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The Internet Research Agency Campaign to Influence the 2016 US Presidential Elections: A Rhetorical Analysis

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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 (2218 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.

1 | 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; Perloff 2014; Carah 2021). 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 and Howard 2018b, 2018a; Bolton 2021). The rapid rise of these sociotechnical platforms has been celebrated as providing a new public commons where democracy can flourish (Hoffman et al., 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 (Lin and Kerr 2019; Aral 2020; 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

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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 (DiResta et al. 2018; Howard et al. 2018; Hoffmann et al. 2019; Aral 2020; Muhlmeyer and Agarwal 2021; Huszár et al. 2022) 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; Samuel-Azran et al. 2015; Pang and Law 2017; Chen et al. 2021). 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 and Stolte 2012). Specifically, it utilises the case of the Internet Research Agency’s (IRA) interference in the 2016 US presidential elections.

2 | 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 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

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.

persuasion were employed by the IRA to influence the 2016 US presidential elections.

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 (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 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 (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; 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 audience's critical faculties (Aristotle 2015). To arouse emotions in an audience, Aristotle (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 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, that is whether through *logos*, *ethos* or *pathos*, but also how key arguments evolve through social interaction to achieve a persuasive effect.

The second canon, arrangement, focuses 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 (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, 385) called “the dress of thought.” This misrepresentation, however, overlooks the important and reciprocal relationship between invention and style. Aristotle (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 (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 makes 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.

3 | 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, 398). This section provides a brief discussion of the rhetorical situation specific to the case at hand.

3.1 | Exigence

To understand the 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 and 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 and 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 (DoJ 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 (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 ...’ (US v. Khusaynova 2018, 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.

3.2 | 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; 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 (US Government 2022). Often, the 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 (FEC 2015). 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 focused 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 (US 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 (US v. IRA 2018; US v. Khusaynova 2018; DoJ 2019). 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.

3.3 | 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.

4 | Method

In undertaking this research, we sought to go beyond a scientific 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 and Stolte 2012, 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 3519 Facebook paid posts, or inorganic messages, and their associated metadata which included message creation date, text, landing page, targeting parameters, impressions, clicks, and spend (USHPSCI, n.d.). Of these 3519 inorganic messages, 2218 appeared during the period 1 Jun 2015 to 8 November 2016, that is, 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 script¹. Following the 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 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.

5 | 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.

5.1 | 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 suppressing 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 2218 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 state's 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.

5.2 | 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 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 (1308 of 2218 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. Figure 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

Ad ID 326
 Ad Text Since 2010, over 350 of our lives have been taken at the hands of police. Those lives of which, were made to be worthless because of our race. Each time we die, many of your people, and those who stand by you, justify the taking of our lives, because they believe we are not human, and are not worthy of life.
 Why should we be a target for police violence and harassment?
 Ad Landing Page <https://www.facebook.com/Black-Matters-1579673598947501/>
 Ad Targeting Location: United States: Baltimore Maryland; Ferguson, St. Louis Missouri; Cleveland Ohio

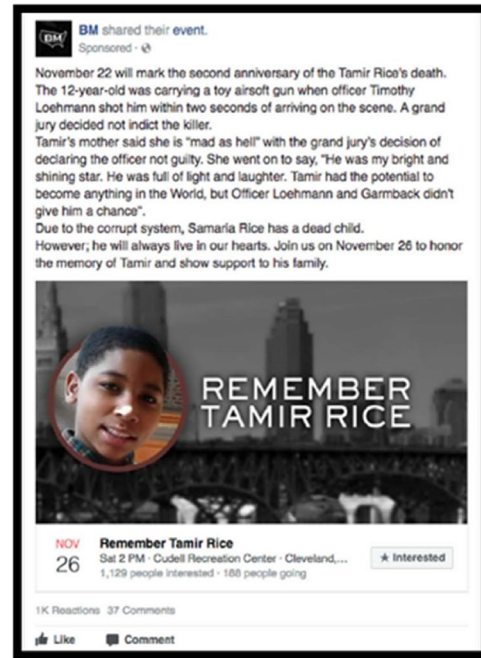


FIGURE 1 | IRA inorganic messaging: Racial injustice.

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).

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) (Figure 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 (Figure 2 bottom).

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. Figure 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.

In conjunction with the more than 50 posts focussed on anti-Clinton messaging, a number were pro Bernie Sanders or Jill Stein (Figure 2 right). These messages were likely designed to persuade left-wing voters into concluding that voting for Clinton was pointless; 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 Figure 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 moral 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).

From without, an overwhelming majority of messaging focussed on anti-immigration examples which framed the

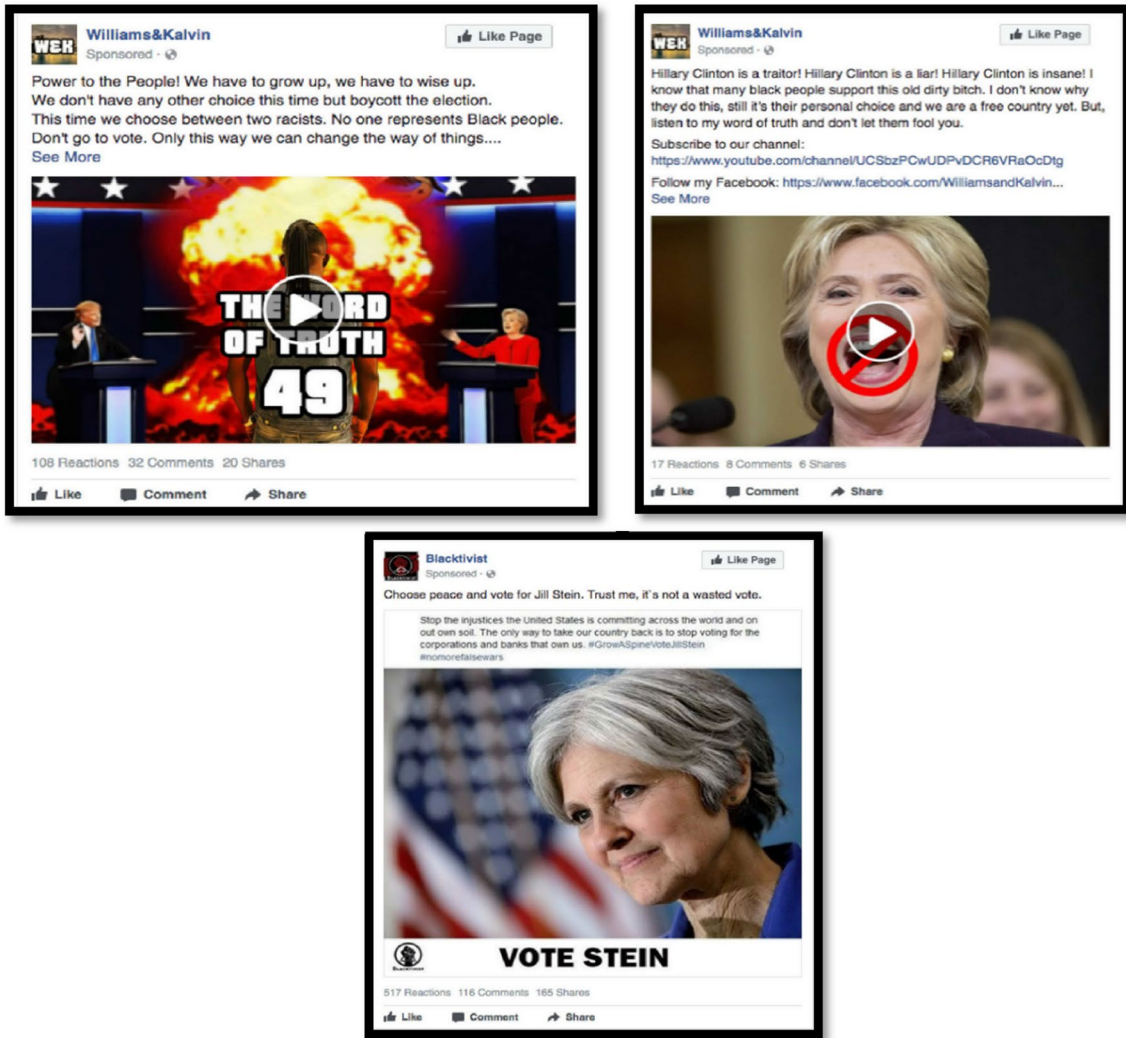


FIGURE 2 | IRA inorganic messaging: Failure to address racial injustice.

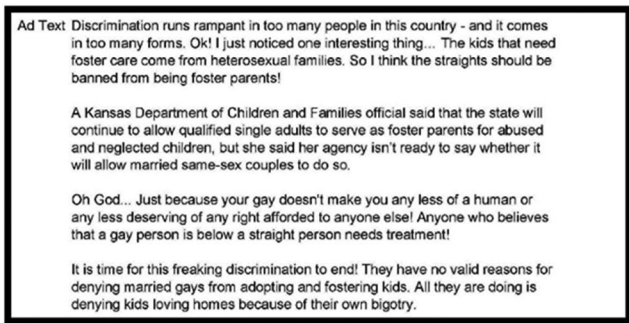


FIGURE 3 | IRA inorganic messaging: Left-wing voters.

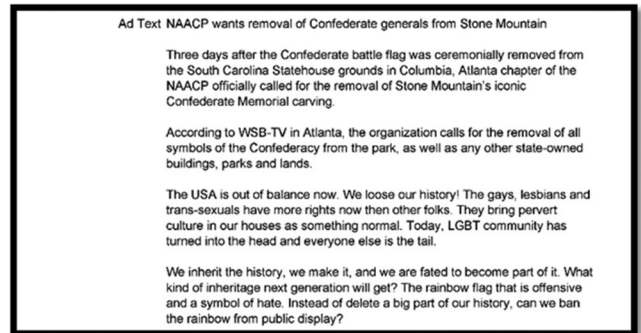


FIGURE 4 | IRA inorganic messaging: Threats to right-wing voters from within.

understanding and evaluation of the issues, particularly the perceived threats to conservative perceptions of national identity. As highlighted in Figure 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 to mobilise right-wing voters to vote. That these messages were factually incorrect or misleading mattered little as they were designed to



FIGURE 5 | IRA inorganic messaging: Threats to right-wing voters from without.



FIGURE 6 | IRA inorganic messaging: Appeals to conservative nationalism.

reinforce pre-existing ideas and beliefs held by the target audience to achieve the desired persuasive effect.

A number of messages were likely designed to appeal to conservative nationalism through pro-police, pro-veteran or, in the case of Figure 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).

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 Figure 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.

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 suppressing 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, 14). We turn then to the second rhetorical appeal, *ethos*.

5.3 | 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; Trojanovski 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

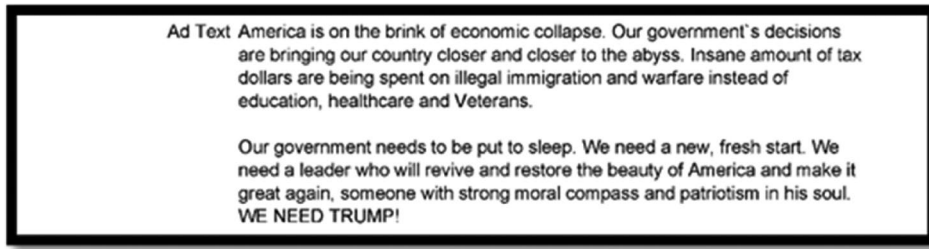


FIGURE 7 | IRA inorganic messaging: Vote trump messaging.

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 (US 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; US 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 (US 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.

5.4 | 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’ (US v. Khusyaynova 2018, 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 and 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. Figure 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, Figure 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. Figure 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.

5.5 | 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 5 months of the campaign, 43% (1.8 m of 4.5 m roubles) of total advertising spend (Figure 8) and seven of the ten top spend messages occurred (296 k roubles).

Analysis of the messages during this period highlights that much of the effort was focused 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,

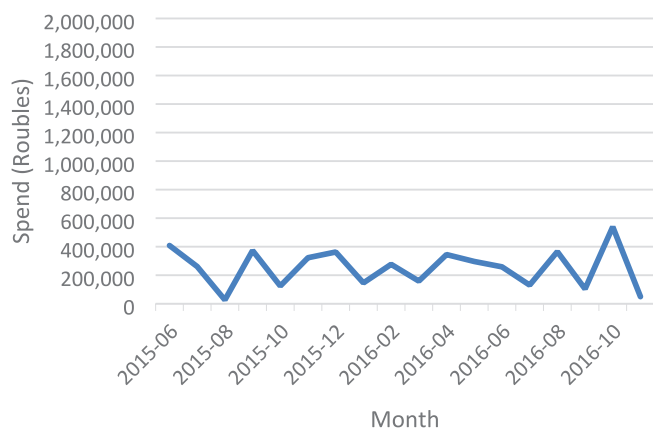


FIGURE 8 | IRA inorganic messaging: Spend by month.

interests, behaviour, and connections. For example, in June 2015, the IRA commenced a comprehensive advertising campaign focused 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, Figure 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 show spikes in IRA advertising activity in April and May 2016, as well as a substantial increase

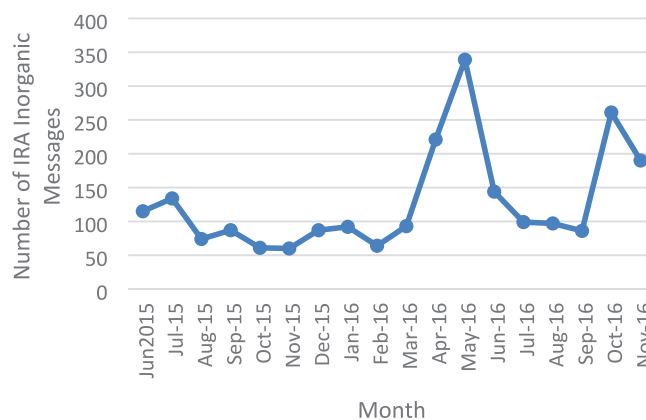


FIGURE 9 | IRA inorganic messaging: Messages by month.

in activity in the months of October and early November 2016—immediately prior to the election (Figure 9). Data from Figure 8 highlight a corresponding increase in advertising spend in these months.

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 (Figure 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 (Figure 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 (Figure 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 (Figure 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 (Figure 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.

5.6 | 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 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, Figure 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 and 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. Figure 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 1.1% for Facebook advertisements.

5.7 | 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 1991) they have also been shown during election campaigns to enhance remembering when voting (Civettini and 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 (Figure 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 and Johnson 1972; Craik and 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 to 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 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' (Figure 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 (Figure 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 the persistence of memories in each target audience that were key to the persuasive process.

5.8 | Delivery

In the social media environment, delivery is focused 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 allow 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 enhances 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 the 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.

6 | 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 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 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.

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Conflicts of Interest

One of the co-authors of this submission, Professor Darrin Hodgetts, is an Associate Editor of the Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology and this poses a potential perceived conflict of interest. Notwithstanding this, given the double-anonymised peer review policy of the Journal, we consider this minimises any potential conflict.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

¹ We would like to thank Professor Ahmed Al-Rawi from Simon Fraser University for his invaluable assistance with the converted PDF files.

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.

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

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