



If the whole of rhetoric could be thus embodied in one compact code, it would be an easy task of little compass: but most rules are liable to be altered by the nature of the case, circumstances of time and place, and by hard necessity itself.

—Quintilian, *Institutes*

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KAIROS AND THE RHETORICAL SITUATION: SEIZING THE MOMENT

ANCIENT RHETORICIANS RECOGNIZED the complexity of rhetoric, and therefore they realized that teaching such a flexible art was a difficult task. Rhetoric cannot be reduced to a handy list of rules on writing or speaking because each **rhetorical situation** presents its own unique set of challenges. A rhetorical situation is made up of several elements: the issue for discussion, the audience for the discussion and their relationship to the issue, as well as the rhetor, her reputation, and her relation to the issue. Rhetors must also consider the time and the place in which the issue merits attention.

Because each rhetorical situation is unique, each occurs in a time and place that can't be wholly anticipated or replicated. The proverb that tells us to "strike while the iron is hot" is certainly applicable to rhetoric: issues sometimes seem to appear (or reappear) overnight; others, such as capital punishment and abortion, seem remarkably enduring in American discourse. Sometimes issues are available for discussion, but audiences who are ready to hear about them cannot be found; at other times an audience for a given issue seems to coalesce overnight. A few years ago, for example, almost no one in the corridors of power

was interested in issues of privacy online. As we write, however, Americans in general are becoming more aware of the issue, thanks in large part to Facebook's initial disregard for its users' privacy. Magazines and newspapers have begun to feature articles on privacy and social networks, and television news makes frequent reference to it. And now it seems that public officials are beginning to pay attention, too. In rhetorical terms, the issue of online privacy has finally found a national audience.

Rhetors must always be prepared, then, to meet the moment and find the place where the sometimes-sudden conjunction of issues with their appropriate audiences appears. The ancients knew this, and they had a name for the right rhetorical moment: they called it "*kairos*." A multidimensional and flexible term, *kairos* suggests a special notion of space and/or time. Because American English does not have a term quite like *kairos*, a bit of explanation is in order.

ANCIENT DEPICTIONS OF KAIROS

The Greeks had two concepts of time. They used the term *chronos* to refer to linear, measurable time, the kind with which we are more familiar, that we track with clocks and calendars. But the ancients used a second term—*kairos*—to suggest a more situational kind of time, something close to what we call "opportunity." In this sense, *kairos* suggests an advantageous time, or, as lexicographers put it, "exact or critical time, season, opportunity" (Liddell and Scott 859). The temporal dimension of *kairos* can indicate anything from a lengthy time to a brief, fleeting moment. *Kairos* is not about duration, but rather about a certain kind or quality of time, a period during which opportunities appear to those who are prepared to take advantage of them. In Roman rhetoric, the Latin word *opportunitas* was used in a similar manner; its root *port-* means an opening, and from it we get English verbs such as *import* and *export* as well as an old-fashioned word for a door or window, *portal*. *Kairos* is thus a "window" of time during which action is most advantageous. On Wall Street there are *kairotic* moments to buy, sell, and trade stock to maximize gains. Victorious sprinters often accelerate at just the right time to pass their opponents. The success of a joke or funny quip depends on its timing, or the *kairos* of its delivery.

Kairos was so important for ancient thinkers that it became a mythical figure. Lysippos, the famous ancient sculptor of athletes, chose to "enroll Kairos among the gods" (Himerius, *Eclogae* XVI i). It is little wonder that someone knowledgeable about competitive athletics—where timing and an awareness of the situation are critical—would render *kairos* into human form.

The picture of Kairos in Figure 4.1 provides a good way to think about the rhetorical situation. Indeed, the rhetor is much like Kairos, bearing many different tools. Not just anybody can balance precariously on a stick while displaying a set of scales on a razorblade in one hand and depressing the pan with another; such feats require practice. As you can see in Figure 4.1, Kairos is concerned about balancing the particulars of the situation, just as he perches tenuously on the blade's edge. His winged back and feet suggest the fleeting nature of time and situations. Perhaps the most remarkable and well known characteristic of Kairos, however, is his hairstyle.

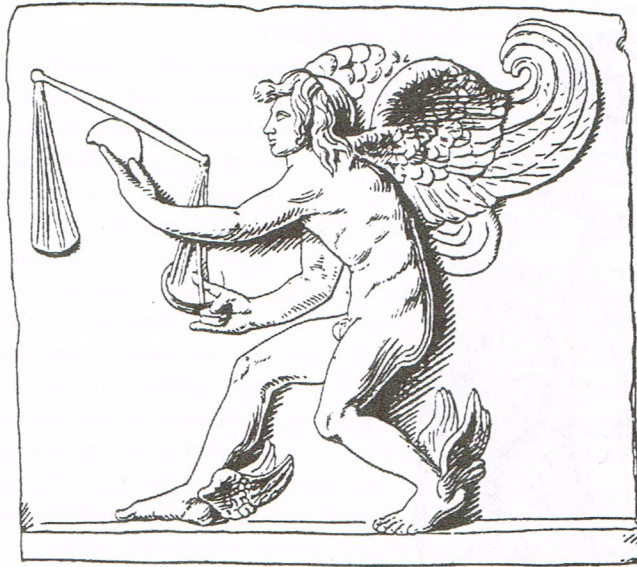


FIGURE 4.1

Kairos, from a bas-relief in Turin. Reprinted from Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion by Arthur Bernard Cook.

Kairos was said to have hair only in the front, suggesting that one must keep an eye out for the opportune moment and seize it by grasping the forelock before it passes.

Figure 4.2 shows another depiction of Kairos, still with wings, this time holding a wheel, again suggesting movement. In this depiction Kairos is flying on the back of another mythical figure: Pronoia, the figure of foresight. Sitting dejected in the background is her counterpart, Metanoia, who is the figure of afterthought or hindsight. This scene, like the forelock in Figure 4.1, suggests the importance of anticipating opportunities and seizing them before they pass by. These figures underscore the many dimensions of *kairos*.

The ancients were certainly aware of the relevance of *kairos* to the art of rhetoric. Indeed, the Older Sophist named Gorgias was famous for having based his theory of rhetoric on it. Philostratus, an ancient historian, tells us that Gorgias may have invented extemporaneous speaking:

For coming into the theater of the Athenians, he had the boldness to say "suggest a subject," and he was the first to proclaim himself willing to take this chance, showing apparently that he knew everything and would trust to the moment (*toi kairoi*) to speak on any subject. (Sprague 1972, 30)

By acknowledging the importance of *kairos*, Gorgias's rhetorical theory accounted for the contingencies of rhetorical situations, for the timely conjunction of issues and audiences. Gorgias studied the particularities of each situation as a means of invention; that is, his awareness of the right time and place helped him to discover compelling things to say.



FIGURE 4.2
Kairos, from a bas-relief in Thebes. Reprinted from Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion by Arthur Bernard Cook.

Isocrates, too, emphasized the importance of *kairos*, claiming that people need to discuss prevailing issues before their currency dissipates:

the moment for action has not yet gone by, [thereby making it] futile to bring up this question; for then, and only then, should we cease to speak, when the conditions have come to an end and there is no longer any need to deliberate about them. ("Panegyricus" 5, 2)

For Isocrates, the urgency and currency of a situation demand action, which calls for lively rhetorical exchanges about an issue. But if an issue has lost its immediacy, then the rhetor must not only deliberate about the issue; she also needs to make a case for its relevance to a given time and place.

KAIROS, CHANGE, AND RHETORICAL SITUATIONS

Alongside the Older Sophists, we believe that the world is always changing and that knowledge itself is full of contraries; that is, knowledge is never certain. *Kairos* draws attention to the mutability of rhetoric, to the ever-changing

arguments that can be found in connection with a particular issue. The available arguments on a given issue change over time because the people who are interested in the issue also change—their minds, their beliefs, their ages, their locations, their communities, and myriad other things. Individuals can become deeply interested in issues, and then they grow disinterested; people change their tastes in music and food and clothing over time, and they change their beliefs and interests as well. An individual may be religiously observant as a child and grow utterly indifferent to religion as an adult (or vice versa). A second individual may have no interest whatever in politics until she joins a community—friends, neighbors, or roommates—that is passionately engaged in political activity. Shared or communal belief changes as well, although this apparently happens more slowly. Americans have been arguing about gun control off and on for over two hundred years, but national interest in the issue waxes and wanes. Interest usually grows when some event, such as a campus shooting, turns the nation's attention to the issue. That is to say, a campus shooting can open a *kairotic* moment in which discussion of gun control seems more urgent than it does at other times.

Kairos also points to the situatedness of arguments in time and place, and an argument's suitability depends on the particulars of a given rhetorical situation. The particulars of a rhetorical situation include the rhetor, of course: her opinions and beliefs, her past experiences, as well as her position on an issue at the time she composes a discourse about it. But the rhetorical situation also includes the opinions and beliefs of her audience at that time and in that place, as well as the history of the issue within the communities with which they identify.

Aristotle claimed that rhetoric seeks the available proofs, and these proofs are made available by the interactions of human beings who find themselves in particular sets of circumstances. That is, rhetorical situations create the available arguments. No one would care about gun control if people were not killed and injured by guns; no one would argue about online privacy if it did not affect our daily lives, and no one would try to convince others to adopt sustainable living practices if the stakes for the future were not so big.

A *kairos*-based rhetoric cannot seek or offer certainty prior to composing, then. Rather, *kairos* requires that rhetors view writing and speaking as opportunities for exploring issues and making knowledge. A rhetoric that privileges *kairos* as a principle of invention cannot present a list of rules for finding arguments, but rather it can encourage a kind of ready stance, one in which rhetors are not only attuned to the history of an issue (*chronos*), but are also aware of the more precise turns taken by arguments about it and when they took these turns. One way to consider the *kairos* of an issue, then, is to explore the history of the issue; another is to pay careful attention to the arguments made by other parties to the issue to cultivate a better understanding of why people are disagreeing at a particular time and in a particular place. In short, the rhetor must be aware of the issue's relevance to the time, the place, and the community in which it arises. Rhetors who understand all the contexts in which issues arise will be well equipped to find convincing arguments in any given situation. Let's say a blogger wants to compose a post about the phenomenon of pinkwashing, a new

word that combines pink (the color of the ribbons designed to raise awareness of breast cancer) and the word “*whitewashing*.” It is a pejorative term responding to the use of breast cancer awareness as a marketing tool to sell products, many of which are manufactured by processes that create carcinogens. (Another, related, term is greenwashing—we bet you can figure out what that means.)

Pinkwashing is also more generally used to apply to instances of Facebook memes in which Facebook users alter their status updates in ways that are supposed to raise awareness of breast cancer. The blogger who is agitated by this issue and wants to challenge her reader’s enthusiastic embrace of what some people call “slacktivism” (a slacker’s version of activism) can begin by looking around for recent and recognizable instances of pinkwashing that help her make an opening for her argument. Or, even more likely, some instance of pinkwashing will leap out at her, motivating her to write in the first place. That particular instance might well open the rhetor’s eyes to other issues embedded within the situation.

This description may make it sound like the rhetor need only lie in wait, and issues will come to him. Nothing could be further from the truth. A rhetor inventing by means of *kairos* needs to pay attention to the world around him. Such a rhetor will want to read, watch, and listen to the news. He will want to pay particular attention to things that agitate him. Given that opinions take shape in a community, chances are the rhetor is not alone in his agitation. Here is an excerpt from an article that was apparently sparked by a certain agitation about a Facebook meme ostensibly promoting breast cancer awareness. The piece was published in the online magazine *Salon* and written by Tracy Clark-Fory.

THE FLIRTY FIGHT AGAINST BREAST CANCER

In yet another tiresome viral campaign, women update their Facebook status with where they “like it”

I was already experiencing serious ocular strain from all the eye-rolling induced by breast cancer awareness month when I came across the “I like it” campaign. It’s yet another attempt at viral breast cancer activism via awkwardly sexual Facebook status updates. Last time around, women impishly posted the color of their bras with no explanation. This time, ladies are telling us how and where they “like it.” For example, “I like it on the bed.” A sampling of recent “I likes” include: the kitchen table, the back seat of a car, my nightstand, the floor, in the closet, on the stairs, on a bar stool and on the washing machine. This is meant to raise awareness—not about kinky female fantasies, but, inexplicably, breast cancer. . . .

Here’s my question, though: Now that you have our attention, what do you have to say? As I wrote about the bra color campaign, “It essentially trumpets: *Hey, breast cancer exists and I’m wearing a bra!* Or, seeing as the status updates mention nothing about disease, perhaps it translates to the more succinct: *Breasts exist!* Either which way, it isn’t news to the vast majority of us.” It’s troublesome enough—not to mention sadly cynical—when breast cancer is sexualized in the service of delivering an actual message. Without an actual message, it just seems plain dumb.

It may seem like something as trivial as a viral Facebook campaign can’t possibly spark a serious argument. But it can, and it has. In this short article, the writer offers a catalogue of issues raised by the campaign: the sexualization of a deadly

disease, the purpose or effectiveness of awareness campaigns, the use of social networking tools to stand in for activism. Indeed, what begins as a series of eye rolls could lead to serious argument, and Clark-Fory's piece only scratches the surface.

Paradoxically, rhetors can step into a *kairotic* moment when it appears only if they are well prepared to do so. Rhetorical preparedness includes an awareness of the communities who are interested in an issue, as well as awareness of their positions on it. Many communities have a stake in the issue of using social network programs to raise breast cancer awareness. Those groups of people include, for example, Facebook users who were perplexed by the mysterious meme and those who know about it and chose to participate. Other communities might include feminists; Facebook's board of directors; women with breast cancer; families of women with breast cancer; or various nonprofit groups such as National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, an organization responsible for having the month of October devoted to raise awareness about the disease; founders and leaders of and contributors to the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, where the pink ribbon campaign got its beginning; and members of smaller, more local communities who have worked together to organize races or events to benefit breast cancer. This is a long list of relevant communities, but it indicates the sort of initial homework that must be done by a rhetor who wants to understand the *kairos* of an issue.

A list of interested communities can serve as a **heuristic** because it can be used to ascertain the available arguments that circulate among interested parties. For example, Facebook users who changed their status updates to indicate where they "like it" might argue that such a campaign is effective because it causes people to think about breast cancer for a moment. Members of Facebook's board of directors might argue that the networking site helps to spread awareness faster than any other kind of campaign. Still other communities, such as women with breast cancer, might think this particular way of raising awareness is ineffectual, distracting, and insensitive to the pain of others. And feminists might remind people that because breasts are constructed as sexual objects in our culture, such an approach harms women in general.

Preparedness also includes some knowledge of the history of the issue. In her short argument, Clark-Fory connects this particular meme to a previous one about bra color and digs up the originating logic of that campaign. Other rhetors who wish to explore this issue might want to learn about the history of public advocacy for breast cancer awareness and find out about various awareness and fundraising campaigns.

***Kairos* as a Means of Invention**

As the preceding paragraphs make clear, *kairos* can serve as a means of **invention**. Invention, remember, is the art of discovering all the arguments made available by a given rhetorical situation. *Kairos* is but one of several means of invention we explore in this book—others are the **stases**, the **commonplaces**, and the **topics**. All these means of invention can generate heuristics, which are usually lists of questions that help rhetors to investigate issues systematically.

Because *kairos* is not only temporal but also spatial, its exploration can generate questions such as these:

1. Have recent events made the issue urgent right now, or do I need to show its urgency or make it relevant to the present? Will a history of the issue help in this regard?
2. What arguments seem to be favored by what groups at this time? That is, which communities are making which arguments? How are their interests served by these arguments?
3. What venues give voices to which sides of the issues? Does one group or another seem to be in a better position—a better place—from which to argue? In other words, what are the power dynamics at work in an issue? Who has power? Who doesn't? Why?
4. What lines of argument would be appropriate or inappropriate, considering the prevailing needs and values of the audience?
5. What other issues are bound up with discourse about this issue right now, in this place, and in this community? Why?

How Urgent or Immediate Is the Issue?

Usually, urgency depends on the audience as well as the existing situation; that is, it depends on recent activity around an issue. Some issues have a relatively short shelf life. *Kairos* is fickle, and as is suggested by his winged shoes, he is also fleeting. The first edition of this book was written in 1990, and we have now revised it several times. Each time we revise, we update the issues we use to illustrate our points so that they will be familiar to our current readers. Most of the issues we dealt with in earlier editions no longer seem urgent. And yet one or two—such as abortion and gun control—appear to have real staying power within American discourse. So in this edition we continue to use both as examples of highly contested contemporary issues. We do this despite feedback from teachers at southern colleges and universities suggesting that many of their students have already made up their minds about abortion and hence do not wish to consider it in the detail required by rhetorical invention. This is an example of how *kairos* can be place based as well.

If you become interested in an issue that does not seem urgent at the moment, it might help to remember that *kairos* is akin to the Latin term *opportunitas*, an opening. Is there an opening for you to begin making new arguments on a particular issue? If not, can you create such an opening?

Arguments and Interests

The specific arguments that are currently circulating about a particular issue play an important role in creating *kairos*. Who makes what arguments and why? What **interest** might motivate someone to object to pinkwashing? In the short editorial

we quoted earlier, Tracy Clark-Fory suggests that one campaign is questionable at best, because it doesn't send a clear and unified message. A number of other rhetors writing about the broader issue of pinkwashing link it to different issues. Peggy Orenstein picks up on the sexualization angle that Clark-Fory complains about and notes that it ignores people with cancer: "Rather than being playful, which is what these campaigns are after, sexy cancer suppresses discussion of real cancer, rendering its sufferers—the ones whom all this is supposed to be for—invisible." Investigative writer Barbara Ehrenreich considers the pinkwashing part of a strategy to keep a happy face on what is otherwise a very grim disease, as part of what she called in a speech to the Breast Cancer Action group the "perkiness and relentless cheerfulness of the breast cancer culture."

More often than not, investigation of a single issue can lead to a host of other, related issues. Sometimes there are as many issues packed together as there are communities interested in what at first glance seemed like a singular issue. An analysis guided by *kairos* will help sort through the various interested communities and their motivations.

We have already suggested that financial considerations often motivate arguments. Groups like Breast Cancer Action and the Susan G. Komen Foundation (a private foundation that supports breast cancer research) have taken opposite stances on corporate partnerships. What motives or values might have fueled the interests of those, like the Breast Cancer Action group, who want to put a stop to pinkwashing? What groups would accept or reject their position? Why?

Considering the interests at stake in an issue can help a rhetor decide the most advantageous way to frame an argument for a particular audience at a particular time. Most issues that capture our attention are highly complex, and they resonate differently among groups with differing political and social agendas. Before launching an argument about a hot social issue, then, a rhetor who wishes to argue persuasively would do well to tune in to arguments already in circulation. Furthermore, he should examine the values and assumptions that drive those arguments. Rhetors who do this can maintain a *kairotic* stance that readies them to speak to various sides of the issue, supporting those that he finds convincing and refuting those with which he disagrees.

To show how consideration of the values and interests in circulation around an issue can help rhetors generate arguments, we now turn to a frightening event: a shooting at Virginia Tech University. Early on the morning of April 16, 2007, police were called to a dorm room on that campus, where they found two people dead from gunshot wounds. Two hours later, a gunman opened fire in a classroom building, killing 30 more people before killing himself. It did not take long for this event to trigger arguments about gun control. Here is one such argument, published in the magazine *The Economist* days after the shooting took place.

AMERICA'S TRAGEDY

In the aftermath of the massacre at Virginia Tech University on April 16th, as the nation mourned a fresh springtime crop of young lives cut short by a psychopath's

bullets, President George Bush and those vying for his job offered their prayers and condolences. They spoke eloquently of their shock and sadness and horror at the tragedy. The Democratic speaker of the House of Representatives called for a "moment of silence." Only two candidates said anything about guns, and that was to support the right to have them.

Cho Seung-hui does not stand for America's students, any more than Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris did when they slaughtered 13 of their fellow high-school students at Columbine in 1999. Such disturbed people exist in every society. The difference, as everyone knows but no one in authority was saying this week, is that in America such individuals have easy access to weapons of terrible destructive power. Cho killed his victims with two guns, one of them a Glock 9 mm semi-automatic pistol, a rapid-fire weapon that is available only to police in virtually every other country, but which can legally be bought over the counter in thousands of gun-shops in America. There are estimated to be some 240 m guns in America, considerably more than there are adults, and around a third of them are handguns, easy to conceal and use. Had powerful guns not been available to him, the deranged Cho would have killed fewer people, and perhaps none at all.

But the tragedies of Virginia Tech—and Columbine, and Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, where five girls were shot at an Amish school last year—are not the full measure of the curse of guns. More bleakly terrible is America's annual harvest of gun deaths that are not mass murders: some 14,000 routine killings committed in 2005 with guns, to which must be added 16,000 suicides by firearm and 650 fatal accidents (2004 figures). Many of these, especially the suicides, would have happened anyway: but guns make them much easier. Since the killing of John Kennedy in 1963, more Americans have died by American gunfire than perished on foreign battlefields in the whole of the 20th century. In 2005 more than 400 children were murdered with guns.

The Trigger and the Damage Done

The news is not uniformly bad: gun crime fell steadily throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. But it is still at dreadful levels, and it rose sharply again in 2005. Police report that in many cities it rose even faster in 2006. William Bratton, the police chief of Los Angeles (and formerly of New York), speaks of a "gathering storm of crime." Politicians on both sides, he says, have been "captured" by the vocal National Rifle Association (NRA). The silence over Virginia Tech shows he has a point.

The Democrats have been the most disappointing, because until recently they had been the party of gun control. In 1994 President Bill Clinton approved a bill banning assault weapons (covering semi-automatic rifles plus high-capacity magazines for handguns) and the year before that a bill imposing a requirement for background checks. But Democrats believe they paid a high price for their courage: losing the House of Representatives in 1994 shortly after the assault-weapons ban, and then losing the presidency in 2000. Had Al Gore held Arkansas or West Virginia or his own Tennessee, all strongly pro-gun, he would have won the election. These days, with hopes for a victory in 2008 dependent on the South and the mountain West, it is a brave Democrat who will talk about gun control. Some of them dismiss the very idea as "insensitive."

Mr. Bush however, has done active damage. On his watch the assault-weapons ban was allowed to lapse in 2004. New laws make it much harder to trace illegal weapons and require the destruction after 24 hours of information gathered during checks of would-be gun-buyers. The administration has also reopened debate on the Second Amendment, which enshrines the right to bear arms. Last month an appeals court in Washington, DC, overturned the capital's prohibition on handguns, declaring that it violates the Second Amendment. The case will probably go to the newly conservative Supreme Court, which might end most state and local efforts at gun control.

Freedom Yes, but Which One?

No phrase is bandied around more in the gun debate than "freedom of the individual." When it comes to most dangerous products—be they drugs, cigarettes or fast cars—this newspaper advocates a more liberal approach than the American government does. But when it comes to handguns, automatic weapons and other things specifically designed to kill people, we believe control is necessary, not least because the failure to deal with such violent devices often means that other freedoms must be curtailed. Instead of a debate about guns, America is now having a debate about campus security.

Americans are in fact queasier about guns than the national debate might suggest. Only a third of households now have guns, down from 54% in 1977. In poll after poll a clear majority has supported tightening controls. Very few Americans support a complete ban, even of handguns—there are too many out there already, and many people reasonably feel that they need to be able to protect themselves. But much could still be done without really infringing that right.

The assault-weapons ban should be renewed, with its egregious loopholes removed. No civilian needs an AK-47 for a legitimate purpose, but you can buy one online for \$379.99. Guns could be made much safer, with the mandatory fitting of child-proof locks. A system of registration for guns and gun-owners, as exists in all other rich countries, threatens no one but the criminal. Cooling-off periods, a much more open flow of intelligence, tighter rules on the trading of guns and a wider blacklist of those ineligible to buy them would all help.

Many of these things are being done by cities or states, and have worked fairly well. But jurisdictions with tough rules are undermined by neighbours with weak ones. Only an effort at the federal level will work. Michael Bloomberg, the mayor of New York, has put together a coalition of no fewer than 180 mayors to fight for just that. Good luck to him.

This piece answers our first question, about urgency: when it was published on the heels of the shootings, recent events had indeed made the issue of gun control urgent once again according to these *Economist* writers. The writers begin, interestingly, by twice broadening the issue beyond the individual Virginia Tech shooter, linking him to the Columbine killers and then to their easy access to destructive weapons. The implication here is that this is a problem unique to the United States—and here it is worth noting that the *Economist* is published

in England. The *Economist* writers therefore offer the perspective of concerned outsiders, but outsiders who know a good deal about U.S. politics. The writers also address the power dynamics in the situation, noting that government leaders had yet to tie the event to the need for gun control, and suggesting that public figures often ignore *kairotic* moments because they would rather not have thorny issues brought front and center when they are not ready to discuss them. Federal legislators' relative silence on the matter stands in contrast to the local officials and the citizens discussed in this essay. The writers tie the Virginia Tech massacre to other school shootings, which did little to change gun laws at the federal level. They also point suggestively to the more diffuse, less head-turning cumulative numbers on gun murders in the United States. In this way, they use the Virginia Tech murders as an occasion to address the problem of gun-related murders in the United States more generally.

The *Economist* piece ends by discussing the groups that have been working for stricter gun control. In the process they begin to answer our second question: which arguments seem to be favored by which groups at this time?

The shootings at Virginia Tech were so devastating that they still persist in cultural memory and retain *kairos*. Each spring, the anniversary of the shootings presents a renewed occasion to discuss issues related to the shootings. Three and a half years later, the Virginia Tech tragedy was invoked in a Texas debate about guns on campus. Here is a blog entry describing the debate, written by Titania Kumeh and published online at *Mother Jones*:

DO GUNS AND COLLEGE MIX?

Should students be allowed to carry concealed weapons on college campuses? Yesterday, the question entered the national limelight after a 19-year-old University of Texas student fired four rounds through the campus with an AK-47 before killing himself. No one else was hurt, the Associated Press reports. But the incident has Texas Gov. Rick Perry—a dude who goes jogging with a loaded pistol—calling for a relaxation of the state's gun-free college laws. He told the AP:

There are already guns on campus. All too often they are illegal. I want there to be legal guns on campus. I think it makes sense—and all of the data supports—that if law abiding, well-trained, backgrounded individuals have a weapon, then there will be less crime.

It's a stock argument for pro-gun partisans: Students and faculty with concealed carry permits need the ammo to shoot back if a crazed gunman enters their school. But a 2002 Violence Policy Center study found that sometimes, *just* sometimes, even the people permitted to carry concealed weapons can become the crazed gunmen. From 1996 to 2001, 41 concealed-handgun license holders in Texas were arrested for murder and attempted murder. And permit holders were arrested for weapons offenses 81 percent more often than the state's general 21-and-over population. Just a decade ago, after launching a year-long investigation into the Lone Star State's licensing laws, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that 400 criminals with prior

convictions had been issued concealed-carry permits despite background checks. And more than 3,000 licensees had since been arrested, including a computer analyst who shot a bus driver in the chest because he'd nearly missed the bus.

But there's another group on Perry's side: Students for Concealed Carry on Campus. At the annual Gun Rights Policy Conference last weekend in San Francisco, SCCC president David Burnett cited the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting—in which “a young and mentally deranged individual took a firearm,” killed 32 people, wounded 17 others, then killed himself—as an example of why licensed gun holders should be allowed to carry them on campus. “The only alternative that we have is to duck and cover,” Burnett said. “A lot of these college campuses like to pretend that they are exempt from the freedoms that we have to carry a concealed weapon.” In protest, 130 campuses have participated in “Empty Holster Contests,” according to Burnett, where they wear their holsters to school sans guns as a symbol that they are disarmed and vulnerable.

Currently, Colorado and Utah allow concealed weapons on campuses. But gun advocates have vowed to press the state on the side of public armament. A Texas state representative, Republican Joe Driver, plans to file legislation (again) that would invite gun-toters back to school, cocked and locked. Criminals “would not go to a place where they don't know who has a gun,” Driver says. “I think it's an absolute deterrent.”

Kumeh begins her argument with a simple question—“Should students be allowed to carry concealed weapons on college campuses?”—and then describes the question's newfound urgency or *kairos* in the wake of the incident at the University of Texas. After characterizing the case in favor of guns on campus, Kumeh dismantles it. Using statistics and an example, she fashions an argument by means of a suppressed premise: even well-trained, properly licensed individuals can lose their temper and use their gun. Whereas the *Economist* writers used Virginia Tech shootings as the urgent impetus for their argument against gun culture in the United States, Kumeh's piece shows the leader of the group called Students for Concealed Carry on Campus using the same incident to argue in favor of guns on campus.

Kumeh's essay does not offer direct clues to why the SCCC president, Kumeh herself, or the governor of Texas believe as they do on the issue of gun control. That is, it is difficult to determine from an examination of these texts alone to what additional communities these people belong. We can make educated guesses, though; members of the National Rifle Association often take positions and make arguments similar to the SCCC leader, whereas members of the Brady Campaign to Control Gun Violence will sympathize with Kumeh's own stance. These assumptions can lead us to search engines and other research tools that will direct us toward more arguments used by those who are interested in the issue of gun control and that will allow us to define more carefully the groups that are invested in the issue.

Power Dynamics in a Rhetorical Situation

As evidenced by the “empty holsters contests,” the arguments put forth in favor of guns on campus are all about power: gun users have it; people who work and study in gun-free zones (i.e., those with empty holsters) don't.

To examine and invent arguments using *kairos* is to consider the power dynamics at work in a particular issue in addition to the recent events and arguments that press on it. The questions to ask here are the following:

- Which arguments receive more attention?
- Who is making these arguments?
- What arguments receive less attention?
- Who is making these arguments?

When gun control arises as an issue, reporters often request statements from groups already organized, such as the National Rifle Association or the Brady Campaign, or in this case, Students for Concealed Carry on Campus. Organized groups often have more power to be heard in given rhetorical situations than do people who are unaffiliated with a relevant group. Government leaders, too, are asked to make known their stances on such issues. Here, for example, is an official statement containing Senator Dianne Feinstein's reaction to the Virginia Tech incident:

My heart nearly stopped when I heard that more than 30 people had been killed at Virginia Tech today.

In an instant, the hopes and dreams of students were destroyed by a cowardly and terrible act of insane violence. My deepest condolences go to all those touched by this violence.

This mass shooting will be seared into our memories, alongside Columbine, 101 California, the University of Texas Clock Tower, and the shooting at a McDonald's in San Ysidro, California.

It is my deep belief that shootings like these are enabled by the unparalleled ease with which people procure weapons in this country. And I believe this will reignite the dormant effort to pass common-sense gun regulations in this nation.

Feinstein represents the state of California, and so she is careful to mention incidents of gun violence that occurred in that state. Unlike other public officials, she connects the violence at Virginia Tech directly to the gun control issue, attending to the spatial dimension of *kairos*.

The arguments made by the governor of Virginia probably had more impact than those made by Feinstein, given his responsibility for the welfare of the citizens of Virginia and his relative proximity to Virginia Tech. On the other hand, we rarely hear or read the opinions of young people about gun control. Students on the campus were repeatedly asked about their emotional responses to the shootings, and they were asked as well to give factual accounts if they were in a position to do so. But reporters for the national media who wrote about the incident did not bother to ask about the opinions of those who will someday make decisions about gun control. How do we account for the absence of the voices of the young from public discourse about the issue of gun control? Could it be that

this group is apathetic? Or does their status as inexperienced voters or (in some cases) nonvoters have something to do with the undervaluing of their position? All these questions and more are raised by considering the power dynamics at work in any rhetorical situation (see the chapter on *ethos* for more discussion of power relations in rhetoric).

A Web of Related Issues

Rhetorical situations are complex. A rhetor who is attuned to *kairos*, then, must demonstrate awareness of the many values and the differential power dynamics that are involved in any struggle over an issue. The stakes in an argument, or even the shape of the issue itself, can shift according to who is speaking, as is illustrated by the contrasting arguments on gun control, discussed earlier. A rhetor attuned to *kairos* should consider a particular issue as a set of differing political pressures, personal investments, and values, all of which produce different arguments about an issue. These diverging values and different levels of investment connect to other issues as well, producing a weblike relationship with links to other, different, new, but definitely related rhetorical situations. The issue of gun control is linked to the issue of violence, of course, and those who are charged to prevent violence, such as the police and the courts, have a large stake in seeing that really dangerous weapons, such as automatic handguns, are kept out of the wrong hands.

But not all arguments sparked by the Virginia Tech shootings had to do with guns. Some mental health professionals worried as well about the impact on viewers of repetitive television coverage of the event. Others wondered about the role of university faculty and administrators in seeking help for students who show signs of instability. Still others condemned NBC for airing the videotapes the killer made of himself before the shooting and then mailed on that morning. As time went on, debates began on other campuses about the need for broad and instantaneous alert systems as a security measure. These and other related issues form a web that provides seemingly endless possibilities, or "openings," for arguments.

We are not suggesting that a rhetor should address all the values and actions pressing on a particular issue at a particular time. Rather, we recommend that rhetors be aware of the issue's ever-shifting nuances, which might lead to new opportunities for rhetorical arguments. Considering the wealth of possibilities produced by attention to an issue's *kairos*, it is no wonder that Gorgias was bold enough to say to the Athenians, "Suggest a subject," and remain confident that he could make a rhetorical argument about it on the spot.

RHETORICAL ACTIVITIES

1. Survey a variety of magazines and newspapers and select a handful of articles on a given issue. How does each article draw on or create *kairos*? Is the issue so pertinent or urgent that little needs to be done to establish the

article's relevance to a time and/or a place? Do some writers or speakers use an opportune moment to "change the subject" and argue about a separate but related set of issues?

2. Using a library periodical database such as LexisNexis or the Internet, look for a few recent articles on gun control or pinkwashing. How has the *kairos* surrounding these issues changed since we wrote this book? Are people still participating in viral campaigns to raise awareness for breast cancer? What form do those campaigns take? Has talk about guns on campuses or gun control more generally faded from the national news?
3. Choose an issue and read broadly about it, keeping track of the various perspectives. Then, make a visual "map" of the arguments, tracking how the main issue gives rise to others. The map may look like two sets of lists, or it may be more sprawling with lots of offshoots, like a web. Be sure to include in the map the arguments people are making, who the people are, and what values they seem to be asserting.
4. Choose an issue and compose an opening paragraph for a paper or speech that shows how the issue matters for people you may be addressing.

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