Relevant RHETORIC

140 Characters to Say "I Hate You": Melissa Click, Racism, and the Media Circus at Mizzou

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On November 9, 2015, University of Missouri communication professor, Melissa Click, made national headlines for attempting to suppress student journalists covering a campus protest,[1] adding to the flurry of media attention already surrounding a major controversy.[2] While participating in student demonstrations against the university administration's alleged indifference toward reports of racism on campus, Click had attempted to eject student reporter, Tim Tai, from a "safe zone" created by protesters. As a result of her errant behavior, Click eventually faced suspension,[3] a misdemeanor assault charge,[4] and official dismissal from the university.[5]

The personal repercussions of Melissa Click's actions extended beyond institutional reprimands. A video of the professor's attempt to expel the student journalist – which included a vivid call for "muscle" to help in the removal – quickly went viral, inciting a firestorm of vitriolic attack against Click via her personal Twitter account as well as through the newly created feed #FireMelissaClick. One tweet called her "a complete disgrace and embarrassment to her profession." Another argued that "she deserves to be ridiculed and disgraced." Even more hateful threats flooded Click's university e-mail inbox, threats that were later released as a matter of public record. One person, for example, emailed her the following invective: "I plan to belly laugh when someone shanks you or sets you on fire." Another person wrote: "I hope you are gang-raped by some of the very animals with whom you're so enamored."[6] Various journalists also chimed in, albeit in a much less hostile manner, to suggest that Click was a poor representative of the academic profession because of her seemingly blatant disregard for First Amendment rights of free speech and press.[7] [8]

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Warranted or not, attacks on social media can be quite persuasive and damaging, leading even to the termination of purportedly secure employment, as was the case with Click herself. This paper utilizes Benoit's[9] expanded typology of attack to examine the strategies used in posts on the #FireMelissaClick Twitter feed. Members of the general public were motivated to elevate the overall offensiveness of Click's actions as well as to emphasize a variety of perceived negative character traits.

This essay examines these strategies, further explores the implications of Twitter as a new attack platform with different rhetorical constraints, and argues for the utility of Benoit's expanded attack framework.

Literature Review

Ryan was one of the first scholars to describe attack rhetoric as a genre.[10] He noted that rhetorical attacks (i.e., *kategoria*, or "speech of accusation") function as a speech-set with instances of *apologia*, which arise as an individual (i.e., the accuser) "perceives an evil or an exigence" in the policy or practice of another, "is motivated to expose it," and "focuses on whether an action was done or not." Extending Ryan's application of *kategoria* to politics, Pfau and Kenski specifically examined "the role and impact of the attack message approach in modern political campaigns" and how McGuire's inoculation construct can act as a "strategy to promote resistance to the influence of political attacks."[11] Benoit and Dorries first developed and applied their typology of persuasive attack in their study of *Dateline NBC's* 1992 attack segment on Wal-Mart.[12] Benoit and Wells observed in a book that same year that much scholarly work has been done in the area of image repair. However, they argued that little to no research had examined the "pervasive form of communication that provokes such responses," namely persuasive attack, or "messages that attempt to damage the image (reputation, face, identity) of a person, group, or organization…"[13] Benoit and Wells applied the framework to the 1992 U.S. presidential debates, effectively extending Pfau and Kenski's[14] and Jamieson's[15] political communication research. Benoit and Wells further explicated the attack strategies laid out by Benoit and Dorries[16] and examined how 1992's three presidential candidates – George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Ross Perot – employed elements of persuasive attack (as well as defense) during the three debates of that election cycle. Benoit and Harthcock would later analyze newspaper advertisements attacking the tobacco industry and concluded that the ads elevated offensiveness by highlighting the harmful effects of smoking on children.[17]

From the time of its initial applications two decades ago, the typology of persuasive attack has been used infrequently in comparison to the genre's big brother—*apologia* studies. A couple of recent examples include Legge, DiSanza, Gribas, and Shiffler's analysis of Rush Limbaugh's public rebuke following his incendiary insults directed at Georgetown Law student Sandra Fluke[18] and Delbert and Benoit's analysis

of the attacks levied in the music lyrics of British hip-hop artist, Professor Elemental.[19] Taylor and Barton examined Twitter attacks by Justin Bieber fans against Esperanza Spalding after she won the 2011 Grammy for Best New Artist.[20] The authors argued that Benoit's typology of attack was "less than useful" in the context of Twitter because Bieber fans were using mostly character attacks against Spalding rather than traditional types of attack, which according to Benoit's theory would focus on the responsibility and offensiveness of the "act" rather than the character of the person being attacked. Although not in response to Taylor and Barton's criticism, other scholars have recently expanded the typology to include strategies unique to character attacks.[21] Others have examined how audiences can become immune to persuasive attacks, and for answers, these scholars turn to research in inoculation and resistance.[22]

The general shortage of persuasive attack applications is inexplicable, but applying the expanded typology now, in the case of #FireMelissaClick,[23] should serve to add greater context and meaning to a controversial rhetorical situation and help us better understand the unique strategies utilized by Twitter users to attack perceived wrongdoers. Social media is an important context in which to explore the rhetoric of attack because messages are likely to be short, unfiltered, and relatively anonymous. Therefore, we pose the following research question to guide our analysis: What attack strategies were used on the Twitter feed #FireMelissaClick to increase the offensiveness of Melissa Click's actions and character?

Method

In order to answer this question, we use Benoit's[24] expanded typology of attack to understand the rhetorical strategies addressing Click's actions and her character traits. Benoit reminds us that what a person *has done* is connected with *who* a person (or organization) is. We make judgments about character based on a person's behavior, yet we also predict behavior based on character. In the initial typology, Benoit and Dorries[25] argued that there are four rhetorical strategies for increasing perceived responsibility for a harmful act and that there are six strategies for increasing the offensiveness of a particular act. The expanded typology adds strategies for persuasive attack on character. It provides four strategies for enhancing perceptions that the target possesses a trait and two strategies for enhancing perceptions that the trait is offensive.

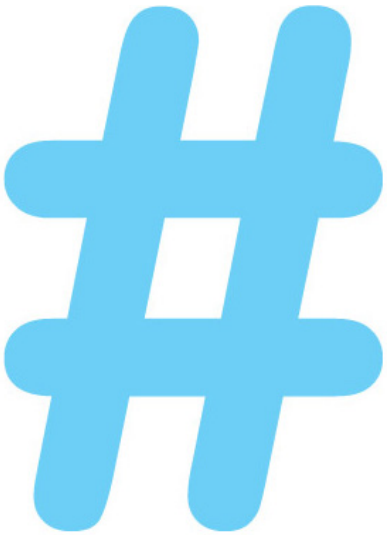
(See Table 1 for a complete list of strategies).

Strategy	**Key Characteristics**
Increasing Perceieved Responsibility	
Committed act before	Similar act committed in the past
Planned the act	Act was deliberate
Knew the likely consequences of the act	Committed act despite awareness of repercussions
Benefited from the act	Stood to gain from the act
Increasing Perceived Offensiveness	
Extent of damage	Magnify the negative effects
Persistence of negative effects	Harm lasts a long time
Effects on the audience	Relate negative effects drectly to the audience
Inconsistency	Words and deeds of the accused are different
Victims are innocent/helpless	Victims did not deserve to suffer
Obligation to protect victims	Accused held to a higher standard of conduct
Enhancing Perceptions that the Target Possesses a Trait	
Accused has performed acts consistent with the trait	Negative acts of accused reflect the negative trait
Accused has made statements consistent with the trait	Discourse of the accused reflects the negative trait
Accused associates with people who share the trait	The accused is different from people with positive qualities
Enhancing Perceptions that the Trait is Offensive	
Exemplify the trait with a particularly offensive example	Provides a more extreme illustration of th etrait
Observe that the audience can experience the negative effects of the trait	Shows how the trait impacts other sin a negative way
Observe that the audience can experience the negative effects of the trait	Shows how the trait impacts others in a negative way

Table 1: Extended typology *kategoria* (attack) strategies

The texts used for this analysis included all tweets directed at Melissa Click on the feed #FireMelissaClick for a period of three weeks following the initial breaking of the story. Although the feed continued to generate some hostile attacks for several months, we feel that the sample chosen adequately reflects the negative public sentiment on social media toward Click during the controversy. As we analyzed the data and selected relevant excerpts to illustrate the strategies, we followed a few self-imposed, but intuitive coding rules. First, we left off the "#FireMelissaClick" hashtag in our coding unless it was part of a sentence. Every

tweet in the feed obviously contains these words or they would not be in the feed, so we omitted them if they were inserted as standalone hashtags (Example: "We hate you, Melissa. #FireMelissaClick"). However, if someone wrote "We need to #FireMelissaClick now because of her inexcusable behavior," we would include the hashtag in our illustrations because it is grammatically part of the sentence structure. Second, we excluded tags that were clearly personal friends of the tweeter (Example: @NaughtyBeyotch) and hyperlinks that would take the reader to an outside website, but coded any other tags that were deemed relevant to the reader. We also did not make any adjustments regarding spelling, grammar, or profanity. Apart from the minor omissions listed above, the tweets are provided exactly as they were written.



Persuasive Attack Strategies on #FireMelissaClick

In our analysis of the tweets, we found that people most often used strategies contained in the new portions of Benoit's typology of attack, which are strategies designed to attack the character of the accused individual. However, they also used several strategies to enhance the overall offensiveness of Click's actions.

Strategies for Persuasive Attack on Character

In terms of character attacks, tweeters used every one of Benoit's four tactics for enhancing perceptions that the target possesses a specific, undesirable trait. We will illustrate the strategies used in the order of their general prominence in the text: 1) accused is contrasted with people who do not share this trait; 2) accused has performed acts consistent with the trait; 3) accused associates with people who share the trait; and 4) accused has made statements consistent with the trait. We also found one strategy for enhancing perceptions that the trait is offensive in that tweeters would exemplify the trait with a particularly offensive example.

Accused is Contrasted with People Who Do Not Share this Trait

Several tweets expressed what Benoit labeled as "guilt by contrast" in arguing that Melissa Click and/or the University of Missouri as an institution pales in comparison to other people or organizations that possess better character traits. For example, Kim Garretson (@KimGarretson) wrote: "Sad @melissaclick being called a J-School prof at #Mizzou. She's not. She's in bullshit liberal arts communication department." Here, the tweet sought to contrast Click and her association with the communication discipline as being

vastly inferior to the reputable journalism school on campus. Similarly, Mamadoxie (@Mamadoxie) differentiated Click from the journalism school by praising its efforts to distance itself from Click: "Nice! MU journalism faculty voting to remove Click's courtesy appointment." KC SportsRadio (@KC_SportsRadio) contrasted her behavior from those values espoused by the university as a whole: "She's a disgrace to a once proud University." All of these examples attempted to separate Click from organizations that surpass her in moral character.

Accused has Performed Acts Consistent with the Trait

Tweeters attacked the University of Missouri for not firing Melissa Click immediately. They suggested the university possessed a trait of cowardice that was reflected in its unwillingness to move quickly in removing her from her position. For example, Carla Ingraham (@ccingraham) tweeted: "Melissa Click white prof, attacks Asian studnt & is STILL EMPLOYD @ Mizzou? The Cowards in Missouri." Additionally, M3Riley (@RileyTX) agreed with the sentiment in writing: "A scared cat. Why does this not surprise me? @MIZZOU #ConcernedStudent1950." David Acton (@ActonDavid) suggests that Missouri had a distorted view of Click's offense and was acting accordingly: "#MelissaClick Mizzou downgrades gang rape to fondling." In each of these examples, the person posting argued that the University of Missouri possessed a negative trait (cowardice and blindness to the situation) that matched the actual behaviors exhibited by the organization.

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Accused Associates with People Who Share the Trait

With this strategy, people try to establish a "guilt by association," whereby they connect the accused person with other deplorable people. For example, Rainbow American (@RainbowAmerican) tweeted that Click is part of a broader problem across American universities: "Professors like #MelissaClick are what's wrong with our colleges! #FreeSpeech #FreePress #America." Others connected Click to a negative political ideology, such as Thermoman (@Audidriver1982), who wrote that "Liberal prof like Melissa Click are everywhere, imagine the things they tell students behind closed doors!" Similarly, Scott Rutledge (@ir_ScottR) tweeted: "Progressives need 'muscle' to convince us their ideas are valid." In each of these examples, the implication is clear that Melissa Click is just one of many liberal professors cultivating a poor

educational environment for university students.

Accused has Made Statements Consistent with the Trait

In addition to people arguing that Click's *actions* were consistent with a negative character trait, some also argued that her *statements* were consistent with a negative trait. For example, one tweeter, Lord Honky (@KinsellaJohnP), argued: "#FireMelissaClick speak for black students because she feels they can't speak for themselves." The tweet suggested that Click possesses an attitude that black students are unable to defend themselves and that she needs to speak on their behalf. According to Lord Honky, the trait of a superior attitude was consistent with Melissa Click's statements during the protest. High Crimes and Misdemeanors (@HighCrimes) also argued that Click's statements were consistent with a trait: "ABOLISH #TaxPayer supported #colleges #universities & #professors that teach #Fascism & #WeHateAmerica." The assertion here is that Click possesses the trait of being an extremist and matches that trait with classroom lectures designed to promote her ideology.

Exemplify the Trait with a Particularly Offensive Example

Some tweets attempted to elevate the offensiveness of a character trait by offering extreme or inflammatory rhetoric to describe the trait. For example, Ramz Paul (@ramzpaul) argued not very subtly that Melissa Click was a racist: "Notice how the White woman is ordering around a proud African-American like he is her slave." Chad Walden (@HCWInsider) also suggested that Click's behavior was racist as he argued that expelling journalists from a safe zone was tantamount to a violent hate crime: "#Mizzou You can't have professors calling for the #lynching of #journalists." Lastly, Bienafe (@bienafe) compared Melissa Click's attitude to those espoused during the rise of Nazi Germany: "#MelissaClick, made Adolf Hitler proud! #universityofmissouri." These tweets all suggested that Melissa Click's behavior toward student journalists was reflective of a deeper racist philosophy. Although we could classify some elements of these tweets as attacks on her actions, we believe that overtly calling someone a racist is more of a character attack based on attitude and ideology than an attack on behavior, at least in these cases since Click did not actually participate in a hate crime as defined by the law.

Some tweeters attacked Click for her personal appearance. It may be debatable whether physical

unattractiveness might be perceived as a negative character trait, but we included it here since the implication was that Click's behavior is ugly, her appearance is ugly and, therefore, her inner character must also be ugly. Examples of this strategy include the following: Danny Scalf (@DannyScalf): "Have you noticed how female, angry university professors are homely & dowdy?"; No Name (@fishnuts4551): "#MelissaClick looks like a dog's ass."; and Richard Charles (@Sarge_Germany): "Why does it look like #MelissaClick would have bad breath that reeked of rusted metal and mayonnaise?" These tweets provide a more extreme type of ad hominem rhetoric because the statements are far removed from assertions addressing Click's primary act of wrongdoing.

Other tweeters had some fun in their posts at Melissa Click's expense, mocking her for what they perceived to be a superficiality in the quality of her research. For example, Eve Keneinan (@EveKeneinan) wrote: "Another reason to #FireMelissaClick. Her C.V.: Top interests? 'the whiteness of Martha Stewart' and 'Twilight.' Emily Zanotti (@emzanotti) also ridiculed her by tweeting: "Melissa Click, embattled Mizzou professor, got a (government funded?) grant to attend a Twilight convention." Although these tweets were not as extreme as those arguing Click is a racist, they did cherry pick specific research studies from her resume that they felt were most worthy of sarcasm and derision.

Overall, the tone of character attacks on Melissa Click involved some fairly inflammatory language in order to describe her as an ugly, elitist, feminist, liberal, and even racist professor. The tweeters even questioned her competence as they mocked her research agenda in media and pop culture studies. When it came to Click's overall character, there wasn't much ground left uncovered by the discursive attacks against her. The attacks against the university were more restrained as they primarily alleged an overall cowardice of school administrators in failing to rein in professors like Click.

Strategies for Persuasive Attack on Actions

In addition to attacks on character, people will sometimes use strategies to elevate the level of re-

sponsibility a person has for an act or the overall offensiveness of the act. Surprisingly, we discovered that tweeters made no use of strategies to increase Melissa Click's perceived responsibility for her actions. This means that in thousands of tweets following the controversy, no one argued that Click committed the act before, planned the act, knew the consequences of the act, or benefitted from the act. They did, however, use a few strategies to increase the overall offensiveness of the act: 1) inconsistency; 2) extent of damage; and 3) persistence of negative effects.

Inconsistency

Several tweets argued that Melissa Click was acting inconsistently in her words or behavior. For example, Gary (@OrangeCoSurf) tweeted that her behavior did not match the role she occupies in her profession: "In communications dept. but hates journalists?"

JoeDelucia (@joedelucia) wrote: "What an asstard! You can't advocate for rights while denying the rights of others. #hypocrisy." And Samantha Chang (@samantha_chang) took issue with people who felt sorry for Melissa Click after the constant scrutiny following the incident: "Right… 'she's' the victim when she sicced an angry mob on a #Mizzou student reporter." These tweets uniformly express the idea that Click was acting in a manner inconsistent with the perceived role of a communication professor, journalist, and rights advocate.

Extent of Damage

Tweeters also emphasized the basic details of Melissa Click's wrongdoing in attempting to suppress the student journalist as well as the focus on the negative effects of that choice. Esscurve (@Esscurve) mocked Click while highlighting the violence that resulted from her choices: "Carrot Top Doppelganger #FireMelissaClick incites mob violence vs #Mizzou student reporters." Natasha (@Tasha26) also emphasized some of the key details of the harmful act: "She harassed an Asian photographer out of a public space & called for others to 'handle' him." Luv Volatility (@LuvVolatility)

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noted that the impact of the expulsion was a clear violation of Tai's journalistic rights: "Professor Melissa Click Threatens Students & Violated 1st Amendment Rights." Alternative Roo (@Alternative_Roo) also emphasized the violations of rights: "#FireMelissaClick for a massive breach of protocol and trying to bully people out of their freedom of expression." These examples illustrate the general strategy of highlighting the specific harms that resulted from Click's actions, namely the inciting of mob violence and the violation of students' constitutional rights.

Persistence of Negative Effects

Although employed less frequently, some tweets emphasized how long some of the effects of the harm might last. For example, Danny Scalf (@DannyScalf) tweeted: "She is why journalism is dying & racial tension's burgeoning." In this example, the argument was that Click's actions may contribute over the long term to the deterioration of the journalism profession and add to enflamed racial tension in America. Brian H. (@bibliobrian) made a different suggestion in tweeting the harm that might come to recruitment efforts at Missouri: "Prospective students will be thinking twice about @MizzouComm. If #MelissaClick keeps her job, they should be ashamed." Similarly, Alli (@aparker70) tweeted that: "No parent will send their son or daughter while she is still employed." Each of these examples demonstrates the strategy of persistence of negative effects because they speculated that the harms from the act will continue well into the future. Overall, many of the attacks on Click established the offensiveness of her behavior by highlighting the negative harms that resulted from them, namely her violation of rights and damage to the journalism profession. It should be noted that the attacks on character and the act itself sometimes overlapped as can be seen in the tweet highlighting Click's "inciting of mob violence" while also simultaneously calling her a "Carrot Top doppelganger."

Discussion

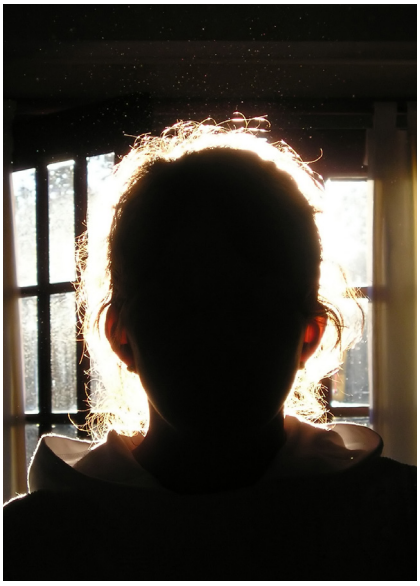
In attempting to provide explanations for some of our key findings, we are forced to speculate about what motivated tweeters to use the strategies they chose and whether those strategies were effective based on internal plausibility and consistency of the arguments. Obviously, social media posts, news coverage, and YouTube sharing of the viral Melissa Click videos collectively contributed to the intensity of negative public attention and was probably at least

a partial impetus for Click's eventual ouster from her faculty position. However, we cannot know for sure what conditions were key in fueling her termination. The slow pace in which the university gathered data on the incident and moved on that information attests to the fact that administrators were probably not motivated to act had the story not become mainstream news. Therefore, the Twitter posts on #FireMelissaClick were an important part of the conversation, and they generally focused more on character than on the expulsion of Tim Tai from the designated "safe zone."

There are several possible reasons for this unbalanced focus on Click's character traits. The first reason is that tweeters likely recognized that most news outlets had already established the general details of the incident and its negative implications. This leaves them with a desire to supplement the story with commentary about her motive and how that motive might be connected to objectionable character traits. Tweeters may also find ad hominem attacks more appealing since the strategy excuses them from having to make rational arguments with reasoning and evidentiary support. Additionally, Twitter's 140-character space constraint doesn't really lend itself to well-developed arguments, at least in that first tweet posted. Readers of the initial tweet are not likely to engage in dialogue on a tweet that contains an incomplete thought or does not inspire interest. The best bet for generating discussion is to keep tweets superficial and provocative; character discussion would satisfy those conditions.

A second explanation is that anonymity provides a useful cover for attacking people unfairly (even when names are provided) because people are often commenting on issues or events involving others with whom they are not acquainted personally. It is certainly much easier to say in a completely unfiltered way that Melissa Click "looks like a dog's ass" when your Twitter name is @fishnuts4551 and your true identity is unknown. We also noticed that many of the more insulting tweets tagged Click's personal Twitter account, so the intent was to have Melissa Click herself read these negative comments rather than to have them remain simply third-party discussion.

A third reason for the prominence of character attacks is that "social-media sites have typically taken a hands-off approach to personal attacks launched by one user against another."[26] This allows Twitter to be its own "safe space" for attacking others in ways that might not always be fair. Users generally ignore Twit-



ter's "official" policy on abuse, which states that users must not engage in "hateful" behavior on the basis of things like age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or inciting others to bombard the Twitter accounts of other users with harassing posts. Clearly, the more extreme character attacks on Click, and the tweets suggesting that users flood Missouri Communication Department Chair Mitchell McKinney's account with harassing emails encouraging Click's termination, would violate elements of this official policy.

Apart from character attacks, we also observed that the tweets did not attempt to establish Click's responsibility for the act, but opted instead to focus on the offensiveness of the act. The most used strategy to elevate offensiveness was arguing that some element of Click's words or actions were inconsistent. One reason tweeters may have opted to focus on inconsistency as a strategy is the unmistakable irony of a "communication" professor attempting to thwart communication. It was also not lost on the people posting that Melissa Click aggressively defended a perceived right to protest in a public space without interference from journalists, while neglecting the actual right of journalists to cover the event.

Strategies for increasing offensiveness of Click's actions also included emphasizing the extent of damage and the persistence of the effects as a persuasive attempt to get the University of Missouri administrators to recognize public outrage and to act to appease those calling for her removal. And it wasn't just those persons active on social media that were dismayed by Click's actions. A group of one hundred Missouri lawmakers called for the university system's Board of Curators to fire Click immediately "for suppressing free speech and further inflaming tensions on the state's flagship university campus."[27]

Overall, we found Benoit's expanded framework for attack to be a useful method for examining attacks, especially those that condemn the person more than the act. Benoit[28] argued that character and act are interrelated. People infer that a negative act was perpetrated because of poor character traits, and they also infer poor character traits from negative acts. Benoit also noted that people argue enthymematically when

addressing character, so perhaps in the case of Click, the tweeters expected the readers of their posts to fill in unstated premises about the act from their discussions of character in the tweets. For example, tweets that suggested Click is a "disgrace," "a fascist," or a person who "make's Adolf Hitler proud" leave many parts of the argument unstated. The overtly stated premise is brief because of the nature of Twitter's 140-character limit, and the implied argument is that she's a disgrace because her actions embarrass the university and journalists who respect the First Amendment. She is argued to be a fascist and ideologically aligned with Hitler because of her allegedly extreme attitudes about freedom of the press on college campuses. Because of this natural connection between character and act, the new framework is a much more comprehensive tool for analyzing cases that contain both types of attack.

Future researchers should apply the new typology to other cases of attack, particularly those with extensive focus on character. Additionally, Ryan[29] suggested that researchers need to examine both persuasive attack (*kategoria*) and persuasive defense (*apologia*) as a speech-set. Stein argued that Ryan's speech-set was incomplete because it ignored an important third component in persuasive responses to *apologia* (labeled *antapologia*).[30] Many of the tweets on #FireMelissaClick address her apology directly instead of the initial offense, which would warrant a study of the *antapologia*. For example, Derek Hunter (@derekahunter) commented: "That's not as much an apology as it is a plea to keep her job. Screw her." Honesty (@Gimme_A_Break1) expressed a similar sentiment: "She isn't sorry. She's sorry she got caught." Some tweeters even suggested they would never accept any form of apology from Melissa Click. This obviously creates some interesting rhetorical constraints on her as she seeks to repair her image. Based on the overlapping flow in any given case between *kategoria, apologia,* and *antapologia,* we argue that researchers should continue to explore all aspects of persuasive attack and defense, although space constraints might limit how many parts of the speech-set can be addressed in a single essay. Notwithstanding, the case of Melissa Click illustrates not only the formidable role that social media has come to play in the court of public opinion, but also the rhetorical lengths to which social media users go to shame—and advocate punishment for—perceived wrongdoers.

End Notes

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