# Wichita "Twitters" about the 2008 Presidential Election: Fantasy Theme Analysis of Messages During Three Election Night Time Phases

## Bobby L. Rozzell*

*Elliott School of Communication*

**Abstract:** The internet application Twitter, according to a description from its website is, "A free social messaging utility for staying connected in real time."[1] The number of users is estimated at more than one million. An average of three million messages is exchanged each day. This study, grounded in Ernst Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) [2], will utilize Glazer and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative method [3] to analyze the themes that emerged in Twitter posts generated in Wichita, Kansas and the surrounding area (20 mile radius) for three time periods on election night November 4, 2008: three hours before John McCain's concession speech, the time period between the beginning of McCain's concession and the end of Barack Obama's acceptance speech, and 3 hours after the close of Obama's acceptance speech [1]. Analysis will emphasize themes that caught on and chained out through the three time periods.

## 1. Introduction

During the 2008 presidential campaign both the Republican and Democratic nominees put to use a number of social media applications. Along with email, blogs, MySpace and Facebook a relatively new communication tool, Twitter, was used by both the McCain and Obama camps. Twitter is unique among popular social media. Each message is limited to 140 characters. Its participants choose who they wish to communicate with and have the opportunity to interact with a large number of people in real time.

These unique properties allow for an analysis of ongoing computer-mediated communication among a large number of people during an event. Based on Symbolic Convergence Theory [2] Bormann's Fantasy Theme Analysis [4] provides a framework to examine the themes that emerge and chain out in this conversation. Groups converge and diverge as the themes become a shared definition of an event or situation. The specific situation, in this case: Election Day 2008 and the concession and acceptance speeches that evening.

## 2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

*Artifact*

Twitter was launched in 2006 and by April of 2007 had 94,000 users [5]. As of January, 2009 Twitter had 6 million subscribers [6]. Twitter limits its users to 140 characters per post [7]. Posts are made on the Twitter.com site and are called "tweets". Users are called "Twitterers." The conversation between users is limited. One can only see messages from people one chooses to "follow," meaning they click the correct icon to allow that relationship. A follower can see all your tweets. You cannot see someone else's tweets unless you are following them. In essence, Twitter is a self-moderating discussion group. Discussions on Twitter range from phatic communication to information sharing through updates and URLs to news reporting from professional and citizen journalists [8].

The artifact used for this research is a collection of all the Tweets by Twitter users in the Wichita area on the night of the election. Well over 100 different people were part of the conversation. The majority of area Twitterers were Obama supporters but McCain supporters, were represented as well as libertarians and some who were not interested in the evening's events. The Tweets were divided into three groups for the purpose of analysis. The first group was all Wichita area Tweets posted on November 4, 2008 from 7:15 pm CST until just before 10:15 pm CST, the approximate start time of John McCain's concession speech. The second group consisted of Tweets posted from 10:15 pm CST till 11:15 pm CST, the approximate time when Barack Obama ended his victory speech. The third group consisted of all Tweets posted after 11:15 pm CST until 2:15 am CST on November 5, 2008.

*Fantasy-Theme Analysis*

What kind of communication do group members share that creates and maintains their shared identity? This is the question Ernest G. Bormann was asking in the early 1970s. He formulated Symbolic Convergence Theory to account, "for those processes which create and sustain a group or organization's consciousness" [9]. Bormann posited that significant symbols are shared by group members and referred to these symbols as fantasies, not as a judgment upon their existence but as recognition of the power they hold within a group. The fantasy of the group is based in reality as the members of the group experience it. They share a story that chains outward into the minds of others. A powerful fantasy can bind group members together and draw others to the group. The symbols converge to not only create reality for the group but to create a community consciousness that binds the group together [10]. This theory has been applied to small group settings, public speaking, organizational communication, as well as interpersonal, mediated and intercultural communication [11].

Fantasy-Theme Criticism is based on SCT and recognizes both the power of fantasy as well as the power of logic [11]. Its goal is to discover the rhetorical vision of a group by examining the artifacts produced by that group. The supposition is that the vision that brings a group together will be so powerful that it will be revealed by the artifacts they produce.

After these themes are identified a rhetorical vision is sought. This brings together the characters, actions and settings into a coherent drama that the group shares. When a rhetorical vision is discovered it means the group under consideration has formed a rhetorical community with bonds that are as strong as the vision they share.

## 3. Conclusions

Three main themes developed during the course of the evening: 1) A focus on history—Obama is viewed as maker and culmination of history. Four times the trope is repeated, "Rosa sat so Martin could walk. Martin walked so Obama could run. Obama ran so our children could fly." 2) Return of the nice guy— The discussion of McCain, during his concession speech, becomes positive and appreciative. His speech is commented on more than Obama's victory speech and is the most discussed event of the evening, after the election of Obama. 3) Supporters at the center—The personal pronoun "I" is used 115 times before Obama's speech and 69 times after the speech. It is only during the speeches that the tone shifts to "we" and a sense of group accomplishment. The supporters report on their feelings during the evening. They talk of themselves more than anyone, including Obama. The campaign phrase, "yes we can" was interspersed with the phrase "yes we did" or "we did it."

The rhetorical vision of the evening was the supporter's belief that they were not only the witnesses of history; they had participated in and were the cause of history. "Yes we can" was not just a slogan but a shared belief. They did not just see their candidate elected; they "did it" and reported their feelings, their tears and the pride they felt, as central to the experience of the evening. Although they lived in a state won by John McCain, they still saw the election of Obama as their accomplishment.

## 4. Acknowledgements

[1] Twitter homepage. twitter.com ret. Nov. 4, 2008

[2] Bormann, E. G. (1985). Symbolic convergence theory: A communication formulation. *Journal of Communication* 35, 128-138

[3] Glaser, B. (1965). The Constant Comparative Method of Qualitative Analysis. *Social Problems* 12, 436-445.

[4] Bormann, E. G. (1972). Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 58, 396-407.

[5] Java, A., Song, X., Finin, T., & Tseng, B. (2007). Why we twitter: understanding microblogging usage and communities. Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 9th WebKDD and 1st SNA-KDD 2007 workshop on Web mining and social network analysis, San Jose, California.

[6] Compete Stats http://blog.compete.com/2009/02/09/facebook-myspace-twitter-social-network/ ret. Feb. 16, 2009.

[7] Huberman, B. A., Romero, D. M., & Wu, F. (2008). Social networks that matter: Twitter under the microscope. 9. Retrieved from http://www.hpl.hp.com/research/scl/papers/twitter/twitter.pdf

[8] Krishnamurthy, B., Gill, P., & Arlitt, M. (2008). A few chirps about twitter. Paper presented at the Proceedings of the first workshop on Online social networks.

[9] Bormann, E. G., Knutson, R. L., & Musolf, K. (1997). Why do people share fantasies? *Communication Studies, 48*(3), 254-277.

[10] Foss, S. K. (2008). *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice* (fourth ed.). Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.

[11] Olufowote, J. O. (2006). Rousing and Redirecting a Sleeping Giant: Symbolic Convergence Theory and Complexities in the Communicative Constitution of Collective Action. *Management Communication Quarterly, 19*(3), 451-492.