From the Agora to the Algorithm: Aristotle's Rhetoric as a Framework for Understanding Social Media Persuasion

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Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing.

George Orwell, 1984

Thesis Abstract

Originally developed to connect people, social media created a new digital space where communities could be built, social networks established, and user generated content created and rapidly shared. Celebrated as a hallmark of progress, the rise of these platforms held great promise for society and were celebrated as providing a new public-commons where democracy could flourish. More recently, however, this capability has been co-opted by governments, political parties, and other organisations to exert power both domestically and internationally, and manipulate others in the pursuit of military, political, and societal goals. This is altering the geopolitical balance of power; polarising societies; creating uncertainty and anxiety; and undermining trust in knowledge, people, systems, and institutions. No longer then is social media merely a tool to bring people together; rather, it is being utilised as a persuasive device to threaten security at the individual, societal, national, and international levels. Understanding this problem and, in particular, understanding how persuasive attempts occur in the digital environment, is, thus, of considerable importance. While research has made considerable gains in understanding how various factors are exploited to effect online persuasion, a gap in our understanding of persuasion in this particular environment remains, particularly as it impacts issues of national security.

This thesis argues that drawing on Aristotle's rhetorical framework and reframing it for the contemporary environment, a more comprehensive understanding of persuasive attempts online can be gleaned. Utilising a psychological humanities approach and a rhetorical framework, this thesis undertook an analysis of two cases to understand how persuasion is attempted in the social media environment, particularly as it impacts on issues of security. The first of these cases drew on 2218 Facebook posts to understand the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) campaign to influence the

outcome of the 2016 US presidential elections. The findings highlight how a comprehensive understanding of the political and social cleavages within the US allowed the IRA to utilise both prosumer interaction in conjunction with the technical capabilities afforded by Facebook to co-construct persuasive arguments to carefully segmented audiences. This was designed to exploit the political and social cleavages, mobilise conservative voters while suppressing liberal voters and, ultimately, to shape the election outcome in a manner desirable to Russia.

The second case drew on 2,473 tweets from Russia's state media Twitter account @RT_Com to understand the campaign to influence the Western response to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Findings from this case highlighted how nation states combine a deep understanding of the social environment with social media platform affordances as part of an increasingly hybrid approach to warfare. More specifically, this case highlights how social media campaigns are undertaken by nation states in support of military objectives by targeting foreign populations and, in doing so, disrupting the political and, thus, military decision making of an adversary.

A separate study undertook a synthesis of the findings from each of the case studies to identify emergent patterns and divergences across the data. Through both inductive and abductive reasoning, the analysis generated theoretical insights and developed a revised rhetorical framework. This thesis advances persuasion research in the social media environment in three key areas. First, it highlights how social media is not simply a transmitter of persuasive messaging but, rather, it is a socio-technical environment where persuasion is co-constructed in a digital ecology through both human interaction and platform affordances. Second, that Aristotle's rhetorical framework, reframed for the contemporary environment, offers a practical and useful analytical tool for understanding persuasive attempts via social media. Third, that when

persuasion in the contemporary social media environment is understood via a rhetorical framework, the implications for security at the individual, societal, national, and international levels become clear.

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Although a latecomer to academia, my delusions of academic grandeur meant that starting this thesis was never a problem. Yet as an intellectual drifter whose ideas wander unpredictably, along with a talent for being easily distracted by new ideas and a propensity for endless procrastination, completing it was always going to be the challenge. While it was touch and go…here we are! Two of the key reasons I am at this stage are my supervisors – Professor Darrin Hodgetts and Professor Kerry Chamberlain – both of whom exemplify the very best of scholarship and collegiality. I couldn't have asked for a better supervisory team, and I am grateful beyond words for the time, support, encouragement, inspiration, and patience that you have both given to get me to this point. I am particularly grateful for the manner in which you both did this – treating me as a colleague throughout this 'ordeal' means more than you know. Thank you both.

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Chapter One: Introduction

In the contemporary digital environment, social media platforms have become an increasingly important part of daily life. Originally developed to connect people, social media provided a new digital space of "networked information services designed to support in-depth social interaction, community formation, collaborative opportunities, and collaborative work" (Hunsinger & Senft, 2014, p. 1). Viewed as a hallmark of progress, the rise of these platforms held great promise for society and were celebrated as providing a new public-commons where democracy could flourish (Blagojević & Šćekić, 2022; Kuznetsov, 2022; Mossberger et al., 2008). This was largely a consequence of the access to data, knowledge, social networks, and collective engagement opportunities they afforded (Woolley & Howard, 2019).

More recently, these social media platforms have developed and implemented new features for political communications (Howard, 2020). Research has shown how these new features allow social media to play a significant role in the circulation of discourse about politics and public policy (Woolley & Howard, 2019). Not only does this make social media an important tool for society, but it also affords the opportunity to utilise it as a strategic tool, allowing it to bypass traditional communications channels and media outlets to engage directly with populations, both domestic and foreign, to shape public opinion and persuade audiences on political issues.

Unsurprisingly this capability has been co-opted by governments, political parties, and other organisations to shape the geopolitical environment in a manner favourable to them. Indeed, Bradshaw et al. (2021a) highlight trends across 81 countries where social media was utilised to spread information, misinformation, and disinformation about political issues in an attempt to persuade audiences. This included in shaping public attitudes domestically where Bradshaw et al. (2021a) highlights how

social media was co-opted in 26 countries as a tool of control to “suppress fundamental human rights, discredit political opponents, and drown out dissenting opinions” (p. i). But as well as for persuading and controlling domestic populations, these tools have also been used to undertake foreign influence operations and persuade global audiences. These operations have evolved into a sophisticated form of information warfare that is an important part of an overall strategy to achieve military, political, and societal goals.

No longer then is social media merely a tool to bring people together. Rather, it is being utilised as a persuasive tool to undermine trust in people, systems, and institutions, and to alter the geopolitical balance of power. In this sense, social media presents a substantial threat to security at the individual, societal, national, and international levels. Understanding how persuasive attempts occur in this environment is, thus, clearly important to allow both proactive and reactive responses to be developed that protect the security of societies in the national and international environment. While a broad range of excellent research has made considerable gains towards this understanding (Aral, 2020; Bradshaw et al., 2023; Halversen & Weeks, 2023; Hoffmann et al., 2019; Jensen et al., 2024; Schmid, 2023; Wojtowicz, 2022), persuasion in the social media environment is one that researchers are yet to fully understand. This thesis aims to address this gap in the research.

This chapter sets the context for the research, exploring the contemporary social media environment and noting the opportunities it provides for shaping collective thought and action by persuading audiences in ways previously not imagined. I highlight how this persuasive potential can threaten security at the societal, national, and international level. The chapter then explores the gap in understanding how this persuasion occurs in the contemporary social media environment before reviewing the literature on the evolution of persuasion to glean insights into how this gap may be

closed. In doing this, I identify Aristotle's classical rhetoric as a framework for enhancing understanding of how persuasion is effected in the contemporary social media environment, particularly as it impacts issues of national security. The chapter concludes with the thesis aim and structure.

The Contemporary Social Media Environment

Social media has emerged as an important research area within the social sciences as the rapid rise of what have been termed sociotechnical platforms have created the opportunity for users to create and share information on every aspect of life (Aral, 2020; Bradshaw, 2020; Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Bradshaw & Howard, 2018a, 2018b; Castells, 2010; Gilardi et al., 2022; Innes, 2020a; Lipschultz, 2022; Naderer, 2023; Vaidhyanathan, 2018; Woolley & Howard, 2019). While the persuasive capabilities of the media are not new, the rapid expansion of social media platforms in cyberspace has enabled a revolutionary change in how this occurs. With a range of new features, or technical components that allow users to interact with the technology (Wolfers et al., 2025), and affordances, or the possibilities emerging from the relationship between the technical features of social media and the people who perceive and use them (Karahanna et al., 2018; Vaast & Kaganer, 2013), social media enables a large number of highly personalised, interpersonal channels that offer near instantaneous reciprocal interactions (Bayer et al., 2020; Cho et al., 2022; Valkenburg et al., 2016). Moreover, social media platforms are both rapidly and continually evolving as dynamic algorithms, network compositions, and personal settings are constantly changing, making an already diverse and complex ecosystem even more so. This has provided a significantly greater opportunity to shape collective thought and action and exert power through persuading others in a manner never before envisaged (Bradshaw,

2020; Bradshaw & Howard, 2018a, 2018b; Couldry et al., 2018; Gilardi et al., 2022; Innes, 2020a; Lipschultz, 2022; Margetts et al., 2015; Naderer, 2023).

Initially this opportunity was celebrated as providing a new public-commons that would enable democracy to flourish, as exemplified by the popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East in 2011. For example, in Tunisia, following a street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, setting fire to himself in protest of government corruption and abuse, family and friends took to social media to share their grievances and to highlight the poor living conditions and political repression in Tunisia (Howard & Hussain, 2011; Kuznetsov, 2022). Communicating in ways that the government proved unable to control, the Tunisian population experienced a cognitive liberation, a term coined by McAdam (1999), which led to a digital uprising against a repressive regime and, in turn, to a physical uprising which resulted in the ousting of longtime president Ben Ali and the subsequent democratisation of the country (Howard & Hussain, 2011; Kuznetsov, 2022). This uprising in Tunisia also provided the inspiration for civil disobedience campaigns, both digital and physical, against repressive governments more broadly across North Africa and the Middle East in what became known as the Arab Spring.

Noting what had occurred in Tunisia along with the deposing of leaders in Libya, Egypt, and Yemen, governments across the region began to make concessions in the hope of heading off political uprising in their own countries (Moldovan, 2020). Algeria repealed its decades old state of emergency law that severely restricted constitutionally granted political freedoms, the Sultan of Oman devolved legislative power to its democratically elected Consultative Assembly, and several oil-rich Arab states committed to both economic and social reform (Howard & Hussain, 2013). Irrespective of the longer-term impacts of the Arab Spring, and noting that dissent

across North Africa and the Middle East is nothing new, Howard and Hussain (2011) note that "…digital media helped to turn individualized, localized, and community-specific dissent into a structured movement with a collective consciousness about both shared plights and opportunities for action." (p. 41). This gave rise to optimism that social media could be a powerful tool in assisting with the spread of democracy. Unfortunately, however, this optimism has given way to significant concerns as evidence continues to mount of a much darker side to social media activities.

There are many dimensions to this problem, with both state and non-state actors expending substantial amounts of resources and effort on social media campaigns that generate information, misinformation and disinformation to effect persuasion. Research by Bradshaw et al., (2021b) of the University of Oxford's Computational Propaganda Research Project, found evidence of social media manipulation of public opinion by governments, political parties, and private companies occurring across 81 countries. This manipulation was identified as being used both domestically to persuade segments of society as part of election interference operations as well as internationally as a tool of geopolitical influence. Unfortunately, social media manipulation to persuade audiences has now become a mainstay in society and the strategies, techniques, and tools used continue to evolve as new technologies such as artificial intelligence are developed (Ahmad et al., 2025; Battista, 2024; Cupać et al., 2024; Hunter et al., 2024; Jozaghi, 2025; Riabets & Tymkiv, 2025; Saheb et al., 2024; Surjatmodjo et al., 2024). These pernicious attempts at persuasion have the potential to pose a critical threat to both democracy and security.

In terms of non-state actors, marginal social movements in numerous countries are undertaking divisive social media campaigns that are heightening ethnic, cultural and racial tensions; inspiring violent nationalist movements; and causing civil

disturbance. Terrorist organisations such as ISIS are leveraging the power of the social media environment through the propagation of socio-ideological messaging to a global audience (Stengel, 2019). This messaging occurs in both open online environments and in virtual environments where infiltration is extremely difficult. Messaging is used to build communities, share stories and grievances, and, ultimately, to radicalise and recruit potential members (Alarid, 2016; Stengel, 2019). Messaging is often obscenely distorted and designed to romanticise the Islamic State and create sympathy towards their cause. While audience demographics vary widely - young and old, male and female, religious and non-religious, well and barely educated, high and low socioeconomic status - a common theme of those who are radicalised and recruited seems to be that they feel something is missing in their lives (Alarid, 2016; KhosraviNik & Amer, 2022). With its low cost of entry, massive and rapid reach, ability to tailor messaging, and the fact that all users are potential prosumers, or consumers who have been integrated into the production process and actively create, modify, share, and engage with content (Toffler, 1980; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), the social media environment is ideally suited to target this group and, in doing so, radicalise and recruit individuals. Indeed, Stengel (2019) notes online social media platforms have largely replaced traditional venues of recruitment such as community centres, mosques, and cafes.

Social media has also been used to communicate and even livestream terrorist operations. For example, in August 2014 a video was uploaded to the Al-Hayat page on the social networking platform Diaspora showing the beheading of American journalist James Foley by ISIS insurgents (Friis, 2015). And in March 2019, Brenton Tarrant used social media to livestream his attack on Muslim worshippers at Mosques in

Christchurch, New Zealand (Young & Caine, 2020). Both of these incidents specifically used social media with the aim of maximising the propaganda impact.

In terms of political persuasion, corporates are increasingly being hired to microtarget large parts of a nation's population to achieve persuasive effect. Microtargeting via social media is a powerful technique that combines big data analytics with sophisticated black box algorithms to deliver highly personalised messages to individuals or specific segments of a population. To achieve this, social media platforms collect vast amounts of data from user interactions, online activity, and personal attributes to build detailed user profiles. These profiles are then utilised to segment audiences based on demographic, psychographic, and personality traits (Kaiser, 2019). This segmentation allows for the precision delivery of personalised messages with highly tailored content designed to resonate with a target audiences specific interests, beliefs, and values. Such strategies are designed to shape social attitudes, alter consumer behaviour, or influence the political process by deepening existing ideological divides, presenting information in a way that triggers emotional reactions, and creating echo chambers that reinforce pre-existing beliefs (Hoffmann et al., 2019, Tufekci, 2014).

For example, in the lead up to the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, the 'Leave' campaign hired Cambridge Analytica, an organisation that describes itself as a "global election management agency" that "uses data modelling and psychographic profiling to grow audiences, identify key influencers, and connect with people in ways that move them to action" (Cambridge Analytica, 2016) to influence the outcome of the referendum. Through a series of questionable practices, Cambridge Analytica acquired social media data on millions of British citizens and provided analysis of this to the Leave campaign (Rone, 2023). It has been alleged that Cambridge

Analytica then utilised sophisticated psychological tools to microtarget voters on social media during the referendum campaign, with messaging focussed on immigration and lack of control of the borders (Kaiser, 2019). This was done with the intention of influencing voting on the issue in favour of the Leave campaign. While the value of the social media campaign has been questioned, what is not in doubt is that the referendum resulted in a surprising victory for Leave and an ongoing political crisis in the United Kingdom. Political persuasion campaigns such as this continue globally and are occurring in an environment where there is a lack of regulation, transparency and accountability. As a consequence, social media manipulation is creating civil and political crises through undermining trust in leaders, the media, and institutions. These actions are threatening both the national and international security environment, as well as the concept of democracy itself.

To understand how this is occurring, a brief discussion of some of the defining characteristics of the social media environment is important.

Characteristics of the Social Media Environment

Widespread Availability and the Scale and Speed of Information

From humble beginnings in 1969, the internet has dramatically evolved to become a central aspect of modern society (Singer & Brooking, 2018; Singer & Friedman, 2014; Whyte & Mazanec, 2023). As a consequence of its low barriers to entry, both in terms of cost and capability, the online environment has enabled a high level of global connectivity. As of April 2025, some 5.65 billion people were active online, a global penetration rate of almost 69%. Growth remains solid with a year-on-year increase at an average of 12.6% between 2003 and 2014, 7% between 2014 and 2021, 4.5% between 2022 and 2024, and 2.7% from 2024 (Kemp, 2025). The ubiquity

of these interconnected systems and their insensitivity to both distance and national borders has enabled near instantaneous global communications, mass data storage and transfer, and a whole host of other highly distributed systems, including social media platforms, that have become essential to almost every aspect of our daily lives. Of the 5.65 billion people online, some 5.4 billion of these are active social media users (Kemp, 2025). Data from GWI reveals that the typical social media user spends an average of 2 hours 24 minutes per day using social media (Kemp, 2025).

Social media platforms arguably trace their origins to the late 1990s and early 2000s, beginning with rudimentary attempts at online social networking, such as Six Degrees in 1997, which allowed users to create profiles and connect with others within their network. While these early platforms proved limited in their capabilities, they laid the groundwork for the rapid evolution of online social interaction. In the early 2000s, platforms such as Friendster and MySpace began to popularise the concept of social networking among broader audiences. MySpace marked a significant turning point by reaching one million active users in 2004 (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019), helping to mainstream social media. Since that time there has been a rapid rise in the number of platforms and the users who frequent them. Facebook (owned by Meta), the largest social media platform, has some 3.1 billion active monthly users globally, making it larger than the population of any sovereign nation and second only to Christianity as the largest self-identifying group in the world (Statista, 2025). Six other platforms have more than 1 billion active users: YouTube (2.5 billion), Instagram (owned by Meta – 2 billion), WhatsApp (owned by Meta – 2 billion), TikTok (1.6 billion), and WeChat (1.4 billion). There are also ten other platforms with more than 500 million active users (Kemp, 2025). Every social media platform user, be it an individual, organisation, government agency, or automated bot, is able to create and disseminate information directly to any

other user on the platform (Lin & Kerr, 2021). This widespread availability makes social media a powerful platform for influencing a wide proportion of the global population.

In terms of the amount of information shared on social media, the figures are staggering. On a daily basis, Facebook's 3.1 billion active users spend an average of 42 minutes on Facebook, upload some 350 million photos, view 100 million hours of videos, and 'like' more than 1 billion posts (Omnicore, 2025a). Of note, Facebook advertising reaches 33% (2.7 billion) of the global population over age 13. More than 2.5 billion YouTube users upload 500 hours of video every minute and view more than 5 billion videos each day (Omnicore, 2025b). On WhatsApp, more than 140 billion messages are sent daily, 586 million X (formerly Twitter) users post more than 500 million tweets daily, and more than 3 billion photos are shared each day on Instagram (Omnicore, 2025c). Of the 3.1 billion users on Facebook, 37% use the social network as the primary means of accessing news with YouTube, Whatsapp, and Instagram users not far behind on 31%, 21% and 18% respectively (Kemp, 2025). In addition to the massive amount of information shared on them, social media platforms enjoy a very low latency with users able to transmit information anywhere on the planet almost instantaneously (Lin & Kerr, 2021). This is in stark contrast to the hours, days or even weeks that characterised more traditional media communication modes.

This sheer volume and speed of information production and diffusion, along with social media being a primary source of news for many, has also resulted in a fundamental shift in communication power from traditional media organisations to anyone with a keyboard. Whereas traditional media companies created editorial boards to produce top-down knowledge that was based on "the subjective choices of experts, themselves made and authorised through institutional processes of training and

certification, or validated by the public through the mechanisms of the market" (Gillespie, 2014, p. 26) anyone with an internet connection and a keyboard is now a potential prosumer, capable of creating, editing, publishing, and instantly sharing information - verified or not, factual or not, and at any time of the day from anywhere on the planet to anywhere else. This shift in communications power has seen social media described as a democratising force (Castells, 2007, 2013). In short, the way social media platforms manage the sheer volume and speed of information that is transmitted over their platforms means that legacy media organisations no longer have a monopoly over news and information. Agenda setting and the framing of issues, for example, is now shared with individuals and social media companies. This has implications for a broad range of social, political, and economic issues as well as issues of national security.

The Mass Reach and Microtargeting Ability of Social Media

Like legacy media, social media is effective at directly reaching large numbers of people. Where social media differs, however, is in being able to do this while at the same time utilising the massive amounts of data aggregated about users and their social behaviour to microtarget individuals with highly personalised messages. It is this broad reach combined with precision control over what content is received by who and when that makes social media so powerful to advertisers, political operatives, and governments alike (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018b).

At the core of this dissemination process are algorithms – calculations coded in computer software that sort, filter and deliver information in a way that maximises engagement (Bradshaw, 2020; Bradshaw & Howard, 2018b; Pasquale, 2015) – without which users would have to sort through vast amounts of information to seek what they are looking for. While these algorithms perform an important role, they are not neutral

or free from bias. Rather, they are a reflection of the data utilised to develop them and the opinions, perspectives and limitations of those who wrote them (Hoffmann et al., 2019), and they can be formulated or tweaked to satisfy powerful economic or political interests (O'Neil, 2016). As a consequence, rather than merely sorting information, algorithms determine both what and how information is disseminated and consumed in a manner that is designed to maximise both engagement and the amount of time a user spends on the platform by personalising content around individual users interests and existing online behaviour (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018a; Fowler, 2016). In this way, algorithms act as powerful gatekeepers in shaping public discourse by deciding which social issues are addressed and which are ignored. This makes them a potent tool of persuasion and one that is ripe to be exploited to increase influence for a specific purpose.

One particular form of algorithm, the social media bot, is an inauthentic social media user controlled in large part by automated software. It is designed to impersonate human beings and interact with 'real' users on social media platforms to influence public opinion without direct human control. While some bots perform legitimate functions such as delivering news and customer service responses, others engage in malicious activities including spam, harassment, and misinformation. Bots can rapidly deliver messaging, replicate themselves, and convincingly mimic human users, making them difficult to detect.

Bots can also operate at scale as botnets (networks of automated accounts controlled centrally by a single operator) to undertake various manipulative activities designed to artificially amplify specific information, re-share information to create a false sense of popularity or support for an issue (astroturfing), or drown out legitimate or alternative perspectives (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018b; Lou et al., 2019; Stella et al.,

2018). Bots do this through boosting the number of followers, retweets, likes, etc; attacking opponents; and overwhelming opposing conversation. In doing so, they both degrade the quality of the information ecosystem, manipulate opinion and, consequently, behaviour (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018a).

A growing number of political actors and governments are using bots to shape public opinion and disrupt discussion, particularly during elections or polarised moments. Indeed, malicious social bots have been active in numerous political influence campaigns including the 2016 and 2020 US Presidential elections (Bradshaw et al., 2021a), the 2016 EU Referendum (Brexit) (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016; Risso, 2018), the Coronavirus pandemic (Bradshaw et al., 2021), and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Geissler et al., 2023). In the 2016 US Presidential election, research by Bessi and Ferrara (2016) estimated that of approximately 2.8 million distinct users engaged in the political discussion, approximately 400,000 of these were bots and were responsible for almost one-fifth, or 3.8 million Tweets, of the entire conversation on the topic.

Algorithms also play an important role in the personalisation of messaging, utilising users' previous online behaviour to ensure maximum engagement and to enhance influence. This personalisation has, however, been taken to a whole new level by companies such as Cambridge Analytica whose integration and synthesis of vast amounts of personal data enable them to build incredibly precise profiles of individuals. These profiles allow the company to develop highly tailored and targeted messages that have the best chance of achieving their persuasion goals. During the 2016 US Presidential elections, for example, Cambridge Analytica combined massive amounts of offline data that they purchased about individuals with widely available online data, gained through various, often questionable means, to create profiles containing some 5000 demographic, psychographic, and personality data points on every single

American over the voting age of eighteen – some 240 million people. This information was then used to develop very specific and highly personalised messages that were tested on trial audiences and refined repeatedly to ensure user engagement before finally being disseminated via social media to influence a broader target audience (Kaiser, 2019). While traditional digital marketing campaigns achieve an industry average of 1-2% conversion rate, a measure of the percentage of users that complete a desired action such as joining a group or donating, Cambridge Analytica claims up to 10% conversion rate utilising this approach, indicating the importance of highly tailored, microtargeted content to large audiences in the success of social media influence campaigns (Wylie, 2019). While this may not seem noteworthy on the surface, it is interesting to note that the 2016 US Presidential elections were decided by 107,000 votes across three states which equates to influencing less than 1% of the voting population.

The Removal of Intermediary Controls

Traditional media environments, at least reputable ones, provide a quality control function by way of expert editorial boards who are authorised and validated through their training, and through market forces, to manage, interpret and evaluate information (Lin & Kerr, 2021). These boards approve the dissemination of a small number of news items to audiences that allows them to make sense of the world around them (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019). The contemporary social media environment, however, is far less reliant on regulation through established intermediaries than the more traditional media environment (House of Lords, 2019) with the power of curating content having shifted from editorial boards to a new set of actors: individuals, social networks, and the algorithms created by large, predominantly American technology companies. This removal of intermediaries in the communication processes has been termed disintermediation (Bessi & Quattrociocchi, 2015). While these developments,

and the shift in communication power have been lauded for their democratising potential (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018a) such as during the Arab spring uprisings and after police officers in Missouri shot and killed an unarmed black teenager in 2013 (Bijan, 2015), they also have a darker side - and one with a number of significant implications.

Firstly, social media platforms provide a highly accessible means for anyone to create and share information. This information can subsequently be shared by anyone else through a variety of methods and at a rate exponentially faster than any traditional media platform. In the process of doing this, however, the information can be subject to multiple edits, rewrites, revisions, and reinterpretations by anyone and everyone as it travels through the media ecosystem (Innes et al., 2021). While there are benefits to this, such as rapid information sharing during times of crisis, it also creates the opportunity for unverified information to spread like ‘digital wildfire’ (Derczynski et al., 2015; Webb et al., 2016). Innes (2020b) has proposed that this can occur through a range of online actors including: individuals who misconstrue things, either inadvertently or intentionally; journalists who, under pressure to break stories, amplify false or misleading information, again either deliberately or unintentionally; groups with ideological agendas deliberately distorting information to suit their specific agenda; and nation states who seek to exacerbate social tensions by manipulating and amplifying information as part of broader influence operations. The harms that this rapid spread of unverified content on social media can cause are described in the 2013 report ‘Digital Wildfires in a Hyperconnected World’ (World Economic Forum, 2013) and include threats to the security of individuals, communities, states, and the broader international environment.

Secondly, the reliance of social media platforms on algorithms to make automated decisions on the sorting, filtering and, ultimately, dissemination of content has the potential to create pronounced echo chamber effects where individuals are exposed only to information from like-minded individuals (Sunstein, 2019), and to trap people inside filter bubbles where information is provided based only on the user's previous online behaviour (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019). These echo chambers and filter bubbles prioritise content that feeds our cravings like sugar and can create distorted versions of events which become accepted as the truth (Tufekci, 2018). Such algorithmic decision making can be incredibly unhealthy for societies by reducing exposure to perspectives that cut across ideological lines, encouraging segregation and polarization, and undermining a vision of the common good (Bakshy et al., 2015; Lazer, 2015; Margetts, 2017).

The process of disintermediation has, thus, resulted in anyone, anywhere, being able to be a creator and disseminator of content, of any kind. More significantly, however, it has allowed predominantly large American technology companies to become powerful gatekeepers of information which they or their clients can utilise in attempts to shape a population's thinking and subsequent behaviour within particular societies, if not more globally. While problematic in its own right, this issue is further compounded by the fact that powerful gatekeepers take little responsibility for how information is filtered, consumed, and manipulated via their platforms.

Lack of Transparency, Accountability, and Regulation

A key issue in understanding contemporary media persuasion lies in the structure of the social media sector which has no real ethical code or regulatory framework. The 2016 revelations relating to election interference in a range of countries, with the exposure of the mass harvesting, sale, and use of a wide range of

personal information gathered from social media platforms, and the use of opaque algorithms as part of decision-making processes, raised significant concerns about the corrosive impact of social media on democratic institutions and processes (Taylor et al., 2018; Koene et al., 2019).

A lack of transparency, accountability and regulation can occur at both the user and platform level within the social media environment. At the user level, a lack of transparency and consequent accountability arises as a consequence of the anonymity that users are afforded in the online environment - as Steiner (1993) so elegantly puts it "On the internet, no one knows you're a dog" (n.p.). This anonymity can have a profound impact on how a user behaves online. In 2001, psychologist John Suler began studying the behaviour of participants in online chat rooms. He found that participants tended to be more aggressive and angrier in cyberspace than they are face-to-face. The anonymity afforded to users in the online environment enabled many to feel that real world norms, responsibilities and social restrictions did not apply. To explain this, he coined the phrase 'toxic disinhibition' (Suler, 2004). This research gave rise to the 'online disinhibition effect' which highlighted a series of key factors that allowed users to behave in this manner and the implications of this on the social influence process. With anonymity, there is a lack of transparency about whether the source, and thus validity, of the information is legitimate or not.

At a platform level, complex and extensive social media terms of service agreements and policies grant extensive power over users' content, data, and behaviour (Taylor et al., 2018). Offered on a Hobson's Choice 'take it or leave it' approach, users trade their privacy for social goals. In doing so, they provide platforms with unfettered rights to intrude on almost every aspect of their online life as well as the ability to share their personal information, and in some cases the personal information of those they are

connected to, with a range of unspecified third parties. This data aggregation allows various parties to gain a detailed understanding of users which in turn allows microtargeting campaigns to be developed and delivered. The extent to which users realise they are giving up their privacy is often questionable as a consequence of the vague language of the user terms (Quinn, 2016; Taylor, 2016).

As previously discussed, algorithmic decision-making processes can provide immense benefit to users by sorting through vast amounts of data to provide them with information that is both of interest and relevant to them (Cottam et al., 2016). However, as Hoffmann et al. (2019) note, the decisions that these algorithms make are not neutral; rather, they have embedded biases and assumptions. Two of the key sources of bias are algorithmic bias and data bias. The former reflects the prejudices or biases held, whether consciously or unconsciously, by individuals and groups involved in the algorithmic development process and can lead to biases in an algorithm that result in systemic and potentially discriminatory errors in AI model outputs. The latter, data bias, can arise as a consequence of biased data being utilised to train AI models, for example data that only represents a particular demographic. Again, this potentially results in an AI model that provides biased outputs (European Crime Prevention Network, 2022). These biases have been shown to lead to a distortion of public perception, reinforcement of stereotyping and prejudice, and the amplification of disinformation (Pasquale, 2015). This has significant implications for a wide range of important social, political, and economic issues.

While it is recognised that algorithms are not neutral, unfortunately, the nature and extent of the implications of this are not always able to be determined as, though highly consequential, the inner workings of these algorithms are closely guarded secrets of the social media platforms – what Pasquale (2015) refers to as Black Box societies –

and there is little to no transparency, accountability or oversight into how these mathematical formulae make decisions that have such a profound impact on society. Without knowing specifically how algorithms are shaping the information environment, it is impossible to evaluate whether a social media platform is acting in good faith for broader societal benefits, whether it is biasing results for its own commercial or political interests, or whether algorithmic or data biases are inadvertently resulting in flawed outputs.

In terms of regulation of the broader digital environment and, more specifically, social media platforms, legislation passed before the digital age initially demonstrated only limited flexibility to be successfully adapted to the online environment. While the digital world was not quite the lawless 'Wild West', there was a substantial amount of activity that occurred on social media platforms that would not be tolerated offline (HM Government, 2017). Although this situation has improved somewhat, it is far from being resolved. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, within the digital environment there are a number of organisations, in addition to nation states, that have a remit for regulation. However, this is fractured with numerous overlaps and gaps. While an increasing number of nations have enacted legislation that designates a statutory regulator for online safety and introduces enforceable duties of care for digital platforms as well as formal mechanisms for content oversight within their jurisdictions, transnational digital governance remains fragmented. Secondly, and notwithstanding the aforementioned regulatory developments, regulation of the digital world continues to struggle to keep pace with opportunities afforded by rapid technological change, particularly in areas such as artificial intelligence and algorithmic amplification. As Barlow (n.d.) notes:

> "Law adapts by continuous increments and at a pace second only to geology in its stateliness. Technology advances in lunging jerks, like the punctuation of biological evolution grotesquely accelerated. Real world conditions will continue to change at a blinding pace and the law will get further behind, more profoundly confused" (n.p.).

Thirdly, in many countries, social media platforms are exempt from liability for illegal content they host if they play a "neutral, merely technical and passive role" towards it (House of Commons, 2019, p. 4). For content that is harmful, but not necessarily illegal, social media platforms self-regulate (House of Commons, 2019). The complexities involved in establishing and implementing effective social media regulation is highlighted by the fact that, in North America, no major regulations have been created to address the problems associated with the misuse of data by social media platforms, including those identified as part of the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Indeed, as recently as May 2023, the Supreme Court of the United Sates declined to address the application of a 1996 law known as Section 230 which provides social media platforms with a legal shield for the content of posts by their users (Freedom House, 2023). While the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) that came into effect in the European Union in 2018 and the more recently introduced Digital Services Act Package have been well received and made substantial progress, they do not go far enough. In particular, the difficult to interpret provisions, and the lack of harmonisation between member states has limited the ability to fully implement the various pieces of legislation. In short, the lack of transparency and accountability of both users and platforms along with the limitations of legislation governing social media platforms has resulted in a major shift in the power to shape public discourse and behaviour to a few, predominantly American, technology companies.

The rapid rise of these sociotechnical platforms along with their unique defining features provides an opportunity to shape collective thought and action, and exert power through persuading others in a manner never before envisaged (Bradshaw, 2020; Bradshaw & Howard, 2018a, 2018b; Couldry et al., 2018; Innes, 2020b; Margetts et al., 2015). Yet the process of persuasion, or influence, in this environment is one that researchers are yet to fully understand. In looking to extend present understandings, a review of the evolution of the scholarship of persuasion can provide some useful insights.

The Evolution of the Scholarship of Persuasion

One of the defining characteristics of human beings as social animals is a unique means of persuasion. This has been defined in different ways: a way that one or more people direct, coordinate, and influence others (Pratkanis, 2007; Walker, 2015); a communication process "wherein one person's attitudes, cognitions, or behaviours are changed through the doings of another" (Cialdini & Griskevicius, 2010, p. 385); as "the myriad ways that people impact one another, including changes in attitudes, beliefs, feelings and behaviour, that result from the comments, actions, or even the mere presence of others" (Gilovich, et al., 2011, p. 276); and as a "symbolic activity whose purpose is to effect the internalization or voluntary acceptance of cognitive states or patterns of overt behaviour through the exchange of messages" (Smith, 1983, p. 7). Although there are subtle differences in each of these definitions, at its core, persuasion is conceptualized as a social psychological phenomenon whereby communicators influence the perceptions or actions of others through social interaction. For the purposes of this thesis, persuasion is defined as the process by which an audience is brought to judgement, belief, or action (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2015).

Persuasion is a common feature of everyday life and the interconnectivity of people in that we persuade others and are persuaded by them numerous times each day. Sometimes this is intentional, sometimes unintentional. Sometimes we are aware of this occurring; sometimes we are completely oblivious to it – persuasion can be subtle, indirect and outside of our awareness (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). When intentional, it can be done well, other times not so much; and sometimes it is done for altruistic reasons but at other times for much more nefarious ones. Issues that are subject to persuasion, whether intentional or unintentional, can range from the trivial, such as what to eat, what to wear, or how to behave in a social situation, through to more consequential ones such as who to vote for, or whether or not to commit a crime.

The topic of persuasion is a vast one that can take many different forms including those of conformity, compliance, obedience, persuasion, propaganda, attitude change, social norms, or minority influence (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Marlin, 2002; Pratkanis, 2007; Smith et al., 2013). Because of the vastness of the topic, the present discussion cannot hope to undertake a comprehensive review of all aspects of it. However, an historical overview of the key literature on persuasion from ancient times through to the contemporary online environment is seen as important as much of what has been said by Ancient Greek philosophers, arguably the first students of persuasion in the West, has been found to be as useful today as it was thousands of years ago (Demirdöğen, 2010). In this sense, understanding the evolution of persuasion from ancient times provides the historical mindedness and, thus, intellectual resources that can be critically applied to understand and, potentially, add value to the contemporary environment.

Classical Rhetoric

In Ancient Greece, the term rhetoric was coined to refer to the use of argumentation, language, and public address to persuade audiences (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E/1991; Perloff, 2014). Trophies were awarded for skill in public oratory and winning these attracted considerable prestige (Golden et al., 2000). While debate remains as to the origins of rhetoric, Quintilian (ca. 95 B.C.E./1921) suggests that the legal scholar Corax of Syracuse along with his student Tisius were the founders of ancient Greek rhetoric and wrote the first books on the topic. Corax's focus was on the development of basic principles of rhetoric for ordinary men, in particular his fellow Sicilians, for use in the law courts to assist them to recover their property which had been seized during the rule of Thrasybalus, the tyrant of Syracuse, prior to his overthrow in 465 BC (Billig, 1996). The rhetorical principles established by Corax provided a platform for subsequent Greek scholars to develop principles for broader rhetorical uses. These broader uses fell into three categories which were determined by the three classes of listeners to speeches – a law court judge with a decision to make about the past, a member of the assembly with a decision to make about the future, and a ceremonial orator who was concerned with the present. From this, it followed that there were three divisions of rhetoric – forensic, or legal rhetoric; political, or deliberative rhetoric; and ceremonial, or epideictic rhetoric (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E/1991). For Aristotle, deliberative rhetoric was the most significant of the three (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E/1991) and interest rapidly grew in acquiring the skills of deliberative rhetoric, or public persuasion (Quintilian, ca. 95 B.C.E./1921).

Shortly after Corax' first writings on the topic, and as a consequence of the upheaval in the Greek world in the latter half of the 5th Century B.C., fellow Sicilian, Gorgias of Leontini, and others such as Protagoras, Hippius, and Prodicus descended on

Athens to provide education in what had become a much in demand topic, that of rhetoric. This group and others came to be known as the Sophists, and none expressed the spirit of rhetoric or was as innovative in their thinking as Protagoras (Billig, 1996). Indeed, such eminent figures as philosopher Sir Karl Popper (1976) have suggested Protagoras' thinking and, in particular, his distinction between the natural and social environment laid the foundations for the development of the social sciences.

Of all of Protagoras' ideas, one of the key ones regarding argument and persuasion was in the two sidedness of human thinking. As Billig (1996) notes, "Protagoras asserted that human affairs are of such a nature that pro and con arguments can always be found" (p. 71) and that contrary statements about how one views the world can each be reasonable, justified, and open to criticism. In essence, Protagoras believed there was no fixed or absolute truth, and that it was pointless trying to discover it. Rather, he believed that there can, indeed must, be open ended, contrary truths (Billig, 1989; Perelman, 1979; Rorty, 1987). This position was applied not only to issues such as someone's perception – for example whether it is hot or cold – but also more broadly to judgements of goodness and badness, or morality and immorality (Plato, ca. 365 B.C.E./1942). The significance of this was that persuasion through proving the 'truth' when arguing social issues was far from guaranteed as truth was not absolute but, rather, was dependent on an audience's perspective. While Protagoras and his fellow Sophists attracted widespread following, not everyone was convinced by them, and their assertions brought them into conflict with some of the key thinkers of the day, most notably Plato.

Plato distrusted the Sophists and their methods, noting in the *Sophist* (Plato, ca. 365 B.C.E./1942) that they were less interested in discovering truths than they were in providing convincing, even if false, arguments. In doing this, Plato was making a

distinction between the content of discourse and its form, noting that in the Sophist tradition, the art of persuasion existed independently of the art of dialectic. In this sense, he asserted that the Sophists were not seeking truth; rather, they were seeking to persuade independent of the truth. While Plato and Protagoras agreed that the world was filled with contradictory arguments, Plato believed that it was possible, essential even, to transcend these to get to the heart of an issue and discover a universal truth. For Plato, this was at the heart of rhetoric and for this reason he rejected the Sophists and developed divergent approaches to the concept of persuasion (Chappell, 1998). While Plato produced numerous works on rhetoric, perhaps one of his greatest achievements in the field was the development of the next generation of thinkers, most notably Aristotle.

Aristotle was a prolific scholar producing hundreds of books on all manner of topics including physics, biology, philosophy, psychology, economics, politics and, of course, rhetoric. His three major works on rhetoric, *Rhetoric I, II and III* (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E/1991) provide an analysis of the various skills and techniques demonstrated by successful orators and they have had possibly the greatest influence on the development of theory that continues to this day (Billig, 1996). While Aristotle considered rhetoric a moral art and infused his theory with a strong ethical or normative component, he was pragmatic enough to recognise the morally neutral nature of rhetoric noting that it could be used by persons of good or bad character for good or bad purposes (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E/1991). In that sense he acknowledged that both the Sophists and Plato had valid points and, recognising this, developed a comprehensive theory of persuasion focussed almost purely on the *techne*, or art, of persuasive speaking (Cooper, 1932; Perloff, 2014). In doing this, Aristotle embraced a philosophy that asserted that persuasion occurs not through finding the truth of a matter, for in Aristotelian rhetoric there are no absolute truths, only open ended, contrary truths.

Although not searching for an absolute truth, it is important to note that Aristotle's rhetoric was steeped in a strong ethical component that emphasised responsible persuasion in civic life (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E/1991; Hogan, 2013).

The *techne* as well as the ethical and civic spirit of Greek rhetoricians, in particular Aristotle, was continued and strengthened by the Roman rhetoricians, most notably Cicero and Quintilian. While these figures introduced little in the way of new persuasive techniques, what they did do was to bring a systematic approach to teaching rhetoric that was grounded in principles of moral conduct (Hogan, 2013; Quintilian, ca. 95 B.C.E./1921).

Cicero, considered by many to be the greatest of the Roman orators, was, among other things a lawyer, politician and philosopher. He is noted for writing both *De Inventione* and *De Oratore*, as well *Rhetorica ad Herrenium* which adapts Hellenic rhetorical doctrine to the needs of Rome and provides insight into the nature of rhetorical teaching in the first century B.C. His writings note the lack of great orators in his time as a consequence of the "incredible vastness and difficulty of the topic" (Cicero, ca. 90 B.C.E./1983, p. 13). He considered the ideal rhetorician to be "an engaged citizen of high moral character and broad learning, one devoted not to his own selfish interests but to the common good" (Hogan, 2013, p. 5) and expressed concern that the powerful orator who lacked moral principles would endanger society. Like Aristotle, and in contrast to Plato, Cicero was not an adherent of the dogma of absolutism, recognising that it was not possible to be in possession of truth and certainty. Rather, he suggested that in searching for an answer to an issue, one should seek likelihood and probability that finds the appropriate balance between absolute certainty and total uncertainty (Skvirsky, 2019).

During the century which elapsed between Cicero's death and the birth of Quintilian, broad education had become an important part of Roman society with rhetoric as its most important part. However, as DeCaro (2011) notes, rhetoric changed substantially during this period with a focus that favoured ornate embellishment over clarity and precision – what became known as 'silver Latin'. Quintilian's *Institutio* was a reaction to this change in focus of rhetoric and placed considerable emphasis on a return to the Aristotelian roots of rhetoric and the need to develop not only oratorical skills, but moral character as well to ensure young Romans grew up to become good citizens. To achieve this, Quintilian (ca. 95 B.C.E./1921) considered that broad training in the liberal arts as well as a mastery of the moral sciences was essential.

While much of the modern literature focusses on the differences between these various approaches to rhetoric in the ancient world, Hogan (2013) notes that the common thread that runs through all of this literature is the need to educate people in both the practical and ethical requirements of civic life so that they could become an orator who "embodied civic virtue and a commitment to the common good" (p. 5). In this sense, the ancient rhetorical tradition constituted a "politics of persuasion where both leaders and ordinary citizens possessed a certain moral compass that served as a check on demagoguery and allowed for responsible judgement in civil affairs" (Garsten, 2006, p. 146).

By the end of the Ancient period, rhetorical theorists, most notably Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, had spent considerable time and effort categorizing the components of their discipline and had divided it into five branches, or canons: invention (determining the essential arguments), arrangement (organising the arguments), style (embodying arguments appropriately), memory (ensuring the

persistence of the argument), and delivery (propagating the argument) (Billig, 1996; Cicero, ca. 90 B.C.E./1954; Eyman; 2015).

The Demise and (re)Emergence of Rhetoric

Over the course of the ensuing centuries, Perloff (2014) notes that a number of spectacular events occurred including the fall of the Roman Empire, the rise of Christianity, various pandemics including the Black Death, and widespread war. This had a considerable impact on dampening the development of rhetoric in the Western world during this period although, interestingly, the concept continued, flourished even, in the classical tradition both in the Islamic world and in Confucian China (Lu, 1998; Vagelpohl, 2015).

In the Western world during the Middle Ages, rhetoric became aligned with religion and education, and, according to DeCaro (2011), played a role as one of the three great liberal arts alongside logic and grammar. The only major thinker on rhetoric during this period is considered to be St Augustine whose *De Doctrina Chrsitiana* described how to interpret and teach the scriptures using rhetorical theory. St Augustine's influence ensured the adoption of rhetoric by the Christian Church as a guide to both teachers and preachers (Foss et al., 1991).

In 1455, the [re]invention of the printing press in Europe by Johannes Gutenberg "brought the most radical transformation in the conditions of intellectual life in the history of Western civilisation" (Eisenstein, 1979, p. 167) and marked the end of the Middle Ages. Importantly, it also codified rhetoric from the sole province of the orator into written text and symbols which represented a key shift in the delivery of rhetoric. This shift, however, was not merely technological, but one that transformed knowledge itself by changing who could create and distribute knowledge, and even what constituted knowledge and truth (Eisenstein, 1979). The consequences of this were

significant and the documenting of knowledge, in particular scientific knowledge, laid the foundations for a significant departure from the ancient theories of rhetoric that had prevailed in previous centuries, most notably in Francis Bacon's works which removed the canon of invention from a classic rhetorical orientation and aligned it instead with the methods of investigation modelled on the emerging physical sciences. In this sense, rhetoric was subordinated to logic and science, seen as focussed only on style and delivery (Howell, 1961).

Following the Middle Ages, the Renaissance period began in Italy, in part, as a response to what was perceived as an "intellectually barren medieval spirit" (DeCaro, 2011, n.p.). The intellectual basis of the Renaissance was a passion for classical study which became known as Humanism. This period saw a revival of both Greek and Roman philosophy, with the works of Aristotle and Cicero considered the most significant.

It was towards the latter part of the Renaissance that a number of significant challenges towards the classical traditions of rhetoric began to emerge. The first of these can be traced to the rise of religious and political fanaticism in the late sixteenth century which resulted in the downplaying of the role of persuasion along with an aestheticization of rhetoric which paid little attention to the canon of invention (Howell, 1961). One of the most significant trends in rhetoric and the study of persuasion, however, and one which largely continues to this day, occurred towards the end of the Renaissance period with the arrival of Rationalism. This movement, with the works of Peter Rasmus and Rene Descartes at the forefront, and in an approach reminiscent of Plato, brought a physical sciences approach to the study of social issues and, in doing so, was one which sought objective, scientific truth. While rhetoric was seen as aesthetically pleasing, it was also seen as "having no connection to science and the

truth" (Foss et al., 1991, p. 8). As such, it was relegated as subordinate to logic. Further, by removing the canons of invention and arrangement, it left rhetoric as an essentially hollow art focussed almost entirely on style (Howell, 1956). In this sense, rhetoric became a mere means of communicating the truth once the scientific approach had discovered it rather than the powerful field through which human life flourished under Aristotelian tradition (Foss et al., 1991). This ill-considered reinterpretation of rhetoric which removed the substance of the art is one of the key reasons the term has become so misunderstood and maligned in the modern era.

The 'New Rhetoric'

Although the seeds of demise of rhetoric in its traditional form were sown in the Renaissance period, it was in the 1940s when the key break from the past occurred with the experimental approach being adopted to systematically uncover the hidden truths of persuasion. In doing this, it was asserted that the experimental approach was superior to traditional rhetorical approaches and that it would solve questions of persuasion once and for all (Billig, 1996). In his foreword to Petty et al.'s (1981) book *Cognitive Responses in Persuasion*, Brewster Smith describes modern research on persuasion, stemming from research in the style of Hovland, Janis and Kelly, as being the 'new rhetoric'. Hovland's work during World War II represented the first large scale, systematic experiments on persuasion and was focussed on trying to understand the effectiveness of propaganda (Billig, 1996). The motivation for this research stemmed from a wartime fear of the power of persuasion on entire societies by charismatic leaders along with a desire to prevent this from reoccurring (Demirdöğen, 2010).

Hovland's propaganda research continued after the Second World War as part of the Yale research programme with the aim of discovering the general laws of persuasion. Like Aristotle, Hovland believed it was necessary to transcend the particular

but, in doing so, became overly focussed on the form of persuasion, largely ignoring the substance, or in Aristotle's parlance – invention. As Freedman et al. (1978) note, social psychologists do this to allow themselves to identify general laws that determine the effectiveness of all messages. Not surprisingly then, one of the key findings of Hovland's programme was the "specification of an initial set of characteristics that influence one's acceptance of a persuasive communication" (Deaux et al., 1993, p. 180). These characteristics included: the source of the communication, the message characteristics, the characteristics of the receiver, and the message context (Demirdöğen, 2010). While on the surface, this formula does not appear dissimilar to Aristotle's findings published more than 2000 years earlier, Billig (1996) notes that it is more akin to a "modern, and theoretically soulless version of Plato's formula for a science of rhetoric" which would enable the "uncertainties of the old rhetoric to progress to the certainties of a new science" (p. 93).

Hovland's work positioned persuasion as one of the most important topics in contemporary psychology and experimental research on the topic flourished. Although the research covered a large number of topics and involved a variety of different approaches, Petty et al. (1981) note that these can be classified into five general theoretical approaches. The learning approach, which assumes that learning processes are responsible for attitude change and, thus, persuasion. The perceptual approach, which emphasises the meaning persuasive communication has for a subject. The functional approach, which highlights the relationship between persuasive communication and underlying motivations and needs. The consistency approach, which posits that a person may be persuaded to change their attitudes so as to maintain internal harmony of their belief system. And finally, the cognitive approach, which

suggests that people will attempt to relate persuasive communication to their existing knowledge about the subject.

These approaches to persuasion, and in particular the cognitive approach, have dominated the modern era and all have made important contributions to the understanding of persuasion. While each approach has its own unique advantages and disadvantages, what they all share is a preoccupation with the scientific approach and the experimental method – what Brewster Smith (1981) referred to as the new rhetoric. Billig (1996) suggests that the work of the new rhetoricians was based on the assumption that, like the physical sciences, knowledge of various social psychological phenomenon such as persuasion would be a cumulative process and that as more is learned about a particular topic, uncertainty would be reduced. To achieve this, questions on a topic would be formalised, hypotheses created, and experiments undertaken to definitively answer the questions with indisputable evidence supporting it. Based on these scientific insights, formal theories could then be developed, and as more and more questions were asked, hypotheses [re]created, and experiments undertaken, it was assumed that more indisputable knowledge would be created, eventually leading to transcendental universal truths and certainty that were agreed on. This is what Nelson et al. (1987) referred to as "the vision of a single, certain, natural and rational order" (p.11). Gone would be the ancient rhetorical uncertainties with their open ended and multiple truths and in its place would be a new rhetoric full of certainty which revealed the hidden truths of persuasion.

Despite the optimism, the ambitions of the experimental method of the 'new rhetoric' psychologists have not been realised. Rather than producing clear universal truths and general principles that provide a nice, orderly psychological explanation of persuasion that links neatly to specific situations, what has been created is an ever-

increasing uncertainty with a jumbled body of conflicting research findings (Billig, 2015). As Fishbein and Ajzen (1982) state, the result of decades of experimentation has resulted in the "accumulation of largely contradictory and inconsistent research findings with few, if any, generalizable principles" (p. 340). To highlight this, Billig (2015) discusses the substantial social-psychological experimental research that was undertaken to definitively answer whether groups tended to make riskier or more cautious decisions than individuals – the risky-shift phenomenon. Results of this research indicated that groups were indeed more likely to make riskier decisions than individuals, for which a variety of explanations were proffered, and the risky shift phenomenon was born. This theory, however, did not last long with further research highlighting that in some situations, groups could be more cautious than individuals – a cautious shift phenomenon (Fraser et al., 1971). Later research suggested that the principle of group polarisation, rather than a risky or cautious shift phenomenon, was responsible for movement towards either a cautious or risky decision, but this in turn gave rise to further research which found a depolarisation effect (Fraser & Foster, 1984). As Popper (1976) noted, "with each step forward, with each problem which we solve, we not only discover new and unsolved problems, but we also discover that where we believed that we were standing on firm and safe ground, all things are, in truth, insecure and in a state of flux" (p. 87).

This pattern is not one which is specific to the phenomenon of group decision making but, rather, is found across all areas of social psychology research including persuasion. Research on the persuasive ability of extrinsic rewards has been countered by research on intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1999); research on attitudes shaping behaviours has been followed by research showing the exact opposite (Mostyn, 1978: Bechler et al., 2021). Even such seminal research as Milgram's obedience studies and

Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment, which resulted in the establishment of important principles of persuasion, have only been partially replicated and have resulted in the discovery of contradictory principles (Reicher & Haslam, 2006; Gibson, 2013). The consequence of this has been an increase in complexity and confusion where "social psychological theories and findings do not form an orderly picture, but there is a sprawling mass of conflicting principles and research findings" (Billig, 2015, p. 59).

In the late 1970s, critical psychology emerged as a distinct sub-discipline, partially in reaction to traditional psychology which was seen as overly individualistic, reductionist, and detached from the social and political contexts in which persuasion occurred (Teo, 2009). Many of the early proponents of critical psychology viewed the prevailing psychological frameworks as inadequate for addressing the complex, socially constructed nature of psychological phenomena such as persuasion. In response, these critical psychologists, turned to alternative epistemological and methodological approaches, particularly discourse and rhetorical theory, which were considered more robust for understanding persuasion (Billig, 2006; Wetherell, 2015). This shift laid the foundation for the emergence of a parallel movement on discursive and rhetorical research alongside critical psychology in the early 1980s. Prominent scholars such as Michael Billig (1987), Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell (1987), and later Ian Parker (1992) played a crucial role in advancing this reoriented persuasion, situating it within the realm of language, rhetoric, and social interaction (Billig, 2008). For these scholars, it is through language, a fundamentally social and dialogical process, that knowledge is constructed (Billig, 1987; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Parker & Shotter 2015) and these constructions bring social worlds into being to make things happen (Wetherell, 2015).

In this critical reorientation, classical rhetoric, notably Aristotle's rhetorical proofs of *logos* (appeal to logic), *pathos* (appeal to emotion), and particularly *ethos* (appeal to credibility), became a useful conceptual resource for scholars and Michael Billig stands out as making the most explicit attempt to link classical rhetoric with psychology. For example, in *Arguing and Thinking* (1987) he treats *ethos* not as an inherent trait of a communicator, as in Hovland's 'source credibility' variable, but as an outcome of discourse. Credibility and character, he argues, is constructed and continually reconstructed through social interactions and discourse. In importing concepts from classical rhetoric, critical psychologists recast persuasion research from an individualised cognitive process to a discursive rhetorical practice where psychological processes are constructed and reconstructed jointly, incorporating broader social and political contexts.

Persuasion and Social Media

A further layer of complexity has been added to the discussion on persuasion with the rapid expansion of online social media platforms providing much greater opportunities for shaping collective thought and action, and exerting power through institutions and practices across society in a manner never before envisaged (Bradshaw, 2020; Bradshaw & Howard, 2018a, 2018b; Couldry et al., 2018; Innes, 2020a; Margetts et al., 2015). These revolutionary platforms provide a range of features which draw on more traditional media as well as a host of newer interfaces and create an environment that has elements of traditional mass media while at the same time large numbers of highly personalised, interpersonal channels (Bayer et al., 2020) that offer near instantaneous and increasingly complex reciprocal interactions (Valkenburg et al., 2016). Moreover, social media platforms are both rapidly and continually evolving as dynamic algorithms, network compositions, and personal settings are constantly

changing, making an already diverse and complex ecosystem even more so (Bradshaw, 2020; Gilardi et al., 2022; Lipschultz, 2022).

Notwithstanding the challenges this complexity causes, research has been undertaken on adapting ancient rhetoric to the contemporary online environment and more specifically to the social media environment. In looking at the broader online environment, Kathleen Welch's (1999) work *Electric Rhetoric: Classical Rhetoric, Oralism and a New Literacy* was one of the first works to explore the use of ancient rhetoric as a framework for understanding persuasion in the digital environment and, although this offers valuable insights, it pre-dates the social media era and is focussed on the production of persuasive digital rhetoric as opposed to its analysis. More recently, Collin Brooke reconfigures the traditional canons of rhetoric to suit the new media environment in his *Lingua Fracta: Towards a Rhetoric of New Media* (2009). Brooke's work provides a comprehensive exploration of the topic and provides an excellent approach that reconceptualises traditional rhetoric to understand the new environment. Importantly, it explores the connections made between the technology, texts, and humans. However, the focus is heavily on the production of "strategies, practices, and tactics available to us and even for inventing new ones" (p. 22) rather than on discovering the available means of persuasion in a particular case. Similarly, Douglas Eyman's (2015) ground-breaking work *Digital Rhetoric: Theory, Method, Practice* situates digital networks as internetworked and interactive systems that are both alive and constantly evolving – what he terms a digital ecology comprising a number of digital ecosystems. In doing this, he positions digital rhetoric as a topic that sits at the nexus of a variety of interdisciplinary fields and, utilising an interdisciplinary approach which draws on both classical and contemporary theories of rhetoric,

highlights how digital rhetoric provides a means for producing, although not analysing, persuasive digital works.

In looking at research more specifically on persuasion in the contemporary social media environment, there have been significant advances in understanding how digital ecosystems can be leveraged to shape attitudes and behaviours to effect online persuasion and political outcomes. A substantial strand of this research is focussed on the technological aspects of platforms, examining how algorithmic curation, network structures, and microtargeting capabilities can be strategically co-opted to amplify messages, accelerate diffusion, enhance reach, and deliver highly personalised and targeted messaging to optimise persuasive effect (Aral, 2020; Hoffmann et al., 2019; Huszár et al., 2022; Muhlmeyer & Agarwal, 2021).

Complementing this technologically focussed research is a broader body of scholarship that explores the various social and cognitive dynamics through which persuasion occurs online. From a security and political communications perspective, this includes studies of election interference and influence operations (Bronstein, 2013; DiResta et al., 2018; Jensen et al., 2024; Samuel-Azran et al., 2015), as well as analyses of broader geopolitical information campaigns and state sponsored digital influence activities (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018b; Bradshaw et al., 2023; Carter & Carter, 2021; Crilley et al., 2022; Hall, 2022; Howard & Hussain, 2011). Scholars have also explored the mobilisation of various emotions in political persuasion (Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2020; Davis et al., 2018; Duncombe, 2019; Schmid, 2023), demonstrating how affective appeals such as fear, anger, and resentment are amplified within networked environments. Further work has examined the symbolic and cultural dimensions of persuasion, including the strategic use of memes, humour, and visual iconography in propaganda communications (De Cook, 2018; Halversen & Weeks, 2023; Woolley &

Howard, 2019), alongside extensive research into the dynamics of both dis- and mis-information in digitally networked environments (Chen et al., 2021; Wojtowicz, 2022).

Notwithstanding the excellent contributions this research has made in providing an understanding of how various technological infrastructures and social dynamics are leveraged to effect political persuasion via social media, key gaps remain in our understanding of how persuasion is constructed and operationalised in this environment. Further, there remains a relative absence of integrative frameworks for systematically analysing the design and implementation of persuasive campaigns in the digitally networked environment.

Several authors have highlighted the utility of traditional rhetorical analysis in attempting to bridge this gap and provide a framework to gain a deeper understanding of persuasion in the social media environment (Bronstein, 2013; Chen et al., 2021; English et al., 2011; Pang & Law, 2017; Samuel-Azran et al., 2015). More specifically, these authors have undertaken research that examines participant responses to various social media messages categorised in terms of Aristotle's rhetorical proofs of *ethos* (appeal to credibility), *pathos* (emotional appeal), or *logos* (logical appeal). These studies highlight that both usage and effectiveness of persuasive strategies varied dependent upon context and audience. For example, in looking at health care messaging on YouTube, English et al. (2011) found *ethos* as the most persuasive proof and *pathos*, particularly as it appealed to humour, as the least persuasive. Similarly, Pang and Law (2017) found *ethos* as the most persuasive appeal when presenting environmental issues on Twitter. In contrast, research by Bronstein (2013) revealed that in the political environment, US Presidential candidates Obama and Romney's use of emotional appeals, or *pathos*, connected with voters most effectively on Facebook. This appeal was not similarly reflected in the 2013 Israeli elections where *ethos* was shown to be

both the most prominent and most effective proof (Samuel-Azran et al., 2015). Of note in this latter research is that *logos* was the least preferred appeal by all the candidates, averaging only 5.9% of all messaging. In looking at persuasion strategies in propagating misinformation on Weibo, Chen et al. (2021) found that *pathos* was the most common and effective strategy utilised.

While valuable in highlighting both the complexity and contextual nature of the effectiveness of rhetorical proofs in the social media environment, this research did not move beyond these proofs – only one part of the traditional rhetorical framework. In that sense, while analysing what arguments were utilised, the research did not explore how the messaging was organised, designed, delivered, or remembered. We posit that by drawing more fully on Aristotle's rhetorical framework and reframing it to the contemporary environment, these aspects can be explored, and a more comprehensive understanding of persuasion attempts in the contemporary social media environment can be gleaned.

Aristotle's Rhetorical Framework

Although the word rhetoric has a multiplicity of uses, Aristotle was careful to note the distinction between the practice of rhetoric focussed on persuading an audience, and the analysis of this to understand how underlying principles might shape persuasion. For Aristotle, the academic aim of rhetoric was "not to persuade, but to discover the available means of persuasion in each case" (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E/1991, p. 35). As an approach to understanding persuasion, rhetorical analysis, as an art, transcends some of the limitations posed by the scientific experimental approach without totally dismissing insights from that tradition. As Leach (2003) notes, "the goal of rhetoric is never to be scientific, or to be able to categorise persuasion for all times

and all places. The power of rhetorical analysis is it immediacy, its ability to talk about the particular and the possible, not the universal and the probable" (p. 211).

This section proposes an approach utilising Aristotle's rhetorical framework, specifically, the five canons, as guiding principles that can be adjusted and interpreted for specific situations to understand persuasion in the contemporary social media environment. This approach focusses on utilising rhetorical analysis to "discover the available means of persuasion in each case" (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E/1991). Rather than simply mapping the canons to the digital environment a broad approach will be taken which recognises the contributions the technology, the text, and the human make, both individually and collectively, to persuasive outcomes.

Irrespective of the type of discourse being chosen (i.e. oral, written, image, etc.) and prior to delving into the rhetorical canons, Bitzer (1968) asserts that understanding the rhetorical situation, or broader context of the discourse, is an important first step when embarking on rhetorical analysis. This context can be understood through a broad analysis and examination of the specific communication event to answer questions of who, what, when, where, and why. To do this, Bitzer (1968) notes that Aristotle developed three categories that needed to be considered: exigence, audience, and constraints, and these allow a rhetorical analyst to "discover and manage the particularities of novel situations…and to discover and formulate a means of disclosing them" (p. 398).

In looking to the first of these, the word exigence comes from the Latin word for demand, and in terms of its use in rhetoric it has been variously defined. One of the most common and recognisable definitions of the term comes from Bitzer (1992) who wrote "it is an imperfection marked by urgency: it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be" (p. 6). In simple terms,

Bitzer is saying that an exigence is simply a problem that needs to be addressed and that the purpose of a rhetorical act is to address it. In most situations there will likely be a number of exigencies, but only those that are capable of being modified through discourse can be considered rhetorical exigencies "which function as an organizing principle, specifying the audience to be addressed and the change to be effected" (p. 7). In undertaking rhetorical analysis, it is essential to identify the exigence for a particular communicative act to ensure that it is contextualised.

The second category of the rhetorical situation is the audience. The purpose of rhetorical discourse is to produce change by influencing people. Given this, an audience is essential for a rhetorical act to be effective but, importantly, the audience must be more than mere passive receptors of rhetoric. Rather they must be one that is capable of both being influenced and of being a mediator of change (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E/1991). Rhetorical analysts must seek to understand the audience both in terms of its creation as well as how it has been positioned by the communicative act.

The final category of the rhetorical situation is the set of constraints which have the ability to prevent the necessary decisions and actions to be undertaken and, in turn, enable the exigence to be addressed. As Bitzer (1992) notes, these constraints are made up of "persons, events, objects and relationships" (p. 7) and are derived from "beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, motives and the like" (p. 7). Constraints can originate either from the rhetor (what Aristotle called artistic proofs) or the situation (inartistic proofs) and understanding the source of these is important to be able to mitigate them. From the perspective of rhetorical analysis, understanding these constraints is important to be able to ascertain either how they were overcome by the communicative act to effect persuasion, or how they worked to prevent persuasion.

Understanding these three categories of exigence, audience, and constraints allows an all-important context of the rhetorical situation to be gleaned. In particular, it enables an understanding of what persuasion is intended to be achieved and through what audiences. It also lays the foundations for the rhetorical analyst to undertake an analysis of the performance of the rhetorical act and, thus, to discover the means of persuasion. Again, Aristotle's framework, divided into five branches, is instructive. This five-fold classification, or what have become known as the five rhetorical canons, comprise: invention, arrangement, expression (or style), memory and delivery.

Invention

Traditionally, scholars have differentiated between the form (*res*) and content (*verba)* of rhetoric, recognising that the content, or substance, of the discourse must first be determined before attending to issues of form, or style. Although more contemporary scholars have been less focussed on issues of substance, instead placing a greater emphasis on style or form, Aristotle placed great importance on the content of rhetorical analysis (Billig, 1996). This aspect is best represented by the canon of invention which, in general terms, involves determining, or inventing, what the essential arguments of a particular issue should be or, as Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E/1991) states, "the art (*techne*) of finding out the available means of persuasion" (p. 37). Invention is a comprehensive activity that goes beyond identifying how previously successful arguments can be applied to a particular situation to include a comprehensive analysis of a new situation to identify what novel arguments could be developed that could be persuasive in that situation.

In looking to invention, Aristotle identified three key elements, what he called rhetorical appeals, as essential ingredients for understanding persuasive content. These elements – *logos, ethos* and *pathos* – provide an excellent start point for conceptually

analysing how a rhetorically effective argument is crafted in an effort to persuade an audience (Rapp, 2012).

In exploring the first of these appeals, *logos,* Aristotle believed that people are most easily or most strongly convinced when they believe something has been proven or demonstrated (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E/1991). On the surface, this seems relatively straightforward: prove or demonstrate something, and persuasion will occur. However, this is an oversimplification of the concept which rests on the flawed assumption that persuasion is merely about an audience learning something and that when educated with the facts, or indisputable truth, they will be persuaded. If this were the case, this would render the art of rhetoric redundant! Of course, this is seldom, if ever, the case and itself relies on a second flawed assumption that truth must be unitary and agreed upon. While consistent with both Plato's philosophy as well as that of the contemporary experimentalists, this approach is inconsistent with Aristotle's rhetorical approach which recognises that there can, indeed must, be open ended contrary truths each of which can be reasonably justified (Billig, 2015).

A deeper exploration of Aristotle's *logos* reveals that the process of rhetorical, as opposed to educational, persuasion consists of proving or demonstrating something on the basis of what the audience already believes (Rapp, 2012, p. 11). In that sense, an audience can be persuaded by enabling them to connect a proposition with something they already agree with or believe in through the process of either induction or deduction. Although both forms of argument can be utilised, rhetoric tends to focus almost exclusively on deduction through the use of the enthymeme - a pair of statements, the first of which comprises a premise, and the second a conclusion with the inference that the conclusion is guaranteed by the premises alone (Rapp, 2012). An important aspect of being able to make this connection is the need for the rhetorician to

be, in Aristotelian terms, an expert in *endoxa* or the accepted opinion of the group they are trying to persuade (Rapp, 2012).

With *logos* we can see that persuasion is achieved if, firstly, we already believe or agree with the premises proposed and, secondly, that we see that the conclusion follows from the premise. While reasonably straightforward, what this model relies on is a rationality that makes the connection between the premises and the conclusion. However, not everyone shares the same rationality and, thus, persuasion through *logos* alone may not always be effective. Taking note of the statement that the orator should "not only look at the argument, that it may be conclusive and convincing, but should also present himself as a certain kind of person and to prepare the audience" (Rapp, 2012, p. 14), we turn to the second of the rhetorical appeals, that of *ethos*.

The means of persuasion called *ethos* relies on the establishment of the trustworthiness or credibility of the orator or author. The traditional understanding of this suggests that people should present themselves as morally upstanding citizens with good or virtuous character. However, that someone has lived a morally upstanding life is neither sufficient nor, more importantly, necessary to be deemed credible. For this reason, Aristotle considered that being a morally upstanding citizen, or having virtue, was only one way someone could appear credible. Other than virtue, Aristotle noted two other reasons why a speaker or author may be deemed credible: through either practical wisdom or good will (Rapp, 2012). While all three together provide the least reason to doubt the credibility of the speaker, two, or even one of these on their own may be sufficient. Importantly, the effect of persuasion through *ethos* is a judgement call about the credibility of the speaker which will vary depending on the audience – what one audience considers practical wisdom and goodwill may be very different from another audience. The importance of *ethos* grows and takes on greater importance when the

audience is not convinced through a strong argument or weak proofs, and the audience will accept a speaker's claims because of their credibility.

The third of Aristotle's means of persuasion, *pathos,* involves the arousal of, or appeal to, the audience's emotions. Aristotle notes that the arousal of emotions can be influenced both by what the orator says as well as by the way they say it. The purpose of arousing the emotional state of the audience, according to Aristotle, is that they do not perceive issues in the same way when emotionally aroused and, thus, it can be used to modify their judgement on a particular issue (Rapp, 2012). This is highlighted by his statement in Rhetoric:

> "…for things do not seem the same to those who are friendly and those who are hostile, not the [same] to the angry and calm but either altogether different or different in importance; to one who is friendly, the person about whom he passes judgement seems not to do wrong or only in a small way; to one who is hostile, the opposite; and to a person feeling strong desires and being hopeful, if something in the future is a source of pleasure, it appears that it will come to pass and will be good; but to an unemotional person and one in a disagreeable state of mind, the opposite" (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E/1991, p. 120).

In order to arouse emotions in an audience, Aristotle notes that an orator must be cognisant of three key factors: the state of mind of the audience (e.g. angry, fearful, sad), the type of person at which the specific emotion is directed, and the reason for that particular emotion (Rapp, 2012).

These three elements, or as Aristotle termed them, rhetorical proofs of *logos, ethos,* and *pathos,* are the essential aspects of the inventional canon of rhetoric and focus on the substance, or form, of arguments as opposed to the style. The first of these proofs, *logos,* emphasises that people are most easily or strongly convinced when they believe something has been proven. While important, on its own *logos* is insufficient as audience judgements do not always follow from the premises provided. For this reason,

the proofs of *ethos* and *pathos* play an important role in the canon of invention through influencing the audience's judgement based on the credibility of the orator and through the emotional arousal of the audience by what they say.

Having explored the invention of arguments, we now turn to the second of the canons, arrangement, that which Bishop Whateley (1963) said in conjunction with invention was the "immediate and proper province of rhetoric, and of that alone" (p. 39).

Arrangement

Having decided upon the right arguments, or indeed combination of arguments, the rhetor needs to organise these in a particular way to optimise their persuasive potential. This aspect of rhetoric is known as 'arrangement'(*dispositio*) and in classical rhetoric focussed on how various parts of the discourse should be arranged. The strategic importance of the canon of arrangement is clearly noted by Quintilian who stated that "arrangement is to oratory what generalship is to war" (Quintilian, ca. 95 B.C.E./1921), highlighting that in the same way a military force can be arranged on the battlefield to defeat a force of equal or even greater strength, so too can the way arguments are arranged be the difference between persuasive victory or defeat. The classic textbooks of rhetoric looked to provide broad guidelines for the arrangement of discourse and were predominantly focussed on the order in which a rhetorical act should occur, a largely chronological approach, or *chronos*, to persuasion.

Initially, Aristotle claimed there were only two necessary components to rhetorical discourse "to state the subject and [then] to demonstrate it" (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E/1991, p. 258). These components focussed on setting out the facts and providing the rhetor's interpretation of these. Arguments were then presented and alternatives rejected to achieve a desired persuasive effect, and the emphasis of these arguments was

predominantly on logic, or *logos*. Recognizing the limitations of this initial approach and the need to incorporate all rhetorical appeals into the discourse, Aristotle went on to add two further parts – the introduction and conclusion. In the former, the audience was not only informed of what was to follow, but, more importantly, it was prepared. This preparation recognised the need to establish credibility with the audience and thus *ethos* was employed to achieve this and to secure their goodwill. In the conclusion, Aristotle recognised the need to bring all of the arguments together and to intensify emotional impact through *pathos*, utilising this to make a final emotional appeal to sway an audience's judgement (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E/1991; Covino & Jolliffe, 2014). The distribution of these rhetorical appeals across the discourse highlights the sophistication of classical rhetoric and, in particular, its psychological aspects by anticipating how audiences would likely respond to different persuasive appeals depending on their placement in the discourse.

Within this broad framework, however, Aristotle recognised that arrangement was contextual and needed to be responsive, going beyond the chronological approach to persuasive attempts to one that exploited the notion of *kairos*, that qualitative notion of time where a confluence of factors allows a persuasive opportunity to be seized. As such, clear rules for discourse were not elucidated and it was emphasised that no single formula would guarantee persuasive success. Rather, broad guidance was provided that indicated that the situation should drive the specific approach to be undertaken and that speakers needed to adapt to this (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E/1991). This meant that not every persuasive speech followed the same outline – in some cases different parts of a speech would require greater elaboration while in others, these parts could be missed altogether. It also meant the order of a speech might vary depending on the context.

Arrangement then is variable, and this is significant as it has to be carefully thought through and aligned with the context, the audience and the arguments identified.

As Corbett and Connors (1999) note the principles of classical arrangement remain relevant in the contemporary environment and provide a "remarkably durable template for organising discourse" (p. 22). This includes not only the oral and written spheres, but also the digital realm where the arrangement of multimodal, multimedia messaging plays an important role in determining how audiences perceive, engage with, and respond to persuasive messages (Crowley & Hawhee, 2011).

Style

In classical rhetoric, style (*elocutio*) concerns language – that is the choice of words, phrases, figures and forms of speech, and overall tone (Martin, 2014). Argument can of course be persuasive on the basis of style although the importance of this canon has ebbed and flowed since Aristotle's time, at times being the primary, or even sole, focus (Billig, 1996). In part, this has resulted in the word rhetoric often being used as a pejorative term in the contemporary environment, one which is focussed on superficial ornamentation but lacks substance. But style is much more than an ornamental add on to an argument. At its core, style is an intrinsic part of rhetoric that plays an important role in the relationship between form and substance (Leach, 2003). Classical theorists understood style as deeply intertwined with the rhetorical appeals in that it can be aligned with *pathos*, through forms of speech to appeal to and stir emotion; or *ethos*, as style is important in establishing the authors credibility. Importantly, style also plays a key part in ensuring clarity and coherence in *logos* through various figures of speech. Far from being purely ornamental then, style plays a central role in the persuasive process.

Aristotle's (ca. 350 B.C.E/1991) thoughts on style were summarised with the statement "to be clear" (p. 221) noting that if it was not clear, it would not persuade as desired. As Archbishop Whateley (1963) notes, however, clarity is a relative quality and must take into consideration the audience of the discourse for which it is designed. For this reason, style was, for Aristotle, predominantly about ensuring that the appropriate language was matched with both the discourse at hand and the audience, and he offered a variety of suggestions for developing a style that would aid in persuasion. The first of these included an emphasis on the importance of energy as a quality of style, which is designed to "stimulate attention, to impress strongly on the mind the arguments adduced, to excite the imagination, and to arouse the feelings" (Whateley, 1963, p. 275). A second feature of style, that of elegance, emphasised the need for a smooth and easy flow of words that avoided excessively ornamental language. To achieve this, Aristotle identified a series of stylistic features, or figurative language, that could be utilised to enhance the persuasiveness of a message. While there are literally hundreds of different categories and types of figurative language, two key ones include various tropes, or artful deviations from the ordinary meaning of a word such as metaphors, similes, synecdoche; and schemas, or artful deviations from the ordinary arrangement of words, such as an antithesis and repetition. The importance of these in undertaking rhetorical analysis is that they highlight the way in which we think and, indeed the way language itself works to effect persuasion (Leech, 2003).

The importance of style extends well beyond classical oratory and remains important in the contemporary environment where stylistic choices by a rhetor can impact whether a message is clearly delivered, whether they are deemed credible, and whether they arouse the desired emotions to achieve persuasive effect. Arguably, this is even more pronounced in the digital environment where the rise of social media affords

new opportunities as a consequence of the multimodal, multimedia platforms that can construct and deliver arguments in real time. Far from being an antiquated canon focussed on ornamentation then, style is an integral component of the persuasive process that determines in a whole host of new ways how messages are received, perceived, and responded to.

Memory

In Ancient Greece, orators were judged by the length of their speeches and also by whether they were able to deliver exactly the same speech twice or more in a row. As such, the development of a good memory for an orator to be able to deliver a lengthy speech without notes was considered an essential part of rhetoric. Indeed, legends abound at the amazing powers of memory of such figures as Hippias and Seneca, the latter of which was said to be able to recall two thousand names in order after hearing them only once (Billig, 1996). Such anecdotes underscore the esteem in which memory was held as a rhetorical canon in classical times.

But the canon of memory (*memoria*) was not merely rote memorisation and recall, it was deemed an art in and of itself where rhetorical arguments and practices could be drawn on as needed (Eyman, 2015). In *On Sense and On Memory,* Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E/1906) notes that memory is recollected, rather than simply recalled, through a dynamic interactive process, either individually or socially, that infers past experience to make sense of a particular thing at an appropriate time (*kairos*). Further, Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E/1906) notes the important relationship between memory and imagination highlighting how context can be intertwined with creativity and the ability to adapt in an effort to accomplish persuasive effect. To develop this, classical rhetorical education incorporated elaborate systems of mnemonics, visualisation, and imagination

which framed memory as both a functional and creative process (Quintilian, ca. 95 B.C.E./1921).

With the advent of the printing press and print medium, this canon lost much of its emphasis as rhetors could access physically stored data rather than having to remember it and this thinking has continued into the social media age. As a consequence, the importance of the canon of memory in the digital age has been largely ignored. However, as Brooke (2009) notes, this perspective conceptualises memory very narrowly - as memory as storage only. Such a view reduces memory to a passive archive and neglects its broader rhetorical function in the classical literature. Conceptualisations of rhetoric need to be taken back to its Aristotelian roots by shifting its focus from that of a mere passive repository to something much more substantial. Reconsidering memory as an active rhetorical process is essential for the digital environment to take into account the unique technological characteristics that social media platforms are both founded on and offer. Further, memory needs to take into account how prosumers interact with this technology to create, preserve, reshape, and recollect the arguments that are key to persuasive effect.

Delivery

Delivery (*actio*, *or pronuntiatio*), the last of the five canons, concerns itself with the presentation of discourse – in antiquity, *how* a speech was delivered rather than *what* it delivered. Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E/1991) noted that the persuasive effect of the best arguments may be entirely negated by its poor delivery while an inferior argument, both in substance and style, can achieve far greater persuasion than it deserves if well delivered. For these reasons, in antiquity the way a speech was delivered was considered of prime importance to ensure that the desired effect, or persuasion, was achieved. To this end, considerable attention was dedicated to two key components of

delivery: vocal training which focussed on the volume, stability and flexibility of the voice; and physical movement which included the use of gestures and facial expressions to support the discourse (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E/1991). In this sense, Aristotle considered that delivery was concerned predominantly, but not exclusively, with the aesthetic qualities of speech to persuade through *ethos* and *pathos* rather than through the rationality of an argument (*logos*).

With the arrival of the printing press in the 15th century, written communication became an important part of communicative acts and delivery evolved from embodied voice and gesture to typography and layout. Despite both the importance and potential of delivery in writing, this canon, like memory, fell by the wayside in the early Renaissance period and a nearly exclusive focus on the canons of arrangement and style became prevalent (Welch, 1999).

The emergence of the contemporary digital environment has, however, seen delivery return to its classical era prominence as a tool of persuasion. Dynamic multimodal and multimedia social media platforms afford rhetors the opportunity to utilise traditional performative components such as the use of voice and physical movement. At the same time, the online environment also enables the ability to incorporate a much broader range of written aspects of delivery such as formatting choices, emojis, and hashtags. But, more than this, social media extends beyond prosumers to take into account the wide range of technological features offered by the platforms that allow it to deliver arguments in ways that profoundly shape how it is received, perceived and acted upon. This includes such features as algorithms that allow audiences to be segmented and microtargeted with highly personalised messaging, as well as automated bots which can replicate key arguments at scale and virally distribute them. In this sense, delivery in the contemporary social media environment requires

rhetorical analysts to take into account not only the human aspect of delivery but also the technical aspects which can enhance its persuasive effect.

Having explored each of the canons in isolation, it has been possible to identify key features of each that may be relevant to undertaking rhetorical analysis in the contemporary social media environment. While this is useful, on its own it is insufficient for as Porter (2009) notes, each of the canons "don't have much generative or productive power unless you put them into dynamic interaction with each other and with other rhetorical topics. In other words, you connect up questions of delivery with rhetorical invention, with audience, with design of a web site, and so on" (n.p.). With this in mind, rhetorical analysis must ensure to not only explore each of the canons as a discrete part of the analytical process but, importantly, must also go on to understand how each of these parts connects with the other to provide a coherent whole that becomes the foundation of the persuasive message.

Thesis Aim

This thesis draws on Aristotle's rhetorical framework to understand how persuasion is effected in the contemporary social media environment particularly as it impacts issues of national security.

Thesis Structure

This thesis is by publication and includes articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals as well as an article under review. The thesis is presented in 6 chapters.

This chapter (Chapter 1) has introduced the thesis and provided the background to the contemporary social media environment noting its promise as a tool of persuasion that has the potential to shape collective thought and action in a manner never before

envisaged. The chapter has highlighted how this persuasive potential threatens security at various levels but notes a gap in understanding how this occurs. The chapter has also reviewed the literature on the defining characteristics of the social media environment as well as the evolution of the scholarship of persuasion before providing a discussion of Aristotle's rhetoric as a potential framework for addressing the gap in understanding how persuasion occurs in the contemporary social media environment.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the research assumptions, design, and methodology chosen to explore the question of how persuasion is effected in the contemporary social media environment. In particular this chapter provides an overview of the application of Aristotle's rhetorical framework utilising a case-based methodological approach.

Chapter 3 presents the first case study, that of Russian interference of the 2016 US presidential elections via social media. This case explores a topic that, while not the first example of state-based attempts to effect persuasion via social media, represented a significant escalation in efforts by a nation state to utilise social media as a tool of persuasion to threaten security at both the national and international level. This chapter has been published in the *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*.

Chapter 4 presents the second case study, that of a social media campaign in support of Russia's 2022 Ukraine Invasion. More specifically, this case undertakes an analysis of the Russian state broadcaster RT's Twitter activities in support of the military operation both leading up to and during the initial phase of the invasion. This chapter has been published in the journal *Political Psychology*.

Chapter 5 synthesises the findings from each of the case studies and undertakes a cross-case analysis to provide a reframed rhetorical framework that brings together

classical theory with contemporary practice. This chapter has been published in the journal *Theory and Psychology*.

The final chapter of this thesis, Chapter 6, draws the threads of the research together. It recaps the key findings of the research and discusses the contribution that these make to understanding how persuasion is effected in the social media environment. It also explores the impact of these findings on both national and international security. This chapter culminates with my reflections on the research process, highlighting its limitations, opportunities for future research, and implications for practice.

Chapter Two: Methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the research assumptions, design and methodology chosen to explore the question of how persuasion is effected in the contemporary social media environment.

Psychological research is a broad church in that it encompasses a wide range of sub-disciplines, paradigms, and theories. Paradigm, in the Kuhnian sense (Kuhn, 1996), refers to a framework of thought that is based on a set of assumptions about both the nature of being (ontology) and the nature of knowledge (epistemology). Nested within this, the term theory refers to a specific set of propositions that explain a particular phenomenon from within a specific paradigm (Bem & De Jong, 2013). Adopting a particular paradigm and subsequent theoretical approach invariably leads to a specific methodological approach towards the conduct of research.

The Renaissance period (circa 14th to 17th century) played an important role in shaping research and saw the adoption of a realist/positivist paradigm which brought a physical sciences approach to the study of social issues. This approach, championed by such eminent figures as Francis Bacon, Galileo Galilei, and Rene Descartes, espoused the idea that studying natural phenomena, including human behaviour, through the scientific approach would reveal objective 'truths' (Bem & De Jong, 2013). Given the lasting dominance of this approach, when Wilhelm Wundt established the first laboratory for psychology in 1879, marking psychology's establishment as a distinct academic discipline, and despite him being a proponent of *Völkerpsychologie* (literally psychology of the peoples), it made both political and strategic sense to align the newly established discipline with the natural sciences (McGarty & Haslam, 1997). Notwithstanding this, there remained much disagreement between those who adopted a

psychological sciences approach and those who preferred a psychological humanities approach (Teo, 2017).

While not denouncing the success of the scientific approach in addressing issues in the natural, testable world, those in favour of a psychological humanities approach considered that there were dimensions of human society that required a fundamentally different approach than that offered by the natural sciences (Risjord, 2014). As Van den Berg (1961, as cited in Romanyshyn, 2012) notes, “modern science cannot explain the essential problems of man…science and technology is successful only for a certain range of problems” (p. 4-5). The psychological humanities provided a way of knowing that went beyond the psychological sciences approach to “draw on the knowledge and practices of the humanities to access extensive content and material as well as a long tradition of research on the processes and products of human mental life” (Teo, 2017, p. 281). This debate was no better highlighted than in the disagreement between Herman Ebbinghaus, who favoured psychology as an exclusively natural science (*Naturwissenschaft*) focussed on empirical observation and causal explanation, and Wilhelm Dilthey who argued for a psychology as a humanities project (*Geisteswissenschaften)* focussed on understanding meaning and interpretation. This latter approach recognised that psychological phenomena have both physiological and first-person, or subjective, meanings (Teo, 2017) and, as such, required different ontological, epistemological, and methodological approaches. Although the debate on approaches continues, Teo (2017) notes that the psychological sciences approach has prevailed and dominates mainstream academia.

Notwithstanding this ‘victory’ of sorts, scholars have argued that the ambitions of this scientized approach, specifically the desire to produce universal truths and consequent general principles, have not been realised (Gergen, 2023). Rather,

psychological research findings have produced “a sprawling mass of conflicting principles and research findings” (Billig, 2015, p. 59). This is not intended as a criticism of the physical sciences inspired approach, for it has an important place in researching the natural world and observable phenomena with exemplary success stories in such fields as mathematics, physics, and chemistry (Gergen, 2023). But the ways of knowing needed by social psychologists go well beyond the methods of scientific psychology if they are to better understand the incredible complexities and contradictions of human behaviour.

In taking this into account, this thesis considers it important to utilise a framework for this thesis that recognises and attempts to overcome the limitations posed by contemporary scientific or experimental research. This requires a look beyond the psychological sciences approach that seeks to identify absolute truths, general laws, and causation to an approach that recognises the importance of the limitless novelty of the humanities and social situations, as well as the multiple, conflicting, but equally valid perspectives that can exist in the social world. In doing this, this research adopts a psychological humanities approach, central to which are concerns about humans as being embedded in their historical, social, political, and cultural contexts. This approach recognises not only individual subjectivities, and acknowledges the uniqueness of these, but also recognises that these subjectivities are embedded in broader contexts which are in constant flux. Importantly these broader contexts not only shape individual subjectivities but are also shaped by them (Teo, 2017). With this in mind, this research adopts a social constructionist position that is in keeping with the humanities and arts tradition within psychology.

Social Constructionism

Social constructionism challenges the supposedly objective and universal basis of much psychological sciences knowledge, with proponents arguing that understanding is not directly dependent on an objective nature of things but, rather, that there are a multiplicity of potential understandings and that these are negotiable, created, sustained and transformed not in the mind, but in various patterns of social processes and relationships (Gergen, 2023; Lock & Strong, 2010). From a philosophical perspective, social constructionism could be considered a social epistemology which supports a humanities or interpretive social sciences approach concerned predominantly with the conceptual transformations of social life (Freedman, 2024).

One of the key founding contributions to social constructionism was Berger and Luckmann's (1966) 'The Social Construction of Reality'. This treatise argues that reality is constructed through a system of socio-cultural and interpersonal interactions in everyday life and that this happens through three key processes: externalisation, objectivation, and internalisation. In externalisation, people communicate both verbally and non-verbally to create narratives that enter the social world. These narratives are then retold, reformulated, and reproduced until they become accepted knowledge, or what Burr (1995) terms, an object of consciousness or objectivation. This knowledge is then internalised to become part of everyday practice and others come into a world where this accepted knowledge already exists (Burr, 1995). Knowledge then is a product of interaction, and because interaction is an ongoing process, knowledge is both dynamic and ongoing (Gergen, 1997b; Khan & MacEachen, 2021).

Gergen (2023) builds on this, highlighting that knowledge does not begin with an individual observing the world but, rather, knowledge emerges from existence in relationships that provides assumptions, theories, and vocabularies about the nature of

the world. Importantly, he notes that these relationships are not value-neutral, merely providing an ‘as is’ factual account of things. Rather, relationships favour particular values, either explicit or implicit, that are carried forward along with the assumptions, theories, and vocabulary to explain their nature. Because different people exist in different assemblages of relationships and bring different assumptions, theories, vocabularies, and values about phenomenon, multiple realities, or truths, can exist as the same narrative can mean different things for different people or at different times.

Although there is no single school of social constructionism, several key tenets have been identified that span the various approaches. First, the central feature of human activity is concerned with meaning and understanding (Gergen, 2023; Lock & Strong, 2010). From a social construction perspective, humans are not merely passive recipients of an external reality; rather, they actively engage with the world to make sense of and understand it. Second, meaning and understanding is constructed and agreed predominantly through social interaction (Gergen, 2023; Lock & Strong, 2010). Individuals do not create meaning in isolation, rather they engage in shared communication, practices, and interactions that negotiate understanding. Human knowledge, in this sense, is inherently relational and our understanding of the world emerges from the social processes in which we participate (Gergen, 2023). Third, this construction of meaning and understanding through social interaction is not fixed or universal (Gergen, 2023; Lock & Strong, 2010) but, rather, is contingent to particular historical, social, cultural, and situational contexts. Meaning and understanding about a particular phenomenon can, thus, vary widely depending on such contextual factors as time, place, and who is involved.

According to Gergen (1997a), there are numerous ways in which social constructionism can contribute to a more fully enriched and broadly effective

psychology that spans the range of social sciences and humanities. First, by viewing the social primacy over the individual and approaching individuals as socially, morally, politically, economically and culturally immersed. This allows us to move beyond an individualist perspective by considering how broader contextual factors contribute to our understanding of phenomena. Second, by unmasking and deconstructing ideologies, interests, and rhetorical strategies which allow us to identify hidden assumptions, biases, and values within social narratives. This leads to a much more nuanced understanding of phenomena. And, third, by approaching mental processes as reflecting social processes and, in doing so, recognising the influence that social factors have on various mental processes.

While social constructionism offers considerable benefits as an epistemological framework for understanding persuasion in the contemporary social media environment, it is not without its weaknesses or criticisms. At the extreme, it has been criticised for ignoring a subject-object relatedness and replacing it with entirely subject-subject relations that result in the stance that there is nothing beyond socially constructed knowledge (Lock & Strong, 2010). As Gergen (2023) notes, this "reduces the physical world to little more than a passive bystander, a blank slate upon which culture can freely inscribe its beliefs. But, it is proposed, nature does make a difference; you cannot construct nature in any way you wish. Reality bites back" (p. 250). In that sense, a social construction of the world cannot simply ignore the physical world.

As a consequence, this thesis will adopt a constructionist approach that Gergen (2023) terms 'ontologically mute'. That is, I take a pragmatic, or contextual, social constructionist approach that is grounded in the view that reality is constructed, or emerges, through language, relationships, and shared meaning-making (Gergen, 2023). While reality is not denied, it is seen as intelligible only through cultural conventions,

social practices and discursive processes. Pragmatic social constructionism emphasizes how knowledge is produced within specific contexts and serves practical purposes rather than reflecting objective truths (Burr, 2015; Gergen, 2023). From a pragmatic perspective, the usefulness of knowledge is prioritized over questions of its ultimate truth (Morgan, 2014). This stance is particularly useful when investigating rhetoric as different rhetors work to influence audience perceptions of reality.

Rhetorical Framework

In looking for a framework or methodology consistent with the epistemological orientation taken, a serendipitous visit to a previously avoided aisle in the library, that of the texts of the ancient Greeks and Romans and, more specifically, the texts on classical rhetoric, provided some inspiration. To the author, a review of the literature on ancient rhetoric (see Chapter One) highlighted how it adopted an approach that went beyond seeking to identify absolute truths and general laws to one that encompassed many of the characteristics that fall under a psychological humanities approach. This includes a recognition of the limitless novelty of social situations (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1991); an understanding of the different ways through which an audiences opinions are either formed, changed, or reinforced (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1991); an understanding how to bypass an audiences critical faculties to achieve a persuasive goal (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1991); and a recognition of the power of arguments that are socially constructed (Billig, 1996).

From the works of Corax, arguably the first of the rhetors, who developed basic rhetorical principles for ordinary men to use in the law courts, through Protagoras and his fellow Sophists, Plato, and on to the Roman orators Cicero and Quintilian, classical rhetoric seemed to offer considerable utility in understanding persuasion in the contemporary environment. But of all of these classical works, one stood out as being

especially relevant - that of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. This treatise not only provided an academic analysis of the various persuasive skills demonstrated by orators in Ancient Greece, but it also offered a framework to analyse how acts of persuasion worked. As outlined in Chapter One, this framework comprises a five-fold classification of rhetoric that includes the canons of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. When combined, these canons offer a framework for understanding persuasive acts that take into account the novelties of a particular situation.

Although not designed to provide a definitive model for understanding persuasion, largely as a consequence of Aristotle's assertion that it was simply not possible to capture the infinite variety of human affairs (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1991; Billig, 1996), this framework appeared to offer considerable potential for use in the contemporary research environment. In part, this was due to the approach recognising not only individual subjectivities but also how these subjectivities are embedded in broader historical, social, political, and cultural contexts which are in constant flux, something few other contemporary models took into account. Indeed, Bryant (1965) asserts that "though modern psychology is very different from that of the Greeks, and doubtless more scientific, modern enlightenment has produced no new method of analysing an audience's persuasiveness that can replace Aristotle's" (p. 36). And so, I decided to incorporate this framework, developed in the classical era, to the digital environment of today to provide an understanding of how social media discourse can effect persuasion.

In applying this framework, Eyman (2015) notes two distinct approaches: a close reading and a distant reading. The first of these focuses upon meaning within the text aside from its context, exploring such formal features as rhythm, figures of speech, and use of metaphor. The latter approach, that of distant reading, considers broader

contextual factors to identify themes and tropes across the canons of the framework. As this latter approach is more consistent with a social constructionist epistemology, I have adopted it for this research. Applying the framework in this way lead me to a case-based methodological approach to this research.

Case-Based Approach to this Research

The case study has its genesis as a method in social research in the latter part of the nineteenth century (Gerring, 2007) when the term came into common use by the highly regarded Chicago School of Sociology (Platt, 1992). The case study's origin as part of sociology comes from the use of case work by US social workers who were a key source of information for sociology researchers at the time. Originally focussed on the study of deviant cases of individuals, with data predominantly collected by interview, the case study was seen as valuable for capturing "the personal significance of those being studied, their inner lives, interactive behaviour, and all the information that could not be collected by the statistical method" (Sena, 2024, p. 25). The value of the case study approach saw it expand not only to other disciplines, including social psychology, but also in terms of the cases studied to include broader phenomena such as groups, organisations, and events (Sena, 2024).

Although a popular method prior to the Second World War, the case study virtually disappeared in the 1940s largely as a result of the rise of quantitative techniques but also in response to its purported lack of external validity; a fallacious criticism which remains to this day (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2012; Platt, 1992; Radley & Chamberlain, 2012). The 1980s, however, saw a resurgence of the case study in social research and, while it is widely utilised today, many psychologists remain reluctant to accept it as a legitimate approach as a consequence of several key concerns around research design, researcher bias, and a lack of generalisability. These concerns come

predominantly from critics whose understanding of research sits squarely within the physical or natural sciences (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2012). In responding to these concerns, Flyvbjerg (2006) deftly corrects the misunderstandings underpinning them, concluding that social science would be strengthened through a greater use of case studies.

As a research approach, case-based inquiry offers an avenue for in-depth investigations of a particular social phenomenon to identify the underlying social processes and relationships, and to gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding within a given context, specifically its natural setting (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2012; Priya, 2021; Radley & Chamberlain, 2012; Small, 2009). In this sense, rather than looking to prove something, a case study involves looking to give meaning to the collected material and provide a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon within its natural setting. This approach supports the social constructionist epistemological position that meaning and understanding is constructed predominantly through social interaction and is contingent to particular historical, social, cultural, and situational contexts.

In looking to the contemporary environment, the emergence of digital platforms and their integration into everyday life where individuals and communities generate contextually rich, unstructured data to engage in meaning making about the world, underscores the suitability of social media for case-based research for several reasons. First, social media captures spontaneous, prosumer-generated content that reflects lived experiences, opinions, and social dynamics as they unfold in real time. This immediacy provides researchers with access to naturally occurring data that is temporally relevant and culturally situated, qualities that align closely with the principles of case study research which seeks to explore phenomena within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2003). Second, the participatory and ongoing nature of discourse on social media platforms enables the observation of social dynamics and collective sense-making (Papacharissi,

2015). This is particularly valuable when constructing in-depth case studies that aim to discover the complexity of social phenomena. Third, the multimodal and multimedia nature of social media data, including text, images, video, and features such as emojis and hashtags, enhances the richness and depth of the case, affording the opportunity to gain not only a deeper, but also more nuanced understanding of a phenomenon. It is for these reasons that a case-based approach was selected for this research to understand persuasion in the contemporary social media environment.

Notwithstanding these benefits, the social media environment poses several challenges when undertaking a case-based approach. Key of these is that a case study presumes a well-defined and bounded problem (Gallagher, 2024). A case study, thus, necessarily has limits. Rather than being a complete picture of a phenomenon from start to finish, a case-based approach provides a story about a particular segment of that phenomenon – the bounded system. But in the contemporary social media environment, boundaries are messy things that are difficult to delineate. Not only is this a consequence of what Gallagher (2024) refers to as the digital intensity of the environment where digital phenomenon intensify the distribution, frequency, scale, speed, and access of information, but it is also due to the difficulties in determining where discourse on a topic begins and ends, where prosumers enter the discourse and how they move through it, and how the links and other technical capabilities of the platforms allow prosumers to move seamlessly to other topics and sites.

In addressing this challenge, Kendall (2009) provides a useful starting point for defining boundaries in the digital environment, suggesting these are considered in three dimensions: spatial, temporal, and relational. In looking to the first of these, spatial boundaries refer to the notion of who, what, and where to research (Kendall, 2009). Understanding these allowed me to make choices about the social media platforms

selected for my research and which data within that environment was useful to understand persuasive attempts. This, in turn, determined the methods and tools utilised to collect and analyse the data. The second dimension, temporal bounding, refers to bounding a case in terms of time (Kendall, 2009). This is a challenging boundary to define given the non-linear nature of the social media environment and for my research involved an iterative process to ensure key features of the case were not excluded. The third dimension, relational boundaries, refers to who is included in the research as well as how they interact with both each other and the technology (Gallagher, 2024). For my research, the relational boundaries needed to consider a range of entities: individual prosumers who engaged with content, particular groups or communities that shared particular content, and organisations that sought to effect persuasion. It also needed to consider how the platforms facilitated relations. This boundary is fundamental to understanding the social processes at the heart of the persuasive effects.

In establishing these boundary dimensions during my research, two issues are important to note. First, that the process was an iterative one. Boundaries did not clearly appear *ex nihilo*; rather they emerged over the course of the research through the interplay of the various entities, narrowing and expanding in a non-linear manner, repeatedly and iteratively as the data set grew. Second, while each boundary dimension is discussed separately, they are inherently interconnected. For my research, identifying the research question and phenomenon to be investigated allowed for the construction of preliminary spatial and temporal boundaries and, in turn, the establishment of relational boundaries. But in establishing these relational boundaries, a reformulation of spatial and temporal boundaries was required. This process continued iteratively until the construction of a case that provided "…an exemplar, which goes to show something

about the class to which it and other members belong" (Radley & Chamberlain, 2012, p. 394) was established.

Two cases were undertaken as part of this thesis, each of which explores the broader topic, that of understanding how persuasion is effected within the social media environment, particularly as it impacts on issues of national security. In doing this, the social media environment was explored as a digital ecology that encompassed not only the people, texts, and technologies within the environment but, more importantly, the broader context, interactions, and relationships both within and across each of the cases. These cases (See Chapters Three and Four) were selected based on several factors. Firstly, they provided exemplars of persuasion campaigns undertaken in a digital ecosystem that impacted on national security, albeit in very different ways. Although the social world is messy, exemplars have considerable value in grappling with this messiness and bringing phenomena to life while retaining the complexities, contradictions, and ambiguities inherent in the case (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2012). Second, these cases were selected to explore variations in how social media platforms operate in different contexts. This variation included different political environments, different persuaders, diverse target audiences, and contrasting national security concerns. By comparing these cases, the research sought to understand both similarities and differences across contexts that shape persuasive outcomes. The author considered this important as it afforded the opportunity to explore how phenomena in different contexts may be interconnected. Third, each case was undertaken on different social media platforms, again offering an opportunity to understand both similarities and differences in digital persuasion across platforms as well as how relationships and events may be interconnected.

One of the key criticisms of a case-based approach to research rests on the argument that case studies lack generalisability and, as such, general theories cannot be generated (Radley & Chamberlain, 2012). This overlooks the fact that researchers undertaking cased based research are not usually searching for universal truths but, rather, that they are utilising the approach to gain a deeper understanding of a specific phenomenon in a particular context (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2012). This provides the opportunity for the process of generalisation to theoretical propositions that are dependent on:

> . . .understanding the contextual factors in the situation where the inquiry took place, judging the new context where the knowledge is supposed to be applied, and making a critical assessment of whether the two contexts have sufficient processes in common to make it worthwhile to link them (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p.79).

This is precisely the approach taken in this research where universal laws of persuasion were not looking to be identified but, rather, an understanding of how persuasive attempts were undertaken within a particular context was sought. This, in turn, was designed to allow for the development of conceptual guidelines for analysing how persuasion functions in the contemporary social media environment. Each case formed the basis of a chapter of the thesis as well as a journal article. A separate chapter of the thesis, and a third journal article, synthesised the learnings from each case study utilising a multiple case study approach to both understand the dynamics within specific cases as well as understand the similarities and differences across cases through a comparative method. Building on this, the third article develops a framework utilising Aristotle's classical rhetoric to understand persuasion in the contemporary social media environment. An overview and contribution of each of the case studies and the third article is provided below. As an overview, it should be noted that more complete details

of the methodologies and methods adopted for each article, including empirical materials gathered and analytical processes, are necessarily provided within those articles with that material abbreviated in this chapter to avoid overlap.

Case 1: Online Influence in the 2016 US Presidential Elections.

Although Russia has a well-documented history of employing information as a tool of state power to influence public opinion (Allen & Moore, 2018; Aceves, 2019), the demise of the Soviet Union and the rise of Putin to power transformed information warfare, or influence operations, from a supporting role to being central in Russian statecraft (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014). In the lead up to the 2016 US Presidential elections, Moscow demonstrated a significant escalation in its influence operations. Commencing as early as 2014, the Russian government engaged in a sophisticated, multi-pronged strategy of interference based on three strands: a 'hack and dump' operation designed to acquire and release information that would undermine the Clinton presidential campaign; attempts to hack online voting systems to manipulate the outcome of the 2016 election in a manner favourable to Russia; and a sophisticated, multi-year social media campaign undertaken by the Internet Research Agency, a St. Petersburg based organisation which undertakes social media influence operations, to influence the outcome of the 2016 election (Department of Justice, 2019). The latter of these is the focus of the first case in Chapter Three.

This case study draws on a large corpus of material (2,218 Facebook advertisements), both organic, or non-paid, posts and inorganic posts, or those posts which generate traffic through paid advertising, as well as their associated metadata from the period leading up to the 2016 presidential elections. Drawing on Aristotle's rhetorical framework, it integrates the canonical attributes, key themes, and key trends

to understand how these were developed into a coherent strategy of persuasion designed to influence the outcome of the elections.

The article written from this case contributes to addressing the research question by exploring a topic that, while not the first example of state-based attempts to effect persuasion via social media, represented a significant escalation in efforts by Russia to utilise social media as a tool of persuasion to threaten security at both a national and international level. While, in case one, I highlight that the IRA influence campaign was estimated to have reached up to 130 million people in the Unites States, it was not possible to determine whether this campaign was sufficient to actually influence the outcome of the 2016 election. Notwithstanding this, what the case was able to determine was how the campaign was designed, developed, and undertaken in an attempt to achieve its desired goals, and how this may have contributed to both voter turnout and votes cast. In this sense, that it did influence the election outcome cannot be ruled out. The understanding gained from this case highlights opportunities for how future attempts at election interference may be identified, understood, and potentially mitigated. Moreover, the case highlighted the utility of Aristotle's rhetorical framework for gaining insights into the processes of persuasion in the contemporary social media environment.

This case study has been published as:

Nelson, N., Hodgetts, D., & Chamberlain, K. (2025). The Internet Research Agency Campaign to Influence the 2016 US Presidential Elections: A Rhetorical Analysis. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, *35*(5) https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.70163

Case 2: Social Media Campaign Supporting Russia's 2022 Ukraine Invasion

On 24 February 2014, Russian forces invaded Ukraine, annexing the Crimean Peninsula and supporting pro-Russian separatists in establishing the independent Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples Republics (Allan, 2020). Following on from this, in February 2022, President Putin announced the Russian government's recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and ordered a 'peacekeeping force' into the breakaway regions on humanitarian grounds. And so, on the morning of 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine in what Putin called a "special military operation" to "demilitarise and de-Nazify" Ukraine (Bloomberg, 2022). To allow Russia to successfully undertake this invasion, it needed minimum interference from NATO forces and, to ensure this, both leading up to and during the invasion, Russia utilised its full information apparatus to undertake numerous, multifaceted operations targeting Western audiences. For this case, I undertake an analysis of the activities of one key component of this information apparatus, RT (formally Russia Today), a Russian state funded and controlled international news broadcaster. Specifically, I analyse RT's Twitter[1] activities (@RT_Com) both leading up to and during the initial phase of the invasion.

This case draws upon a large corpus of Twitter data (2,473 Tweets), including organic messaging and its associated metadata, and utilises Aristotle's rhetorical framework to integrate the canonical attributes, key themes, and key trends, and

[1] [1] As of July 2023, Twitter was rebranded to X. Given that the research for this case study occurred prior to the rebranding, 'Twitter' and all its associated terminology is used throughout this thesis.

ascertain how these were developed into a coherent strategy of persuasion designed to impair a NATO response to Russia's invasion and subsequent annexation of Ukraine.

This article contributes to the research by exploring how nation states utilise social media as part of an increasingly hybrid approach to warfare. More specifically the article highlights how social media campaigns can be undertaken by nation states in support of military objectives by targeting populations and, in doing so, disrupting the political, and thus military, decision making of an adversary. Lessons from this case provide opportunities for establishing how to both identify and understand how future influence operations may be used in support of military operations. Moreover, it offers suggestions on how these may be mitigated, both proactively and reactively. Like case one, case two again highlighted the potential of Aristotle's rhetorical framework for gaining an understanding into the attempted processes of persuasion in the contemporary social media environment.

This case study has been published as:

Nelson, N., Hodgetts, D., & Chamberlain, K. (2025). Russia's@ RT_Com Twitter campaign supporting the 2022 Ukraine invasion: A rhetorical analysis. *Political Psychology*, *00*, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.70044.

In analysing both of these cases, I utilised a three-stage analytical process based on the Miles and Huberman (1994) framework for qualitative case study analysis. First, I undertook a manual review of all posts and their associated metadata utilising the rhetorical framework to identify the key canonical attributes of each post as well as the key themes. Second, broader analysis of the dataset was undertaken by generating various PivotTables and PivotCharts in Excel (e.g. themes by date) to identify key trends in the data. Third, drawing on Aristotle's rhetorical framework, I undertook an

analysis integrating the canonical attributes, key themes, and key trends to ascertain how these themes and trends were developed into a coherent strategy of persuasion.

Article 3: Development of an Analytical Framework

The third article I wrote for this thesis is presented in Chapter 5. In this chapter, I undertook a synthesis of the findings from within each of the case studies as well as a cross-case analysis to identify emergent patterns and divergences across the data. Central to this was the application of Aristotle's rhetorical canons of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery as a guiding analytical framework. These canons functioned as both deductive categories as well as conceptual lenses to develop a more extensive theorisation of Aristotle's rhetorical framework in the contemporary social media environment.

The analytical process employed for this chapter was an iterative one that utilised both deductive and abductive reasoning. The deductive aspect was grounded in the classical rhetorical framework and utilising the five canons provided *a priori* categories through which the case data could be initially interpreted. At the same time, an abductive approach was important to identify the most plausible explanations for the observed phenomena and to generate novel theoretical insights. This abductive approach became particularly valuable when the data resisted straightforward classification against the rhetorical canons. For example, contemporary practices such as algorithmic amplification did not sit neatly within the classical canons of style or delivery, and the abductive approach allowed for theoretical adaptations that better accounted for the contemporary environment. In that sense it contributed to the theoretical innovation underpinning the revised rhetorical framework, offering a way to account for novel, unexpected, and emergent features of persuasion in the contemporary environment.

The outcome of this chapter is a reframed rhetorical framework that synthesises classical theory with contemporary practice. This revised framework not only contributes to the academic discussion of rhetoric and social psychology, but it also offers practical utility for both researchers and practitioners seeking to understand how persuasive messaging is constructed, delivered, and received in the contemporary social media environment. This is important as these persuasive attempts have the potential to impact on security at the local, national, and even global level. Understanding how these attempts are crafted and undertaken offers opportunities to mitigate the detrimental impacts they could have on security.

This chapter has been published as:

Nelson, N., Hodgetts, D., & Chamberlain, K. (2026). From the agora to the algorithm: Aristotle's rhetoric as a theoretical framework for understanding social media persuasion. *Theory & Psychology*, *00*, 1-25. https://doi.org/10.1177/09593543251407228.

As a thesis by publication, two key points should be noted. First, that there is some unavoidable overlap, and thus repetition, across the three articles, particularly as they discuss the background to persuasion research and the rhetorical framework. Second, that although the publications included in this thesis are co-authored with the supervisors, the candidate was the primary contributor to each manuscript. Specifically, the candidate led the conceptualisation of the research, study design, data collection and analysis, and the preparation of the manuscripts. Supervisors provided guidance, feedback, and editorial support throughout the research and publication process.

Ethical Considerations

The online social media environment provides researchers with unprecedented opportunities and rich, diverse sources of data which have become increasingly important for a wider range of academic disciplines including social psychology. This is exemplified by the substantial increase in scholarly publications based on social media data over the past decade (National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities [NESH], 2019; Sold & Junk, 2021). Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (now X) offer large-scale, real-time data that can reveal valuable insights into a wide range of social phenomena. However, the acquisition and use of such data is not without its ethical challenges and the opportunities afforded are, of course, accompanied by a responsibility to ensure the data is obtained and utilised in an ethical manner (Burkell et al., 2022; Jacobson & Gorea, 2022; Locatelli, 2020).

While traditional ethics frameworks such as those grounded in the principles of autonomy, benefit, justice, and avoidance of harm (Massey University, 2017) continue to offer a foundational basis, they were developed in an era void of social media. Social media data brings with it new contextual challenges that the more traditional approaches are not always well suited to deal with. For example, whether content posted publicly on a social media platform is indeed public, and the potential flow on implications of this to the person posting the information. Consequently, applying traditional ethical models without adaptation to the new environment may lead to over cautious exclusion of valuable data or, conversely, to research practices that may breach human rights and potentially even harm people.

In recognition of these challenges, there have been a number of publications in recent years providing guidance on this new field of research in the social media environment (Burkell et al., 2022; Jacobson & Gorea, 2022; NESH, 2019; Samuel et al.,

2018; Sold & Junk, 2021; Townsend & Wallace, 2017). However, this guidance is often conflicting and a clear ethical framework for researchers remains elusive. The key areas of ongoing concern and contention within social media research such as the present study include whether data should be considered private or public, whether informed consent is necessary, how anonymity can be achieved, and how any risk of harm can be mitigated (Burkell et al., 2022; Jacobson & Gorea, 2022; Locatelli, 2020; NESH, 2019; Sold & Junk, 2021; Townsend & Wallace, 2017). Each of these areas is further complicated by the varied nature of social media platforms and their ever-evolving terms of service, as well as differing legal and ethical regulations across different jurisdictions.

As these remain issues of ongoing debate in academia, the author actively engaged with the literature; with social media platform policies, and terms and conditions; and with Massey University's Human Ethics Committee (Southern A) to ensure they were adequately addressed (See Appendix 1). In addressing the issue of whether data is considered public or private, and consequently whether informed consent is necessary, I adopted the definition of publicly available data as "data that can be obtained and used without login information and is freely available for third parties – such as researchers – to use" (Jacobson & Gruzd, 2020). Research that relies exclusively on publicly available data as defined above has been deemed not to require ethics board review when it is either legally accessible to the public and appropriately protected by law; or when it is publicly accessible and there is no reasonable expectation of privacy (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, 2018).

With regard to data collection for the first case study, as part of its investigation into election interference, Facebook made a total of 3,519 Facebook paid posts, or inorganic messages, and their associated metadata publicly available for researcher access via the US House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (USHPSCI, n.d.) public facing website. With regard to the second case study, third-party software (Stevesie HAR file web scraper) was utilised to access the Twitter Application Programming Interface (API) to collect publicly available Twitter data. Not only does Twitter's privacy policy permit this, but platform users must also agree to it as part of the terms and conditions of using the platform. In this sense, with both case one and two, only publicly available data was accessed, and this was in accordance with the terms and conditions of the respective social media platforms.

With regard to the ethical issues of anonymity and mitigation of harm, data anonymisation was considered as an approach to avoid revealing sensitive information and protect vulnerable individuals. However, this was not consistent with platform policies as both Facebook and Twitter's display requirements require the authors profile picture, username, and display name together with a link to the user's profile to be displayed. Again, this requirement is agreed to by users as a condition of using the platforms.

In this sense, it is considered that the research met the requirements as laid out in the Massey University (2017) Code of ethical conduct for research, teaching and evaluations involving human participants; the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Report (2018); and the social media platforms policies, and terms and conditions.

Notwithstanding this, for the purposes of this proposal, and as agreed with the Chair of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC) (Southern A), a low-risk ethics notification was submitted and accepted (MUHEC Ethics Notification Number: 4000023837).

Chapter 3: Case Study One – The Internet Research Agency Campaign to Influence the 2016 US Presidential Elections: A Rhetorical Analysis.

Abstract

The centrality of information and communicative processes in persuading society has, historically, made the media one of the key networks of power and influence in society. The rapid expansion of social media platforms has, however, enabled revolutionary changes in how this power is wielded and how persuasion occurs. This has had a profound impact on how political, economic, and social issues are understood and addressed. While a comprehensive body of social psychological theory and applied practice on the topic of persuasion has been developed over many years, persuasion in the contemporary social media environment is one that researchers are yet to fully understand. Methods for achieving this understanding continue to evolve. This article draws on a large corpus of material (2,218 Facebook advertisements and metadata) which documented the Russian Internet Research Agency campaign to influence the outcome of the 2016 US presidential elections. Drawing on Aristotle's rhetorical framework, this article presents a process analysis to understand how political persuasion is undertaken in the contemporary social media environment. The findings provide new insights into the social psychological processes of persuasion in contemporary society and demonstrate the utility of a rhetorical framework in understanding persuasion campaigns in dynamic digital settings.

*Keywords***:** Social media; social psychology; persuasion; rhetorical analysis.

This case study has been published as:

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As a thesis by publication, some of the material in this chapter overlaps with the articles published in Chapters 4 and 5.

Introduction

Much of the public deliberation around the topic of media persuasion and the manipulation of public opinion is not new in applied social psychology and has occurred in the context of the legacy media environment comprised predominantly of print, radio, and television (Castells, 2013; Carah, 2021; Perloff, 2014). However, the rapid expansion of social media platforms has provided a greater opportunity to influence collective thought and action and exert power through influencing populations and even national decision-makers in a manner never envisaged (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018a, 2018b; Bolton, 2021). The rapid rise of these sociotechnical platforms has been celebrated as providing a new public-commons where democracy can flourish (Hoffmann et al., 2019). But such platforms have also given rise to much darker scenarios, whereby a variety of actors can generate information, misinformation, and disinformation to persuade others for nefarious purposes (Aral, 2020; Lin & Kerr, 2021; Pantazi et al., 2021). This can have a profound impact on how political, economic, and social relations at local, national, and even global levels are understood and consequently addressed. Understanding how campaigns such as this are crafted and implemented in an effort to effect persuasion is, thus, important.

Although there are various definitions of persuasion, at its core it can be conceptualised as a social psychological phenomenon whereby communicators influence the perceptions or actions of others through social interaction (Perloff, 2014). Scholarship on persuasion dates to at least the Ancient Greeks where the term rhetoric was coined to refer to the use of argumentation, language, and public address to persuade audiences (Billig, 1996). While the importance of different aspects of rhetoric varied over time, it remained largely unchanged until the arrival of Rationalism in the latter part of the Renaissance period. Rationalism brought a physical sciences approach

to the study of persuasion in an attempt to uncover objective, scientific truth and, in doing so, moved rhetoric away from its traditional form. This approach was further reinforced in the 1940s with the experimental approach being adopted to systematically uncover the hidden truths of persuasion (Billig, 1996). Brewster Smith describes this research on persuasion, stemming from the work of Hovland, Janis, and Kelly, as being the 'new rhetoric' (Petty et al., 1981). Despite the optimism, the ambitions of the experimental method of the 'new rhetoric' have not been realised. Rather than producing clear universal truths and general principles that provide a nice, orderly psychological explanation of persuasion, what has been created is an ever-increasing uncertainty with a jumbled body of conflicting research findings (Billig, 2015).

In the contemporary era, a further layer of complexity has been added to persuasion research with the rapid expansion of online social media platforms providing greater opportunities for shaping collective thought and action. There has been useful research in the broader online environment (Aral, 2020; DiResta et al., 2018; Hoffmann et al., 2019; Howard et al., 2018; Huszár et al., 2022; Muhlmeyer & Agarwal, 2021) which has made significant gains in understanding the broader technological and, to a lesser extent, social vulnerabilities that exist in the information ecosystem and how these are exploited to subvert the political, economic and social environment. However, understanding persuasion in the social media environment, particularly the social interactive aspects, remains an evolving field which researchers are yet to fully understand.

To develop this understanding, several authors have drawn on traditional rhetorical works to explore the broader online environment (Brooke, 2009; Eyman, 2015) or to gain an understanding of persuasion in the social media environment (Bronstein, 2013, Chen et al., 2021; Pang & Law, 2017; Samuel-Azran et al., 2015).

While valuable in highlighting both the complexity and contextual nature of the effectiveness of rhetoric in this environment, this research does not move beyond an analysis of the roles of *ethos, pathos,* and *logos* – only one part of the traditional rhetorical framework. We posit that a more comprehensive understanding of persuasion in the contemporary social media environment can be gained by drawing more fully on Aristotle's rhetorical framework. In looking to do this, this article adopts a case study approach outlined previously in this journal (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2012). Specifically, it utilises the case of the Internet Research Agency's (IRA) interference in the 2016 US presidential elections.

Rhetorical Framework

In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle distinguishes between the practice of rhetoric to persuade an audience, and the analysis of how acts of persuasion work (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1991). This article is focussed on the latter of these, the analysis. Aristotle's rhetorical framework was divided into five canons: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery (Table 1). These canons serve, in modified form, as guiding principles for our analysis of how processes of persuasion were employed by the IRA to influence the 2016 US presidential elections.

Table 1 *Rhetorical Canons*

Rhetorical Canon	Definition
Invention	The key arguments developed on a particular issue to persuade an audience. Done through appeals to logic, credibility, and emotion.
Arrangement	The organisation of arguments both chronologically and when a confluence of activities provides opportunities to be seized.

Style	Embodying arguments in language and multimedia appropriate to the audience.
Memory	How arguments are preserved, maintained, and recalled.
Delivery	How messages are circulated to engage an audience and enhance persuasive effect.

Unlike more contemporary scholars who tend to focus on the form (*res*) of rhetoric, Aristotle placed great importance on the content (*verba*) or substance (Billig, 1996). This aspect of rhetoric is best represented by the canon of invention which, in general terms, involves determining the essential arguments that can be used to persuade a target audience on a specific issue. Invention goes beyond merely identifying how previous arguments can be applied to a particular situation and includes a comprehensive analysis that identifies how arguments, both established and novel, may be persuasive in a given context. Through the canon of invention, Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1991) noted that persuasion was brought about through three kinds of proof – *logos* (appeals to logic), *ethos* (appeals to credibility), and *pathos* (appeals to emotion).

According to Aristotle, people are most easily persuaded when they believe something has been proven through an appeal to logic or *logos* (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2015). This seems relatively straightforward – prove something and persuasion will occur. However, a deeper exploration of Aristotle's *logos* reveals that the process of rhetorical persuasion consists of proving something based on what an audience already believes. In that sense, an audience can be better persuaded if it can connect a logical proposition to something they already agree with or believe in (Rapp, 2012).

Persuasion can also be realised through the credibility of the speaker (*ethos*). While Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./2015) stated that this was often based on the rhetor's

character, he also noted that a rhetor may be deemed credible or trustworthy by displaying practical wisdom or good will. It is important to note that audiences differ in what they consider to be practical wisdom and good will, and therefore *ethos* is a judgement call about the credibility or trustworthiness of the rhetor.

Pathos involves the evoking of emotions in a target audience, particularly those pertaining to pain or pleasure, and aims to persuade through bypassing an audiences' critical faculties (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2015). To arouse emotions in an audience, Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1991) notes that a rhetor must be cognisant of three key factors: the state of mind of the audience (e.g. whether it is angry, fearful, sad), the type of audience at which the specific emotion is directed (based on such factors as education, class, and political leaning), and the reason for that particular emotion (understanding how and why a particular event may trigger a particular emotion) . Both *pathos* and *ethos* are key categories through which the social psychological aspects of rhetoric can be explored and understood.

In the contemporary social media environment where everyone is a potential prosumer – both consumer and producer of messaging – and messaging is both ongoing and evolving, it is appropriate to investigate not only how and why key arguments are seeded by a rhetor, i.e. whether through *logos, ethos, or pathos,* but also how key arguments evolve through social interaction to achieve a persuasive effect.

The second canon, arrangement, focusses on how arguments are organised into a coherent discourse. In classical rhetoric, arrangement was a formal system of organisation that aligned rhetorical appeals with specific parts of a speech – a largely linear approach to organising arguments reflective of the notion of *chronos,* a quantitative or chronological notion of time. However, a deeper reading of Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./2015) highlights that arrangement is much more intimately tied to the notion

of *kairos*, a qualitative notion of time where a confluence of events provides an opportunity to be seized (Smith, 1969). In this sense, while messaging can be arranged chronologically by a rhetor and received by an audience to achieve persuasion, this persuasion can be considerably enhanced when messaging exploits situations or events as they arise. In the contemporary environment, rhetorical analysts must look beyond how communicative acts are arranged by a rhetor in a linear manner to explore how spontaneous messaging exploits events to enhance persuasion.

For Aristotle, the third canon, style, was about utilising language appropriately. This canon has often been misinterpreted and criticised as purely ornamental or simply a vehicle to express, or even embellish ideas – what Corbett (1965, p. 385) called "the dress of thought". This misrepresentation, however, overlooks the important and reciprocal relationship between invention and style. Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./2015) notes that to be effective, style must be both clear and appropriate, and that it should generate both emotion (*pathos*) and character (*ethos*). In the contemporary environment, style has gone beyond merely transmitting static, text-based messaging to multimedia, interactive messages that can target highly specific audiences. Rhetorical analysis in this environment needs to consider how style is utilised to engage with specific audiences, to generate emotion, and to demonstrate character in an effort to achieve the desired persuasive effect.

In Ancient Greece, orators were judged by the length of their speeches and ability to deliver the same speech on multiple occasions (Billig, 1996). This perspective conceptualises the fourth canon, memory, very narrowly – merely as storage. However, a broader exploration of the classical literature highlights that memory was about far more than merely storage. Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1906) notes that memory is not merely recalled but, rather, is recollected through a process of individual and social

deliberation that infers experience to make sense of a situation. In this sense, memories are evoked and recollected through social psychological processes. The unique characteristics of the social media environment allow a wide range of prosumers to negotiate, reshape, and reshare individual memories to socially construct collective memories. Further, it allows them to do this utilising a multimedia, dynamic, and interactive process that arguably make the construction of memories more powerful. Rhetorical analysts in the contemporary environment should keep in mind the need to look not only for the trends emerging in communicative efforts, but also the ways and means by which key ideas are being promoted in public deliberations.

In classical rhetoric, delivery, the final canon, concerned itself with the presentation of discourse, how something was delivered rather than what was delivered. Much of classical rhetoric was focussed on the delivery of speech, and while techniques of delivery varied depending on context, at its core, delivery was concerned with the aesthetic qualities of speech to persuade primarily through *ethos* and *pathos.* While this focus remains in the contemporary environment, it is considerably enhanced by key features of social media platforms. Specifically, the multimedia and multimodal nature of messaging; the algorithmic distribution of messaging that allows it to be highly targeted towards specific audiences; and the autonomous agents, or bots, which can engage an audience in a variety of ways. Rhetorical analysis needs to explore the multitude of ways messaging can be delivered via social media to amplify or suppress key arguments to effect persuasion.

These canons serve, in modified form, as guiding principles for our analysis of Russia's IRA campaign to interfere in the 2016 US presidential elections.

The Rhetorical Situation

Prior to delving into the rhetorical canons, Bitzer (1968) foregrounds the importance of understanding the broader context surrounding a specific rhetorical situation. He highlights how Aristotle developed three categories that needed to be considered to understand context: the *exigence*, or the situation that needs to be addressed; the *audience*, one which is not only able to be influenced but is, in turn, able to facilitate the desired change; and the *constraints*, those elements that may limit the achievement of a rhetorical objective. Understanding these categories allows the researcher to "discover and manage the particularities of novel situations…" and then utilise the canons "…to discover and formulate a means of disclosing them" (Bitzer, 1968, p. 398). This section provides a brief discussion of the rhetorical situation specific to the case at hand.

Exigence

To understand exigence surrounding this case, it is crucial to recognise that Russia has a well-documented history of employing information as a tool of state power to influence public opinion both domestically and abroad. As far back as 1919, then Soviet leaders recognised the opportunity presented by racial inequalities to create discord and undermine democracy in the US (Allen & Moore, 2018; Aceves, 2019). With the demise of the Soviet Union and the rise of Putin to power, influence operations transformed from a supporting role to being central in Russian statecraft (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014; Ball, 2017).

In the lead up to the 2016 US presidential election, Moscow demonstrated a significant escalation in its influence operations. This was, in large part, a consequence of the two main presidential candidates, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, declaring contrasting stances towards Russia. Clinton was positioned as an adversary while

Trump was positioned as a friend who openly admired Putin. In addition to Trump expressing a desire for closer ties between the US and Russia, he openly questioned the relevance of NATO (Department of Justice , 2019). And so, commencing as early as 2014, the Russian government engaged in a sophisticated, multi-pronged strategy of interference to influence the outcome of the 2016 elections in a manner favourable to Russia (Office of the Director of National Intelligence [ODNI], 2017).

This strategy was based on three strands, one of which, a sophisticated, multi-year social media campaign, was undertaken by a St Petersburg organisation, the IRA. The IRA undertook social media operations on behalf of the Russian government to influence the course of international affairs (DoJ, 2019), and to "…sow division and discord in the U.S. political system, including by creating social and political polarization, undermining faith in democratic institutions, and influencing U.S. elections…" (United Sates of America v. Elena Alekseevna Khusyaynova [USA v. Khusyaynova], 2018, p. 6).

The specific exigence, or situation to be addressed then, was the 2016 US presidential elections and the threat posed to Russia by the potential election of Clinton. The rhetoric generated by the IRA served to influence the outcome of the election in favour of Trump through changing voting behaviour.

Audience

American citizens registered to vote in 2016 totalled more than 158 million (Duffin, 2022). This group is comprised of diverse political beliefs, cultural backgrounds, sexual orientations, ages, classes, faiths, and so forth. The sheer size and diversity of this audience meant that no singular message could realise the desired persuasion and, thus, it had to be segmented and targeted with a range of rhetorical strategies. Audience targeting required an intimate understanding of US society and,

ideally, the existing cleavages, political and otherwise, within that society that could be exploited. The first step in this was to understand the process by which the US elects the president – the US electoral college featuring a winner takes all system for each state. Although most states consistently elect a particular party, there are a small number of swing states that have historically voted either way (USA Government, 2022). Often, election of a president comes down to the outcome in one of the key swing states. For example, the 2000 US presidential elections were decided by only 537 votes in Florida (Aral, 2020), while the 2004 elections were decided by 118,000 votes in the key swing state of Ohio (Federal Election Commission [FEC], 2005). To influence the outcome of the 2016 elections, therefore, it was not necessary for the IRA to persuade all voters, but rather a relatively small number in persuadable swing states.

To identify target audiences, from 2014, the IRA began to research US sites on social media that were focussed on political and social issues. This research involved not only understanding the digital ecology but also tracking a variety of metrics on the sites to gain a deep understanding of key audiences and issues, and how best to engage with them to achieve their influence objective (United States of America v. Internet Research Agency [USA v. IRA], 2018). The IRA also deployed staff to the US specifically to undertake intelligence gathering on the political cleavages and key audience influencers within US society. Further, posing as US citizens, the IRA contacted political and social activists within the US to gain further understanding of key audiences and interests (Department of Justice, 2019; Trojanovski, 2018; USA v. IRA, 2018; USA v. Khusyaynova, 2018). These activities provided the IRA with an understanding of the fracture points and, thus, audiences that could be segmented and targeted for persuasion. At its highest level, the data indicates that the IRA segmented

voters into three distinct audiences, right-wing, left-wing, and African American audiences in traditional swing states.

Constraints

Constraints are those factors which can limit the achievement of the rhetorical objectives. The IRA campaign faced two key constraints. The first was the need to obscure the campaign from being discovered by the target audience, the news media, US government agencies or, indeed, the social media platforms themselves. The second constraint was how content within the social media environment evolves continuously and may be repurposed by different prosumers and re-emerge in a manner that does not support the rhetorical objectives. As our analysis reveals, several well-considered strategies were developed by the IRA to ensure that a level of anonymity and deniability of the campaign was maintained, and that messages evolved in the desired manner.

Method

In undertaking this research, we sought to go beyond a scientistic social psychology approach that looks to discover general laws that govern social action – what Flyvbjerg (2006) refers to as an epistemic model. Rather, we sought to explore the complexities in the underlying social processes and relationships to gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of persuasive attempts in a given context. Case studies have been identified as offering a means to do this, allowing an investigation of a particular social situation to identify insights into underlying processes "whilst preserving the context, complexities, and contradictions inherent to social life" (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2012, p. 382). We therefore adopt a case study approach to undertake an in-depth investigation into a specific context, that of the IRA interference in the 2016 US

presidential elections, and to develop descriptions and interpretations of persuasive attempts within this context utilising a rhetorical framework.

As part of its investigation into the IRA campaign, the US House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence released a total of 3,519 Facebook paid posts, or inorganic messages, and their associated metadata which included message creation date, text, landing page, targeting parameters, impressions, clicks, and spend (United States House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence [USHRPSCI], n.d.). Of these 3,519 inorganic messages, 2,218 appeared during the period 1 Jun 2015 to 8 November 2016, i.e. in the lead up to the presidential elections. This data serves as the basis for the present rhetorical inquiry.

The raw data from the messages was converted into an Excel file using pdftotext software and a customised Perl script. Following cleaning of the dataset to fix or remove incorrect, corrupted, incorrectly formatted, duplicate or incomplete data, we organised the data into a Microsoft Excel table (see supplementary data) to allow for the efficient management and analysis of the data. We then undertook a three-phase analytical process, based on Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework for qualitative case study analysis, comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

In the first phase, data reduction, we manually reviewed all posts and their associated metadata to summarise, code, and cluster the data, and to consequently identify the key emerging trends. In this phase, we also organised IRA messaging against relevant canons of the rhetorical framework for subsequent analysis. In the second phase, data display, we undertook a broader visual analysis of the reduced dataset by generating various PivotTables and PivotCharts in Excel (e.g. spend, impressions, and clicks by date; ads by date, location, and target). These visual

transformations proved invaluable in enabling us to synthesise individual level data into broader patterns and identify additional key trends as well as relationships between various elements of the data. In the final phase of the interpretive process, we drew conclusions from the categorised data and verified these for accuracy and consistency. We used Aristotle's rhetorical framework to integrate the canonical attributes and key trends, and to determine our interpretation of how these were developed into a coherent strategy of persuasion by the IRA. The lead author carried out the analytical process in the first instance, with all authors then collectively verifying the analysis and conclusions for both accuracy and consistency. We refined our conclusions based on this collaborative verification process.

Findings

Having provided the context to the situation, we now present the findings using Aristotle's five rhetorical canons, in turn, as a framework for understanding the processes of persuasion employed by the IRA.

Invention

As former NSA and CIA Director Michael Hayden explains "influence campaigns don't create divisions on the ground, they amplify divisions on the ground" (Ioffe, 2017, n.p.). This is consistent with Aristotelian rhetoric which does not look to change an audience's mind but, rather, to persuade by enabling them to connect to arguments with which they already agree (Rapp, 2012). It is also reflective of the approach taken by the IRA, who developed essential arguments that exploited and amplified existing political cleavages with the goal of mobilising conservative voters while simultaneously supressing liberal voters. Given voter turnout rates over the

previous four elections of between 53% and 58% (Pew Research Center, 2020), mobilisation of conservative voters in 2016 seemed eminently achievable.

Of the 2,218 posts, 739 (33%) were organic, or non-paid. The remaining 1479 (67%) were inorganic posts, or posts which generate traffic through paid advertising. A key strength of inorganic posts is that they allow the microtargeting of a specific audience, and indeed this is precisely how the IRA utilised them. Our analysis highlights that most of these inorganic posts could be categorised into three classes of argument: racial injustice, specifically the state discriminating predominantly against African Americans; liberal inequity, the states inaction in addressing discrimination against liberal groups; and white grievance and fear, the fear that the institutions and values of a conservative white America were under existential threat. These arguments were differentially targeted at the three distinct audiences: African American, left-wing, and right-wing voters respectively. We now draw on Aristotle's rhetorical appeals (*pisteis*) of *logos, ethos* and *pathos* to understand how these three arguments were crafted into rhetorically effective messaging.

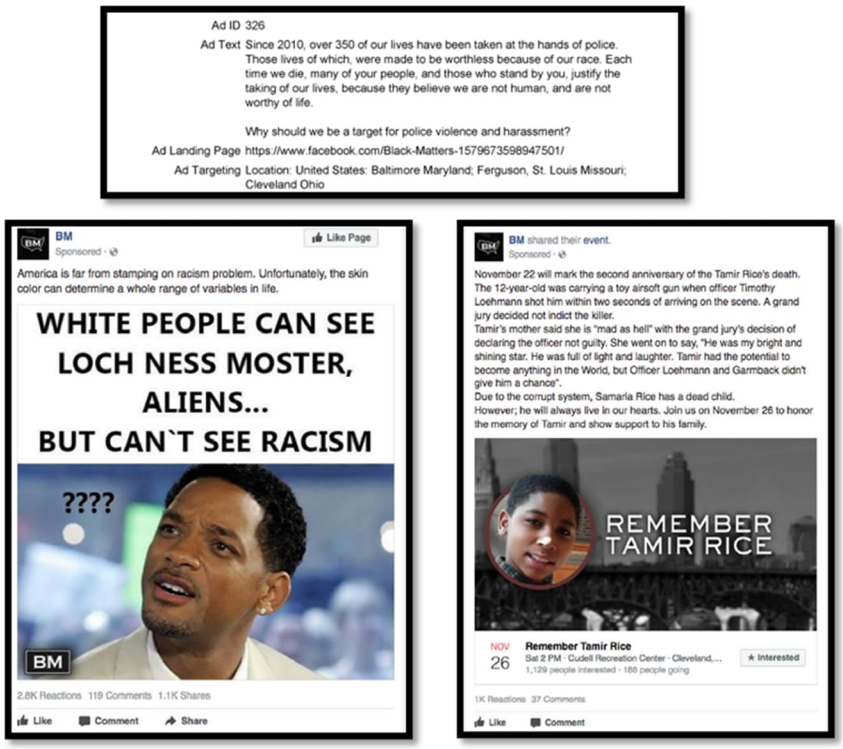
Logos

While *logos* is focussed on persuasion through appeals to logic, Aristotle asserts that this process is more effective when it reinforces what an audience already believes (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2015). This is precisely the approach taken by the IRA as it sought to reinforce pre-existing beliefs and amplify existing cleavages to influence voting behaviour. We discuss how this approach operated for each of the targeted groups.

Issues based on race played a significant role in the IRA influence campaign with almost 60% of messages targeting racial injustice (1,308 of 2,218 messages). Although several racial groups were targeted, including African Americans, Native

Americans, Mexican Americans, and Muslim Americans (although not a race, this group was constructed and targeted as such) the overwhelming effort (1098 posts or 84%) of the IRA racial advertising was directed towards African American voters. Most of these messages utilised examples of racism, police brutality, poverty, and failure of the current political system in supporting African Americans to substantiate claims of racial injustice. These messages were assessed as being designed to reinforce pre-existing beliefs and strengthen in-group solidarity. Fig. 1 provides three examples of IRA posts targeting African Americans using the key recurring themes of racism and police brutality. The written message of these posts was often supported by memes, which have been shown to aid in the construction of collective identity through shared norms and values (Silvestri, 2018). Memes frequently included imagery of African Americans killed by police, such as Tamir Rice (bottom right), likely to elicit anger. Emotional content that elicits anger has been shown to be more likely to be shared (Chen et al., 2023). Memes also included well-known African American celebrities to enhance both the credibility and spread of messaging. The use of humour was often combined with celebrity memes (bottom left) as this has been shown to offer a palatable vehicle for social critique and resistance (Williams, 2020).

Figure 1 *IRA Inorganic Messaging: Racial Injustice*

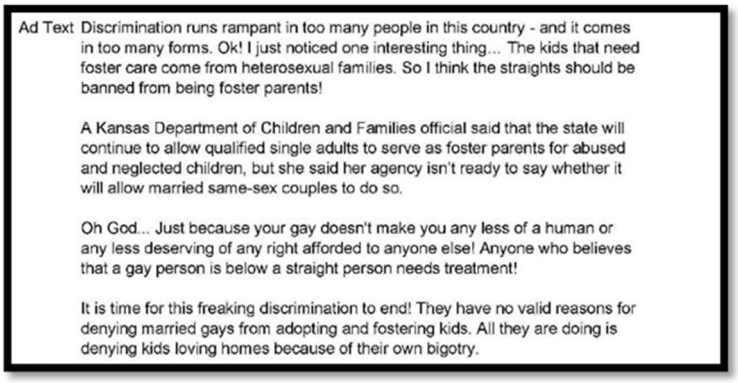


This approach was reinforced by the IRA through other messages interspersed throughout the campaign utilising enthymemes (a syllogistic argument comprising a single premise and a deduction). One such theme served to cultivate disillusionment with the existing government, in which Clinton served as Secretary of State, which had failed to address issues of racial injustice (premise) (Fig. 2 top row). Messages were designed to convince (through deduction) African American voters that voting for Clinton was pointless and that they should either opt out of voting or vote for an independent candidate, such as Jill Stein, rather than Clinton (Fig. 2 bottom).

Figure 2 *IRA Inorganic Messaging: Failure to Address Racial Injustice*

Means of persuasion targeting left-wing voters were remarkably similar to those targeted at African Americans although the arguments were different. Messages to this audience utilised examples, both factual and false, on several politically and emotionally charged liberal issues such as LGBTQ discrimination, human rights, gender discrimination, and pro-life issues, likely in an effort to play on confirmation bias and reinforce existing beliefs on liberal inequity. Fig. 3 shows a post discussing a specific instance of perceived discrimination against the LGBTQ community. This post utilises emotive language to draw attention to discrimination against same-sex couples and, more importantly, to highlight the inaction of the state in addressing this issue. The use of emotive language is likely an attempt to increase arousal and motivate the sharing of this message.

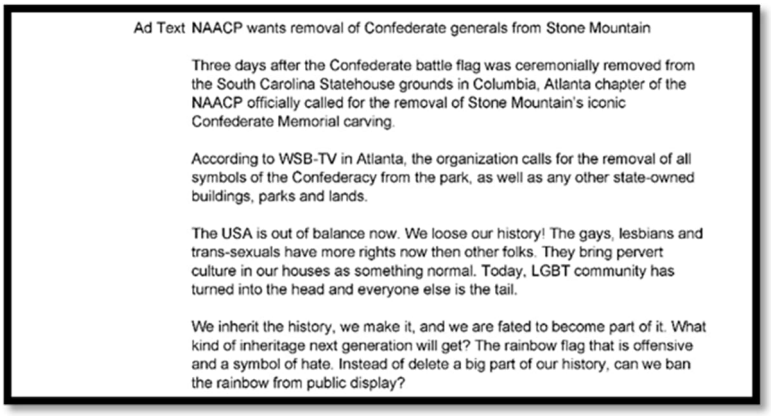
Figure 3 *IRA Inorganic Messaging: Left-Wing Voters*



In conjunction with the more than 50 posts focussed on anti-Clinton messaging, a number were pro Bernie Sanders or Jill Stein (Fig. 2 right). These messages were likely designed to persuade left-wing voters into concluding that voting for Clinton was pointless, and they should either opt out of voting or vote for an independent candidate who was more supportive of liberal rights.

Messaging to right-wing voters overwhelmingly adopted an ultra-conservative, nationalist argument designed to create fear that the nation state, its institutions, and values were under threat both from within and without. As highlighted by Fig. 4, from within, messaging predominantly utilised examples – factual, false, and misleading – of politically and emotionally charged issues such as socialism, gay rights, and elitism to portray the broader perception of the morale demise of society and, in turn, provoke outrage. Emotional content that has a moral component to it has been shown to be substantially more likely to be shared (Chen et al., 2023).

Figure 4 *IRA Inorganic Messaging: Threats to Right-Wing Voters from Within*



From without, an overwhelming majority of messaging focussed on anti-immigration examples which framed the understanding and evaluation of the issues, particularly the perceived threats to conservative perceptions of national identity. As highlighted in Fig. 5, these messages frequently targeted Latin American and Muslim immigrants, presenting the US as under attack from these groups. Messaging utilised well known racist tropes, such as portraying Mexicans as parasites and Muslims as terrorists, as well as memes to convey negative concepts of them through well understood symbols such as a cockroach or the ISIS flag. Messaging also targeted President Obama, highlighting his connection to Clinton and labelling him as a traitor. This messaging was reinforced with a meme of Obama in the oval office dressed as a Muslim. Memes such as this have been shown to provide a vehicle for groups who hold extreme opinions to find and share their voice (DeCook, 2018). We assess that messaging to this audience was likely designed to achieve several things: to cultivate a right-wing ecosystem; to stoke right-wing fervour; and, ultimately, to mobilise right-wing voters to vote. That these messages were factually incorrect or misleading mattered little as they were designed to reinforce pre-existing ideas and beliefs held by the target audience to achieve the desired persuasive effect.

Figure 5 *IRA Inorganic Messaging: Threats to Right-Wing Voters from Without*

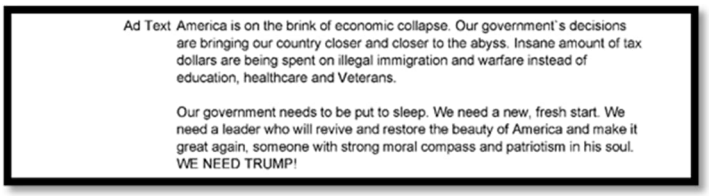
A number of messages were likely designed to appeal to conservative nationalism through pro-police, pro-veteran or, in the case of Fig. 6, pro-second amendment issues. This messaging painted democrats as extreme and wanting to take away the constitutional rights of right-wing voters. It often utilised militaristic, violence-gesturing memes in the form of guns, knives and confederate flags which have been identified as effective tools for enhancing the virality of extreme right-wing messaging (DeCook, 2018).

Figure 6 *IRA Inorganic Messaging: Appeals to Conservative Nationalism*

Together, these messages targeting right-wing voters were assessed as being designed to promote the picture, albeit false, of an existential threat to the cultural identity of the conservative in-group. This provided the seeds for eliciting outrage with

right-wing voters and appears designed to persuade them that their only option to prevent this was to mobilise votes for Trump. As highlighted in Fig. 7, this is further reinforced through the use of enthymemes to achieve the same persuasive effect through inductive reasoning – that America is on the brink of collapse and that Trump is needed to make America great again.

Figure 7 *IRA Inorganic Messaging: Vote Trump Messaging*



In terms of *logos* then, IRA persuasion appears not designed to change the minds of the target audience but, rather, to reinforce pre-existing beliefs and amplify existing political cleavages with the persuasive goal of mobilising right-wing voters while supressing left-wing voters. This approach relied upon a rationality that connected the logical premises with the conclusions presented. However, because not everyone shares the same logic, persuasion through *logos* alone may not be effective. As Aristotle argued, the orator should "not only look at the argument, that it may be conclusive and convincing, but should also present himself as a certain kind of person" (Rapp, 2012, p. 14). We turn then to the second rhetorical appeal, *ethos*.

Ethos

Within the social media environment, the source of messaging is not always transparent. As such, credibility through practical wisdom and good will as it pertains to a particular audience is key. This was particularly the case during the IRA campaign.

The IRA undertook the campaign using staff who were fluent in English and had a comprehensive understanding of US politics – practical wisdom and credible sources that could be quoted in messaging (Chen, 2015; Troianovski et al., 2018). These staff spent more than a year exploring and tracking various groups on US social media sites and gathering intelligence inside the US to gain a comprehensive understanding of the US socio-political environment. This allowed them to develop a digital ecology and build online relationships with US citizens, and to produce well-researched and carefully crafted messages. These messages often-incorporated quotes from well-known US citizens such as Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Beyonce, Caitlyn Jenner, and Miley Cyrus, which were microtargeted at likely receptive audiences. Through these means, IRA operatives likely aimed to appear legitimate and credible, allowing them to shape the narrative. The impact of the campaign was continuously and comprehensively monitored and adjusted, and IRA employees were regularly evaluated to ensure the content they posted was appropriate and appeared authentic. They were provided with feedback, ongoing training, and refined directions to enhance the quality of their activities (USA v. IRA, 2018).

The IRA also went to considerable lengths to conceal their identity in efforts to maintain the credibility and legitimacy of the messaging. They purchased proxy servers in the US and set up virtual private networks to ensure messaging appeared to originate in the US (Aceves, 2019; USA v. Khusyaynova, 2018). They also established several hundred fake email accounts in the US using personal information stolen from US citizens which was utilised to establish social media accounts and engage US citizens (USA v. IRA, 2018). To pay for advertising, they used false bank accounts in the US and Russia, the latter registered under fictitious US identities (Aceves, 2019). Our analysis shows that the IRA timed their messages to appear as if they were posted from

within the US so as to gain maximum engagement with target audiences when they were online. Through these means the IRA substantially promoted *ethos* through their messaging.

Pathos

In looking to appeal to specific emotions, IRA employees were directed to "effectively aggravate the conflict between minorities and the rest of the population" and cultivate "political intensity through supporting radical groups" (USA v. Khusyaynova, 2018, p. 13). In targeting right-wing voters, this was achieved through a coordinated approach utilising contemporary politically and emotionally charged topics in conjunction with multimodal and multimedia messaging to incite anger, enmity, and fear all of which have been shown to be key to the diffusion of messaging on social media (Duncombe, 2019; Al-Rawi & Rahman, 2020). Central to this process were inorganic messages, sometimes factual but mostly not, which portrayed right-wing understandings of the nation, its institutions, and values as under threat from ethnic minorities and liberal voters.

In targeting ethnic minorities, the focus was often on African Americans, Muslims, and Latin American immigrants. Fig. 5 highlights messaging targeting Latin American immigrants, referring to them as "parasites" who are exploiting Americans and destroying the country. Associated imagery reinforces the parasitic message and aims to dehumanise these immigrants, portraying them as public enemies and generating anger and hatred against them. The arbitrary assessment of 20 million of these immigrants magnifies the scale of the issue in a likely effort to intensify right-

wing fear, enhance right-wing cohesion, and mobilise them to vote for Trump.[2] In targeting African American and left-wing voters, Fig. 2 features anti-establishment, and anti-Democrat messaging likely designed to generate anger and frustration by highlighting a political system that is failing "Black people". It goes on to advise the target audience to "boycott the election" in an attempt to influence voter behaviour. The most hateful messaging targeting African American voters was anti-Clinton messaging. Fig. 2 shows messaging disparaging Clinton as a traitor, a liar, and as insane and questioning why "…black people support this dirty old bitch". It is supported with imagery of Clinton laughing as if mocking African Americans. This was likely designed to generate anger and frustration as well as a sense of disillusionment to enhance virality and was further amplified through organic messaging likely to discourage voting by African American voters.

Briefly, reviewing the three elements of invention highlights how means of persuasion were developed to exploit existing cleavages by amplifying contentious issues at either end of the political spectrum. This strategy seeded arguments and was likely designed to elicit outrage, spread confusion, and stoke distrust, with the ultimate goal of influencing voting behaviour – specifically mobilising right-wing voters while suppressing left-wing and African American voters. Having explored the canon of invention, we turn to the second of the canons: arrangement.

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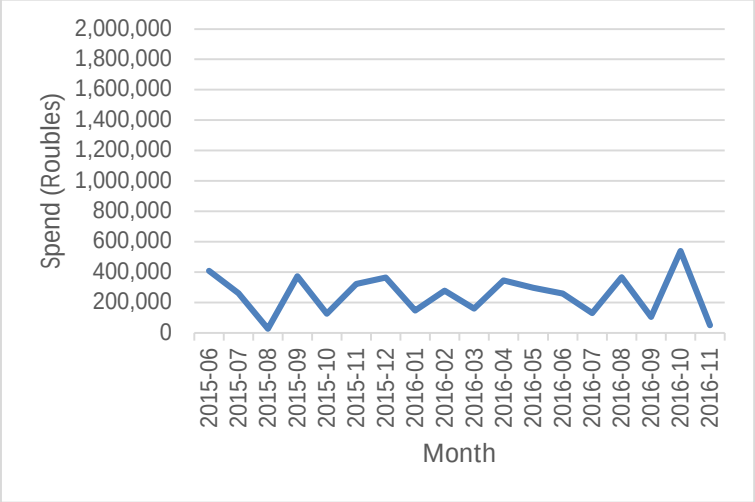
[2] While organic and inorganic messaging is bound together, we only have access to the inorganic messaging. Facebook removed all organic messaging linked to this campaign from its platform in 2017.

Arrangement

An analysis of the arrangement of IRA messaging highlights that while elements of *chronos* were important, messaging also allowed organic discussion amongst users to emerge, but this was carefully and continuously shaped through inorganic messaging by the IRA at opportune times (*kairos*).

In the first five months of the campaign, 43% (1.8m of 4.5m roubles) of total advertising spend (Fig. 8) and seven of the ten top spend messages occurred (296k roubles).

Figure 8 *IRA Inorganic Messaging: Spend by Month*



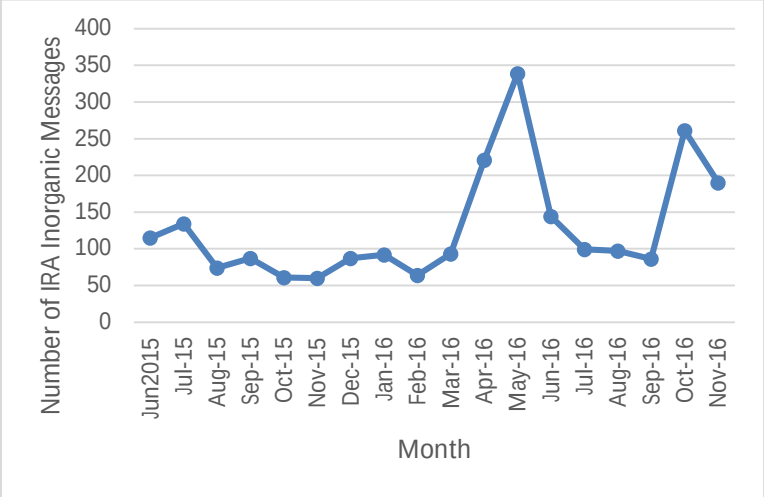
Analysis of the messages during this period highlights that much of the effort was focussed on establishing and growing a digital ecology based around existing political cleavages. This was achieved through typical digital marketing practices which saw the IRA create specific digital ecosystems likely to target audiences based on criteria such as demographics, location, interests, behaviour, and connections. For example, in June 2015 the IRA commenced a comprehensive advertising campaign focussed on racism and police brutality to build a ‘Black Matters’ ecosystem. This

campaign targeted voting age individuals (18-65) interested in African American social and political issues who were located in Baltimore, Maryland; Ferguson, St Louis; and Cleveland, Ohio – potential swing states where recent incidents of police brutality had occurred. This ecosystem was built utilising real-world examples of racism and police brutality that linked to social media sites where organic discussion could occur. Hashtags (e.g. #Blacklivesmatter, #Charlestonshooting, #policebrutality) made posts searchable, extended reach, and likely enhanced engagement. Audience understandings were socially constructed through organic dialogue by prosumers who shared common beliefs about black youth being killed by the police and racial injustice.

In line with *kairos*, advertising seized upon opportune events to ensure issues of concern to the target audience were continually reinforced. For example, throughout the period Jul-Sep 2016, messages targeting African American voters focussed on seven separate incidents of African American men being killed by police officers. In addition, several other messages commemorated the anniversaries of the deaths of several high-profile African American youth at the hands of police in previous years. For example, Fig. 1 (bottom right) is an IRA message advertising an event to “Remember Tamir Rice”, a 12-year-old African American shot by a police officer in 2014 for carrying a toy gun. This message included a photograph of the victim and emotional commentary from the family, both which have been shown to enhance virality of messaging (Chen et al., 2023). It also highlighted the response of the judicial system in choosing not to indict the officer for the shooting and used this to portray the system as corrupt and racist. This was likely an attempt to arouse anger and make the message more likely to be shared to influence voting behaviour. Similar patterns of arrangement by the IRA can be observed across other digital ecosystems populated by both left and right-wing voters.

The concept of *kairos* in the arrangement of inorganic messaging can also be seen as the campaign progressed where the IRA seized on several political events that occurred during the period under investigation. The data shows spikes in IRA advertising activity in April and May 2016, as well as a substantial increase in activity in the months of October and early November 2016 – immediately prior to the election (Fig. 9). Data from Fig. 8 highlights a corresponding increase in advertising spend in these months.

Figure 9 *IRA Inorganic Messaging: Messages by Month*



An analysis of these posts indicates that they are linked to shaping messaging around key events covering both Republican and Democrat primaries (Apr – May 2016) and supporting Trump's candidacy throughout May 2016. The October and early November advertising was run during the presidential election debates between Clinton and Trump, as well as during the build up to the November 8 election day. During the last month of the campaign, three discrete messaging themes were prevalent.

First, there was an increasing number of anti-Clinton advertisements targeted across the political spectrum that raised several often-false issues (Fig. 2 top row).

These included her involvement in fraud and other criminal activities; the inappropriate sexual behaviour of her husband; and that an election win for her would result in higher taxes, increased immigration, more terrorist attacks, banned guns, and economic depression. The sum of these messages appears designed specifically to discourage left-wing and African American voters from voting for Clinton. Left-wing voters were encouraged to opt out of voting or to vote for an alternative, such as the independent candidate Bernie Sanders or Green party candidate Jill Stein (Fig. 2 bottom). Of note, in key battleground states, the votes for Stein were more than the difference between the votes for Trump and Clinton (Seipel, 2016). Second, in this period an increased number of messages focussed on racism and police brutality likely to target African American audiences (Fig. 1). These messages highlighted a corrupt system "that did not represent black people" and appear designed to sow outrage and indignation, ultimately discouraging black communities from voting (Fig. 2 top row). Third, there were an increased number of pro-Trump messages designed to mobilise right-wing voters by contrasting the dire current situation in the US ("economic collapse", "insane amounts of tax dollars being spent on illegal immigration") to the benefits of a Trump win – delivering lower taxes, strengthening gun rights, and ensuring liberty for 'real' Americans (Fig. 7).

In terms of arrangement then, IRA messaging clearly utilised aspects of chronological organisation to curate specific ecosystems. However, the features available in social media platforms allowed the IRA to undertake a much more proactive form of arrangement, more akin to the concept of *kairos,* where opportune events were seized upon to ensure issues of concern to each of the target audiences were continually reinforced through inorganic messaging.

Style

Style concerns the skilful and appropriate use of language to express ideas that generate both *pathos* and *ethos*. The social media environment enabled the IRA the opportunity to achieve this in a variety of innovative ways.

We assess that the IRA, having identified their three broad target audiences and invented a means of persuasion to address these, were able to segment these audiences, through microtargeting, and provide them with unique, inorganic messaging in a style that was both clear and appropriate to each. Although messaging directed at each audience was no doubt different in style, and often contradicted messaging to other audiences, this did not matter due to the use of social media to segregate them.

Aristotle identified specific features of style, such as figures of speech and metaphor, that enhanced persuasion. While these are still relevant to the social media environment, the move away from text based, static, linear communication to multimedia, interactive communication that centralises prosumers and their active reworking of messaging allows these features to be utilised in a more dynamic way. In particular, the use of memes alongside written messaging served an important role in both identity and community building, as well as in the viral transmission and persistence of key themes. As DeCook (2018) notes, memes "provide bite sized nuggets of political ideology and culture that are easily digestible and spread by netizens" (p. 485). The IRA likely utilised these to not only set the agenda on key issues but also to frame the discussion around them and influence collective sensemaking in a manner designed to achieve the rhetorical objectives.

One of the classic stylistic features was metaphor (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2015). The IRA made effective use of metaphor in their messaging, particularly when it came to right-wing voters. For example, Figure 5 (right) demonstrates the use of

a war metaphor for the election campaign, asserting that conservative America is under attack from Democratic policies of enabling mass illegal immigration. This message states that the only way to 'win this war' is to elect a leader who loves America and will protect it – Trump. This is further reinforced by the meme of Obama in the Oval Office dressed as a Muslim and surrounded by Islamic symbols, including the ISIS flag – portraying him as the enemy. There is also a call-to-action link to the IRA developed 'Stop A.I.' (All Invaders) page. Here style appears designed to not only generate anger and fear but also to drive clicks and conversions to IRA developed pages where organic conversations can be amplified and intensified.

Similarly, Fig. 5 (left) characterises illegal immigrants in the US as parasites likely in an attempt to compose a powerful picture of the destruction they are reaping on America. Again, this is enhanced by a carefully designed meme – a feature which has been shown to both elicit emotions and promote the rapid spread of messages (Makhortykh & González Aguilar, 2020). This post is designed to promote feelings of enmity towards immigrants and notes that it is time to get rid of them, implying voting for Trump, who stated he would deport them. Like the previous post, it also provides a call-to-action link to the 'Stop A.I.' page allowing users to move from consumers to prosumers actively participating in the persuasion process.

Figures of speech such as antithesis are also widely used by the IRA to emphasise contrasting ideas between left and right-leaning voters. Fig. 6 shows a message targeting 'patriots' and supporters of the Second Amendment – a predominantly right-wing audience. It highlights a contrast between Republican and Democrat perspectives on guns, falsely claiming that Democrats want to take away the constitutional right of citizens to own guns. In doing this, it likely seeks to generate fear in the right-wing audience, an emotion which enhances the likelihood of messages

being shared, and in doing so mobilise them to vote for Trump. Like most other right-wing messages, the text is supported by a meme heavy in symbology which assists in amplifying transmission (Chen et al., 2023). It also has a call-to-action link to a 'Being Patriotic' site developed by the IRA to drive clicks and conversions, and to amplify the message through organic postings.

All in all, the IRA employed a style that went beyond merely transmitting static, text messages to passive audiences, to one where multimedia, interactive messaging enabled prosumers to become active participants in the persuasion process, amplifying and intensifying the impact of their campaign. The wide range of tools available in the social media environment enabled the effectiveness of this style as highlighted by an average clickthrough rate of messaging, a measure of effectiveness of an online marketing campaign, during the period of 8.1%. This is significantly higher than the industry average of 1.5% for Facebook advertisements (Navarro, 2025).

Memory

Understanding memory in the digital environment requires consideration of the range of practices that allow prosumers to preserve, recall, maintain, and reshape key arguments. In its efforts to shape the outcome of the election, the IRA posted a substantial number of inorganic messages. They also contributed to many more organic discussions across the hundreds of social media accounts and 73 social media groups they established (Aral, 2020). This vast amount of information, both paid and organic, would simply overwhelm prosumers and desired memories created could easily be obscured. To shape memory construction and ensure these memories persisted, the IRA carefully crafted messages that focussed on a very limited number of specific and simple arguments for each target audience. The cumulative reproduction of these familiar arguments, whether true or false, meant they were more likely to become

engrained in deliberations which, in turn, would enhance their persistence. Persistence was further enhanced by messaging that was heavily laden with emotive arguments, in particular negative emotions of anger, fear, and enmity. Not only do emotions, particularly negative emotions, affect a person's judgement (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1991) they have also been shown during election campaigns to enhance remembering when voting (Civettini & Redlawsk, 2009) – an important consideration for the IRA.

The ability to microtarget messages meant that IRA messaging was able to remain consistent to very specific, predetermined audiences. It also allowed the IRA to focus messaging to each audience that tapped into pre-existing beliefs and biases. For example, in targeting African American audiences, inorganic messaging focussed almost exclusively and repeatedly on systemic racism, as exhibited by police brutality against African Americans, and the futility of voting to address this issue (Fig. 1). Messaging that is consistent with pre-existing beliefs has been shown to more easily facilitate the processing of new information which, in turn, can lead to enhanced memory (Bransford & Johnson, 1972; Craik & Lockhart, 1972). Microtargeting also allowed the IRA to enhance persistence of memory through *kairos*. For example, in implementing the racial injustice argument targeted at African Americans, the IRA seized upon the deaths of seven youths at the hands of police leading up the election to create numerous and repeated inorganic messages. This was likely designed to fuel anger in the African American target audience, an emotion which has been shown to be a key in enhancing the sharing of information and, thus, its persistence (Chen et al., 2023).

The use of memes, particularly pictures and catchphrases, to transmit key arguments featured heavily in messaging to all audiences – a tactic not new to Russian

propagandists (Aceves, 2019) but one well adapted to the social media environment by the IRA. As Williams (2020) notes though, memes do not exist in a vacuum, and so an understanding of the US political environment, particularly the political cleavages, was essential to allow the IRA to utilise memes that were unique to, and could resonate with, each target audience. These memes provided an opportunity for digital communities to construct group identities through shared values, and, subsequently, to express a collective voice to communicate key cultural knowledge in an easily digestible manner (Williams, 2020). This enhanced the likelihood of messaging going viral which, in turn, enhanced persistence of key themes. Memes to the right-wing audience appear designed to provoke high arousal emotions based on stigmatising out-groups. The IRA utilised both new imagery as well as well-known symbols of right-wing patriotism including the American eagle, the Confederate flag, and guns with the catchphrase 'Defend the Second' (Fig. 6). Memes comprising these right-wing symbols have been shown to be powerful in the construction of collective identities and the viral spread of political views (DeCook, 2018), further enhancing persistence of key arguments that facilitate persuasion. For the African American audience, images of black youth killed by police were utilised to create memories (Fig. 1). These memories were continually reinforced through repetition, particularly on key anniversaries and closer to the election date, likely to enhance persistence of memory.

The use of links and hashtags (#Iamblackandproud, #rainbowpride, #MakeAmericaGreatAgain) in inorganic messages allowed users from each target audience to move to previously established sites and engage in organic discussion with like-minded peers to undertake collective sense-making. Not only does this process provide a more powerful opportunity for creating memories, but it also enhances the potential for persistence through the repetition of key arguments.

Briefly, IRA messaging suggests it went beyond a narrow perspective of memory as storage to one that conceptualised memory more broadly as a range of practices that allowed prosumers to preserve, recall, maintain and participate in key arguments. Accordingly, it provided the opportunity for memory making to be a collective rhetorical process and one which had a much greater chance of ensuring persistence of memories in each target audience that were key to the persuasive process.

Delivery

In the social media environment, delivery is focussed on how messages are circulated to engage the audience in a multitude of ways in an effort to enhance its persuasive effect. In delivering its various messages, the IRA exploited the lack of oversight and regulation of social media platforms that allows hateful content to thrive online. They also utilised the technical capabilities of Facebook, in particular its ability to microtarget users and the algorithms that facilitate the viral spread of carefully crafted messages, in a way that enhanced the likelihood that these messages would be accepted and attended to.

Microtargeted delivery of carefully designed multimedia messages amplifying contentious issues at either end of the political spectrum was undertaken by the IRA to each of the three predetermined audiences. These messages appear designed to seed arguments that exploited societal cleavages and, in doing so, generate desired emotions. In turn, these emotions provided clickbait to drive prosumers to IRA created social media sites unique to each audience. These sites became echo chambers, where pre-existing beliefs were reshaped, recirculated, and amplified inside a closed system insulated from contradictory messaging. These echo chambers were further reinforced by the algorithmic biases that skewed or limited information flows – presenting prosumers only with information that fitted within their pre-existing preferences and

beliefs. In the case of the right-wing audience, this resulted in organic messaging on these sites becoming even more explicit and hateful, offering no pretence of acceptance of minoritised groups such as African Americans, Muslims, immigrants, LGBTQI, and liberals.

The delivery of audiences to IRA created sites provided several opportunities for enhancing the persuasive effectiveness of the IRA influence goals. First, it moved the notion of *ethos* away from the credibility of a single author to one where collective credibility was achieved through engagement with likeminded individuals. Second, the ongoing evolution of organic messaging, albeit shaped by the IRA, meant that key arguments were dynamically constructed and reinforced by a target audience, resulting in their consensual understanding, and arguably more powerful agreement on, key issues. Third, in achieving both enhanced credibility and greater understanding, delivery ensured that messages were not merely received and ignored, but, rather, were attended to by audience segments. This arguably enhanced the persuasive effectiveness of messaging.

Although listed as the last of the rhetorical canons, the importance of delivery should not be underestimated in ensuring an argument is not only circulated, but also attended to. After developing a means of persuasion, the IRA utilised the technical features of Facebook to enhance delivery of not only messages, but also key arguments. In particular, microtargeting to offer highly personalised messages to segmented audiences, interactive links which allowed prosumers to become participants in the persuasion process, and algorithms which facilitated the viral spread of messages were all used to deliver messages in a manner which enhanced their persuasive effect.

Conclusion

The rapid expansion of social media platforms has enabled a revolutionary change in how persuasion occurs. This has profound impacts on how political, economic, and social issues are understood and, consequently, addressed. While not the first example of this, the information operation conducted via social media to influence the 2016 US presidential elections by the IRA represented a significant escalation in efforts to utilise social media as a tool of persuasion to threaten security at both national and international levels.

Our analysis found that, following an 18-month period of research to understand the digital ecology and key fracture points within US society, the IRA commenced a social media campaign to influence the election outcome in a manner favourable to Russia. In doing this, our analysis found that they segmented voters into three distinct audiences: African American, left-wing, and right-wing. The IRA then developed persuasive arguments to target each audience with messaging focussed on racial injustice, liberal inequity, and white grievance and fear respectively. Like Aristotelian rhetoric, which connects audiences to arguments they already agree with, we assess that the IRA sought to amplify existing political cleavages and reinforce existing voter preferences with the goal of mobilising conservative voters while simultaneously suppressing liberal voters. Utilising the technical capabilities afforded by the social media platform, in particular the ability to microtarget audiences, the IRA delivered unique, multimedia messages to carefully segmented audiences in a style that was clear and appropriate to each. Interactive links to other social media sites, along with social media algorithms helped to facilitate the viral spread of carefully crafted messages in a way that enhanced the likelihood of these being attended to. The cumulative reproduction of these messages, often heavily laden with emotion, meant persuasive

arguments were more likely to become engrained in deliberations, enhancing their persistence and, potential persuasive effect.

Our findings highlight the utility of the traditional rhetorical framework for understanding persuasive campaigns in the contemporary social media environment. We have documented how the social media environment offers considerable potential in developing the three elements of invention – *logos, ethos, and pathos* – both from a traditional perspective but also in new ways. While traditional rhetoric focusses on a singular rhetor and a single audience, within the social media environment, the fact that everyone is a potential prosumer able to access, create and instantaneously share data means rhetorical situations comprise multiple rhetors, who may or may not be coordinated, as well as multiple audiences, all of whom have differing purposes for engaging. It also means that rhetorical appeals enter a further dialectical process, often being reinvented in [un]anticipated ways. This reframes invention as *proairesis* (action) (Brooke, 2009) which provides the opportunity for an ongoing process of invention – an opportunity ideally suited to the social media environment.

Although an analysis of the case shows aspects of a formal system of chronological organisation, so prevalent in classical rhetoric, it highlighted how the social media environment enables a much more proactive form of arrangement, more akin to the concept of *kairos.* This means online discussion can take advantage of contextual opportunities that arise, rather than following a pre-determined timeline, to carefully and continuously shape the discussion to ensure the desired persuasion occurs.

In looking at the canon of style, our analysis highlights the range of tools available in the social media environment. In particular, the ability to microtarget an audience, allows influencers to transform a traditionally static and individualistic, top-down consumer approach to one where users become prosumers and active participants

in the persuasion process. Thus, messaging can go beyond merely transmitting a message but, rather, can be well integrated with invention to provide clear and appropriate messaging that is unique to pre-defined audiences. This clearly has the potential to enhance the persuasiveness of messaging.

Given the vast amount of information produced by social media and given the fact that prosumers can enter the discourse at different points and take unique paths through it, it became clear that conceptualising memory ‘as persistence’ rather than merely ‘as storage’ was essential. This allowed a considerably greater understanding to be gleaned of how various practices and activities created, preserved, maintained, recalled, and reinforced key aspects of an invented argument in an effort to achieve the desired persuasive effect.

The dynamism and sheer volume of information delivered and consumed in the social media environment makes it challenging for influencers to maintain a coherent, persuasive message. Again, the ability of social media to segment and microtarget audiences means that influencers can tap into and reinforce pre-existing beliefs and prejudices of uniquely segmented audiences through repetition of a small number of simple arguments. By ensuring maximal exposure to these arguments, the potential to achieve the desired persuasive outcome is considerably enhanced.

Notwithstanding the utility of Aristotle’s rhetorical framework for gaining insights into the processes of persuasion in the contemporary social media environment, limitations remain in understanding the real-world impact of an influence campaign utilising this approach. In this particular case, even though the IRA campaign is estimated to have reached between 110 and 130 million people (Aral, 2020), it is not possible using rhetorical analysis to determine whether the methods or reach of this campaign were sufficient to actually influence the outcome of the 2016 election.

However, rhetorical analysis is not unique in its inability to determine this real-world impact. Indeed, Aral (2020) notes the considerable challenges across multiple studies, both quantitative and qualitative, in determining clear cause and effect. What is known, however, is that the campaign was designed to contribute to a significantly increased voter turnout and, indeed, hundreds of thousands of additional votes were cast (Aral, 2020). Given the outcome of the election was decided by some 77,000 votes across three swing states – Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin (National Archives, 2021) – that it did influence the election outcome certainly cannot be ruled out. It is also possible that the campaign contributed to the outcome through the suppression of left-wing votes from liberal and African American voters.[3]

The sheer volume of data in this environment also provides limitations in utilising the rhetorical approach. Indeed, in undertaking this research, the relatively small number of inorganic messages analysed manually, some 2200, proved both challenging and time consuming. Future research may benefit from a mixed methods approach incorporating rhetorical analysis in conjunction with new automated tools and techniques that allow analysts to deal with data at scale. This mixed methods approach offers opportunities to overcome some of the challenges posed by the sheer volume of data that is central to the contemporary social media environment.

All in all, while rhetorical analysis has some limitations, we argue that it provides useful insights into persuasion processes in the social media environment. These insights, as highlighted by this case study, are invaluable and offer not only

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[3] We note that while we found evidence of conservative voter mobilisation, there is no direct evidence of liberal voter suppression available.

opportunities to understand how persuasion campaigns are being undertaken, but they also offer potential suggestions on how these campaigns might be countered. Doing this has the potential to enhance a nation states security.

Chapter 4: Case Study Two – Russia's @RT_Com Twitter Campaign Supporting the 2022 Ukraine Invasion: A Rhetorical Analysis.

Abstract

Information and communicative processes have historically played a pivotal role in shaping public beliefs, positioning the media as a key source of power and influence within society. The rapid expansion of social media platforms has revolutionised how this media power is wielded to influence how political, economic, and social issues are mobilised, understood, and addressed. Understanding how this process occurs is, thus, important but methods for achieving this understanding continue to evolve. This article draws on a large corpus of material (2,473 Tweets and associated metadata) produced by the Russian state media Twitter account, @RT_Com, as one part of a broader campaign to influence the Western response to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. We identified five overarching narratives that @RT_Com developed to influence its target audience: No Russian invasion; the West is threatening Russian security; Ukraine is part of Russia; Russia will utilise nuclear weapons to protect its sovereignty; and economic, political, and social insecurity in the West. Drawing on Aristotle's rhetorical framework, this article presents a process analysis to understand how these narratives were developed into means of persuasion. The findings provide new insights into the processes of persuasion in contemporary society.

Keywords: Security; social media; Twitter; persuasion; Ukraine; Russian invasion; rhetoric; Aristotle

This case study has been published as:

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As a thesis by publication, some of the material in this chapter overlaps with the articles published in Chapters 3 and 5.

Introduction

The centrality of information and communicative processes in constructing societal understandings of political, economic, and social issues makes the media a key network of power and influence in society (Carah, 2021; Herman & Chomsky, 2010). While there is an abundance of research on how persuasion is effected, such research has occurred largely in the context of the legacy media environment of print, radio and television (Perloff, 2014). However, the contemporary media environment has evolved considerably to incorporate a much broader range of platforms, and social media has played a significant role in shaping societal understandings in recent years. While the rapid rise of these platforms was initially celebrated as a new public-commons where democracy would flourish (Hoffmann et al., 2019; Howard & Hussain, 2011), this optimism has given way to significant concerns as evidence continues to mount of a much darker side to these platforms, one that impacts on security issues at all levels from the personal to the global (Aral, 2020; Metakides, 2024; Singer & Brooking, 2018; Vaidhyanathan, 2018: Woolley & Howard, 2019). Understanding how symbolic power (to name and define issues and events to promote particular social orders) and influence is promoted in this environment is, therefore, important.

While there are a variety of definitions of persuasion, for the purpose of this article we define it as a social psychological phenomenon whereby communicators influence the perceptions or actions of others through social interaction (Perloff, 2014). The academic study of persuasion dates to at least the Ancient Greeks where the term rhetoric was coined to refer to the use of argumentation, language, and public address to persuade audiences (Billig, 1996). Ancient rhetoric comprised a number of aspects, or canons, and while the emphasis on different aspects of rhetoric has varied throughout history, at its core, rhetoric remained largely unchanged until the arrival of Classical

Rationalism in the 16th Century brought a physical sciences approach to the study of persuasion. This approach reached a peak around 1940 when experimental methods were adopted to solve rhetorical problems in an approach that became known as the 'new rhetoric' (Petty et al., 1981). This 'new rhetoric' was driven largely by Carl Hovland's research into the persuasive effects of propaganda during the Second World War which sought to uncover general principles of persuasion (Billig, 1996). Despite this desire, it has been widely recognised that clear general principles have not emerged from these laboratory-based efforts. Rather, it has been argued that what has been found is "…an accumulation of largely contradictory and inconsistent research findings with few, if any, generalizable principles…" (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1982, p. 340).

A further layer of complexity has been added to persuasion research with the rapid expansion of online social media platforms. These platforms have enabled a revolutionary change in how persuasion occurs as a consequence of the large number of highly personalised, interpersonal channels that offer near instantaneous reciprocal interactions as opposed to the relatively simple unidirectional effects in traditional media (Bayer et al., 2020). Moreover, social media platforms are both rapidly and continually evolving as dynamic algorithms, network compositions, and personal settings are constantly changing, making an already diverse and complex ecosystem even more so (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018a; Couldry et al., 2018; Gilardi et al., 2022; Lipschultz, 2022). Notwithstanding the challenges this complexity causes, researchers have made significant gains in understanding how various factors are exploited to effect online persuasion. Some of this research is focussed on technology (Aral, 2020; Hoffmann et al., 2019; Huszár et al., 2022; Muhlmeyer & Agarwal, 2021) and seeks to understand how the technical aspects of platforms can be co-opted to spread information and facilitate change. Other research explores how various social and

cognitive vulnerabilities can be exploited via social media to achieve persuasive effect. This body of research is broad and, from a national security perspective, includes work investigating election influence (Bronstein, 2013; DiResta et al., 2018; Jensen et al., 2024; Samuel-Azran et al., 2015); broader geopolitical influence (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018b; Bradshaw et al., 2023; Carter & Carter, 2021; Crilley et al., 2022; Hall, 2022; Howard & Hussain, 2011); the exploitation of various emotions to effect political influence (Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2020; Davis et al., 2018; Duncombe, 2019; Schmid, 2023); the use of memes and symbols in spreading propaganda (De Cook, 2018; Halversen & Weeks, 2023; Woolley & Howard, 2019); and both dis- and mis-information (Chen et al., 2021; Wojtowicz, 2022). Notwithstanding the excellent contributions this research has made in providing an understanding of how various technological and social factors are exploited to effect political persuasion via social media, gaps remain in our understanding in this environment and frameworks for gaining this understanding are lacking.

Several authors have highlighted the utility of traditional rhetorical analysis in attempting to bridge this gap and provide a framework to gain a deeper understanding of persuasion in the social media environment (Bronstein, 2013; Chen et al., 2021; English et al., 2011; Pang & Law, 2017; Samuel-Azran et al., 2015). More specifically, these authors have undertaken research that examines participant responses to various social media messages categorised in terms of Aristotle's rhetorical proofs of *ethos* (appeal to credibility), *pathos* (emotional appeal), or *logos* (logical appeal). The studies highlight that both usage and effectiveness of persuasive strategies varied dependent upon context and audience. For example, in looking at health care messaging on YouTube, English et al. (2011) found *ethos* as the most persuasive proof and *pathos*, particularly as it appealed to humour, as the lowest. Similarly, Pang and Law (2017)

found *ethos* as the most persuasive appeal when presenting environmental issues on Twitter. In contrast, research by Bronstein (2013) revealed that in the political environment, US Presidential candidates Obama and Romney's use of emotional appeals, or *pathos*, connected with voters most effectively on Facebook. This appeal was not similarly reflected in the 2013 Israeli elections where *ethos* was shown to be both the most prominent and most effective proof (Samuel-Azran et al., 2015). Of note in this latter research is that *logos* was the least preferred appeal by all the candidates, averaging only 5.9% of all messaging. In looking at persuasion strategies in propagating misinformation on Weibo, Chen et al. (2021) found that *pathos* was the most common and effective strategy utilised.

While valuable in highlighting both the complexity and contextual nature of the effectiveness of rhetorical proofs in the social media environment, this research did not move beyond these proofs – only one part of the traditional rhetorical framework. In that sense, while analysing what arguments were utilised, the research did not explore how the messaging was organised, designed, delivered, or remembered. We posit that by drawing more fully on Aristotle's rhetorical framework and reframing it to the contemporary environment, these aspects can be explored, and a more comprehensive understanding of persuasion attempts in the contemporary social media environment can be gleaned. In seeking to do this, this article adopts a case study approach. The case to be used is that of the Russian media organisation, RT (formerly Russia Today), specifically the RT Twitter platform (@RT_Com) campaign in support of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Rhetorical Framework

Dating back to Ancient Greece, the term rhetoric was coined to refer to the use of argumentation, language, and public address to persuade audiences (Perloff, 2014).

Aristotle, however, distinguishes between the practice of rhetoric to persuade an audience, and "…the faculty of analysing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1991). This article is focussed on the latter of these, the analysis.

Aristotle's analytic framework was divided into five canons: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery (Table 1).

Table 2 *Rhetorical Canons*

Rhetorical Canon	Definition
Invention	The key arguments developed on a particular issue to persuade an audience. Done through appeals to logic, credibility, and emotion.
Arrangement	The organisation of arguments both chronologically and when a confluence of activities provides opportunities to be seized.
Style	Embodying arguments in language and multimedia appropriate to the audience.
Memory	How arguments are preserved, maintained, and recalled.
Delivery	How messages are circulated to engage an audience and enhance persuasive effect.

In looking to the first of these, Aristotle placed great importance on the content, or substance of rhetoric (Billig, 1996) recognising that the content (*verba*) of the discourse must first be determined before attending to issues of form, or style (*res*). This substantive aspect is best represented by the canon of invention, which has been described by Aristotle as the art (*techne*) of finding out the available means of persuasion (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2015). In this sense, invention involves

determining the essential arguments, both established and novel, on a particular issue that are used to persuade a target audience. Through the canon of invention, Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1991) noted that persuasion was brought about through three kinds of proof – *logos* (appeals to logic), *ethos* (appeals to credibility), and *pathos* (appeals to emotion).

It is commonly assumed that people are most easily convinced when they believe something has been proven through an appeal to logic (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2015). This seems relatively straightforward – prove something, and persuasion will occur. A deeper exploration of Aristotle's *logos*, however, reveals that the process of persuasion consists of proving something on the basis of what the audience already believes. In that sense, an audience can be more easily persuaded by enabling them to connect a proposition with something they already agree with or believe in.

Ethos relies on the establishment of the trustworthiness or credibility of the rhetor. As Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1991) noted "We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible, and opinions are divided" (p. 8). Aristotle notes that credibility can be achieved through moral conduct, as well as appeals to practical wisdom or good-will (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2015). Importantly, the effect of persuasion through *ethos* is a judgement call about the credibility of a rhetor which will vary depending on the audience – what one audience considers practical wisdom or good-will may be very different from another audience.

Pathos involves the arousal of, or appeal to, those emotions that affect target audiences' judgements, particularly those pertaining to pain or pleasure (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2015). The purpose of emotive appeals is to persuade through bypassing an audiences' critical faculties (Rapp, 2012). To arouse emotions in an audience, Aristotle

(ca. 350 B.C.E./1991) notes that a rhetor must be cognisant of three key factors: the state of mind of the audience (e.g. angry, fearful, sad), the type of audience at which the specific emotion is directed, and the reason for that particular emotion.

The second canon, that of arrangement, focusses on how arguments are organised. In part, arrangement was a formal system of organisation that set out each argument based on its purpose – a largely linear approach to organising arguments. While this type of organisation has a chronological aspect to it, or *Chronos*, arrangement is much more intimately tied to Aristotle's notion of *kairos*, that qualitative notion of time where a confluence of factors such as the context, the audience, and the rhetorical purpose, provides an opportunity to be seized (Kinneavy & Eskin, 2000). Rhetorical analysis in the contemporary social media environment must consider the many ways in which communicative acts can be arranged beyond the traditional liner approach to achieve the desired persuasive effect.

For Aristotle, the third canon, style, was about embodying arguments in language appropriate to the target audience. Although often misconstrued in the contemporary environment as merely window dressing, style has an important and reciprocal relationship with invention. Rather than asking whether style or substance (invention) is more important, it is useful to determine what kind of style is best utilised to support the substance, or arguments created. Rhetorical analysis in the social media environment needs to consider the wide range of multimedia and multimodal tools available, and to determine how these are connected to a specific audience to achieve a persuasive effect.

In classic rhetoric, the fourth canon, memory, seemed focussed on a model of memory as merely storage, that is the memorisation of speeches by the rhetor. A deeper exploration of this canon, however, suggests that memory requires the consideration of

a range of practices that allow an audience to preserve, maintain, and recall key arguments. Brooke (2009) refers to this form of memory as persistence of patterns, moving memory beyond an individualised notion of mental storage to a collective rhetorical activity. Analysing this canon in social media communication is a challenging task which must take into account the socially constructed, ever evolving, non-linear nature of rhetoric in this environment.

Aristotle's final canon, that of delivery, was focussed on the effective presentation of a speech by a rhetor with a focus on voice projection and gesture – a very linear approach to delivering arguments (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2015). However, in the contemporary environment, delivery extends well beyond the simple performative nature of a non-transactional communicative act to include the various dynamic systems and processes through which messages are circulated to engage an audience in a multitude of ways and enhance its persuasive effect.

These canons serve, in modified form, as guiding principles for our analysis of a specific case of social media influence – namely @RT_Com's Twitter influence campaign both leading up to and during the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Prior to an exploration of the rhetorical canons, however, Bitzer (1968) highlights the importance of understanding the broader context surrounding a specific rhetorical situation. He discusses the three categories developed by Aristotle that need to be considered to understand the context: *exigence*, or the situation that needs to be addressed; *audience*, one which is not only able to be influenced but is, in turn, able to facilitate the desired change; and *constraints*, those elements that may limit the achievement of a rhetorical objective. Bitzer (1968) notes that understanding these categories enables one to "discover and manage the particularities of novel situations…" and then utilise the canons "…to discover and formulate a means of

disclosing them" (p. 398). The following section provides a brief discussion of the rhetorical situation specific to the case at hand.

The Rhetorical Situation

Exigence

Prior to delving into the rhetorical canons, and to understand the broader context surrounding the situation in Ukraine, it is crucial to recognise Russia's, and in line with those, Putin's, overarching goals. At the highest level, these goals are relatively straightforward: for Russia to be seen as a resurgent great power, and to ensure that Putin's leadership regime is not threatened (Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament [ISCP], 2020). Since the demise of the Soviet Union, however, several events have occurred involving Ukraine that, in Putin's mind, threaten both goals. First, the eastward expansion of NATO which Putin describes as "within spitting distance of Russia" (Dibb, 2022, p.6) is seen as a serious threat to Russia's security. Second, the 2004-05 Orange Revolution protests in Ukraine gave Putin cause for concern that Ukraine could be the catalyst for a new pro-democracy movement that could bring down his regime (Dickinson, 2021). Third, the Bush administration's poorly worded statement following the 2008 Bucharest Summit stating, "we agree today that these countries (Ukraine and Georgia) will become members of NATO" (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation [NATO], 2008) was seen as a serious provocation that threatened Russia's security. Fourth, the 2014 Maidan Revolution in Ukraine, which saw the ousting of Russian aligned President Yanukovych and the overthrow of the Ukrainian government, was seen by Putin as an attempt by the US to draw Ukraine into the US orbit (Hunter, 2022). Combined, these events resulted in Russia perceiving, or at least portraying, Ukraine as a state being contested between Russia and the West. Further,

Russia portrayed that the loss of Ukraine to the West would present an existential threat to Russia (Hunter, 2022).

And so, on 24 February 2014, Russian forces invaded Ukraine, annexing the Crimean Peninsula, and supporting pro-Russian separatists in establishing the independent Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples Republics (Allan, 2020). Two separate agreements, Minsk I, signed in September 2014 and Minsk II, signed in February 2015, were designed to put an end to the conflict and resolve the underlying political issues (Åtland, 2020). However, for a variety of reasons beyond the scope of this article, neither of these agreements were ever implemented in any meaningful way, and fighting continued with neither side making significant gains. In March 2021, Russia commenced a major build-up of military forces and equipment on its border with Ukraine under the guise of a long-planned exercise (Shuster, 2022). This build-up continued into early 2022 with Russia continuing with its claims of peaceful intentions. On 21 February 2022, Putin announced the Russian government's recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and ordered a 'peacekeeping force' into the breakaway regions on humanitarian grounds. On the morning of 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine in what Putin called a "special military operation" to "demilitarise and de-Nazify" Ukraine (Bloomberg, 2022). To allow Russia to successfully undertake these activities, it needed minimum interference from NATO forces. From Russia's perspective, then, the specific exigence, or situation to be addressed, was the threat that NATO posed in preventing Russia's invasion and subsequent annexation of Ukraine. The rhetoric generated by @RT_Com served to impair a NATO response.

Audience

States look to persuade two key audiences when justifying the use of force: the domestic population and the international community (Wojtowicz, 2022). In the case of

the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this international audience can be further broken down to: states allied to Russia, neutral states, Ukraine, and NATO states and their allies. The focus of this research is on influence activities directed at the latter of these audiences - NATO states and their allies.

As part of a non-linear approach to warfare that encompasses any type of action such as economic policies or information operations to weaken an opponent (Splidsboel Hansen, 2017) both leading up to and during the invasion, Russia utilised its full information apparatus to undertake numerous, multifaceted operations to target the audience. RT (formally Russia Today), as a Russian state funded and controlled international news broadcaster, was a key component of this apparatus specifically designed for foreign audiences (Global Engagement Center [GEC], 2020; Atlantic Council, 2023). Established in 2005 as an English language television news channel to propagate Russian President Vladimir Putin's ideas abroad (Hall, 2022), it has evolved to become a multimedia, multiplatform news agency providing a variety of services in seven languages (RT, n.d.). In 2008, Putin included RT's parent company, TV Novosti, on its list of organisations of strategic importance (RBC Group, 2008) and in 2013, RT's Editor-In-Chief, Margarita Simonyan, described her role as "to secure the national interests of the Russian Federation in the information field" (Hunt, 2018, p.2). According to its website "RT creates news with an edge for viewers who want to Question More. RT covers stories overlooked by the mainstream media, provides alternative perspectives on current affairs, and acquaints international audiences with a Russian viewpoint on major global events" (RT, n.d.). This statement is instructive in describing RT's approach to both news and the audience it targets.

In its approach to news, RT is used as an instrument of the state and acts as the storyteller of Russia's strategic narratives (Nae, 2022). In terms of its audience,

although diverse (Crilley et al., 2022), RT positions itself to appeal to those in the West, particularly Europe and the US, with an anti-establishment, anti-Western predisposition, and who are attracted to incendiary ideas (Birrell, 2018; Miazhevich, 2018). Targeting this audience with Russian strategic narratives, it aims to disrupt Western social fabric, sow chaos, and create doubt amongst its geopolitical rivals (Elswah & Howard, 2020; Golovchenko et al., 2020). RT has a large online and social media presence across major mainstream platforms as well as far right platforms including Gab, Rumble and Odysee. Its Twitter site, @RT_Com, is an English language site that has more than three million followers. While comparatively small, Twitter is an important platform for RT given it is a key communication medium for high-profile individuals including political leaders, political commentators, influencers, and celebrities (Duncombe, 2019). It also contains several unique features such as the short length of messages; the open, dynamic nature of conversations; and its algorithms amplifying right leaning politics (Huszár, et al., 2022). Combined, these made @RT_Com ideally suited to target a Western, right-wing, anti-establishment audience particularly high-profile accounts such as Western politicians and influential media personalities whose own beliefs serve Russian interests. Targeting this audience was aimed to influence opinions in a manner favourable to Russia, to disrupt the political decision-making of Western nations, and, in doing so, impair a NATO response to Russia's actions.

Constraints

Constraints are those factors which can limit the achievement of the rhetorical objectives. The key constraint faced by the @RT_Com campaign involved the 2017 decision by Twitter to block @RT_Com from undertaking inorganic, or paid, messaging which would allow it to micro-target audiences (Twitter, 2017). This restricted @RT_Com to organic, or non-paid, messaging.

Method

Data

Using the Stevesie HAR file web scraper to access the Twitter API v2, we collected 6,578 English language tweets and their associated metadata from @RT_Com covering the period 24 Nov 21 – 24 Mar 22, i.e., three months pre and one month post invasion. Metadata collected included message creation date, author ID, conversation ID, text, attachments, multimedia url, and public metrics (retweets, replies, likes, and quotes count). This time period was selected for preliminary review based on key events, specifically the announcement by the Ukrainian President in late November of a build-up of 100,000 Russian troops on Ukraine's border, and the de-amplifying of @RT_Com in late March prior to it being blocked in early April. A preliminary review of these tweets highlighted that key messaging relating to the invasion did not begin in earnest until one month prior to the invasion. Further, messaging did not significantly change after 3 Mar. As such, the data was reduced to include 2,473 tweets covering the period 24 Jan – 3 Mar 22 (1977 pre and 496 post invasion). This data forms the basis for the present rhetorical inquiry.

Procedure

The extracted dataset was provided by the Stevesie HAR file web scraper as a CSV file. Following cleaning of the dataset to fix or remove incorrect (e.g. outside the date range or containing obvious data errors), corrupted, incorrectly formatted, duplicate or incomplete data, the data was then organised into a Microsoft Excel table to allow for more efficient management and analysis of the data. We then undertook a three-stage analytical process based on the Miles and Huberman (1994) framework for qualitative case study analysis. First, a manual review of all posts and their associated metadata

was undertaken utilising the rhetorical framework to identify the key canonical attributes of each post as well as the key themes. Second, broader analysis of the dataset was undertaken by generating various PivotTables and PivotCharts in Excel (e.g. themes by date) to identify key trends in the data. Third, drawing on Aristotle's rhetorical framework, an analysis was then undertaken integrating the canonical attributes, key themes, and key trends to ascertain how these themes and trends were developed into a coherent strategy of persuasion by @RT_Com. This process was undertaken by the lead author in the first instance with results reviewed collectively by all authors during each stage and refined until agreement was reached.

Findings

Having provided the context to the situation, we now present the findings using Aristotle's five canons as a framework for understanding the influence campaign employed by the @RT_Com campaign.

Invention – Determining the Argument

In exploring the data, we identified five overarching narratives, or key arguments, that @RT_Com developed: No Russian invasion; the West is threatening Russian security; Ukraine is part of Russia; Russia will utilise nuclear weapons to protect its sovereignty; and economic, political, and social insecurity in the West. The number of messages focussed on each of these narratives is shown in Figure 10 (pre-invasion) and Figure 11 (post-invasion). These narratives were developed into means of persuasion which went beyond traditional notions of Aristotelian invention to a more dialectical process where prosumers further developed, reshaped, and amplified arguments. We now draw on Aristotle's rhetorical appeals of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* to discuss these @RT_Com means of persuasion.

Figure 10 *Pre-Invasion Messaging*

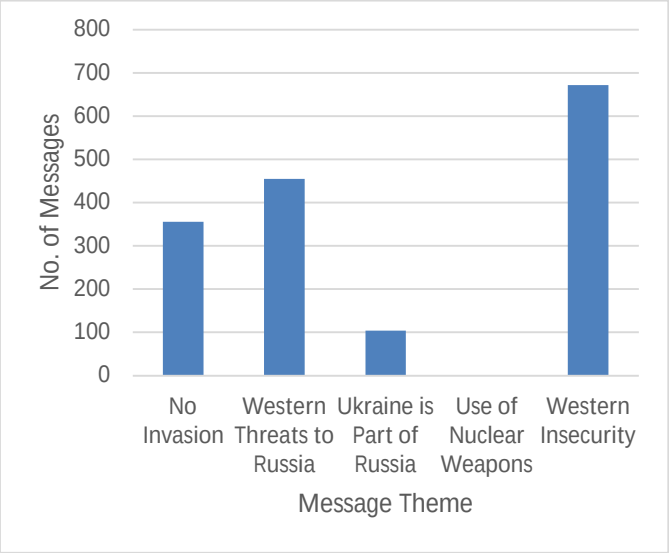
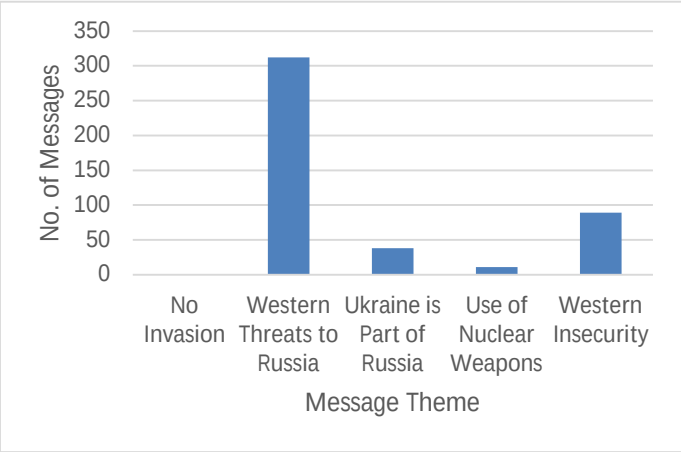


Figure 11 *Post-Invasion Messaging*



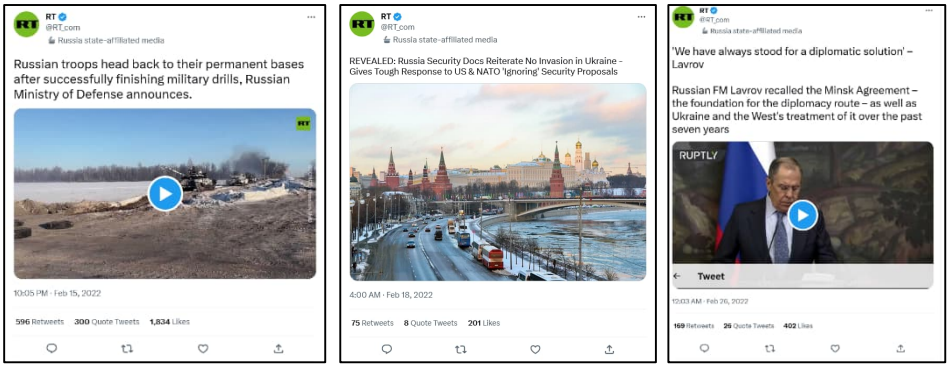
Logos – Persuasion through Logic

While *logos* is focussed on persuasion through appeals to logic, Aristotle's concept of *logos* asserts that this process of influence is more effective when it reinforces what an audience already believes (Rapp, 2012). This is precisely the approach @RT_Com took in targeting its audience with each of the five narratives.

First, assertions that there would be no Russian invasion comprised 18% (356 posts) of @RT_Com's pre-invasion messaging (Fig. 12). This messaging served to

mask Russia's intentions with the likely aim of impairing a Western response. It consisted of two key strands. First, it downplayed the massive military build-up on Ukraine's northern border as nothing more than a long-planned exercise to practice defensive operations. While early messaging focussed on the routine nature of the exercise, from mid-February, this shifted to highlight various Russian units returning to their bases, often using video to support these claims (Fig. 12 left), likely in an attempt to reduce tensions and delay any Western response. Second, messaging asserted that NATO's actions in deploying to the region were provocative and worsening tensions. These messages emphasised Russia's desire to de-escalate these tensions and resolve issues through negotiation, and included purported information from official documents reiterating there would be no invasion (Fig. 12 centre) as well as statements from senior officials emphasising Russia's desire for a diplomatic solution (Fig. 12 right).

Figure 12 *No Russian Invasion Messaging*



These strands were supported with 48 Tweets quoting Russian authorities' direct denial of any intention to invade, at times utilising humour to ridicule Western warnings of an invasion as comical (Fig. 13). The use of humour, particularly mocking humour, has been shown to achieve disproportionate attention across social media platforms and, further, has been shown to be highly effective in discrediting opposing views (Davis et al., 2018), in this case Western assertions of an impending Russian invasion.

Figure 13 *Ridiculing Invasion Messaging*

A second means of persuasion based on a perceived threat to Russia's security formed a significant part of @RT_Com's messaging both pre (455 posts or 23%) and post invasion (312 posts or 63%). Messaging presented issues from a deep rooted and carefully cultivated Russian imperial perspective and comprised several strands.

First was the purported threat presented to Russian speaking and ethnic Russian residents in eastern Ukraine. A carefully choreographed series of messages focussed on Ukrainian aggression progressed from threats to purported attacks, and, ultimately, to genocide of ethnic Russians in the Donbas. This messaging was often in the form of video statements from senior Russian officials, for example, Putin claiming Russia was not safe from ongoing Ukrainian threats (Fig. 14) and was likely designed to reinforce the critical nature of the situation. Irrespective of the veracity of this messaging, Russia was likely using these to justify a military intervention in Ukraine and to deny any responsibility for the coming war. Ultimately, this messaging was likely designed to impair any Western response to Russia's initial invasion.

Figure 14 *Threat to Russian Security in the Donbas Messaging*

Second was the broader threat posed to the Russian state by the failure of the West to honour various security agreements (Fig. 15). While this included such agreements as the Minsk Accords, messaging was heavily focussed on the NATO Agreements. Messaging invariably involved videos of senior Russian officials, particularly Putin, and played on the ongoing debate of the eastward expansion of NATO (Fig. 6 centre) in breach of a 1990s agreement. This messaging portrayed NATO as the aggressor and as an existential threat to Russia and was likely designed to sow doubt in its target audience about the validity of any Western intervention in the current conflict. This doubt was, in turn, likely designed to impair a Western response.

Figure 15 *Threats to Russia Messaging*

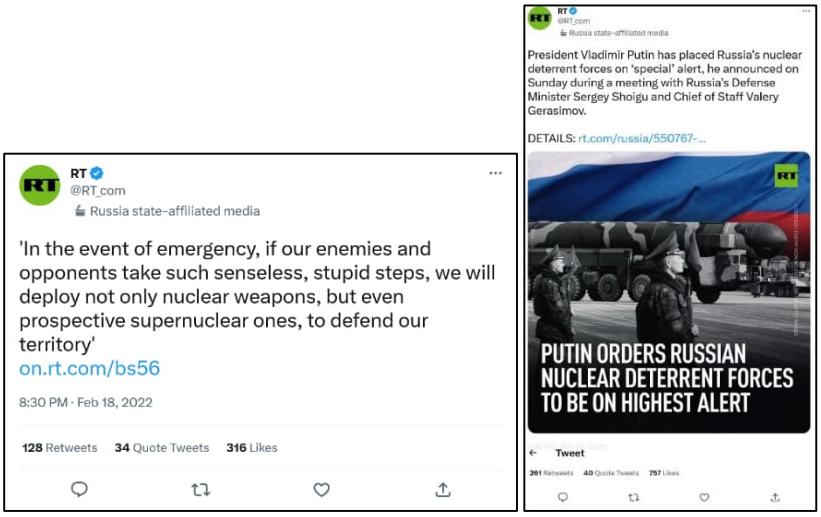
Third, messaging often attacked Ukraine's historical legitimacy, presenting arguments that, historically, Russia and Ukraine are one nation and one people. Messaging often utilised videos of Putin articulating a particular view of the region's history, explaining how Ukraine was never a sovereign nation but, rather, always a part of Russia (Fig. 16 left). While the history of Ukraine is both complicated and contested, and is without question intertwined with Russia, there is no historical link that indicates Russia and Ukraine have always been one people. Rather, in these messages, Putin is transforming what is a complex history into a simple message that denies centuries of historical events and serves his own interests (Plokhy, 2017). While this messaging distorts both historical and ongoing events through decontextualization, selective

presentation, and half-truths, cleverly, it includes and may work to reinforce and crystalise elements of truth as a Western audience might perceive it, providing the opportunity for developing a means of persuasion with the target audience. Utilising revisionist versions of history is a longstanding Russian propaganda tool and was used extensively in the lead up to the invasion to justify Russian actions. This messaging was likely designed to legitimise Russia's invasion and, in doing so, impair a Western response.

Figure 16 *Ukraine and Russian Historical Unity*

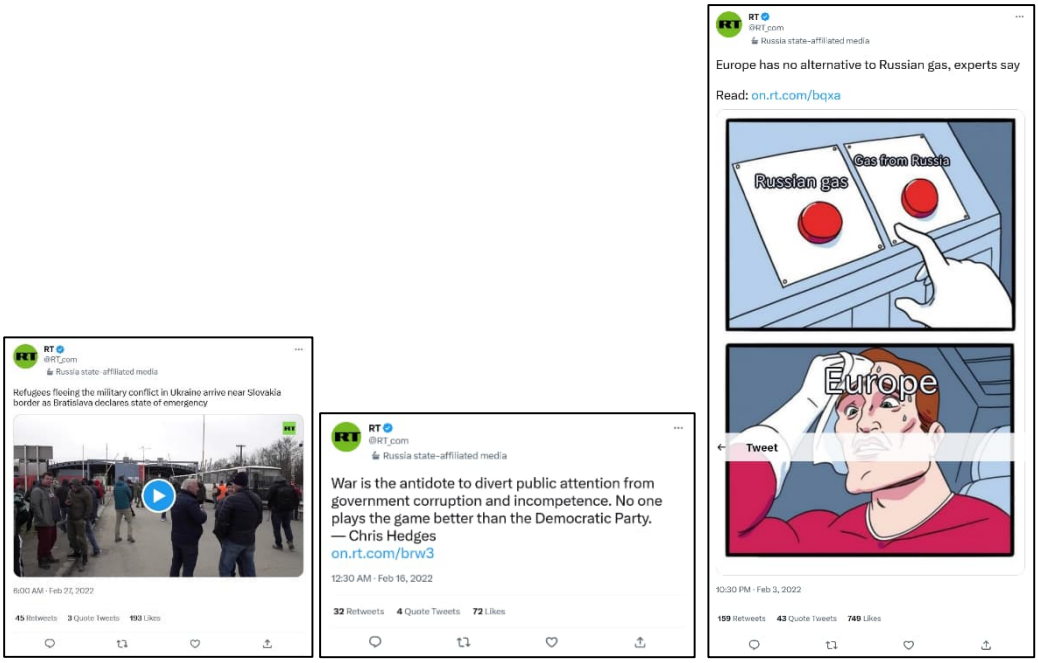
While comprising only a very small portion of messaging (1 tweet pre and 11 tweets post-invasion) a fourth means of persuasion focussed on the threat of a Russian nuclear response to any NATO military action (Fig. 17). Messaging included militaristic, violence-gesturing imagery in the form of nuclear weapons and military parades which have been shown to be effective tools for enhancing virality of messaging to right-wing audiences (De Cook, 2018). Messaging also included links to videos of senior Russian officials, including Putin and Defence Minister Shoigu, reminding the West that Russia retains the largest stockpile of nuclear weapons and that these were being placed on the highest alert should Russia be attacked. This messaging is significant given the ramifications of a nuclear response and was likely designed to incite fear. This fear was, in turn, likely designed to engender Western hesitancy in responding to the Russian invasion.

Figure 17 *Nuclear Threat Messaging*



The final means of persuasion was classic Russian information operations – a steady stream of messages (34% of pre and 31% of post-invasion messaging) that focussed on political, economic, and social insecurity in Western states (Fig. 18). This messaging emphasised political dysfunction, rising domestic security issues, growing economic disparity, and social division in the West, particularly Europe and the US. Post invasion, messaging was heavily focussed on the negative impact that the mass migration of Ukrainian refugees would have on NATO states (Fig. 18 left) as well as the soaring energy costs that any NATO intervention in Ukraine would cause (Fig. 18 right). Cleverly, @RT_Com often did this by harvesting, repackaging, and selectively presenting news stories from various US and European media outlets to enhance the credibility of the messaging. This messaging was likely designed to focus Western attention on significant domestic issues rather than Ukraine and, in turn, impair a NATO response.

Figure 18 *Western Political, Economic and Social Insecurity Messaging*



In classic Aristotelian *logos,* then, @RT_Com utilised messaging to create a narrative that was likely designed to legitimise Russia's actions, create doubt and uncertainty in the target audience, and impact Western decision making. Ultimately, this was likely designed to impair any NATO response. As Aristotle notes, however, not everyone shares the same logic, so persuasion through *logos* alone may not always be effective. With that in mind, we turn to the second rhetorical appeal, *ethos.*

Ethos – Persuasion through Credibility

In classical rhetoric, *ethos* focussed on a rhetor presenting themselves as a morally upstanding character as well as on appeals to practical wisdom or good will (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2015). @RT_Com utilised all of these to enhance the persuasiveness of its messaging.

@RT_Com homepage looked to provide credibility in several ways. Firstly, it had the Twitter blue checkmark which designated it an active, notable, and authentic account. Second, it designated itself as a media and news company that is on air in 100+

countries and has a Twitter following of over 3 million. Third, its Twitter banner states, “Freedom over censorship, truth over narrative” and this was reinforced with the statement “Don’t want your news filtered”, likely to present itself as a source of truth and to contrast itself with Western media. Fourth, it hyperlinks to the RT website where its significant engagements and achievements are highlighted.

In framing news, @RT_Com attempted to gain credibility by providing an alternative perspective that challenged the mainstream Western media narratives. It did this by sharing news from mainstream sources, but then deconstructing these before rebuilding them, utilising its own version of the ‘truth’, to highlight how mainstream media does not cover stories either objectively or fully, but suggesting @RT_Com does. For example, Fig. 13 (left), builds on Western media messaging which highlights the current crisis as due to the failure of the Minsk Accords. @RT_Com messaging is grounded in this Western premise but builds on this by exploiting ambiguity in the agreements to lay blame for their failure on Ukraine’s non-compliance. In this way, @RT_Com messaging draws its conclusion from a premise which is agreed by the West, giving the conclusion greater credibility.

@RT_Com also gained credibility through its use of highly regarded sources. Russian politicians and senior officials, none more so than President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov, played an important role in adding credibility to messaging directed at the target audience. For example, when discussing the failure of the Minsk Accords and a desire for a diplomatic solution pre-invasion, @RT_Com utilised video imagery of Lavrov to add authority and, thus, credibility to the assertions (Fig 3 right). Similarly, immediately preceding key events in the invasion, video messaging of Putin was regularly utilised to add credibility to Russian explanations of the situation and, in turn, to justify the need for Russian action. By way of example, immediately prior to the

invasion on 24 Feb, @RT_Com published videos of Putin explaining the critical nature of the situation in the Donbas and the ensuing humanitarian concerns of the 1.2 million Russians in that region (Fig. 14 & 16). While these speeches were a patchwork of both real and contrived information, they were likely deliberate acts designed to add credibility to the Russian perspective and consequently to justify Russia's next steps: a special military operation. In this way, @RT_Com was likely using Putin to add credibility to shaping narratives and opinion, and in doing so impair any Western response to the invasion.

In addition to Russian voices, and to further inspire trust in the audience, statements, albeit misrepresented or lacking context, from key Western figures such as Ukrainian Defence Minister Reznikov, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg, and White House Press Secretary Psaki were presented to support Russian messaging. Carefully selected videos of 'independent' US and European experts were also posted, all of whom reinforced @RT_Com and Kremlin messaging. These included Earl Rasmussen of the Eurasia Center, Gilbert Doctorow of the American Committee for East-West Accord, and Daniel McAdams of the Ron Paul Institute for Peace and Prosperity. These voices were further reinforced by messages parroting Russian talking points from high-profile US politicians and key right-wing influencers such as (then) former US President Donald Trump, US Senators Josh Hawley and Ted Cruz, and television host Tucker Carlson. The inclusion of these Russian and, more particularly, Western voices likely aimed to add credibility to Russian messaging or, alternatively, to foster the impression that truth is contested. Ultimately, this is designed to reduce the chance of Western support to Ukraine.

Pathos – Persuasion through Emotion

Pathos involves the arousal of, or appeal to, those feelings that affect target audiences' judgements, particularly those pertaining to pain or pleasure (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2015). The purpose of emotive appeals is to bypass audience critical faculties (Rapp, 2012). An analysis of @RT_Com messaging highlights appeals to emotion in several ways.

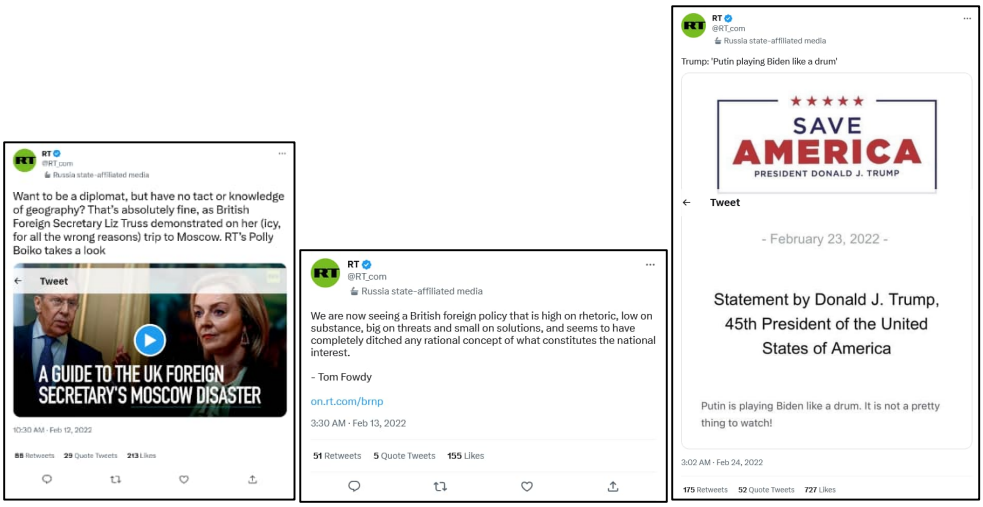
First, through highlighting political dysfunction as well as economic and security concerns in Western society, @RT_Com likely aimed to generate enmity towards policies and actions that would benefit Ukraine to the detriment of Western society. By way of example, Figure 9 highlights key messages reinforcing the already hyper-partisan politics in the US, as well as issues of gas and immigration, both of which, it is stated, will have a substantial social and economic impact in the West should it become involved in a war in Ukraine. In this way @RT_Com is cleverly tapping into and reinforcing the importance of problems that already exist in US society and using these to promote and crystalise fear that any support of Ukraine will further exacerbate these problems. This is likely designed to limit Western support of policies or actions that may benefit Ukraine.

Second, through highlighting Russia's willingness to employ nuclear weapons, messaging was designed to reinforce fear in a Western audience. Pro-Kremlin narratives often utilise fear to portray to an audience that Russia cannot be defeated, and that escalation of the situation is not only pointless but counterproductive. As highlighted in Figure 8, this was done utilising powerful images of the size and capability of the weapons as well as with text, capitalised and increased in font size (e.g., "PUTIN ORDERS RUSSIAN NUCLEAR DETERRENT FORCES TO BE ON THE HIGHEST ALERT") to reinforce the magnitude of the threat. Fear has been shown to be a

powerful emotion for impacting a person's judgment (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2015; Farwell, 2012) and is key to the diffusion of messaging on Twitter (De Cook, 2018). In this case, it is likely designed to either delay or limit any Western response to Russia's actions.

Third, @RT_Com messaging was designed to appeal to the target audience through humour, in particular through the trolling of Western leaders (Fig. 19) and messaging that mocked Western assessments of an invasion date (Fig. 13). These messages are well suited to the social media environment and have been framed in an engaging manner that is both simple and memorable, advances Russia's interests, challenges alternative narratives, and deflects criticism. Humour, particularly satire, has been used by numerous states to promote specific versions of contested international events (Chernobrov, 2022) and is central to both how @RT_Com claims legitimacy for Russian foreign policy (Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2020) and discredits opposing views on social media (Davis et al., 2018).

Figure 19 *Trolling of Western Leaders Messaging*



Having explored the utility of the three elements of invention: *logos, ethos, and pathos*, in providing important insights into @RT_Com campaign, we now turn to the second of the canons: arrangement.

Arrangement – Organising the Argument

An analysis of the arrangement of @RT_Com messaging highlights that while there is a chronological aspect to it (*Chronos)*, it was arranged much more by context and rhetorical purpose, akin to Aristotle's notion of *kairos,* seizing opportunities as they presented themselves.

Pre-invasion messaging focussed on the denial of a Russian invasion ran from 25 Jan to 22 Feb 22 (Fig.12). Messaging utilised elements of *Chronos* to proactively provide a Russian explanation for events and to reinforce its no-invasion stance. For example, the military build-up on the Ukraine border was explained away as merely a long-planned exercise and this message was continually reinforced throughout the period (Fig. 12). From early Feb, messaging began to appear advising that troops were returning to their home bases following the conclusion of the exercise (Fig 12). This messaging was likely designed to shape Western opinion by providing a plausible justification for activities that Russia was undertaking. Messaging during this period also utilised elements of *kairos,* seizing opportunities as they were presented to refute Western assertions and to reinforce its no-invasion messaging. In classic Aristotelian tradition it did this through statement of its case – that there will be no invasion – followed by various proofs using *logos* (that captured Russian documents reiterate there will be no invasion – Fig. 12 centre), *ethos* (using senior figures to add credibility to explanations that Russia is seeking a diplomatic solution – Fig. 12 right), and *pathos* (utilising humour to mock Western assertions – Fig. 13 & 19). In undertaking this messaging, Russia was likely seeking to disrupt any potential NATO interference of the invasion. Of course, once the invasion occurred on 22 Feb, this line of messaging ceased completely.

On 15 Feb 22, @RT_Com commenced its second line of argument in earnest – that of a Western threat to Russia. This messaging was arranged in two parts: pre-invasion which ran through to 23 Feb 22 (Fig. 14), and post invasion which commenced in earnest on 24 Feb 22. Pre-invasion messaging was undertaken in conjunction with ongoing 'no invasion' messaging but was much more proactive, adopting a judicial, or forensic rhetorical approach, to set the scene for a tactical justification of an invasion under the guise of a 'special military operation'. Over a series of days, messaging was arranged utilising elements of *logos* (that, based on current military posture, Ukraine was poised to attack Russian citizens in the Donbas region – Fig. 14) and, more significantly, *pathos* (appealing to emotions by invoking acts of genocide and humanitarian crises – Fig. 14), to build a picture of Russian citizens in the Donbas region under increasing threat from Ukraine. These messages culminated in presenting a situation so dire that Russian intervention on humanitarian grounds was portrayed as necessary. This messaging was important during a critical period in Russia's activities and was aimed at sowing doubt around the actual situation in the Donbas to delay any Western actions.

@RT_Com messaging highlighting the threat to Russia continued post-invasion but switched to strategic justifications for both its invasion and subsequent expansion. These justifications focussed on key historical events such as purported breaches of the Minsk Accords (Fig. 15 left) and, more significantly, the Eastern expansion of NATO (Figure 6 centre and right) to highlight a perceived existential threat to Russia.

In line with the notion of *kairos,* immediately prior to the invasion and continuing post-invasion, messaging was designed to coincide with the commencement of the fourth line of argument, that of a potential nuclear response by Russia to any Western interference in Ukraine (Fig. 17). While utilising elements of both *logos* and

ethos, this messaging was focussed on *pathos* by appealing to fear, long considered one of the most powerful means of persuasion (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2015). In the present case, this fear of triggering a nuclear response was likely designed to prevent Western interference during the most critical part of Russia's actions: the initial invasion. Although infrequent (only 11 messages post invasion), messaging around a Russian nuclear response was arranged at critical times (*kairos*) to optimise Russia's ability to achieve key operational goals.

Arranged across the entire timeframe was @RT_Com messaging based around two lines of messaging: Ukraine's historical legitimacy; and political, economic, and social insecurity in the West. As previously discussed, the former of these relied on a historical perspective that painted Ukraine as always having been a part of Russia and also to highlight how any Western interference is not only illegitimate but also counterproductive in bringing peace (Fig. 16). The latter of this messaging, that of portraying insecurity in the West (Fig. 18), was part of a broader goal to influence opinion in the West, particularly the US, and had the aim of focussing Western nations' efforts on addressing pressing domestic security issues instead of wasting money in Ukraine (Osadchuk & Carvin, 2024). These issues included ongoing issues of crime, racism, and corruption in the US, but were also forward looking to highlight further potential issues of Western involvement including mass migration and an energy crisis. Both lines of messaging were utilised repeatedly to reinforce the issues likely in an attempt to impact Western opinion and, in turn, to limit Western involvement in Ukraine.

As highlighted above, @RT_Com messaging was arranged consistently utilising aspects of both *Chronos* and, more significantly, *kairos* ensuring messaging was synchronised with key events to enhance achievement of the rhetorical, and

consequently operational, objectives. Of note, while it is unlikely that @RT_Com was aware of Russia's intentions ahead of time, tight control of state media by the Kremlin and Federal Security Service (FSB), including a daily list of key talking points known as the 'temnik' provided to senior officials at RT detailing what issues needed to be covered and how they were to be covered (Mozur et al., 2022) meant that @RT_Com messaging was well aligned with Russian activities. This ensured that arrangement, particularly *kairos*, was effective. Having explored how @RT_Com messaging was arranged, we now turn to style, the language of messaging.

Style – Designing the Argument

Style is about embodying arguments in a language that is appropriate to the target audience. Twitter offers a variety of tools to enhance messaging and, in turn, the persuasive potential of arguments, and @RT_Com utilised these (see below) in a variety of innovative ways to legitimise issues.

To be persuasive, language should be compact and clear (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./2015; Farwell, 2012; Tudhope, 2024). With a maximum of 280 characters per Tweet, Twitter certainly was that. The limited length of Tweets meant that key issues and conversations could be easily followed in real time. Moreover, conversations were more open and dynamic than on other platforms as Tweets were visible not only to those who had chosen to follow, but to everyone who visited the platform, whether a member or not. However, as Duncombe (2019) notes, such short messaging makes "substantive engagement difficult and snark very easy" (p. 417). @RT_Com messaging both overcame this limitation and capitalised on it. In overcoming it, much of @RT_Com messaging provided a brief textual summary often supported by photographs and video images. Although allowing up to 280 characters, @RT_Com Tweets accompanied by multimedia imagery were often considerably less than this,

particularly those that required rapid dissemination. For example, in pre-emptively justifying the invasion, a series of very short messages, supplemented by multimedia, highlighting the criticality of the situation in the Donbas is evident (Fig. 14). This may have been a deliberate strategy as research has shown Tweets within the range of 71-100 characters get the most retweets (Wylie, 2020) and those with supporting multimedia are furthermore likely to be retweeted (Mondal et al., 2023), a likely goal for @RT_Com messaging on issues of immediate importance. A significant number of messages also contained hyperlinks which allowed readers to move to sites where issues of interest were able to be explored in depth. Utilising visual, oral, and more comprehensive textual layers, these sites included messaging from a variety of different perspectives and credible commentators, in line with Aristotle's notion of *ethos*, likely to reinforce the desired narrative. In addition to reinforcing key narratives, Hönings et al. (2022) highlighted that messaging with URLs strongly correlate with retweetability.

Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./2015) notes that style should generate emotion (*pathos*) and this was an area where @RT_Com appears to have taken particular care in shaping messages. Capitalising on the short nature of Tweets, @RT_Com delivered a style of messaging that appeared focussed less on issues of logic (*logos*) and more on promoting and possibly reinforcing desired emotional responses (*pathos*), in particular those of anger, frustration, and fear, to ensure they got both attention and engagement. Efforts to elicit anger and frustration were particularly prominent in messages that appear to be designed to legitimate the 'special military operation', where a series of short Tweets used emotively laden language such as 'genocide', 'humanitarian crisis', and 'situation is critical'. These messages were often supported with videos of Putin and other senior figures describing the situation and using similarly emotive language likely to add credibility (*ethos*) to messages (Fig. 14). These emotions were also targeted post-

invasion in constructing the narrative framing intervention as a necessary response to Western breaches of international security arrangements such as the Minsk Accords and NATO Agreement (Fig. 15).

Messaging to elicit fear occurred both pre and post invasion but was done sparingly and strategically. The focus of these messages, as previously discussed, was on Russia's potential nuclear response to any Western interference of Russian activity. This messaging was invariably short and threatening, highlighting not only Russia's nuclear capability but also their readiness and willingness to use it. Messaging was often accompanied by imagery of Russian nuclear missiles to reinforce the capability and included succinct, all capital statements on the imagery to emphasise the seriousness of the threat (Fig. 17). As previously discussed, to elicit desired emotions, @RT_Com also frequently layered messaging with transgressive humour to contradict Western assertions of such things as an impending Russian invasion and to troll Western nations and leaders. For example, in Fig. 13, a Russian Foreign Affairs spokesperson is quoted as asking the West to advise the schedule for the invasion so the Russians could plan their vacation. Similarly, in Fig. 19, humour is used to troll the UK Foreign Minister, likely to damage her credibility. Humour has been shown to be an important form of political dialogue that both drives social media engagement and assists in legitimating arguments (Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2020). All in all, @RT_Com employed a style that went beyond merely transmitting messages to passive audiences to one that engaged them through a variety of means and generated key emotions to both amplify and intensify the impact of their campaign. Having explored the canon of style, we now turn to that of Memory.

Memory – Ensuring Persistence of the Argument

Understanding memory in the digital environment requires consideration of the range of practices that allow prosumers to preserve, recall, maintain, and reshape key arguments, what Brooke (2009) refers to as persistence of patterns.

In developing its narrative to impair an effective Western response to Russian actions in Ukraine, @RT_Com posted a substantial number of messages, almost 2,500 during the period reviewed. Many of these messages contained hyperlinks to further messaging (1778), and/or multimedia imagery (2275). The messages were retweeted a total of 160,572 times, received 74,437 replies, were liked 424,587 times, and were quoted (retweeted with a comment) 32,474 times. The sheer volume of information produced, consumed, reshaped, and recirculated provided substantial challenges to @RT_Com in ensuring desired memories were both constructed and persisted. @RT_Com overcame these by crafting clear and concise messaging focussed around the five key arguments discussed above, and continually repeating these (see Fig. 10 & 11) through messages in various forms. The cumulative repetition of arguments and their ongoing transmission through liking, retweeting, and quoting has been shown to enhance both the power and persistence of arguments as well as limit the impact of any countering arguments (Hassan & Barber, 2021). Persistence was further enhanced by the style of messaging @RT_Com used, both the multimedia nature of messaging to trigger powerful emotions as well as textual messaging that represented and elicited negative emotions of anger, frustration, and fear. Use of these emotions has been shown to enhance information diffusion (Duncombe, 2019) in turn likely enhancing memory.

Although hashtags were, surprisingly, not widely used in @RT_Com messaging, hyperlinks and multimedia were extensively used. These provided followers with opportunities to move to sites where key messaging was reinforced further,

engagement in organic discussion with like-minded peers could occur, and guided collective sense-making could be undertaken. This was likely in an attempt to ensure the persistence of memories through the repetition of key arguments from sources perceived as credible. Conceptualising memory as persistence allows for a greater understanding of the persuasive efforts of the @RT_Com campaign and situates memory as an active and important part of the rhetorical process rather than a mere repository.

Delivery – Propagating the Argument

In the social media environment, delivery is focussed on how messages are circulated to engage the audience in a multitude of ways to enhance its persuasive effect. Given @RT_Com's inability to utilise inorganic messaging to micro-target an audience, it had to rely on organic messaging to its 3 million plus followers to promote its desired persuasive outcomes. This posed considerable challenges not only due to the sheer size of the group, but also because of the very different follower segments, many of whom would likely be either neutral or opposed to arguments presented (Duncombe, 2019). Notwithstanding this, @RT_Com appeared to adopt an approach that, in classic Aristotelian fashion, relied on the delivery of a limited number of key arguments to specific communities within its followers that shared key assumptions and beliefs. Acceptance of these arguments was rendered more likely through several means: multimedia delivery, embedded URL, and emotional messaging and repetition. Collective repetition is particularly prominent immediately post invasion where responses to key messages more than doubled. A sample of the top 20 Tweets both pre and post invasion highlight retweets increased from 10k pre to 20.9k post-invasion, replies from 2.5k to 11.3k, and likes from 26k to 54k. Repeated delivery of information has been shown to be perceived as more truthful than new information (Hassan &

Barber, 2021), the consequence for this campaign being that greater repetition of @RT_Com messaging synchronised with key events was likely to have an enhanced effect on influencing the target audience. For example, immediately prior to the invasion, frequency of messaging regarding the genocide and humanitarian crisis unfolding in the Donbas substantially increased, likely to justify a 'special military operation' and limit any Western interference (Fig. 14).

While delivery to its own platform was significant, it is possible that greater persuasive effects occurred through @RT_Com's ability to ensure its narrative and key arguments were picked up and delivered by other sources. In part, this was likely a consequence of Western mainstream media simply scanning @RT_Com for news of interest (Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019). However, this was possibly a consequence of a deliberate strategy to deliver pro-Kremlin narratives more widely both before and after the invasion. This strategy appears to have two key strands: the development of fake websites to deepen desired messaging, and the use of bots to spread messaging on other social media networks. In looking to the first of these, NewsGuard (2022) has identified 309 websites, 162 in English, that have been sharing key Ukraine messages from @RT_Com often within minutes or even seconds. This includes not only text, but also images, links, and videos. Specific sites include both anonymous websites as well as purportedly credible foundation and research websites. These will likely have been developed well prior to the invasion and, therefore, built up a significant following prior to being utilised specifically for Ukraine messaging. While web traffic data was not available for these sites during the period in question, subsequent research has identified in May and Jun 2022, an average of more than 2.5 million visits to 11 of these websites (Balint et al., 2022). This significantly enhances the delivery potential of key messaging from @RT_Com.

Attending to the second strand, it is unsurprising that Russia engaged in the use of bots to enhance delivery of key messages across social networks. These bots allow replication and repackaging of key messages and the viral redistribution of them to the target audience with relative ease, in this case politicians and media influencers in the West whose own beliefs serve Russian interests. Our analysis of the data highlighted some interesting trends with regard to the use of bots by @RT_Com. Using the OSoMe Botometer, a random selection of 1000 @RT_Com followers revealed 361 (36%) of these achieved an overall score greater than four (on a scale of 0 to 5 where 0 displays human-like behaviour and 5 displays the most bot-like). While this does not definitively classify these accounts as bots, it provides a high likelihood of this probability.

This finding is important as it suggests more than a third of @RT_Com followers, or more than 1 million accounts, are bots designed to amplify delivery of information. Delving into the detail of these bots is also illuminating. For example, @PhilDeCarolis, supposedly an American middle-aged male from Southern California who joined Twitter in 2009, achieved a Botometer score of 4.1. During the period in question, 'Phil' posted more than 450 tweets per day and retweeted 574 @RT_Com messages (an average of 19 tweets and 24 retweets per hour every hour of every day). A number of these messages were also found to have been posted on 'Phil's' Gab and Truth Social accounts under the same name to amplify them to a larger right-wing, anti-establishment audience where discussion was reshaped and recirculated. Given the likelihood that bot accounts like 'Phil's' comprise more than a million of @RT_Com followers, this allows delivery of messages to target not only the desired audience on @RT_Com but, crucially, to target the same audience well beyond this platform. Doing this allowed @RT_Com to not only deliver key messages to target audiences beyond

Twitter, but also to ensure repetition of messaging which can considerably enhance its persuasive potential.

Discussion and Conclusion

As part of a non-linear approach to warfare that encompasses any means to weaken an opponent (Splidsboel Hansen, 2017), in both the lead up to, and following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia's expansive information network undertook a persuasion campaign likely designed to enhance the chances of a successful invasion of Ukraine by impairing any Western response. One arm of this network, RT, and specifically RT's Twitter platform, @RT_Com, played a key role in the campaign, aimed at a Western right-wing, anti-establishment audience, particularly high-profile accounts such as politicians and influential media whose own beliefs might serve Russian interests. Targeting this audience was likely aimed to help disrupt the political decision-making of Western nations, influence opinions in a manner more favourable to Russia, and, in doings so, impair a NATO response to Russia's actions in Ukraine.

This sophisticated campaign delivered messaging not only to the specific target audience on @RT_Com, but also to a much wider network comprising several hundred websites and numerous other social media platforms, enhancing its persuasive potential. The obvious question from this is whether this was sufficient to achieve its assessed goal of impairing a NATO response to Russia's actions. Given the lack of success of both the initial invasion and the fact that, post-invasion, Russia has become mired in a conventional war largely as a consequence of NATO support to Ukraine, it can be argued that the influence campaign, although comprehensive and sophisticated, has been largely ineffective…thus far. This is likely due to two key factors. First, it is likely a consequence of Russian intelligence failures which anticipated a rapid and decisive victory in Ukraine (Dylan et al., 2024). Instead, however, Ukrainian resistance along

with Western support ensured that Ukraine not only withstood an invasion by one of the world's largest militaries but caused significant damage to them in the process. Russian messaging likely failed because it had not anticipated this outcome. Second, and more significantly, messaging was likely ineffective due to Western pre-bunking actions. These actions saw Western governments declassifying and publicly disseminating intelligence at an unprecedented extent to get ahead of Russian narratives and pre-bunk them as part of their own rhetorical work (Littell & Stark, 2023). This proved highly effective and meant NATO forces were able to respond effectively to the Russian invasion. It also provides a useful template for countering future Russian influence operations.

The inadequacies of Russia's influence activities were also self-identified in an analytical note, purportedly captured from Russia's FSB, titled "Problems of information and propaganda support of the special operation in Ukraine". This note discusses influence activity failures during Russia's war against Ukraine and recommends a series of changes to enhance the rhetorical effectiveness of them moving forward (Recorded Future, 2022).

To some extent, however, these inadequacies overlook some of the nuances of the current situation in Ukraine and ignore that Russia has likely had some, albeit limited, success with its influence operations. While Western support for Ukraine generally remains high, debates remain in Europe and the US regarding adequate levels of funding for Ukraine, and both the supply and use of certain weapons to it. It has also been argued that attitudes toward supporting Ukraine have become sharply divided in the US around party lines (Atlantic Council, 2023). It is likely that these cleavages will continue to be exploited by the Kremlin to reinforce anti-war sentiments in the United States and Europe and to undermine support for Ukraine. In that sense, while this

particular influence campaign may not have achieved a decisive victory for Russia yet, only time will tell whether it ultimately does.

Notwithstanding the ineffectiveness of this particular @RT_Com influence campaign thus far, and noting Aristotle's (ca. 350 B.C.E./2015) argument that a failure to persuade in any particular instance does not invalidate the entire art, understanding how campaigns such as this are crafted and implemented in an effort to effect persuasion is important to enable effective responses to be developed and to ensure security, and even democracy, is maintained. Although a variety of new methodologies have been developed for the contemporary social media environment, this article has shown that an understanding of persuasion in this environment can be also informed by insights from the past, specifically, the rhetorical framework of Aristotle. In applying this framework to the case of @RT_Com's campaign, several interesting findings were made.

First, this research further highlights the potential of the social media environment, specifically Twitter, to utilise the three elements of invention – *logos, ethos, and pathos* – to effect persuasion not only in traditional, but also new, ways. In particular, we highlight the potential for invention to be socially constructed through collaborative consensus making by prosumers, thereby creating a more powerful form of persuasion. Second, it demonstrates how the social media environment can incorporate aspects of both *Chronos* and, more significantly, *kairos* in arranging messaging to take advantage of the confluence of events in the physical world. Third, it highlights how social media can employ a style that goes beyond efforts to merely transmit messages to arguably passive audiences to one that engages population segments through a variety of multimedia means and generates key emotions to amplify and intensify the impact of persuasion. Fourth, the research situates memory as an

active and important part of the rhetorical process rather than as a mere repository, highlighting the range of practices that allow prosumers to preserve, recall, maintain, and reshape arguments. Finally, it documents how the delivery of messages goes well beyond the simple performative nature of a communicative act to include the various dynamic systems and processes that allow messages to be not only more widely circulated but also attended to. Arguably, these findings highlight the potential of social media, and in particular Twitter, to develop a far more powerful form of persuasive rhetoric.

The sheer volume of data in this environment did, however, provide some considerable challenges in utilising this approach. Indeed, in undertaking this research, the relatively small number of organic messages analysed manually, some 2500, proved both laborious and time consuming, as did establishing the relationships between the various actors. The use of rhetorical analysis in conjunction with new automated tools and techniques offers further opportunities to overcome some of the challenges posed by the sheer volume of data that is central to contemporary information operations.

Notwithstanding this limitation, we argue that a rhetorical analysis of @RT_Com's campaign provides some useful insights into how Russia attempted to undertake an influence operation to disrupt the political decision-making of Western nations and, in doing so, impair a NATO response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. These insights are important and offer potential opportunities to counter Russian actions. But more than this, the analysis of @RT_Com's campaign highlights the broader utility of Aristotle's rhetorical framework for gaining insights into the processes of attempted persuasion in the contemporary social media environment.

Chapter 5: From the Agora to the Algorithm: Aristotle's Rhetoric as a Theoretical Framework for Understanding Social Media Persuasion

Abstract

Historically, media have been one of the key networks of power and influence in societies largely as a consequence of their utility in channelling information flows and, in doing so, persuading populations. However, the rapid expansion of social media platforms has revolutionised how such mediated persuasive power is wielded. Many nation states have engaged in sophisticated social media campaigns to influence how others understand economic, social, political and, importantly, security issues. In some cases, these campaigns have undermined the legitimacy of democratically elected governments and threatened security at local, national, and global levels. Developing theoretical understandings of how these campaigns are undertaken is, therefore, essential. While there has been some excellent research undertaken towards advancing understandings of such campaigns, conceptual challenges remain in theorizing persuasion in contemporary social mediascapes. We propose that, although social media provide innovative and unique features that enable revolutionary changes in how communication and persuasion occur, a look to the past can be instructive in conceptualising contemporary acts of persuasion. More specifically, we argue that drawing on Aristotle's rhetorical framework and reframing its canons of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery to contemporary mediated worlds can deliver new insights into the theoretical processes of persuasion via social media.

Keywords: social media, persuasion, security; rhetoric, Aristotle

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As a thesis by publication, some of the material in this chapter overlaps with the articles published in Chapters 3 and 4.

Media institutions and technologies are active everyday players in the relationships and communicative processes through which people construct predominant understandings of political, economic, and social aspects of society. As storying institutions, media are implicated in how people make sense of the world and act in it through social processes that inform, reinforce, or challenge understandings and personal narratives, and arouse emotions. The centrality of information and communicative processes within society makes the media one of the key networks of power and influence in society (Bennett, 2016; Berger, 2012; Carah, 2021; Castells, 2010; Cottam et al., 2016; Couldry, 2000; Herman & Chomsky, 2010; Hoewe & Peacock, 2020; Miller, 1998; Mutz et al., 1996).

Theory and research relating to media persuasion is not new. An abundance of existing scholarship has focussed historically on legacy media of print, radio, and television. However, the rise of the internet, and more specifically social media platforms, has provided opportunities for scholars and political analysts to explore how digital media forms contribute to collective thought and action, and are used to exert power in influencing others in a manner never before envisaged (Bennett, 2016; Bradshaw & Howard, 2018a, 2018b; Couldry & Hepp, 2018; Gilardi et al., 2022; Innes, 2020a; Lipschultz, 2022; Margetts et al., 2015; Naderer, 2023). These social media platforms provide a range of features which draw on legacy media but also include a host of newer interfaces which provide various highly personalised, interpersonal channels offering complex reciprocal interactions (Bayer et al., 2020; Cho et al., 2022; Muhlmeyer & Agarwal, 2021; Valkenburg et al., 2016). Moreover, these platforms are both rapidly and continually evolving as dynamic algorithms, network compositions, and personal settings constantly change, making an already diverse and complex mediated ecosystem even more so.

The rise of these platforms has been celebrated as providing a new public-commons where democracy could flourish as exemplified by the popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East in 2011 (Blagojević & Šćekić, 2022; Howard & Hussain, 2011; Kuznetsov, 2022). These platform-enhanced events were largely a consequence of the access to data, knowledge, social networks, and collective engagement opportunities they afforded (Woolley & Howard, 2019).

However, such platforms have also given rise to much darker scenarios, whereby a variety of actors can generate information, misinformation, and disinformation to persuade others and impact how they understand economic, social, political and, importantly, security issues (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018b; Dhawan et al., 2022; Gisondi et al., 2022; Muhammed & Mathew, 2022; Vaidhyanathan, 2018; West, 2016). Unsurprisingly this capability has been co-opted by governments, political parties, and other organisations to shape the geopolitical environment in a manner favourable to them. Indeed, Bradshaw et al. (2021a) identified evidence of 81 countries where social media was utilised to spread political disinformation in an effort to manipulate public opinion and effect persuasion. This included shaping public attitudes domestically to "suppress fundamental human rights, discredit political opponents, and drown out dissenting opinions" (p. i). For example, in the lead up to the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, the 'Leave' campaign hired Cambridge Analytica, an organisation that describes itself as a "global election management agency" (Cambridge Analytica, 2016) to influence the outcome of the referendum. Through a series of questionable practices (Rone, 2023), Cambridge Analytica utilised sophisticated psychological tools to microtarget voters on social media during the referendum campaign, with disinformation messaging focussed on immigration and lack of control of the borders (Kaiser, 2019). This was done with the intention of

influencing voting on the issue in favour of the Leave campaign. More recently, following the fatal shooting of US conservative activist Charlie Kirk, social media was exploited to reinforce partisan talking points, frame the incident as evidence of a growing threat to white, conservative Americans, and call for retaliation to “Crush the Left” (Rosenblat & Barnes, 2025, p. 17).

But as well as for their use for persuading and controlling domestic populations, these tools have also been used to undertake foreign influence campaigns and persuade global audiences. For example, social media has been utilised by states to influence election outcomes in adversary states (e.g. 2016 US presidential election, 2017 French presidential election, 2024 Romanian presidential election), and to spread disinformation around the COVID-19 pandemic contributing to growing fear and mistrust in any type of vaccine (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2021). These campaigns have evolved into a sophisticated form of information warfare that is an important part of an overall strategy to achieve geopolitical goals.

In terms of non-state actors, marginal social movements in numerous countries are undertaking divisive social media campaigns that are heightening ethnic, cultural and racial tensions; inspiring violent nationalist movements; and causing civil disturbance. Terrorist organisations such as ISIS are leveraging the power of the social media environment through the propagation of socio-ideological messaging, including live streaming terrorist attacks, to a global audience. This messaging is used to build communities, share stories and grievances, and, ultimately, to radicalise and recruit potential members (Stengel, 2019).

No longer, then, is social media merely a tool to bring people together. Rather, this epistemic commons is being utilised as a persuasive tool to alter the geopolitical balance of power; to effect polarisation of societies; to create uncertainty and anxiety; to

undermine trust in knowledge, people, systems, and institutions; and to bypass critical faculties to shape both beliefs and behaviour thereby reducing individual agency.

Understanding how persuasive campaigns are crafted and implemented to effect persuasion is, thus, important to enable effective responses to be developed that protect the security of individuals, groups, states, and the international environment. While such efforts can be informed by longstanding scholarship on media persuasion (Carraro & Castelli, 2010; Franz & Ridout, 2010; Glynn et al., 2018; Krupnikov & Connors, 2018), the complexity and ambiguity of the social media environment, and in particular the integration of the technical and social environments, creates additional challenges to theorising and documenting how persuasion is effected digitally. We posit that a return to the past, specifically to the rhetorical works of Aristotle, offers theoretical insights into understanding persuasion in the contemporary social media environment. In arguing this, we draw on lessons identified in case studies undertaken that utilise Aristotle's rhetorical framework to theorise and analyse social media persuasion during the 2016 US Presidential elections and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine (Nelson et al., 2025a, 2025b).

Background

The academic study of persuasion dates to at least the Ancient Greeks where the term rhetoric was coined to refer to the use of argumentation, language, and public address to persuade audiences (Billig, 1996). Aristotle, one of history's earliest and most influential figures on the art of rhetoric, distinguishes between the practice of rhetoric to persuade an audience, and "…the faculty of analysing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1991, p. 7). Our focus is on the latter of these, the analysis, to highlight the utility of a rhetorical framework in understanding political influence campaigns on social media. Originally founded for use

in law courts to allow ordinary men to argue their case, forensic rhetoric provided a platform for the subsequent development of the two other branches of rhetoric: epideictic rhetoric, focussed on praise or blame during public ceremonies; and deliberative rhetoric, focussed on communicating support for a particular policy – the focus of this article.

Classical rhetoric comprised several aspects, or canons (Table 1), and while the emphasis on these canons has varied throughout history, at its core, rhetoric remained largely unchanged until the arrival of Classical Rationalism in the 16th Century brought a physical sciences approach to the study of social relations.

Table 3 *Aristotelian Rhetorical Canons*

Rhetorical Canon	Definition
Invention	The key arguments developed on a particular issue to persuade an audience. Done through appeals to logic, credibility, and emotion.
Arrangement	The organisation of arguments both chronologically and when a confluence of activities provides opportunities to be seized.
Style	Embodying arguments in language appropriate to the audience.
Memory	How arguments are preserved, maintained, and recalled.
Delivery	How messages are circulated to engage an audience and enhance persuasive effect.

The physical sciences approach reached a peak around 1940 when experimental methods were adopted to solve rhetorical problems in an approach that Brewster Smith described as the "new rhetoric" (Petty et al., 1981, p. xii). This 'new rhetoric' was driven largely by Carl Hovland's experimental studies into the persuasive effects of propaganda during the Second World War which sought to measure persuasion as an

individualised cognitive process and in doing so uncover general principles of persuasion (Billig, 1996; Hovland & Lumsdaine, 2017). Despite this desire, it has been widely recognised that clear general principles have not emerged from these laboratory-based efforts. Rather, it is argued that what has been found is "…an accumulation of largely contradictory and inconsistent research findings with few, if any, generalizable principles…" (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1982, p. 340).

In the 1970s, critical psychology emerged as a sub-discipline, in part as a reaction against traditional, experimental psychology which was seen as overly individualistic, reductionist, and detached from the social and political contexts in which persuasion occurred (Teo, 2009). For many early critical psychologists, discourse and rhetorical theory offered robust epistemological and methodological alternatives to mainstream psychology (Billig, 2006; Wetherell, 2015) and so a parallel movement in discursive and rhetorical research emerged alongside critical psychology in the early 1980s. In Western contexts, key scholars such as Michael Billig (1987), Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell (1987), and, later, Ian Parker (1992) advanced this movement that reoriented research into persuasion within the realm of language, rhetoric, and social interaction (Billig, 2008). These scholars argued that it is through language, a fundamentally social and dialogical process, that knowledge is constructed (Billig, 1987; Parker & Shotter 2015; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and these constructions bring social worlds into being to make things happen (Wetherell, 2015).

In this critical reorientation, classical rhetoric, notably Aristotle's rhetorical proofs of *logos* (appeal to logic), *pathos* (appeal to emotion), and particularly *ethos* (appeal to credibility), became a useful conceptual resource for scholars. Although a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this article, Michael Billig stands out as making the most explicit attempt to link classical rhetoric with psychology. For

example, in *Arguing and Thinking* (1987) he treats *ethos* not as an inherent trait of a communicator, as in Hovland's 'source credibility' variable, but as an outcome of discourse. Credibility and character, he argues, is constructed and continually reconstructed through social interactions and discourse. In importing concepts from classical rhetoric then, critical psychologists recast persuasion research from an individualised cognitive process to a discursive rhetorical practice where meaning is constructed and reconstructed jointly, incorporating broader social and political contexts. We return to this issue later.

A further layer of complexity has been added to persuasion research with the rapid expansion of online social media platforms. These platforms have enabled a revolutionary change in how persuasion occurs because of the large number of highly personalised, interpersonal channels that offer near instantaneous reciprocal interactions as opposed to the relatively simple unidirectional influences of legacy media forms (Bayer et al., 2020). Furthermore, social media platforms are characterized by continuous and rapid evolution which is driven by dynamic algorithmic processes, shifting network structures, and individualized user configurations, all of which contribute to the ever-increasing complexity of the social media ecosystem (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018a; Couldry et al., 2018; Gilardi et al., 2022; Lipschultz, 2022). Notwithstanding the challenges these complexities raise, scholars have made significant gains in understanding how various factors are exploited to effect online persuasion. Some of this theory and research is focussed on technology (Aral, 2020; Hoffmann et al., 2019; Huszár et al., 2022; Muhlmeyer & Agarwal, 2021; Wolley & Howard, 2019) and seeks to understand how the technical aspects of platforms can be co-opted to spread information and facilitate change. Other research explores how various social and cognitive vulnerabilities can be exploited via social media to achieve persuasion.

This body of research is broad and, from a political influence perspective, includes work investigating election influence (Bronstein, 2013; DiResta et al., 2018; Jensen et al., 2024; Samuel-Azran et al., 2015); broader geopolitical influence (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018b; Bradshaw et al., 2023; Carter & Carter, 2021; Crilley et al., 2022; Hall, 2022; Howard & Hussain, 2011); the exploitation of emotions to effect political influences (Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2020; Davis et al., 2018; Duncombe, 2019; Schmid, 2023); the use of memes and symbols in spreading propaganda (De Cook, 2018; Woolley & Howard, 2019); and both dis- and mis-information (Chen et al., 2021; Halverson & Weeks, 2023; Wojtowicz, 2022).

Building on Billig's (1996) assertion that rhetorical psychology provides an alternative to standard social scientific approaches to persuasion, several authors have highlighted the utility of traditional rhetorical analysis in attempting to bridge knowledge gaps and provide a theoretical framework to gain a deeper understanding of persuasion in the social media environment (Bronstein, 2013; Chen et al., 2021; English et al., 2011; Pang & Law, 2017; Samuel-Azran et al., 2015). More specifically, these authors have undertaken research that examines participant responses to various social media messages categorised in terms of Aristotle's rhetorical proofs of *logos*, *ethos*, or *pathos*. These studies highlight that both usage and effectiveness of persuasive strategies varied dependent upon context and audience. For example, in looking at healthcare messaging on YouTube, English et al. (2011) found *ethos* as the most persuasive rhetorical proof and *pathos*, particularly as it appealed to humour, as the least persuasive. Similarly, Pang and Law (2017) found *ethos* to have the most persuasive appeal when presenting environmental issues on Twitter (now X). In contrast, research by Bronstein (2013) in the political environment, revealed that US Presidential candidates Obama and Romney's use of emotional appeals, or *pathos*, connected with

voters most effectively on Facebook. This appeal was not similarly reflected in the 2013 Israeli elections where Samuel-Azran et al. (2015) showed *ethos* was both the most prominent and most effective rhetorical proof. Of note in this latter research is that *logos* was the least preferred appeal by all the candidates. In looking at persuasion strategies in propagating misinformation on Weibo, Chen et al. (2021) found that *pathos* was the most common and effective rhetorical proof utilised. Clearly, contextual and audience variables impact the most appropriate approach to achieving persuasion.

While valuable in highlighting both the complexity and contextual nature of the effectiveness of rhetorical proofs in the social media environment, previous research has not moved beyond these rhetorical proofs, which are only one part of the classical rhetorical framework. Although analysing what arguments were utilised, the research left a gap in our understanding of persuasion in this environment as it did not explore how the key arguments were organised, designed, delivered, or remembered. In this sense, the research does not fully capture how both social interaction and platform technical affordances such as multimodality and algorithmic curation combine to effect persuasion. We suggest that by drawing on Aristotle's rhetorical framework more fully and reframing it to the contemporary environment, these aspects can be explored, and a more comprehensive understanding of persuasive attempts can be gleaned.

We now turn to a discussion of each of the rhetorical canons, noting their classical utility along with their applicability to the contemporary social media environment. We then highlight how this rhetorical framework may be drawn on to analyse social media persuasion attempts.

Aristotle's Rhetorical Framework

Invention

Traditionally, scholars have differentiated between the form and content of rhetoric, recognising that the content, or substance, of the discourse must first be determined before attending to issues of form (Billig, 1996). This aspect is best represented by the canon of invention which, for those focussed on the practice of rhetoric to persuade an audience, involves determining, or inventing, what the essential arguments of a particular issue should be or, as Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1991) states "the art (*techne*) of finding out the available means of persuasion" (p. 37). Invention is a comprehensive activity that goes beyond identifying how previously successful arguments can be applied to a particular situation to include a comprehensive analysis of new situations to identify what novel arguments could be developed that could be persuasive in those situations.

In the social media environment, everyone is a potential prosumer, both a consumer with access to information as well as a producer able to create and share both multimodal and multimedia data in ways never deemed possible. In this way, the social media environment is a much more social model of invention where arguments can be seeded and fertilised by a rhetor for prosumers to further develop, reshape, and amplify. But not only do prosumers actively reinvent arguments, these arguments, in turn, actively reinvent prosumers in a mutually constitutive, ongoing relationship akin to Gidden's structuration theory (Lippuner & Werlen, 2009). Arguments, thus, exist in an ongoing relationship and come into being through social action. As Brooke (2009) notes, this reframes invention as *proairesis* (action) as opposed to hermeneusis (interpretation) and provides the opportunity for an ongoing process of invention. For analysts, such as academics and security professionals, our task is "not to persuade, but

to discover the available means of persuasion in each case" (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1991, p. 35). In seeking to understand the key lines of argument in the social media environment, we must look not only for the arguments occurring in individual archives but also for the continuously evolving arguments that occur through social interaction.

In looking to invention, Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1991) identified three key elements, *logos, ethos,* and *pathos,* as essential ingredients for understanding persuasive content. In exploring the first of these, *logos,* Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1991) proposed that people are most easily or most strongly convinced when they believe something has been proven or demonstrated. On the surface, this seems relatively straightforward; prove or demonstrate something, and persuasion will occur. However, this is an oversimplification of the concept which rests on two flawed assumptions. Firstly, that persuasion is merely about an audience learning something and that when educated with the 'facts', or indisputable truth, they will be persuaded. Secondly, that truth must be unitary and agreed upon. This latter assumption is inconsistent with Aristotle's rhetorical approach which recognises that there can, and indeed must, be open-ended contrary truths each of which can be reasonably justified (Billig, 2015).

A deeper exploration of Aristotle's *logos* reveals that the process of rhetorical, as opposed to educational, persuasion consists of proving or demonstrating something based on what an audience already believes or sees themselves as aligned with. In that sense, an audience can be persuaded by connecting them to a premise they already agree with or believe in, and then making a logical deduction based on that, what Aristotle called the enthymeme (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1991). An important aspect of being able to make this connection is the need for the rhetor to be an expert in *endoxa* or the accepted opinion of the group they are trying to persuade (Rapp, 2012). The social

media environment provides a range of opportunities to connect prosumers to various propositions and, thus, lay the platform for a desired conclusion to be reached to effect persuasion.

For example, in seeking to influence the outcome of the 2016 US presidential elections, the Internet Research Agency (IRA), a St Petersburg based organisation working on behalf of the Russian government, undertook a sophisticated social media campaign targeting key audiences in the United States: African American, left-wing, and right-wing voters. This campaign targeted these audiences utilising three key arguments: racial injustice, liberal inequity, and white grievance and fear respectively. In targeting right-wing voters specifically, the accepted premise of this group that mass illegal immigration was occurring was deduced to pose a threat to the US, its institutions, and its values. In turn, this threat was designed to create grievance and fear. The persuasive goal of this line of argument was not one of trying to change minds but, rather, of reinforcing pre-existing beliefs, amplifying existing cleavages in society, and, ultimately, influencing voting behaviour by mobilising right-wing voters (Nelson et al., 2025a).

Because not everyone shares the same underlying premises, persuasion through *logos* alone may not be effective. As Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1991) notes, the orator should "not only look at the argument, that it may be conclusive and convincing, but should also present himself as a certain kind of person" (p. 14). We turn then to the second rhetorical appeal, *ethos*.

The means of persuasion called *ethos* relies on the establishment of the trustworthiness or credibility of the orator or author traditionally because of them presenting themselves as a morally upstanding citizen with good or virtuous character. However, Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1991) noted two other reasons why a speaker or

author may be deemed credible: through either practical wisdom or good will. Importantly, the effect of persuasion through *ethos* is a judgement call about the credibility of the speaker which will vary depending on the audience; what one audience considers practical wisdom and goodwill may be very different from another audience or may vary over time. In that sense, arguments utilising *ethos* are not static; rather they are active and are reconstructed through an ongoing process as prosumers engage in their everyday lives and social activities. The importance of *ethos* grows and takes on greater importance when the audience is not convinced through a strong logical argument.

In the social media environment, analysing how *ethos* may enhance persuasion poses an interesting challenge, often as a consequence of the lack of transparency of the true source of a message. In some situations, this is clear, and influence can occur through the traditional notion of *ethos*. For example, during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, RTs (formerly Russia Today) Twitter platform (@RT_Com) utilised statements, albeit misrepresenting or decontextualising these, from key Western figures to support carefully crafted Russian messaging. These included political figures such as Ukrainian Defence Minister Reznikov, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg, and White House Press Secretary Psaki, as well as purported independent experts such as Earl Rasmussen of the Eurasia Center. These voices were further reinforced by messages parroting Russian talking points from high-profile US politicians and key right-wing influencers such as former US President Donald Trump, US Senators Josh Hawley and Ted Cruz, and television host Tucker Carlson. By dint of their profile, these individuals could be said to add credibility to the messaging targeting the desired audiences (Nelson et al., 2025b).

In cases where there is a lack of transparency of the source of the message, the rhetorical analyst must look beyond identity to explore broader factors which may function as an enabler of *ethos*. These could include the number of followers a user has; who the followers are and whether they have strong or weak ties; the number of likes, shares, or retweets of a message; or even what particular hashtags have been used. Incorporating modern analytical methods into a rhetorical analysis framework may offer some useful insights into the human and non-human actors, as well as the networks they are part of, that enable *ethos* in the social media environment.

The third of Aristotle's means of persuasion, *pathos*, involves the arousal of, or appeal to, feelings that affect target audience's judgements, particularly those related to pain or pleasure (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1991). The underlying assumption of this rhetorical appeal is that an audience may perceive issues differently when emotionally aroused and, thus, *pathos* can be used to bypass their critical faculties and modify their judgement on a particular issue (Rapp, 2012).

To arouse emotions in an audience, Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1991) notes that a rhetor must be cognisant of three key factors: the state of mind of the audience (e.g. angry, fearful, sad), the type of persons at which the specific emotion is directed, and the reason for that emotion. The utility of this rhetorical appeal to the social media environment is clearly highlighted in the research literature (Ferrara & Yang, 2015; Steinert, 2021; Steinert et al., 2025). In particular, these researchers have noted the power of social media to scaffold, or socially construct, emotions in a way that limits critical thinking and, in turn, impacts judgement and behaviours. For example, Steinert (2021) notes how the online sharing of emotional content during the coronavirus pandemic led to emotional contagion, which in turn influenced societal value structures. Similarly, in the 2016 elections, the IRA utilised the fear of mass immigration in

threatening their way of life in the United States to mobilise right-wing voters to vote (Nelson et al., 2025a). The rhetorical analyst in this environment must explore the multitude of ways that *pathos* is generated to arouse the appropriate emotions that, in turn, generate the desired persuasive outcome.

These three elements, or as Aristotle termed them, rhetorical proofs of *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*, are the essential aspects of the classical inventional canon of rhetoric and focus on the substance, or form, of arguments. In the contemporary environment, we argue that prosumers are embedded within rhetorical spaces where rhetorical processes are increasingly dominated by image and spectacle in efforts to generate emotion through *pathos* rather than more traditional engagement with *logos* or the personhood of *ethos*. This distorts classical rhetoric from a position in which Aristotle emphasises the logical and ethical dimensions of persuasion to one in which Debord's Society of the Spectacle would suggest inverts these, leading to a society where critical engagement is overshadowed by the seductive pull of images and superficial appeal. In this sense, while Aristotle's rhetoric underscores the power of communication in shaping thought and action, Debord highlights how this power has been hijacked by a spectacle-driven culture that shapes both individual identities and social relations through mediated constructions of reality (Debord, 1967/2014).

Notwithstanding this, and irrespective of the emphasis placed on each of the rhetorical appeals as persuasive tools, in the digital environment, invention is an ongoing process of discovery where arguments can be seeded by a rhetor but understandings of these are socially constructed by target audience members. This leads to, arguably, more powerful persuasive effects and, while rhetorical analysts must look for the continuously evolving arguments that occur through social interaction, they must

also look for how these were initially seeded and what specific appeal is emphasised to understand such persuasive campaigns.

Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1991) notes that while arguments are central to persuasion, on their own they may be insufficient to persuade. With that in mind, we turn to the second canon, Arrangement.

Arrangement

The way arguments are arranged can be the difference between persuasive success or failure, and ancient rhetoricians understood that arguments, however good they were, needed to be organised into a convincing discourse (Billig, 1996). Arrangement (*dispositio* or *taxis)* in classical rhetoric was essentially a formal system of organisation and classical textbooks provide broad guidelines focussed largely on the order in which a rhetorical act should occur. Aristotle recommended four parts (introduction, statement, argument, and epilogue) (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1991), Quintilian five parts (the genesis of the five-paragraph essay) (Quintilian, ca. 95 B.C.E./1921), and Cicero six divisions (Cicero, ca. 90 B.C.E./1954). Cicero even linked specific divisions with rhetorical appeals for optimal persuasive effect. In the introduction he noted the importance of establishing credibility and, thus, suggested the employment of *ethos*. Through the middle of the oration, he suggested the use of *logos* to state the facts, provide proof, and refute alternative arguments. In the conclusion, Cicero argued the need for employing emotional appeals or *pathos* (Cicero, ca. 90 B.C.E./1954). While guidelines on structure were provided in classical texts, clear rules were not elucidated, and orators could choose to take a different approach as the situation dictated. However, this approach to arrangement has a largely chronological aspect, or *chronos*, to it and while its utility remains in the social media environment, it poses some challenges.

In the social media environment, prosumers have much greater control over the order in which they experience information, and everyone's path may differ in how they move through it. Further, discourse in this environment never really begins or ends but rather forms part of a continuous evolution of communications. In this sense, the ability to structure arguments in line with *chronos* is more challenging and authors need to utilise other tools, such as repetition of arguments, to allow prosumers who are immersed in the digital ecosystem to navigate the information in the order of their choice while still being exposed to key arguments. In exploring this, Brooke (2009) suggests a reframing of the chronological aspect of arrangement from one of sequence to one of patterns. This sees arrangement as an emergent feature within digital ecosystems as opposed to something that is fixed or predetermined. Techniques such as repetition of arguments and consistency of examples are key in creating the patterns that allow users to move through the information using any path while still being exposed to key arguments.

For example, in the three months leading up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, (Nelson et al., 2025b) note that of the 1977 tweets posted by @RT_Com, 1587 of them focussed on only four key arguments. These arguments were continually repeated and supported with consistent examples to create patterns in the rhetorical field. This meant that prosumers could enter the conversation at any stage, move through or navigate it in any order they chose, all whilst being exposed to the key arguments.

Although *chronos* was important in classical rhetoric, arrangement was also tied to Aristotle's notion of *kairos,* that qualitative notion of time where a confluence of factors such as context, audience, and rhetorical purpose provides an opportunity to be seized (Kinneavy & Eskin, 2000). Arrangement in the digital environment is ideally suited to *kairos,* in large part due to the speed and scale of the dissemination of

information. For example, leading up to the 2016 US presidential elections, one key argument targeting African American voters focussed on racial injustice. Messaging centred on the failure of the current political system in supporting African Americans and was designed to convince them to either opt out of voting or to vote for an independent candidate. Examples supporting this were historic incidents of police brutality where young African American men had been killed by police. During the final months leading up to the election, and in line with the notion of *kairos*, messaging seized on seven separate real-time incidents of African American men being killed by police officers in swing states to constantly reinforce the key racial injustice argument (Nelson et al., 2025a).

For those focussed on the practice of rhetoric to persuade an audience, the canon of arrangement in the contemporary social media ecosystem provides some considerable challenges in arranging arguments, particularly when considered from a lineal perspective of *chronos*. Notwithstanding this, social media also provides considerable opportunities for overcoming these challenges as well as for rapidly exploiting opportunities as they arise, the notion of *kairos*. Therefore, those focussed on undertaking a rhetorical analysis must remain cognisant of these challenges and opportunities and consider the many ways in which arguments can be arranged beyond the traditional linear approach to enhance the likelihood of key arguments being received and, in turn, the desired persuasive effect achieved.

Style

If invention concerns *what* is to be said, then style concerns *how* it is said. From a rhetorical perspective, style (*elocutio*) concerns the skilful use of language to express ideas. Although the importance of this canon has ebbed and flowed since Aristotle's time and has often been misconstrued as merely window dressing (Billig, 1996), at its

core, style is an intrinsic part of rhetoric that has an important reciprocal relationship with invention. Indeed, rather than asking whether form (style) or substance (invention) is more important, one should ask what kind of style is best utilised to support the arguments created (Leach, 2003; Martin, 2014).

For Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1991), style was predominantly about ensuring that the language used was clear and appropriately matched with both the discourse at hand and the audience. The "aptness of language" he noted was "one thing that makes people believe in the truth of your story" (p. 149). In this sense, the clarity and appropriateness of language plays an important part in ensuring the logical coherence and, thus, persuasiveness of the argument, making it important for *logos.* But as Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1991) notes, language is also appropriate if it expresses both emotion (*pathos*) and character (*ethos*). In this sense, persuasion, rather than mere understanding, needs to employ a style that goes beyond the logic of an argument and connects an audience with emotions that are appropriate to the situation (*pathos*), particularly those related to pleasure or pain, and allows them to identify with a rhetor (*ethos*) and the message they are conveying.

The proliferation of social media platforms and the consequent explosion of information on them makes attracting attention on social media a challenging proposition (Zhang et al., 2025). Yet, attracting attention to key arguments in this environment is important for engagement which, in turn, is key for achieving a desired persuasive effect. This attracting of attention is the role of style and social media offers the opportunity to enhance the persuasive capability of a communicative act through a wide range of multimodal and multimedia tools, and through the ability to develop and rapidly disseminate clear and appropriate messages to a variety of highly targeted audiences.

In looking at clear messaging, the fast-paced nature of social media where users look for quick reads rather than deep ones (Porubay, 2025) sees social media encourage brevity. With a maximum of 280 characters per post, X is certainly brief, and the limited length of posts means that key issues and conversations can be easily followed in real time. Although other platforms allow much longer posts (e.g. Facebook 63,206 characters) research has shown that those with 80 characters or less receive 66% higher engagement than longer posts (Tudhope, 2024). However, Duncombe (2019) notes that such short messaging makes "substantive engagement difficult and snark very easy" (p. 417), a challenge for ensuring messages are both clear and appropriate.

Notwithstanding this, the multimedia nature of social media allows prosumers to overcome the limitations imposed by brevity. In overcoming a lack of substantive engagement, short posts can be supplemented by hyperlinks, allowing users to move to sites where issues of interest can be explored in depth. Multimedia imagery, both still images and video, can also be utilised to support brief messaging and provide a more comprehensive understanding of a topic. Short messaging supported by hyperlinks and multimedia imagery have been shown to be more likely to engage an audience and to be shared (reposted, retweeted, etc.) (Hönings et al., 2022; Jaakonämki et al., 2017), an important goal for any rhetor seeking to persuade an audience.

In looking to capitalise on the 'snark' of short messaging, research has shown that messages that include high arousal emotions, both positive and negative, are more successful at stimulating engagement (Jaakonmäki et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2025). When combined with multimedia imagery, particularly the use of memes, messages serve an important role in both identity and community building and enhance the viral transmission and persistence of key arguments. In turn, this has been found to enhance persuasiveness (DeCook, 2018). For example, IRA messaging during the 2016 US

presidential elections targeting right wing audiences was focussed on arousing negative emotions (*pathos*), particularly those of anger and fear, to achieve persuasive outcomes. This was often supported with disparaging memes which proved successful at stimulating social media engagement by increasing likes, comments, and shares (Nelson et al., 2025a).

But as well as style needing to be clear, Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1991) noted that style also had to be appropriate if it was to influence. Social media provides a considerable opportunity to enhance the appropriateness of style through its ability to segment audiences and then, through microtargeting, providing each prosumer with unique messaging in a style that is both clear and appropriate. Leading up to the 2016 US elections, the IRA identified three target audiences (African Americans, left-wing, and right-wing voters) and invented means of persuasion to address each. They then segmented these audiences and targeted each with key messaging specific and appropriate to only them. Although messaging directed at each audience was different in style, and often contradicted messaging to other audiences, this did not matter as they were segregated. It also resulted in average clickthrough rates of 8.1%, significantly higher than the industry average of 1.5% for Facebook posts and greatly enhancing engagement, thus, persuasive potential (Nelson et al., 2025a).

Style in classical rhetoric was focussed on ensuring language was both clear and appropriate to the discourse at hand. While this focus remains fundamentally unchanged in the social media environment, style has gone beyond merely transmitting static, text-based messages to audiences, to one where a wide range of multimedia, interactive tools allow messaging to be highly targeted to specific audiences in a manner that is both clear and appropriate to them. This considerably enhances the persuasive potential of key arguments. Rhetorical analysis of style in this environment needs to consider the

different styles employed, as well as those avoided, and how these styles connect with the targeted audiences to achieve the desired persuasive effect.

Memory

Much of the contemporary scholarship on the classical canon of memory (*memoria*) notes that in Ancient Greece, orators were judged both by the length of their speeches and by whether they were able to deliver the exact same speech twice or more in a row (Billig, 1996). The conclusion of this understanding of memory has been that with the advent of print medium, this canon has lost much of its emphasis and, thus, in the contemporary environment, is considered largely redundant. Indeed, Corbett (1990) notes that of all the canons, memory has the least utility as "not much can be said, in a theoretical way, about the process of memorizing; and after rhetoric came to be concerned mainly with written discourse, there was no further need to deal with memorizing" (p. 27). This perspective, however, conceptualises memory very narrowly as merely storage and recall.

A deeper exploration of the classical literature indicates that the canon of memory was about far more than merely recall. Indeed, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* [Rhetoric for Herennius] (Cicero, ca.90 B.C.E./1954) calls memory the "treasury of things invented" (p. 205), highlighting the important link between the canons of memory and invention, and noting that memory is about the rhetorical practices of storing and recollecting arguments at an appropriate time (*kairos)*. In his short treatise *De Sensu and De Memoria* [On Sense and On Memory], Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1906) notes that memory is recollected, rather than simply recalled, through a process of deliberation, either individually or socially, that infers past experience to make sense of a particular thing, an approach not dissimilar to what contemporary cognitive psychologists have concluded (Schacter & Addis, 2007). Further, Aristotle

(ca. 350 B.C.E./1906) notes that memory "belongs to that to which imagination must be assigned" (p. 105) and that "memory cannot exist apart from imagery" (p.103), highlighting the importance of sensations and emotions in memory recollection. In this sense, he argues memories are not merely things that are recalled, but they are evoked and recollected through a dynamic, interactive process that is highly contextual.

The ever-evolving, seemingly context-lacking nature of rhetoric in the social media environment, based on both individual subjectivities and the social influences that shape and reshape messages, would seem at first glance to provide the canon of memory with some considerable challenges. However, the unique characteristics that social media offers enables memory, particularly memory related to invention, to be articulated through a range of new practices and activities that allow prosumers to create, preserve, recollect, and reshape key arguments. Interestingly, conceptualising memory in this way takes it back to its Aristotelian roots by shifting its focus from an individualised notion of storage to a collective rhetorical activity.

While memories on social media are initially individual archives that are created and stored as digital artefacts, they do not exist in isolation. Rather, they are automatically shared to a wide range of prosumers who then negotiate, reshape, and reshare the memories. This connects posts with a social framework which helps to define them and, through a process of social construction, repurposes and recreates collective memories. As Schudson (1993) notes, recollection of collective memories is, at its core, a form of storytelling, and social media allows the rhetor to shape this storytelling through seeding key arguments and then through strategic posts at particular points in the discourse, as well as through features such as Twitter's trending topics, to highlight the prominence of key arguments. This is akin to what Ben-David et al. (2024) have described as "a baseline presence of continuous social media discourse…alongside

mnemonic bursts that occur on either commemorative…or non-commemorative occasions" (p. 19). This can be particularly powerful when messaging is microtargeting highly specific, like-minded audiences. For example, of the 1977 @RT_Com tweets leading up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, 1587 focussed on only four key arguments which were continuously reinforced as part of the ongoing discourse. These messages containing the key arguments were retweeted a total of 160,572 times, received 74,437 replies, were liked 424,587 times, and were quoted (retweeted with a comment) 32,474 times, further enhancing the likelihood of collective memories being created and recollected around the key arguments (Nelson et al., 2025b).

Other key features of social media, in particular the multimedia opportunities it affords, provide powerful opportunities for the creation and recollection of memories. As Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1991) notes, imagination and imagery are key to the creation, storage, and recollection of memories as are emotions, particularly those emotions related to pain and pleasure. The widespread use of memes by the IRA in the lead-up to the 2016 US elections appears designed to provoke high arousal emotions to different target groups. To right-wing voters memes were focussed on stigmatising out-groups and defending the second amendment (Nelson et al., 2025a), both of which have been shown to be powerful in the construction of collective identities and viral spread of views in right-wing audiences (De Cook, 2018). In targeting an African American audience, memes focussed on black youth killed by police were continually reinforced through repetition, both on key anniversaries of deaths and when new deaths occurred (Nelson et al., 2025a). The imagery in these memes and the emotions they were designed to evoke likely aided in embedding key arguments as collective memories.

Accordingly, social media affords those focussed on persuading an audience the opportunity to take memory beyond the narrow perspective of recall and articulate it

through a range of features and practices that allow rhetors to create, preserve, recollect, and reshape key arguments. In doing so, this provides the opportunity to create powerful memories which are important for persuasive effect. Rhetorical analysts seeking to discover how persuasive attempts are being undertaken must keep in mind the need to look not only for the patterns emerging in the discourse to identify the key arguments that are trying to be embedded in memory, but also the features and practices being utilised beyond the discourse to evoke memories and enhance recollection of key arguments.

Delivery

Delivery (*actio or pronuntiatio*), the last of the five canons, concerns itself with the presentation of discourse: *how* something is delivered rather than *what* is delivered. Much of the classical focus on delivery was on the delivery of speech in a public context and so attention was dedicated to training in vocal projection and physical gestures. Aristotle's rhetoric was steeped in a strong ethical component that emphasised responsible persuasion in civic life (ca. 350 B.C.E./1991). While he asserted that a case should, in fairness, be argued only through facts, he recognised that other aspects of presentation, specifically the way things are said, affected its persuasive intelligibility. In this sense, he believed that delivery was concerned with the aesthetic qualities of speech to persuade through emotions (*ethos* and *pathos*) rather than just the rationality of an argument (*logos*). But Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1991) also recognised the importance of delivery in written prose, noting not only that it was different from spoken oratory, but that it needed to be tailored for different audiences. In the contemporary social media environment, we argue that the relevance of the classical perspective of the canon of delivery not only remains but is enhanced by the key features available on social media platforms. In particular, the highly interactive forms

of multimedia; the algorithmic distribution of messages and the autonomous agents, or so-called social bots, that can engage an audience in a multitude of ways to achieve a desired persuasive effect.

In looking to the first of these, the interactive multimedia environment of social media, key arguments can be developed and supported utilising still and video imagery as well as memes, all of which have been shown to have an important psychological role in appealing to both *ethos* by adding credibility to messaging, and *pathos* though the evocation of key emotions (De Cook, 2018; Halversen & Weeks, 2023; Tabatabaei & Ivanonva, 2021). This allows messaging to go beyond mere understanding of arguments and generate persuasive effects. Utilising predictive analytics to narrow audience and message focus, these arguments can then be trialled prior to delivery proper. Woolley and Howard (2019) note that different versions of digital communication content are often A/B tested on small populations to identify key metrics such as click-through rates, likes, shares, etc. Based on this testing, the most likely persuasive versions can then be delivered. Once delivered, these key arguments undergo sharing, negotiation, and re-shaping through a process of social appropriation to make further meaning of them. Through a series of tools, rhetoricians seeking to achieve a persuasive outcome can monitor the effectiveness of these narratives and adapt strategies, in real time, to ensure the ongoing effectiveness of key arguments.

The algorithmic distribution that social media facilitates provides considerable advantages for the canon of delivery. Key of these is the ability for rhetors to utilise social media to segment audiences into various combinations of desired characteristics based on geographic, demographic, psychographic, and behavioural features (Kaiser, 2019). Unlike messaging conveyed by legacy media which addresses a large and diverse audience, social media allows for the delivery of carefully designed messaging

to a highly targeted audience and creates echo chambers where a target audience engages in organic discussion that not only reinforces pre-existing beliefs but amplifies them in a closed system insulated from contradictory messaging (Begby, 2024). Arguably, this social construction of messages enhances the credibility or *ethos* of key arguments through consensual collective understanding. For example, during the lead up to the 2016 US elections, the IRA knew it was not necessary to persuade all voters in the US but, rather, a relatively small number in a few swing states. Using social media, they were able to segment audiences into three key categories in swing states: right-wing, left-wing, and African American. Each of these audiences was then microtargeted with specifically tailored messaging which was designed to exploit existing cleavages in society, elicit outrage, sow confusion and distrust, all with the aim of influencing voting behaviour in different ways for each target audience (Nelson et al., 2025a). The multimedia nature of messaging meant it was able to utilise various styles that incorporated all three rhetorical appeals (*logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*) in the microtargeted delivery of unique arguments.

The use of autonomous agents, or social bots, affords the opportunity to enhance delivery of key messages both on and across social media platforms. These bots allow for the automatic replication and repackaging of key messages at scale and the viral redistribution of them to the target audience and beyond with relative ease. Not only does this make messaging more likely to reach a target audience, but it can also add credibility to that messaging through automated liking, commenting, and following. Arguably, the opportunities social bots provide can enhance the persuasiveness of messaging. During the lead up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it was found that 36% of accounts (1 million accounts) following @RT__Com were likely bots amplifying the delivery of key messaging. One of these bots was found to be posting an average of 19

tweets and 24 retweets every hour of every day for the entire three-month period under investigation (Nelson et al., 2025b). Doing this allowed @RT_Com to not only deliver key messages to target audiences both on and beyond Twitter, but also to ensure viral repetition of messaging which, as previously discussed, can considerably enhance its persuasive potential.

Rhetorical analysis seeking to understand persuasive attempts in the digital environment must then look beyond the mere transactional nature of communicative acts to identify how the features offered by social media platforms are utilised in the delivery of key arguments. In particular, analysts need to explore how multimedia is being utilised to support the delivery of key arguments, how algorithms are being used to segment and microtarget audiences with key arguments, and how social bots are being used to further amplify key arguments.

Conclusion

As discussed in this article, research has shown that numerous nation states are engaging in sophisticated social media campaigns designed to shape how others understand economic, social, political, and importantly, security issues. In some cases, these campaigns are undermining the legitimacy of democratically elected governments and threatening security at local, national, and global levels. Understanding how these campaigns are undertaken is essential, and while much good research has been undertaken towards this end, challenges remain in understanding how persuasion operates in the contemporary environment.

This article contributes to the psychological theory and research on persuasion in the social media environment through reconceptualising it as a socio-technical process that is co-constructed in a digital ecology. Conceptually, we go beyond previous research to advance an analytical framework that takes Aristotle’s five rhetorical canons

from oratory and adapts them to platformed digital communications, showing how persuasion emerges from the interplay of social interaction and platform affordances such as multimodality, audience segmentation, and algorithmic curation. We highlight how this framework yields a practical, theoretically coherent, and empirically useful tool for analysing and understanding persuasive attempts via social media. In applying this framework to case studies in the social media environment, several valuable conclusions can be drawn.

First, this article highlights the potential of the social media environment to utilise the three Aristotelian elements of invention – *logos. ethos, and pathos* – to effect persuasion in new ways. In particular, it highlights the potential for invention to be seeded and shaped by a rhetor but socially constructed through collaborative consensus-making by prosumers, arguably creating a more powerful form of persuasion. Second, this article demonstrates how the social media environment can incorporate aspects of both *chronos* and, more significantly, *kairos* to arrange arguments beyond a traditional linear approach and to rapidly exploit opportunities as they arise in the real world. Third, it highlights how social media can employ a style that goes beyond efforts to merely transmit messages to arguably and varyingly 'passive' audiences to one that engages audiences through a variety of multimedia means and generates emotion to amplify and intensify the impact of persuasion. Fourth, social media affords the opportunity to extend memory beyond a narrow perspective of the recall of arguments and articulate memories through a range of features and practices that allow rhetors and audiences to create, preserve, recollect, and reshape key arguments. Finally, it highlights how the digital environment offers a range of features that can substantially enhance the delivery of key arguments. These include the multimedia nature of messages, algorithmic delivery that allows audiences to be segmented and

microtargeted with specific arguments, and the utility of bots to amplify key arguments. Arguably, these findings together highlight the potential of social media to develop a far more powerful form of persuasive rhetoric than previously seen. But more than this, the discussion highlights the considerable utility of Aristotle's rhetorical framework for gaining insights into the processes of persuasion in the contemporary social media environment.

While the focus of this article has been on understanding persuasive attempts in the social media environment, an essential first step in allowing practices to be developed to counter such attempts, it is worth noting the opportunity afforded by the rhetorical approach to move beyond understanding and to undertake anticipatory analysis and targeted intervention. While a comprehensive exploration of such developments is beyond the scope of this article, some preliminary thoughts are offered. With invention, the focus is on how arguments are tailored to commonplaces, or general, shared assumptions used to secure the adherence of target audiences (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969), to achieve persuasive effect. An understanding of these commonplaces and early identification of potential arguments can inform pre-emptive narrative framings that can reduce an audience's susceptibility to manipulation by exposing them to likely arguments and by seeding credible alternatives and inoculative refutations. Rhetorical arrangement allows analysts to track both message sequences (*chronos*) and, importantly, opportunity structures (*kairos*), those moments when a confluence of events opens pathways for disruption. In practice, this requires real-time monitoring to identify and anticipate patterns of arguments rather than simply examining individual messages. Interventions can then be targeted at these patterns, as opposed to point-by-point refutation of individual messages, and timed to pre-empt persuasive attempts. Style analysis highlights the multimodal affordances that scaffold

both identity and affect. This can be leveraged by developing repositories of high-fidelity, pre-tested messages tailored to specific audiences that local actors can rapidly adapt to pre-bunk manipulative messaging.

Further, in the platformed environment, memory is not a passive repository but a socially negotiated practice through which events are re-told and re-made salient. This is aided by platform affordances that make retrieval and resurfacing effortless. A rhetorical approach offers practical opportunities for countering persuasive attempts by allowing analysts to follow the temporal dynamics of narrative persistence, attending to how invention and arrangement are combined, particularly during *kairotic* events and periods of ritualised retellings, to anticipate likely reactivation of persuasive themes and to prepare pre-emptive counter-narratives.

Finally, delivery in the social media environment looks beyond the simple transactional nature of a communicative act to identify how the features offered by social media platforms are utilised to deliver key arguments. Analysing delivery reframes practices for countering persuasive attempts away from an exclusive focus on content and toward network flows by making the process of delivery transparent – following the processes that describe how and why a message travelled in a particular way, for example whether a message was paid or organic, what targeting parameters were provided, and what amplification it obtained through various technical features. This allows analysts to reconstruct the pathways by which messages gain attention and to discriminate between organic circulation and manipulated cascades.

In sum, adopting a canon-complete rhetorical framework allows analysts the ability to move from reactive content policing to proactive ecology management. In this sense, not only does a rhetorical framework allow for a greater understanding of

persuasive attempts via social media, but it also provides an opportunity to more effectively counter the threats posed by manipulative messaging.

In utilising this framework, however, two key points are worth noting. First, that the rhetorical framework does not provide rules for achieving persuasion. Rather, it offers conceptual guidelines for both effecting persuasion and analysing how it functions. The novelty of each situation and the uncertainty that this creates means that the rhetorical framework must be adapted to take the context and audience into account in each specific situation. Second, while the framework has been presented in a somewhat linear manner discussing each of the canons independently, the strength of the framework lies in all canons comprising integrated elements of a whole that link form (style, memory, and delivery) and substance (invention and arrangement) in mutually supporting and reinforcing ways to effect desired persuasion.

In concluding, in this article we sought to develop a framework for understanding a growing problem in contemporary society, that of the co-option of social media as a persuasive tool that threatens security at the individual, societal, national and international level. We argue that a rhetorical framework derived from Aristotle's thinking and reframed for the contemporary environment provides a valuable theoretical framework for understanding, and potentially countering, persuasion in the contemporary social media environment.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis sought to better understand a growing problem in contemporary society: the co-option of social media as a persuasive tool. Originally developed to connect people, social media created a new digital space where communities could be built, social networks established, and user generated content created and rapidly shared (Van Dijck, 2013). Celebrated as a hallmark of progress for the knowledge they shared and the collective engagement opportunities they offered, the rise of these platforms held great promise for society and were celebrated as providing a new public-commons where democracy could flourish (Blagojević & Šćekić, 2022; Kuznetsov, 2022; Mossberger et al., 2008; Woolley & Howard, 2019).

More recently, however, these platforms have been co-opted by governments, political parties, and other organisations to shape the environment in a manner favourable to them (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018b, 2019; Dhawan et al., 2022; Gisondi et al., 2022; Muhammed & Mathew, 2022; Vaidhyanathan, 2018; West, 2016). Domestically, this is highlighted by the use of social media in 26 countries as a tool to restrict human rights, undermine political opponents, and silence opposing voices (Bradshaw et al., 2021a). But as well as for persuading and controlling domestic populations, these platforms have also been used by nation states as a sophisticated tool of information warfare to undertake influence activities globally to achieve geopolitical goals (Nelson et al., 2025a, 2025b). These platforms have also been co-opted by non-state actors who are undertaking divisive social media campaigns that are heightening ethnic, cultural and racial tensions; inspiring violent nationalist movements; and causing civil disturbance (Bradshaw et al., 2021a, Stengel, 2019).

Social media is, thus, no longer merely a tool that brings people together. Rather, it has been co-opted as a persuasive tool to exert power and manipulate others in

a manner never before envisaged (Bennett, 2016; Bradshaw & Howard, 2018a, 2018b; Couldry & Hepp, 2018; Gilardi et al., 2022; Innes, 2020a; Lipschultz, 2022; Margetts et al., 2015; Naderer, 2023). In doing this, it is altering the geopolitical balance of power; polarising societies; and, at a human level, creating uncertainty and anxiety; undermining trust in knowledge, people, systems, and institutions; and shaping both beliefs and behaviour.

Understanding this problem, and in particular understanding how persuasive attempts occur in the digital environment, is, thus, of considerable importance. However, these platforms comprise a range of features which make this a complex undertaking. Moreover, these features are both rapidly and continually evolving as dynamic algorithms, network compositions, and personal settings are constantly modified, making an already diverse and complex ecosystem even more so (Bradshaw, 2020; Gilardi et al., 2022; Lipschultz, 2022).

Notwithstanding this, research has made considerable gains in understanding how various factors are exploited to effect political persuasion online. Some of this research is focussed on technology (Aral, 2020; Hoffmann et al., 2019; Huszár et al., 2022; Muhlmeyer & Agarwal, 2021) while other research explores how various social and cognitive vulnerabilities can be exploited via social media to achieve persuasive effect. Although this research has made some excellent progress in providing an understanding of how various technological and social factors are exploited to effect persuasion, gaps remain in our understanding of persuasion in the social media environment and, notably, frameworks for gaining this understanding are lacking.

A number of scholars have argued that traditional rhetorical analysis offers a productive means of addressing these conceptual gaps by providing a structured framework through which to investigate persuasive attempts in a digitally mediated

environment. Foundational work by Brooke (2009), Eyman (2015), and Welch (1999), demonstrates the continued relevance of rhetorical theory for understanding the evolving persuasive dynamics online. These authors contend that classical rhetorical approaches can be adapted for the digital environment, enabling scholars to move beyond purely technical explanations to examine how persuasion is constructed within a digital ecology. While incredibly valuable, this work did not extend to the social media environment.

Building on this foundational work, a further body of research has applied aspects of the classical rhetorical framework to the social media environment (Bronstein, 2013; Chen et al., 2021; English et al., 2011; Pang & Law, 2017; Samuel-Azran et al., 2015). More specifically, these authors have undertaken research that operationalises Aristotelian theory by examining participant responses to various social media messages categorised in terms of Aristotle's rhetorical proofs of *ethos* (appeal to credibility and authority), *pathos* (emotional appeal), and *logos* (logical reasoning). In doing so they highlight how, despite the technological capabilities of social media platforms, classical rhetoric offers considerable opportunities for understanding underlying persuasive strategies on these platforms.

While valuable in highlighting both the complexity and contextual nature of the effectiveness of rhetorical proofs in the social media environment, this research has not moved beyond these rhetorical proofs – which are only one part of the traditional rhetorical framework. Although analysing what arguments were utilised, the research leaves a gap in our understanding of persuasion in this environment as it did not explore how the key arguments were organised, designed, delivered, or remembered. In this sense, the research does not fully capture how both social interaction and platform

technical affordances such as multimodality and algorithmic curation combine to effect persuasion.

To that end, the aim of this thesis was to draw on Aristotle's complete rhetorical framework and reframe it to the contemporary environment to more fully understand how persuasive attempts are undertaken in the social media environment, particularly as they impact issues of national security.

Key Insights and Implications

In engaging with the research problem and addressing the research aim, this thesis presents three separate studies – two case studies (Chapters 3 and 4) and an analytical study (Chapter 5) that features key insights from these cases and reframes the rhetorical framework by bringing together classical theory with contemporary practice. Across these studies, three interconnected findings emerged. First, that social media is not simply a transmitter of persuasive messaging but, rather, it constitutes an evolving digital ecology where actors, technologies, and audiences co-construct discourse to achieve persuasive effect. Second, that within this digital ecology, Aristotle's rhetorical framework, reframed for the contemporary environment, offers a practical and useful analytical framework for understanding persuasive attempts via social media. Third, and in recognising the potential threats to security posed by social media, that when persuasion in the contemporary social media environment is understood via a rhetorical framework, the implications for security at all levels become clear and opportunities for intervention to limit the threats to security begin to emerge. I will now discuss each of these findings in turn.

Social Media as a Digital Ecology

In exploring the first of these, that of social media as a digital ecology, the thesis notes how persuasion via social media is not adequately explained by more traditional models of message transmission where audience participation is a downstream effect. Rather, the social media environment is a sociotechnical system whose affordances: availability, scale, speed, multimodality, and algorithmic distribution, along with the fact that everyone is a potential prosumer capable of creating, editing, publishing, and instantly sharing information, reframes not only who holds communicative power but also how this power is exercised. This reframing highlights the environment as a digital ecology where persuasion is not a simple linear process where a particular input produces a persuasive output but, rather, is an emergent effect of a variety of interdependent social actions and technical processes that interact under constantly changing conditions within a given context. In this sense, arguments are not merely constructed by a rhetor and transmitted for persuasive effect, they are socially constructed, reinterpreted, and reconstructed through collaborative consensus-making by prosumers and platforms. This arguably creates a much more powerful form of persuasion.

In utilising this ecological metaphor, three key aspects are worthy of note. First, that the digital ecology metaphor is not simply a decorative overlay; rather, it is an insight that aligns an epistemic perspective with empirical phenomena across the cases. In identifying Aristotle's canons as ecological functions, it moves the rhetorical framework from one of message-centrism to one of system-centrism where discovering the available means of persuasion takes into account a range of both social and technical features. For example, in looking to influence the outcome of the 2016 US presidential elections, the IRA undertook an extensive period of planning and preparation to identify

the various cleavages in US society before identifying three distinct audiences and developing arguments unique to each. Using the technical capabilities afforded by the social media platforms, in particular the algorithmic curation and distribution of arguments at speed and scale, the IRA then seeded and fertilised unique, multimodal messaging to carefully segmented audiences for them to further develop, reshape, and amplify key arguments (Chapter 3). The co-construction and cumulative reproduction of these messages meant persuasive arguments were likely to become engrained in deliberations, enhancing their persuasive potential.

Second, that the digital ecology, along with the features it offers, is an integral part of the rhetorical strategy and must be considered in conjunction with messaging when planning a persuasion strategy or campaign. However, in implementing the strategy, the establishment of the digital ecology necessarily precedes the messaging. This suggests that successful persuasion campaigns are as much about ecosystem engineering, establishing pages, creating and cultivating echo chambers, and automating accounts, as they are about messaging capability. Indeed, in both cases explored as part of this research, the technical and organisational infrastructure was put in place first to ensure that audiences could be carefully constructed, and narratives subsequently propagated and seeded to targeted audiences to allow the social construction of arguments. In the case of the IRA campaign, this was achieved through algorithmic curation to create echo chambers that acted as closed habitats to intensify in-group norms and, in turn, persuasive effect (Chapter 3). Not only does this challenge traditional models of persuasion, but it also means that while persuasive strategies can be seeded by a rhetor, they evolve as part of a further dialectical process, often emerging in completely unanticipated ways to effect persuasion.

Third, it is worth noting that even if the digital ecology is optimised and persuasive messaging and processes are sophisticated, this does not guarantee persuasive outcomes. Despite the comprehensive and sophisticated nature of the @RT_Com campaign (Chapter 4) this thesis highlights how it was largely ineffective in achieving its persuasive objectives to impair a NATO response, albeit these remain ongoing. In part, this was a consequence of Russian intelligence failures which led to the implementation of persuasion strategies which were not suited to the operational environment. More significantly, however, the failure was a consequence of Western governments getting ahead of Russian narratives to pre-bunk them. To allow effective actions such as these to be developed, understanding persuasion campaigns is essential, and a rhetorical framework provides utility in both gaining this understanding as well as in identifying potential countermeasures. I return to this later in the conclusion.

A Reframed Rhetorical Framework

Building on this, when looking across the chapters of this thesis, a consistent theme emerges: that when Aristotle's rhetorical framework is reframed for the contemporary social media environment, it yields a practical, conceptually coherent, and empirically useful tool for analysing and understanding persuasive attempts via social media (Chapter 5). Far from being antiquarian, a rhetorical analysis attuned to the canons of invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery as they are enacted in the digital environment helps explain how contemporary actors plan and implement persuasion campaigns.

Methodologically, the thesis set out to combine an interpretive, psychological humanities inquiry with systematic case analysis. Adopting a psychological humanities orientation (Teo, 2017) and a pragmatic social constructionist stance (Gergen, 2023), the research privileges usefulness and context over universal law-seeking and treats

persuasive messaging as relational achievements negotiated in communicative practices. That stance proved especially apt for rhetoric, where meaning is made *with* audiences in evolving situations rather than simply transmitted *to* them.

Chapter 5 consolidated this orientation by explicitly reframing the canons against contemporary affordances including algorithmic curation, microtargeting of key audiences, cross-platform delivery, and automated agents. The outcome was a revised framework that merges classical theory with digital practice and is offered as a set of conceptual guidelines, not prescriptive rules, for analysing persuasion under conditions of novelty and uncertainty. Critically, the canons are treated as mutually reinforcing rather than siloed, so that questions of form (style, memory, delivery) are analytically intertwined with those of substance (invention, arrangement). This re-articulation was not simply theoretical. It was tested and refined abductively across two case studies: a Facebook-centred analysis of the Internet Research Agency's campaign to influence the outcome of the 2016 US presidential elections (Chapter 3), and a Twitter/X-centred analysis of @RT_Com's 2022 campaign in support of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Chapter 4). Both cases demonstrated the utility of the canons in a platformed environment but noted how they must be adapted to capture digital practices. For example, algorithmic amplification did not map neatly to classical style or delivery without adjustment. I now look specifically at the utility of each of the canons for understanding persuasion in the digital environment.

Invention

For Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1991) invention is the "art (*techne*) of finding out the available means of persuasion" (p. 37). In a digital ecology, invention becomes fundamentally social in that rhetors seed arguments that audiences engage with, reinterpret, reconstruct, and reshare, making meaning in circulation. This move from

author composition to socially constructed arguments was visible in both cases where arguments were seeded and fertilised, but it was the prosumers who further developed, reshaped, and amplified these, thus reframing invention as a socially constructed and ongoing process. The implication of this for undertaking rhetorical analysis in the contemporary environment is that analysts should look not only at what arguments are introduced but also at their social extensibility that solicits and facilitates audience co-production. In that sense, this canon becomes a lens on argument design for uptake rather than merely argument content.

In line with this, audience formation in the social media environment is a key part of invention. The IRA's planning and preparation prior to the conduct of the 2016 campaign and the consequent segmentation of voters into three key audiences highlight how rhetors engineer audiences and then drive specific and unique arguments to them via algorithmic curation. These arguments were predominantly centred on identity-salient themes to match the created audience and to enhance the likelihood of uptake. Invention messaging also heavily utilised *pathos*-focussed appeals specific to each audience, likely in an effort to bypass deliberation and engage through polarisation (Chapter 3). The way in which this allows for the further enhancement of identities and grievances that prosumers can connect with and further propagate arguably make this a far more powerful form of persuasion.

Arrangement

With the canon of arrangement, or the organising of the argument, reframing takes advantage of the scale and speed of the platforms to pivot from a predominantly chronological approach to arranging the arguments (*chronos*), to one of *kairos* that seizes persuasive opportunities as they arise, both exogenous events such as scandals and crises, as well as endogenous signals such as trending topics. Arrangement thus

becomes a context-adaptive process within the digital ecology rather than a pre-determined approach. Both cases highlight how arguments are nested in news cycles and real-time events rather than in fixed sequences, with both the IRA and @RT_Com timing their releases to external triggers such as police violence in the case of the former (Chapter 3) and troop movements and political elite statements in terms of the latter (Chapter 4). The implication of this is that rhetorical analysis must track messaging across time to identify the alignment between situational cues and message dissemination so as to understand the persuasive patterns that are being created and repeated across time and context.

Style

For Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1991), the canon of style, or design of arguments, was not merely one of decoration but, rather, was the fitting of discourse to both audience and purpose. In the digital environment, style is reframed from one focussed on discourse to one of multimodal orchestration where discourse, imagery, videos, and other interactive tools are tailored to audience-specific cultures and sub-cultures. Style is also where the rhetorical proofs of *ethos* and *pathos* are engineered and made legible to target audiences. For @RT_Com, style blended technocratic *logos* with fear and humiliation messaging (*pathos*) to generate desired emotions. Style also incorporated reputational borrowing from authoritative but sympathetic Western voices (*ethos*) to provide credibility (Chapter 4). The goal of this was to enhance uptake and effect persuasion. For rhetorical analysis in the contemporary environment, the implication is that style should identify affordance specific choices and link them explicitly to audience design and emotional positioning.

Memory

This thesis reinforces a classical understanding of memory as one of active recollection and patterned persistence rather than mere storage. It highlights how social media affords rhetors the opportunity to collectively create, preserve, and recollect key argument through a range of both infrastructural features and social practices. In this environment, memory is not simply about the storage and recall of information, rather key arguments are shaped and made persistent through processes of reinforcement, including repeated posting or resharing; reinterpretation; and social negotiation. While both cases utilise a large corpus of data (2,218 Facebook posts by the IRA and 1977 @RT_Com Tweets), each campaign focussed on only a small number of arguments which were either continuously reinforced, including after key events, to ensure preservation of grievances, or recontextualised to fit new opportunities that arose, both examples of the importance of *kairos* in this environment. This ensured arguments were normalised and stabilised over time in patterns. In undertaking a rhetorical analysis in the social media environment, this implies analysts must look beyond single posts to identify how both infrastructure and social practices create the patterns that become memories.

Delivery

In antiquity, Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1991) noted that the persuasive effect of the best arguments may be entirely negated by poor delivery while an inferior argument, both in substance and style, can achieve far greater persuasion than it deserves if well delivered. Arguably, in the contemporary digital environment where the platform infrastructure affords the opportunity to segment audiences, undertake multimodal circulation, and automate amplification of arguments, this maxim is even more relevant. Both cases highlight how utilisation of platform affordances played an important role in

appealing to *ethos* thru adding credibility and to *pathos* through the evocation of desired emotions. Further, the cases highlighted how the combination of micro-targeted delivery and automated amplification of key arguments enhanced argument contagion. The implication of this for rhetorical analysis in the social media environment is that analysts should seek to understand how both social processes and platform features are being utilised in conjunction with each other to generate persuasive effect.

Collectively, the canons offer the opportunity to understand not only *what* is being delivered in an attempt to effect persuasion, but also *how* messaging traverses the digital ecology to effect persuasion. This is the principal contribution of the thesis, the revision of the canons as a viable analytic framework for understanding persuasive attempts in the digital environment.

Implications for the Security Environment

In the introduction, I noted how social media's promise as a democratic commons has been eclipsed by its exploitation as a tool of geopolitical influence that poses a threat to both democracy and security. This is largely a consequence of the sociotechnical nature of platforms whose affordances (scale, speed, interactivity, multimodality, algorithmic curation) reorganise who holds communicative and persuasive power, as well as how it is exercised. When this communicative and persuasive power is examined through a rhetorical framework, its implications for security at the individual, community, national, and international levels become evident and opportunities for intervention through anticipating, detecting, and mitigating those security threats emerge. The discussion that follows first traces the security implications at the various levels. It then outlines some preliminary thoughts on how a canon-complete rhetorical framework offers unique opportunities for identifying approaches to address these security challenges.

At the level of the individual, social media platform affordances threaten security by exploiting attentional capture through highly targeted, multimodal, emotion-laden messaging. The thesis demonstrates how appeals keyed to *endoxa* (widely shared beliefs) and orchestrated through *pathos* can bypass critical faculties to shape both beliefs and behaviour. In the @RT_Com case, short, image-laden posts using emotively laden language were utilised in an effort to invoke desired emotional responses, particularly those of fear, anger, and frustration, to legitimate aggression and discourage a Western response (Chapter 4). Similarly, in the IRA case, *pathos* was prevalent, with unique emotive-laden arguments targeted at highly tailored audiences to generate specific emotions. In turn, this was designed to influence individual voting behaviour (Chapter 3). Algorithmic curation and distribution of messaging is central to this, personalising exposure and bypassing critical faculties to shape beliefs and behaviour and, in doing so, reduce individual agency. This is problematic and threatens security at an individual level, particularly when the focus of messaging is on such issues as election outcomes or conflict escalation.

At the group or community level, platform affordances enable rhetoric to target pre-determined, receptive audiences by ritualizing existing grievances and normalizing antagonism to achieve persuasive goals. In the case of the 2016 US presidential elections, the IRA was shown to have undertaken a comprehensive period of planning to gain an understanding of the key political cleavages within US society as well as the key audiences who corresponded to these cleavages. A digital ecology was then developed along with a series of arguments which sought to amplify these existing cleavages and turn different segments of US society against each other to mobilise conservative voters while simultaneously suppressing liberal voters (Chapter 3). With the @RT_Com case, analysis showed how selected, borrowed *ethos* from Western

officials and influencers was woven into Russian narratives to create a sense that truth is contested. This, in turn, fed domestic polarisation and undermined solidarity with Ukraine (Chapter 4).

This highlights how carefully coordinated rhetorical campaigns on social media construct parallel information ecosystems with distinct messaging and arguments enabling mobilisation and subsequently persuasion around identity-based issues. In such environments, communities become security vectors where competing grievances are aired to facilitate polarisation, and conflict becomes a by-product of persuasive messaging that further reinforces in-groups while vilifying out-groups.

Nationally, the findings highlight how persuasion campaigns threaten democratic legitimacy and governance capacity by contaminating the information environment, distorting deliberation, and undermining trust in institutional authority. As shown in both cases, the scale, speed, and algorithmic nature of platformed delivery allow domestic and foreign actors alike to saturate attention with narratives that frame such significant issues as national elections or national security in ways that entrench suspicion and cynicism, sow discord, and ultimately shape beliefs and behaviour. As the IRA campaign illustrates (Chapter 3), even relatively small shifts among persuadable audiences in key areas can prove decisive, and result in downstream political instability and institutional mistrust. While the platform affordances, particularly those of scale and speed, provide an opportunity for those attempting to persuade, they also compress decision windows for those decision makers looking to counter persuasive messaging, further threatening security at the national level.

Internationally, the research situates social media persuasion as a core instrument of hybrid or grey-zone conflict, that fuzzy space in international relations where hostile activities are undertaken by states to achieve strategic goals but fall below

the threshold of conventional warfare (Mazarr, 2015). Messaging in the social media environment does not merely support strategy; it is an integral part of it and is used to shape alliance cohesion, to challenge national resolve, and to legitimate actions. The @RT_Com case demonstrates how state-aligned media employed narratives targeted at Western publics (no invasion, NATO as aggressor, nuclear resolve, Western security issues) to impair collective action and deter a robust response to Russia's actions. These messages were seeded, reframed, and recirculated at scale and speed both on and across platforms and often utilising *pathos*-led delivery to heighten fear and anger and to optimize exposure. Such activity was likely aimed less at belief change and more at saturating audiences with plausible alternatives, increasing uncertainty, fragmenting alliances, and raising decision costs for national governments (Chapter 4). In this way, rhetorical campaigns become integral to persuasive strategies that seek geopolitical effects without overt escalation.

Addressing Security Risks through a Rhetorical Framework

While the focus of this thesis has been on understanding persuasive attempts in the social media environment, and this is seen as an essential first step in allowing measures to be developed to counter such attempts, what has been highlighted is the opportunity afforded by a rhetorical approach to move beyond understanding to one of anticipatory analysis and targeted intervention development. While a comprehensive exploration of intervention is beyond the scope of this thesis, preliminary, albeit rudimentary, suggestions are offered.

In looking at the canon of invention, focus is on how arguments are keyed to *endoxa*, or those commonplaces and shared assumptions within target groups. Systematically identifying these commonplaces enables early identification of messaging likely to carry persuasive effect. Security actors can use this to inform pre-

emptive narrative design to deliver messages that reduce an audience's susceptibility to manipulation by exposing them to likely arguments and seeding credible alternatives and inoculative refutations ahead of time. In practice, this means combining situational awareness with participatory engagement to produce messages that acknowledge legitimate concerns while shutting down manipulative framings before they take hold.

Rhetorical arrangement allows security analysts to track not only message sequences (*chronos*) but, importantly, opportunity structures (*kairos),* or those moments when a confluence of events opens pathways for disruption. In practice, this implies real-time monitoring to identify and anticipate patterns of key arguments rather than simply individual messages. Interventions can then be targeted at these patterns, as opposed to point-by-point refutation of individual messages, and timed to pre-empt persuasive attempts, e.g. by surfacing credible counter-testimony, saturating attention with corrective narratives, or deploying friction (slowed resharing) during identified *kairotic* windows. Situational awareness combined with platform affordance of speed and scale allows security practitioners to move from reactive debunking to proactive pre-bunking, a far more effective approach to countering persuasive attempts (Lewandowsky & Van Der Linden, 2021).

Style analysis highlights the multimodal affordances that scaffold both identity and affect. Security practitioners can leverage style by developing repositories of high-fidelity, pre-tested messages tailored to specific audiences that local actors can rapidly adapt to pre-bunk manipulative messaging. There is also an opportunity to introduce design frictions in platform affordances that are frequently implicated in high arousal spread (e.g. warnings on resharing image macros that match known patterns of incendiary style) as well as investing in rhetorical literacy programmes that teach how emotions such as humour, fear, anger, or nostalgia are mobilised to bypass scrutiny.

Because stylistic repertoires are culturally coded, community partnership is crucial as trusted members of the various target audiences are well positioned to translate security-relevant content into material that carries resonance.

In the platformed environment, memory is a socially negotiated practice through which events are re-told and re-made salient. Both cases show that persuasive actors work on memory as much as on belief, cultivating mnemonic hooks such as vivid imagery, anniversaries, and memes that can be periodically reactivated to reinforce preferred narratives over time. This work is aided by platform affordances that make retrieval and resurfacing effortless. A rhetorical approach opens practical opportunities for countering security threats by encouraging analysts to follow the temporal dynamics of narrative persistence, attending to how invention and arrangement are combined, particularly during *kairotic* events and periods of ritualised retellings, to anticipate likely reactivation of persuasive themes and to prepare pre-emptive counter-narratives.

Delivery in the social media environment looks beyond the simple transactional nature of a communicative act to identify how the features offered by social media platforms are utilised to deliver key arguments. In the cases examined, persuasive effect depended not only on the eloquence of an argument, but also on its delivery through algorithmic curation, distribution, and amplification. Analysing delivery then reframes security practices away from an exclusive focus on content and toward network flows. A rhetorical perspective helps identify potential counter measures through a process of delivery transparency, following the processes that describe how and why a message travelled in a particular way, e.g. whether a message was paid or organic, what targeting parameters were provided, and what amplification it obtained through various technical features. This form of delivery transparency allows security practitioners to reconstruct

the pathways by which messages gain attention and to discriminate between organic circulation and manipulated cascades.

In sum, adopting a canon-complete rhetorical framework allows analysts and practitioners the ability to move from reactive content policing to proactive ecology management - anticipating how arguments will be invented, recognising the *kairotic* patterns by which they are arranged, designing and evaluating styles that inoculate, tending to collective memory, and regulating the infrastructures of delivery. This provides an opportunity to more effectively address the threats to security posed by manipulative messaging.

Contribution of the Research

This thesis advances persuasion research in the social media environment through reconceptualising it as a distributed, socio-technical process that is co-constructed in a digital ecology through human interaction and platform affordances. Working from a social constructionist orientation within the psychological humanities (Teo, 2017) the thesis contributes a reframed rhetorical framework tailored to social media communication, a methodology that advances a rhetorical-constructionist approach, and empirically grounded insights that have practical utility for policy, platform governance, and psychology. Together, these contributions extend the field beyond a linear message of persuasion to a dynamic ecology of influence.

Conceptually, the thesis advances an analytical framework that adapts Aristotle's five rhetorical canons from oratory to platformed digital communication, showing how persuasion emerges from the interplay of messages, audiences, and platform affordances such as multimodality, audience segmentation, and algorithmic curation and distribution. While prior analytical studies of social media persuasion utilising classical rhetoric (Bronstein, 2013; Chen et al., 2021; English et al., 2011; Pang

& Law, 2017; Samuel-Azran et al., 2015) often stop at *ethos, pathos,* and *logos,* in this thesis I utilise the full rhetorical framework to theorise persuasion as a recursive, co-constructed process where arguments are seeded for prosumers to further develop, reshape, and amplify. This theoretical work is brought together in Chapter Five which articulates in detail how the canons translate from the agora to the algorithm and positions rhetoric as a living analytic rather than an historical curiosity.

Methodologically, the thesis develops a rhetorical-constructionist approach consistent with a psychological humanities tradition that reframes each canon and applies it through case-based inquiry. The design combines distant reading of a large digital corpus with context-sensitive analysis, enabling the tracing of how arguments are seeded, stylised, delivered, taken up, and recollected over time. This approach connects discourse, context, psychological processes (e.g. emotional arousal, credibility judgements, and identity alignment) and technical structures (e.g. audience segmentation, algorithmic curation, and social-bot distribution) to go beyond the constraints of a decontextualised experimental approach to persuasion by treating communication as a rhetorical act embedded in a socio-technical ecology. The methodology is demonstrated across two different cases highlighting the transferability of it as a flexible framework across platforms, issues, and audiences.

Empirically, the thesis documents recurrent patterns by which both state and state supported actors look to effect persuasion online. Invention is shown to be anchored in audience segmentation and calibrated to prevailing beliefs; arrangement couples key argument repetition with *kairotic* bursts linked to unfolding events; style privileges brevity, multimodal messaging, and transgressive humour that facilitates affective resonance and group identification; memory work consolidates narratives through prompts, anniversaries, and iterative re-posting; and delivery leverages

microtargeting, iterative testing, and coordinated automation to extend reach and durability. These findings demonstrate that persuasion via social media is about the construction and management of socio-technical information ecologies.

The value of these findings is both scholarly and applied. From an applied perspective, for social media platform governance the rhetorical lens suggests oversight that attends not only to content but also to arrangement patterns, stylistic features, memory-engineering tactics, and delivery techniques. For policymakers, the analysis points to interventions that address the broader ecology: constraints on opaque microtargeting; algorithmic transparency around delivery infrastructure; and resourcing agile, *kairotic* counter-messaging that pre-empts or interrupts key argument consolidation. From a scholarly perspective, the framework supports both critical media literacy and psychological resilience programmes that help people understand how arguments are invented, stylised, memorialised, and delivered to audiences to effect persuasion. These findings speak directly to the security and democratic risks identified in the introduction to this thesis.

More broadly for psychology, this thesis suggests a more pluralistic psychology of persuasion in which interpretive, rhetorical analysis attuned to context and recognising persuasion as a socio-technical process complements measurement-driven science seeking causal effects. The theoretical chapter offers an analytical framework, grounded in classical rhetoric but reframed to take into account the affordances of the digital environment, for studying complex social behaviour without collapsing it into decontextualised variables.

Briefly, the thesis contributes a reframed rhetorical framework suitable for analysing persuasion in the contemporary social media environment; a rhetorical–constructionist methodology that links psychological processes to socio-technical

dynamics; and empirically grounded insights with both scholarly and applied utility. Reframing persuasion as a co-constructed process shaped by invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery as these interact within platformed ecologies, extends the scope of persuasion research and enhances psychology's ability to both understand and address the security challenges posed by a digital public square.

Limitations and Future Research

Notwithstanding its contributions, this thesis is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged, and which provide opportunities for future scholarship. These limitations relate to the case-based topics adopted, the nature of the data and platform affordances, and the inability to determine real-world impacts.

First, the research relies on two intensively studied cases: the Internet Research Agency's activity to influence the 2016 US presidential election (Chapter 3) and @RT_Com messaging in support of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Chapter 4). While case selection allows close attention to invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery as these unfolded in a particular context to effect persuasion, what Gallagher (2024) refers to as a bounded system, it also introduces scope limitations. In the two cases, the findings are shaped by specific contextual issues: the platforms, the issues at hand, the various audiences, and the time frame researched. Different issues, platform affordances, audiences, and languages may see persuasion unfold in different ways. Moreover, state-linked campaigns are not the only focus of persuasion, commercial, private, and grassroots actors may undertake similar activities for persuasive effect.

Second, there are inherent limitations with both data collection and analysis in the social media environment as well as with opacity in platform infrastructures. Social media is a big data environment where multimodal data moves at scale and speed

through algorithmic systems that are not fully observable to external researchers. For this thesis, I undertook largely manual data collection and analysis in an effort to gain an in-depth understanding of persuasive attempts within a given context. The relatively small number of messages collected and analysed manually across both cases proved both laborious and incredibly time-consuming. Utilising this approach then results in practical limitations on scale which in turn impacts on findings. Additionally, metadata accessible to researchers does not fully capture algorithmic ranking, A/B testing regimes, or paid amplification, which are central to the canon of delivery. These constraints temper claims about reach, exposure, and impact.

Third, notwithstanding the utility of Aristotle's rhetorical framework for gaining insights into persuasive attempts via social media, limitations remain in understanding the real-world impact of an influence campaign using this approach. For example, with the IRA campaign to influence the 2016 US presidential elections (Chapter 3), despite identifying how key arguments were developed and delivered to various audiences of up to 130 million people, it was not possible to determine whether the campaign was sufficient to actually influence the outcome of the election. While problematic, rhetorical analysis is not alone in its inability to determine real world impact. As Chapter Three notes, considerable challenges across multiple studies, both quantitative and qualitative, have emerged in determining clear cause and effect.

Several opportunities exist to address these constraints. First, future research should look to expand the comparative base across rhetors, platforms, issues, regions, and audiences to evaluate the portability and limitations of the rhetorical framework and to map where canon dynamics converge or diverge.

Second, automation of collection and analysis at scale using computational social science software, including artificial intelligence, which is tailored to a rhetorical

framework could overcome some of the big data issues associated with research in this environment. Natural language processing could assist distant reading to identify key themes for invention; sequence and burst detection could capture arrangement in both *chronos* and *kairos*; computer vision software could analyse style in image–text ensembles; graph analytics could map memory as the persistence and transformation of arguments over time; and bot detection and audit methodologies could illuminate delivery infrastructures. Notwithstanding the opportunities afforded by these tools, caution would need to be exerted when utilising them to guard against model hallucination (Rawte et al., 2023), bias reproduction (Mehrabi et al., 2021) and privacy concerns (Das et al., 2025) and to ensure discourse is not merely collapsed into decontextualised tokens.

Third, mixed-methods approaches offer opportunities in this environment. Quantitative methods combining large-scale collection, sorting and automated mapping of canon dynamics with purposive qualitative sampling for rhetorical analysis may be useful. Further, field or natural experiments, where ethically and practically feasible, could test whether persuasive attempts derived from rhetorical analysis measurably alter exposure, interpretation, or behaviour. Such designs could more tightly connect interpretive insight with big data evidence.

Finally, the findings highlight an opportunity for a programme of inoculation, preparing audiences from pre-school to retirement, to recognise and resist manipulative persuasion attempts. Inoculation programmes should be more than generic critical thinking; interventions could be based upon the rhetorical framework. For example, modules could teach how arguments are invented by tapping into *endoxa* (shared commonplaces); how arrangement leverages *kairotic* moments to steer attention; how multimodal style shapes affect; how memory is engineered through repetition,

anniversaries, and mnemonic hooks; and how delivery infrastructures work to microtarget audiences and create echo chambers. While based around a rhetorical framework, programmes would, of course, need to be age-differentiated and partnerships with schools, tertiary institutions, employers, and civic organisations would be crucial for reach and sustainability.

Concluding Comment

In conclusion, this thesis sought to better understand a growing problem in contemporary society: the co-option of social media as a persuasive tool to undermine trust, erode social cohesion, and alter the geopolitical balance of power. This understanding is vital if we are to address the threats to both democracy and security posed by this co-option of social media. While an ever-growing body of research has been undertaken to understand this topic and some excellent contributions to the literature have been made, gaps remain in both our understanding and, notably, the frameworks for gaining this understanding. Drawing on a rich history of rhetoric, this thesis revisited classical perspectives and reframed them to them to offer a potential way of understanding persuasion in the contemporary social media environment, particularly as it impacts issues of national security.

Through applying this framework across various cases, this research identified several findings, both scholarly and, importantly, applied. From a scholarly perspective, several chapters of the thesis have been published in peer-reviewed journals, contributing to ongoing discourse and thinking on contemporary persuasion. These contributions also highlight the relevance of classical thinkers such as Protagoras, Aristotle, and Cicero, whose ideas, though often overlooked, continue to offer valuable insights for modern psychology and persuasion research. Indeed, their inclusion in this

study enriches our understanding of how persuasion operates today, in an environment inconceivable to the likes of Aristotle.

For an applied researcher interested in contributing to solving real-world practical problems, the rhetorical framework offers actionable governance, policy, and practitioner suggestions for understanding what is a significant problem for society. This understanding provides an essential first step in developing counter measures to address the problem.

Although the thesis is complete, my work does not end. Rather this marks the beginning of a new phase of research. I am committed to delving further into the topic, drawing on the learnings so far to further refine this framework by incorporating rapidly advancing technologies and methods that will allow for the real time collection and analysis of persuasive attempts. Ultimately, this will allow me to develop timely and pragmatic countermeasures that address what is one of the most pressing challenges of our time.

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Appendix – Statements of Contribution

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
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STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION
DOCTORATE WITH PUBLICATIONS/MANUSCRIPTS

We, the student and the student's main supervisor, certify that all co-authors have consented to their work being included in the thesis and they have accepted the student's contribution as indicated below in the Statement of Originality.

Student name:	Nick Nelson
Name and title of main supervisor:	Professor Darrin Hodgetts
In which chapter is the manuscript/published work?	Three

Describe the contribution that the student and members of the supervisory team have made to the manuscript/published work:[1]

Student undertook research and drafting of article. Supervisors provided guidance and editing.

Please select one of the following three options:

- (●) **The manuscript/published work is published or in press**

  Please provide the full reference of the research output:

  Nelson, N., Hodgetts, D., & Chamberlain, K. (2025). The Internet Research Agency Campaign to Influence the 2016 US Presidential Elections: A Rhetorical Analysis. Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology, 35(5) https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.70163

- ( ) **The manuscript is currently under review for publication**

  Please provide the name of the journal:

- ( ) **It is intended that the manuscript will be published, but it has not yet been submitted to a journal**

Student's signature:	Nick Nelson	Main supervisor's signature:	Professor Darrin Hodgetts Digitally signed by Professor Darrin Hodgetts Date: 2025.11.12 19:30:57 +13'00'

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STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION DOCTORATE WITH PUBLICATIONS/MANUSCRIPTS

We, the student and the student's main supervisor, certify that all co-authors have consented to their work being included in the thesis and they have accepted the student's contribution as indicated below in the Statement of Originality.

Student name:	Nick Nelson
Name and title of main supervisor:	Professor Darrin Hodgetts
In which chapter is the manuscript/published work?	Four

Describe the contribution that the student and members of the supervisory team have made to the manuscript/published work:[1]

Student undertook research and drafting of article. Supervisors provided guidance and editing.

Please select one of the following three options:

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