the podcasts I listen to is *Media Matters with Bob McChesney*, which is broadcast out of University of Illinois Public Radio station

WILL AM 580. On May 9th, McChesney had Jessica Clark and Tracy Van Slyke on the program discussing *Beyond the Echo Chamber*. Most of the discussion was centered around the central focus of the book: the rise of what has become known as the "progressive blogosphere" and how emergent networked media is helping challenge the mainstream media's lack of critical reporting.

At one point in the discussion McChesney raised the issue of the progressive blogosphere "preaching to the choir." Clark and Van Slyke were quick to take issue with the whole notion of preaching with the choir, preferring instead to foreground the concept of "assembling the choir." That is, Clark and Van Slyke drew attention to the importance of "rhetorics of solidarity" to a broader progressive project. In their book, Clark and Van Slyke argue that

> "preaching" is actually a false description of what many progressive projects do...it is the assembling and activating of the choir that is the critical strategy. Just as churches, temples, or mosques serve as the hubs for those seeking to examine and fortify their beliefs, a number of media outlets have evolved into central meeting places for those looking to join, debate, and strengthen political movements (148).

A bit further on they quote from Bob Ostertag's book, *People's Movements, People's Press: The Journalism of Social Justice Movements* about the importance of what I might call "solidarity rhetoric" to any developing social movement:

if we seek a voice in shaping our society beyond our immediate social circle, we have to step outside our daily existence into roles which we are not accustomed and for which we have little or no institutional support. We have to band together to maximize our very limited time and resources. Before we can do any of that, we have to find each other—identify others with the same interests who are also willing to step outside their daily lives to pursue our long-shot objectives. We have to see who's good at

what, who else is doing what, who might rise to the occasion if given half a chance. We have to make plans, formulate strategies, set priorities. We have to agitate, educate, mobilize, confront, and more. In short, we have to constitute ourselves as a political subject, a constituency, a *social movement*. And if we had done this sometime between 1830 and 2000 we would have made a newspaper. In most cases, it would have been the first thing we did (148-9).

Clark and Van Slyke then add that "From 2000-2008, the first thing that many activists and journalists did to join and define the progressive movement was to start a blog" (149).

Clark and Van Slyke's appearance on *Media Matters* couldn't have been timelier. At the end of the spring 2010 semester, I was beginning to hear some criticisms about the work I was doing on the XChange. Most of the criticisms were coming from readers who were generally supportive of the union and, in a few cases, were actively trying to strengthen our local. My critics began to question the effectiveness of what I was doing, suggesting that I might be more effective if I concentrated on getting the union's message out to the local and state media. Each of my critics wanted me to know that they valued the work I was doing with the XChange and that they read it on a regular basis; however, they felt that I should be spending more time reaching out to local reporters. Their concerns were motivated by the fact that Kutztown's administration announced their intentions to pursue retrenchment of faculty and the elimination of some academic programs in response to the university's "budget crisis." At the core of the message seemed to be that in "serious times" one cannot afford to rely upon a blog to "get the word out." A blog is a luxury that one can afford only when there are not serious challenges to face.

This criticism is important because it helps illuminate some issues that will inevitably be posed as one engages in viral advocacy. Let me take on the easiest issue first. Viral advocacy is *not a substitute* for the kind

of public rhetorics necessary for political organization. One still needs to pursue reporters and seek to make your voice or your organization's voice heard in the mainstream media, for example. But, I should note, that the kind of viral advocacy I have been discussing here is *not in opposition* to more traditional public rhetorics. As I suggested above, viral advocacy can actually enhance an organization's ability to be heard in the mainstream media. When viewed from this perspective, a good viral campaign *enhances* traditional advocacy work. The point is that *they are not the same thing*. In order for a viral campaign to be effective, it is necessary to be attentive to the generic demands of digital social networks.

A more difficult issue has to do with what kinds of rhetorical practices are valued by political communities and how they are valued. It seems to me that this issue has to be addressed more as a set of questions in specific organizational contexts: what kind of rhetorical practices are valued by the organization? How does the organization value or devalue specific rhetorical practices? And, are the organization's intended outcomes consistent with the rhetorical practices that the organization values? The first question is, essentially, an empirical question that can be answered by examining the actual rhetorical artifacts of the organization. In the context of our local and state union, this would mean our union's official newsletter, emails to members, strategy documents, public relations campaigns, and a whole range of other materials. One can ask questions about the privileged voice of the artifacts, how the texts construct the audience, and what the intended purpose seems to be in order to understand the ways in which particular rhetorical practices are praised and which are disciplined. How is the circulation of communication allowed to flow and in what ways is it policed?

It is this last question that has seemed especially important for my work on the XChange. From my vantage point, our union as a whole does a decent job with the more traditional forms of public relations and advocacy. In the time that I've been involved in our local chapter,

I've seen our local public relations committee do an outstanding job in publicizing the union's message, especially during our last round of negotiations; but, I think most of our members would agree that we need to be more consistent in engaging local media when negotiations are not going on or when there is not a crisis looming. In short, our union heavily values rhetorical practices seeking to participate in the public sphere.

However, our local and state union generally have not engaged in the kind of work that Bob Ostertag foregrounds: the work of constituting ourselves as a political subject. Frankly, I think this work has been glaringly absent from both our local and State union work in any sustainable way. There have been moments of this kind of "constitutive work"— especially during contract negotiations—but in each case it seemed as though we were constituted as a political subject *by circumstances*. That is, we responded to an external exigence—contract negotiations, strike preparations, or a vote of no confidence. The problem with that kind of dynamic is that when the exigence is gone, so is the "stuff" that helped link people together. Some of this is unavoidable, of course. But it is clear to me that we need more forums—not ONLY the XChange—in which this work takes place.

I am of the mind that democratic literacies—the rhetorical practices that help constitute democratic subjects—are under assault. That is, we do not have spaces to practice democratic deliberation in ways that allow us to see ourselves in a productive, critical relationship to each other. Without spaces to *be* democratic subjects, we risk the democratic promise itself. We give up a sense of deep democracy for procedural democracy. I believe that viral rhetoric, the kind of advocacy and agitation I've been discussing in particular, can help constitute ourselves as a political subject—but one that is a subject as a choir is a subject: solidarity *in and with* difference.

The "rules" I introduced above can be useful for activists and progressive organizations who are venturing into the world of social networking or

who are looking for ways to sharpen their digital campaigns. However, I think it is important that we embrace the opportunities for foregrounding the ways in which social networks can help build our movements in the long term, by valuing the constitutive work that is necessary to make our movements sustainable.

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