

# Present Tense

A Journal of Rhetoric in Society

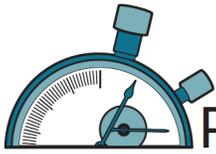
## The Ethos of Mr. Robot

Andrew Pilsch  
Texas A&M University

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## The Ethos of Mr. Robot

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### “But First, a Word from our Corporate Overlords!”

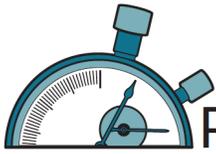
*Mr. Robot* is a Golden Globe-winning television series that aired its second season in 2016. Following a young cybersecurity expert and hacker named Elliot Alderson (Rami Malek), the show documents the machinations of a radical hacker collective, fsociety, as it seeks to dismantle a giant multinational corporation, E Corporation (referred to as “Evil Corp” throughout the show). fsociety’s penchant for releasing video missives featuring scrambled voices, masked narrators, and messages of everyday people needing to wake up to realities of corporate brutality channels the anti-corporate *ethos* of the hacker collective Anonymous. Like the real-world Anonymous, fsociety positions itself as a watchdog over an amok corporate society, though the group in the show pursues an agenda blending data leaks with traditional terrorist plots (the show’s first season concerns attempts to physically destroy a data storage facility containing tape backups of the world’s debt record). From the narrator’s monologues about the dangers of money to the foregrounding of debt as a plot device, the show is steeped in contemporary anti-corporate *ethos*.

*Mr. Robot* is simultaneously hailed as a triumph of brand management. The show airs on USA, which for much of the 2000s was known for its “blue sky” dramas such as *Psych*, *Royal Pains*, and *Burn Notice* in which attractive people investigate crime amidst sunny, sumptuous environs (Yahr). As news coverage on the demise of this period of USA

programming makes clear, the interchangeability and bland agreeability of these dramas became something of a cultural joke (Yahr). In opposition to the cheerfulness of “blue sky” dramas, *Mr. Robot* represents a new model of content creation (Yahr). In an interview published in *Variety*, Alexandra Shapiro, marketing and digital executive VP at NBCUniversal Cable Entertainment, reports that *Mr. Robot* is part of USA Network’s rebranding from the 2000-era “blue sky” slogan of “Characters Welcome” to a new “We the Bold” brand identity. As *Variety* reports,

USA’s qualitative research found that the national mood among the demographic that the network most covets—the span of the twentysomething millennials through the fortysomething Gen-Xers—is darker and grittier these days than it was in 2004-2005. The immediate post-9/11 years left USA’s core demo “weirdly optimistic,” Shapiro noted (qtd. in Littleton).

The piece also notes that “in comparing cultural research done a decade ago with contemporary data, the USA team was surprised to find how deeply the trauma of the economic meltdown has lingered in the culture” (Littleton). Thus, *Mr. Robot*’s theme of “a deep-seated distrust of governmental institutions and big business” is integral to USA’s rebranding. USA is owned by NBCUniversal—an entertainment conglomerate that is, in turn, owned by Comcast—the kind of pervasive, powerful, and unaccountable corporate monolith against which fsociety struggles (“NBCUniversal”).



# Present Tense

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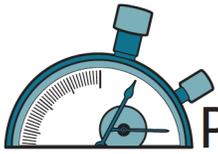
This state of affairs, in which a giant corporate entity is using anti-corporatism as part of a rebranding effort, seems ripe for exploring how anti-corporate, resistant *ethos* functions today. Specifically, *Mr. Robot* speaks to the increasing complex constructions of *ethos* in a multimodal media ecology. That there is no position of pure and absolute sincerity, that we are all imbricated in the brutalities of capitalism, is not a novel idea; however, *Mr. Robot*, as content, seeks to agitate against the very forms of power that enable it to circulate in the first place. In this essay, then, I study the kind of *ethos* *Mr. Robot* builds for its viewers. I discuss this *ethos* in the context of Benjamin Bratton's *The Stack*—which conceptualizes the world of ubiquitous computing as an “accidental megastructure,” an unplanned, globally built environment that replaces traditions of citizenship and sovereignty—and Casey Boyle's call for a “continuous rhetoric” that responds to the torrent of data produced within this new world. In doing so, I show how *Mr. Robot*'s oddly stacked *ethos* engages both calls within rhetorical theory to emplace *ethos* and the changing nature of place in Bratton's *Stack*. Where I find that *Mr. Robot* signals the evacuation of traditional narratives of resistance, I conclude by suggesting how we might, instead, use current practices of resistance, taking Black Lives Matters as an example, as a way of theorizing an emplaced, continuous, and generative *ethos* for the world of ubiquitous computing.

## “Citizens of the World, We are Here to Help”: Stacked *Ethos*

Corretta Pittman explains Aristotelian *ethos* as the need to establish a rhetor's “good sense, good moral character, and good will” (Pittman 44). Nedra Reynolds has labelled such an understanding as the commonly held contemporary one, while her work reveals that

the Greek understanding of the term is tied, etymologically, to a strong sense of place (Reynolds 327–29). From Reynolds's insight, as Judy Holiday summarizes, scholarship on *ethos* and place has pushed this connection to acknowledge that “cultural stratification and inequity underwrite the majority of human interaction and are aspects of the human condition” and that *ethos* “emerges . . . as a study of the relationships among competing ‘habitual gathering places’” (Holiday 389). Rhetorical invention becomes a process of sorting through “a sense of self/other that is always socially embedded and dislocates the equation of *ethos* and intrinsic character” (403). Matthew M. Heard calls this sifting and sorting “attunement,” suggesting that the cultivation of *ethos* is the creation of an “identity” through “a recurring, prolonged dwelling within the complexities of tone” and that this identity can be understood as attempting to find the proper tone that resonates with a given audience (46). Nathaniel Rivers argues that *ethos* can be thought of as “association generated by interest” and the “forging of alliances in order increase our reality.” These contemporary accounts of *ethos* encompass the social co-construction of the self, the layered standpoints that go into such a construction, and the situatedness of knowledge claims.

Much of this scholarship also tacitly connects *ethos*, following Aristotle, to human production. In contrast, the “Strathclyde Statement on Corporate Identity,” a widely cited manifesto authored in 1995, begins by asserting that a corporation's identity “articulates the corporate *ethos*, aims and values and presents a sense of individuality” (Balmer et al.). Suggesting that thinking in terms of a corporate identity yields “an image consistent with the organisation's defining *ethos* and character,” the



# Present Tense

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document also highlights a consistent *ethos* as a way to “build understanding and commitment among its diverse stakeholders.” In this document (and the extensive literature that cites it), *ethos* is treated as an ambient articulation of a corporation’s personality or character. *Ethos* is seen as both an external marketing tactic and a means of building cohesion within an organization.

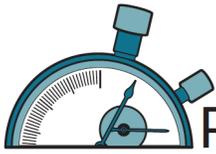
I have argued elsewhere that corporate organizations can be imagined as a hive of wasps (Pilsch). Wasp hives are singularly focused on producing more wasps, and the actions of individuals are only explicable in the context of the hive. Thus, tracing individual wasps, or humans working for a corporation, or TV shows produced by a media conglomerate, is not as productive as thinking about the agency of the corporate whole. Imagining such a collective *ethos* for USA seems to contradict the radical *ethos* of *Mr. Robot*. In the act of servicing a new, edgy corporate identity, the show gives voice to a narrative critical of the overwhelming power of corporations.

This fragmented corporate identity complicates both the ecological understanding of *ethos* and its implicit humanness. In *Rethinking Ethos*, Kathleen J. Ryan, Nancy Myers, and Rebecca Jones exemplify ecological *ethos* by recounting how environmentalist Terry Tempest Williams’s “*ethos* emerges from [an] ecology of forces. She draws from the multiple threads of her experiences and interactions with others to create a relational and situated *ethos*” (1). This work on *ethos* traces the networks that come to constitute the authority that underscores communicative acts; however, Williams’s situated *ethos*, in all its messy emergence, occupies a particular, singular place.

How does *ethos* function when emerging in between places that contradict one another? *Mr. Robot*’s ideological commitments to anti-corporatism are directly at odds with its use by USA as a corporate rebranding endeavor. As the *Variety* piece explains, “‘Characters Welcome’ heralded USA’s headlong dive into the original scripted series business” while “‘We the Bold’ speaks to the kinds of stories we tell at USA Network. . . . It reflects our programming, our characters, our audience, and, most importantly, our values as a network” (Littleton). This is the challenge of thinking *ethos* with *Mr. Robot*.

The place of *Mr. Robot*’s *ethos* mirrors the complex redefinition of place in Benjamin Bratton’s *The Stack*. Bratton argues that planetary-scale computing has accidentally created a planet-wide architectural megastructure he calls The Stack. For Bratton, “The Stack is a machine that becomes a state,” and technologies such as cloud computing as much as the underlying logic of computation itself have remade sovereignty into a conversation between traditional nation-states and extra-state entities such as Google (51). Bratton argues that this new sovereignty means an “end to nonplace” and the creation of “a different kind of placefulness” within the overlapping and sometimes competing layers of sovereign entities (some computational, some geographical) (16). As *Mr. Robot*’s stacked *ethos* shows, a new placefulness needs a new emplaced *ethos*.

For Bratton, this new kind of place is similar to the tangle of competing “habitual gathering places” discussed by Holiday, with the exception that some of these (such as cloud computing) are distributed. He suggests that in the new “data sovereignty,” “various parts [look] like *chora*, *demos*, *agora*, *polis*, *dromos*, and *technics*,” highlighting that, in the “composite city machine,” a new set of rhetorical practices is



# Present Tense

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needed (Bratton 10). Within these new gathering places, “we see not one totality but the production of multiple and incongruous totalities,” which begins to explain *Mr. Robot’s* conflicted dual-*ethos* as anti-corporate firebrand and corporate tool (12).

## **“We’re all Living in Each Other’s Paranoia”: Continuous *Ethos* in Place**

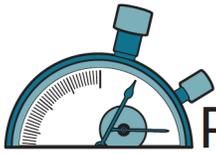
In the world of ubiquitous computing discussed by Bratton, as Casey Boyle argues, “we are always speaking, debating, voting, informing” as part of a vast computationally mediated conversation (272). With this ubiquity of discourses, Boyle suggests that we are never fully speaking and never fully listening but, instead, darting between these poles as we simultaneously produce and consume data. As such, he asks us to imagine “a *continuous rhetoric*” (274). In a continuous rhetoric, “resonance,” rather than the classical understanding of deliberation, is produced through discourse (275). These resonances define a continuum of different identity positions—“inclusive of but irreducible to categories of subject and objects”—for discursive subjects (275).

Bratton further complicates Boyle’s idea of rhetorical resonance by offering not just two poles but six continuous layers of engagement within The Stack: user, interface, address, city, cloud, earth. Together, these layers provide starting points for any interaction within the megastructural machine he argues the world is becoming. Bratton calls each “U-shaped trajectory” through The Stack a “column.” These columns “fix one User to another by linking layers,” but “any one User will initiate millions of different columns at different moments over time.” For Bratton, this abundance of virtual

traces does not mean “that there is no ‘there there’ but rather that moment to moment, there are too many ‘theres’” (67). In a continuous rhetoric, emplaced *ethos* becomes an overly emplaced *ethos*: too many places, some of which may contradict one another.

I have been discussing *Mr. Robot’s* layering of emplaced *ethos* as a contradiction, but is it? In the show’s first episode, Mr. Robot (Christian Slater) explains to Elliot the reason fsociety is targeting Evil Corp: “What if I told you that this conglomerate just so happens to own 70% of the global consumer credit industry” (Oplev). Unlike the contemporary debt industry, crisscrossed by a variety of governmental and nongovernmental interests, the show depicts Evil Corp as a monolith. Evil Corp is ubiquitous, as one of the show’s fake ads explains: “If you see our logo, that means you can rest assured that you’re buying the best food, clothing, shelter, transportation, hygiene, electronics, and life’s necessities that money can buy” (Ganatra). In the show, Evil Corp condenses the networks of contemporary power into a single entity. Conquer Evil Corp, and the heroes of fsociety save the world.

An article in *Business Insider* titled “Hackers Can’t Really Erase Your Student Loan Debt Like in ‘Mr. Robot’” explains the fantasy of this construction. Evil Corp’s debt holdings are not actually the way our financial system works. . . . We refer to American Express or Mastercard as a “credit card company,” but each actually has its own network of parties, all responsible for different tasks—processing payments, storing information, issuing credit to customers, contacting merchants, etc. And that’s only the beginning. (Fussell)



# Present Tense

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Instead of a corporate monolith, the reality of consumer debt is Bratton's post-state megastructural machine. Like a wasp hive, debt is a tangle of writhing agents that hungers for one thing: payment.

To collapse the tension between USA's corporate rebranding and *Mr. Robot's* ethos of anti-corporate resistance, I argue that the subtle transformation of consumer debt from tangled stack to corporate monolith transforms the messy, conflicted places of contemporary resistance into a David-vs-Goliath story of a group of isolated outcasts overcoming a superior foe. As USA's marketing research makes clear, millennials have been victimized by the 2008 economic collapse in the form of student loan debt, skyrocketing housing costs, and collapsing job markets, but these faceless economic forces do not make exciting TV. Thus, *Mr. Robot* leverages the *ethos* of Anonymous to provide a conventional escapist fantasy that is dressed up in the trappings of radical politics.

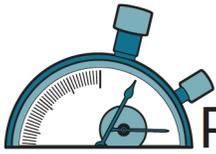
## **"I'm Not About to Goddamn Tweet About it": Progressive Ethos Today**

This corporate anti-corporatism shows the exhaustion of traditional resistance as a category for ethical action. As Jeffrey Nealon explains, "the narratives by which we categorize that period called 'the 60s'—narratives of unprecedented rebellion, resistance, and liberation—don't necessarily do much useful work in explaining or intervening within a very different historical situation" ("Periodizing the 80s" 65). Narratives of revolutionary desire that say "no" to the repressive logic of a paternalistic, centralized authority are not particularly useful in an era in which power is distributed through planetary-scale computation. In Nealon's account of the historical shift away from the 60s,

the trend toward privatization in all layers of the economy yields a reality "where capitalism has already worked its way into every fiber of our 'private' lives" (76). In this environment, Nealon suggests "one doesn't get to *decide* to denounce capitalism," one can only "*respond* to it" (*Post-Postmodernism* 97).

*Mr. Robot's* ethos denounces rather than responds. This *ethos* occludes the fact that working through the privatized world is the only means of creating a more just reality. This process of working through capital is called accelerationism, a project "to unleash latent productive forces" and to reshape "the material platform of neoliberalism . . . toward common ends" (Williams and Srnicek 355). Similarly, Bratton writes about The Stack to show how we may shift its development "toward the . . . realization of a more genuinely luxurious social geology" (72). In both moves, the strategy is not to say "no" to the world but to work within the infrastructure of contemporary capital to unleash the radical potentials it contains.

This shift in tactics must be accompanied by a shift in *ethos*, one example of which is embodied by the Black Lives Matter movement. Activists associated with #BlackLivesMatter (including Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and DeRay Mckesson) have made successful use of corporate-style brand identity and social media platforms to circulate and coordinate their work of attaining social justice for oppressed populations. Julius Bailey and David J. Leonard argue that #BlackLivesMatter, as an utterance, is effective in its "seemingly common sense exhortation" that "demands nothing more than a bare minimum of human sympathy from the listener" (67). This minimal injunction is specifically designed to circulate within the



## Present Tense

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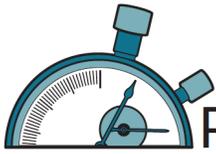
communicative matrix that structures contemporary capitalism.

The viral call of #BlackLivesMatter serves as a column, in Bratton's terminology, through the various layers of The Stack, that unifies activist platforms in the common cause of disrupting the power structures of white privilege. Russell Rickford praises #BlackLivesMatter for its "spontaneity and self-organization," calling it "a grassroots surge rather than a measured and conciliatory airing of grievances" (Rickford 37). This spontaneity yields a decentered, network-driven activism in which, as Catherine L. Langford and Montené Speight illustrate, "activists organize protests, demonstrations, die-ins, teach-ins, and other acts of resistance in the name of #BlackLivesMatter" (80).

Action in the name of a hashtag is a good model for *ethos* in the continuous rhetoric Boyle calls for. Such a continuous *ethos* might also resemble Jim Corder's writing on the topic. Corder suggests that certain kinds of *ethos* can resist "the flood of language" that "crowds our living space and our time" with too many messages (20). Such *ethos*, like discourse itself, "is never completely achieved" but "always emerging" (23). A continuously emerging *ethos* "is generative and fruitful when the time and space stewarded by the speaker give free room for another to live in" (20). Such an *ethos* projects a space in which others can gather and work, like a hashtag that "evolved . . . into a movement" (Langford and Speight 80).

Within the torrent of data that makes up life in The Stack, #BlackLivesMatter is a hook to which a variety of resistant action can connect. Rather than rely on individual authority, #BlackLivesMatter is a collectively authored *ethos* that works within the computational architecture of the contemporary

world. Where *Mr. Robot* uses hacktivism to imagine an impossible, fantastic narrative of denunciation that services a shift in the *ethos* of the USA Network from "Characters Welcome" to "We the Bold," #BlackLivesMatter offers us a glimpse of a continuous, emergent, generative *ethos* that circulates virally and provides "free room" for the work of creating a more just world in the present.



# Present Tense

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## About the Author



Andrew Pilsch is an assistant professor of English at Texas A&M University. His research and teaching focus on rhetoric and the digital humanities. His first book, *Transhumanism: Evolutionary Futurism and the Human Technologies of Utopia*, is available from University of Minnesota Press.