

Russia's @RT_Com Twitter campaign supporting the 2022 Ukraine invasion: A rhetorical analysis

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Abstract

The centrality of information and communicative processes in influencing and contributing to the beliefs held in a populous has, historically, made the media one of the key networks of power and influence in society. The rapid expansion of social media platforms has revolutionized how media power is wielded to influence how political, economic, and social issues are mobilized, 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 (2473 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 utilize 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

Aristotle, persuasion, rhetoric, Russian invasion, security, social media, Twitter, Ukraine

As of July 2023, Twitter was rebranded to X. Given that this research occurred prior to the rebranding, 'Twitter' and all its associated terminology is used throughout this article.

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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, 2021; Metakides, 2024; Singer & Brooking, 2018; Vaidhyanathan, 2018; Woolley & Howard, 2018). Understanding how symbolic power (to name and define issues and events to promote particular social orders) and influence are 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 & Cacioppo, 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 recognized 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, 1981, 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 personalized, 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 & Rodriguez, 2017; 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 focused on technology (Aral, 2021; 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 et al., 2023; Bradshaw & Howard, 2018b; 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, 2018); and both dis- and misinformation (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 categorized 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 depending 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 humor, 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 utilized.

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 analyzing what arguments were utilized, the research did not explore how the messaging was organized, 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 organization, 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, 1991). This article is focused 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 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 organization 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) recognizing 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, 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 (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, 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 (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 goodwill (Aristotle, 2015). Importantly, the effect of persuasion through *ethos* is a judgment call about the credibility of a rhetor, which will vary depending on the audience—what one audience considers practical wisdom or goodwill may be very different from another audience.

Pathos involves the arousal of, or appeal to, those emotions that affect target audiences' judgments, particularly those pertaining to pain or pleasure (Aristotle, 2015). The purpose of emotive appeals is to persuade through bypassing an audiences' critical faculties (Rapp, 2012). To arouse emotions in an audience, Aristotle (1991) notes that a rhetor must be cognizant of three key factors: the state of mind of the audience (e.g., angry, fearful, and 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, focuses on how arguments are organized. In part, the arrangement was a formal system of organization that set out each argument based on its purpose—a largely linear approach to organizing arguments. While this type of organization 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 linear 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 utilized 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 focused on a model of memory as merely storage; that is, the memorization 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 individualized notion of mental storage to a collective rhetorical activity. Analyzing 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 focused 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, 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 their 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 utilize 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 recognize 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 (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 2004–2005 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" (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 Yanukovich and the overthrow of the Ukrainian government, was seen by Putin as an attempt by the United States 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 February 24, 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 was 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 February 21, 2022, Putin announced the Russian governments recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and ordered a "peacekeeping force" into the breakaway regions on humanitarian grounds. On the morning of 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 minimal 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 into 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 utilized 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 (Atlantic Council, 2023; GEC, 2020). 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 organizations 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 (Crisley et al., 2022), RT positions itself to appeal to those in the West, particularly Europe and the United States, 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 among its geopolitical rivals (Elsawah & 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 Odyssey. 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 favorable 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 that 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 6578 English language tweets and their associated metadata from @RT_Com covering the period November 24, 2021, to March 24, 2022, that is, 3 months pre- and 1 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 1 month prior to the invasion. Further, messaging did not significantly change after March 3. As such, the data was reduced to include 2473 tweets covering the period January 24 to March 3, 2022 (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 the cleaning of the dataset to fix or remove incorrect, corrupted, incorrectly formatted, duplicate, or incomplete data, the data was then organized 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 utilizing 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 utilize nuclear weapons to protect its sovereignty; and economic, political, and social insecurity in the West. The number of messages focused on each of these narratives is shown in Figure 1 (pre-invasion) and Figure 2 (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.

Logos—persuasion through logic

While *logos* is focused 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 (Figure 3). 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 focused on the routine nature of the exercise, from mid-February this shifted to highlight

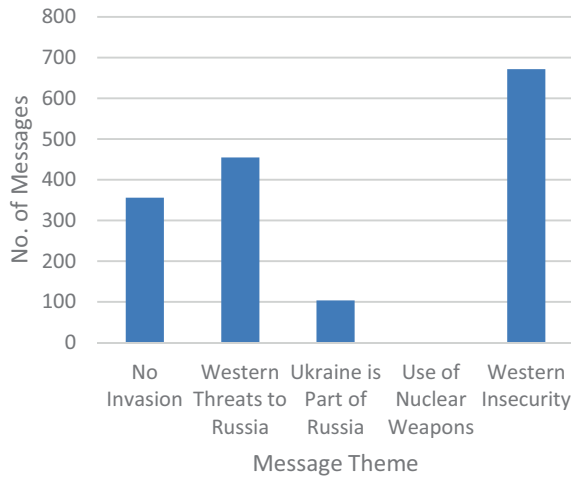


FIGURE 1 Pre-invasion messaging.

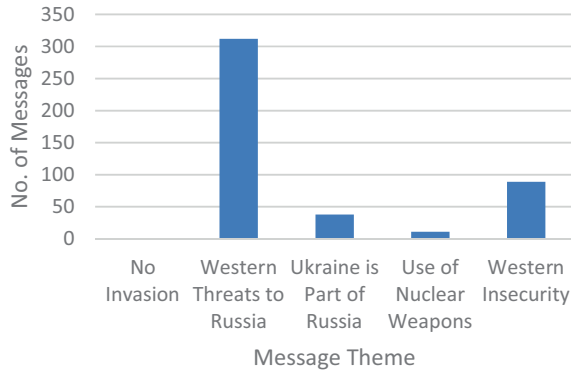


FIGURE 2 Post-invasion messaging.

various Russian units returning to their bases, often using video to support these claims (Figure 3, 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 emphasized Russia's desire to de-escalate these tensions and resolve issues through negotiation, and included purported information from official documents reiterating that there would be no invasion (Figure 3, center) as well as statements from senior officials emphasizing Russia's desire for a diplomatic solution (Figure 3, right).

These strands were supported with 48 Tweets quoting Russian authorities' direct denial of any intention to invade, at times utilizing humor to ridicule Western warnings of an invasion as comical (Figure 4). The use of humor, particularly mocking humor, 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.

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.



FIGURE 3 No Russian invasion messaging.



FIGURE 4 Ridiculing invasion messaging.

First was the purported threat presented to Russian-speaking and ethnic Russian residents in eastern Ukraine. A carefully choreographed series of messages focused 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 (Figure 5) 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.

Second was the broader threat posed to the Russian state by the failure of the West to honor various security agreements (Figure 6). While this included such agreements as the Minsk Accords, it was heavily focused 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 (Figure 6, center) 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.

Third, messaging often attacked Ukraine's historical legitimacy, presenting arguments that, historically, Russia and Ukraine are one nation and one people. Messaging often utilized 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 (Figure 7, 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



FIGURE 5 Threat to Russian security in the Donbas messaging.

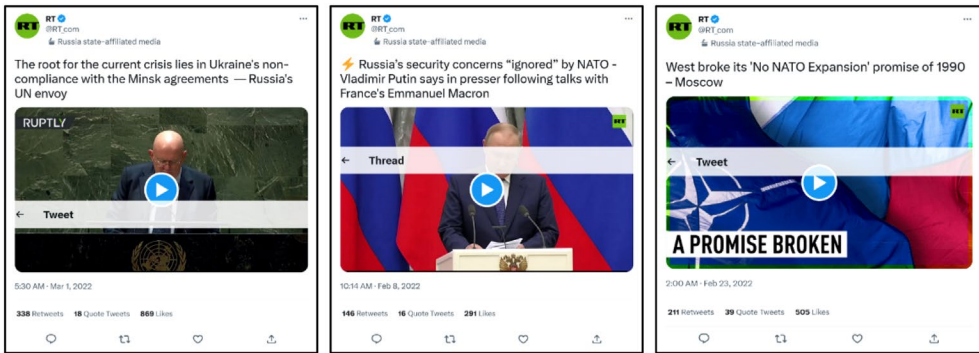


FIGURE 6 Threats to Russia messaging.



FIGURE 7 Ukraine and Russian historical unity.

history into a simple message that denies centuries of historical events and serves his own interests (Plokhyy, 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 crystallize elements of truth as a Western audience might perceive it, providing the opportunity for developing a means of persuasion with the target audience. Utilizing 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 legitimize Russia's invasion and, in doing so, impair a Western response.

While comprising only a very small portion of messaging (1 tweet pre and 11 tweets post-invasion) a fourth means of persuasion focused on the threat of a Russian nuclear response to any NATO military action (Figure 8). 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 the virality of messaging to right-wing audiences (De Cook, 2018). Messaging also included links to videos of senior Russian officials, including Putin and Defense 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.

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 focused on political, economic, and social insecurity in Western states (Figure 9). This messaging emphasized political dysfunction, rising domestic security issues, growing economic disparity, and social division in the West, particularly Europe and the United States. Post-invasion, messaging was heavily focused on the negative impact that the mass migration of Ukrainian refugees would have on NATO states (Figure 9, left) as well as the soaring energy costs that any NATO intervention in Ukraine would cause (Figure 9, right). Cleverly, @RT_Com often did this by harvesting, repackaging, and selectively presenting news stories from various United States 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.

In classic Aristotelian *logos* then, @RT_Com utilized messaging to create a narrative that was likely designed to legitimize Russia's actions, create doubt and uncertainty in the target audience, and impact Western decision-making. Ultimately, this was likely designed to impair



FIGURE 8 Nuclear threat messaging.

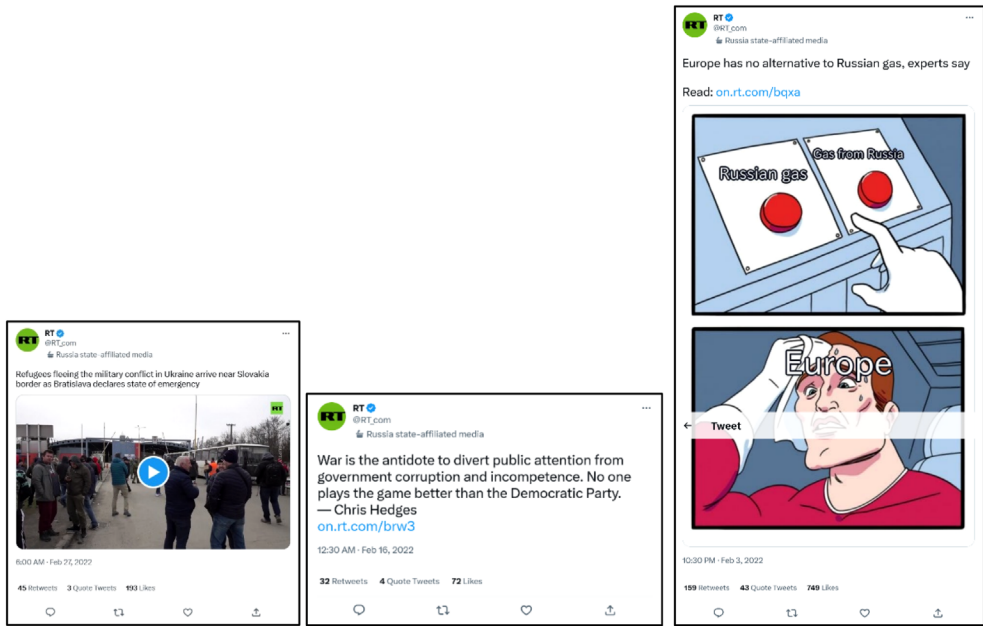


FIGURE 9 Western political, economic, and social insecurity messaging.

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* focused on a rhetor presenting themselves as a morally upstanding character as well as on appeals to practical wisdom or good-will (Aristotle, 2015). @RT_Com utilized 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 as 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, utilizing its own version of the “truth,” to highlight how mainstream media does not cover stories either objectively or fully—but @RT_Com does. For example, Figure 4 (left) builds on Western media messaging that 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 that is agreed upon 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 utilized video imagery of Lavrov to add authority and, thus, credibility to the assertions (Figure 3, right). Similarly, immediately preceding key events in the invasion, video messaging of Putin was regularly utilized 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 February 24, @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 (Figures 5 and 7). 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 Defense 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 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' judgments, particularly those pertaining to pain or pleasure (Aristotle, 2015). The purpose of emotive appeals is to bypass the 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 toward 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 United States, 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 crystallize 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 utilize 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 utilizing powerful images of the size and capability of the weapons

as well as with text, capitalized 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, 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 humor, in particular through the trolling of Western leaders (Figure 10) and messaging that mocked Western assessments of an invasion date (Figure 2).

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. Humor, 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 (Crilly & Chatterje-Doodly, 2020) and discredits opposing views on social media (Davis et al., 2018).

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—Organizing 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 focused on the denial of a Russian invasion ran from January 25 to February 22, 2022 (Figure 3). Messaging utilized 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 (Figure 1). From early February, messaging began to appear advising that troops were returning to their home bases following the conclusion of the exercise (Figure 1). This messaging was likely designed to shape Western opinion by providing a plausible justification for activities

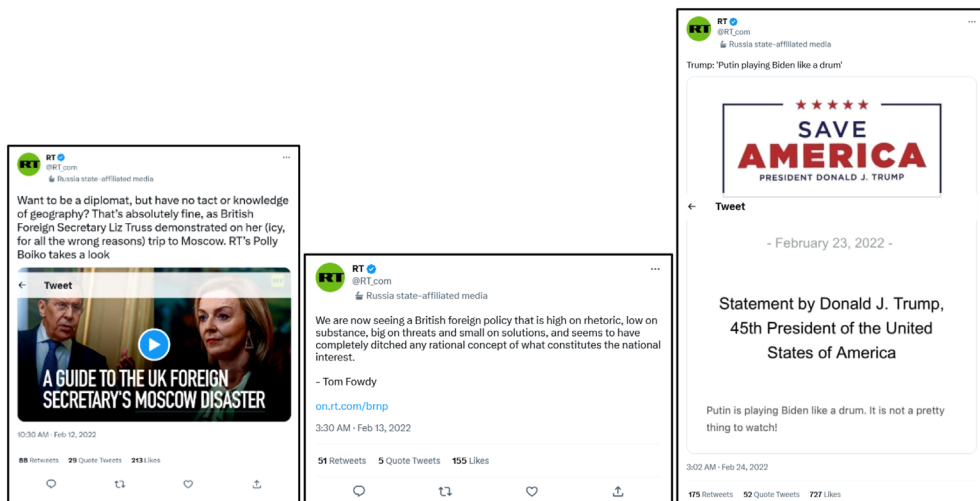


FIGURE 10 Trolling of Western leaders messaging.

that Russia was undertaking. Messaging during this period also utilized 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 a 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—Figure 3, center), *ethos* (using senior figures to add credibility to explanations that Russia is seeking a diplomatic solution—Figure 3, right), and *pathos* (utilizing humor to mock Western assertions—Figures 4 and 10). In undertaking this messaging, Russia was likely seeking to disrupt any potential NATO interference in the invasion. Of course, once the invasion occurred on February 22, this line of messaging ceased completely.

On February 15, 2022, @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 February 23, 2022 (Figure 5), and post-invasion, which commenced in earnest on February 24, 2022. 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 utilizing elements of *logos* (that based on current military posture Ukraine was poised to attack Russian citizens in the Donbas region—Figure 5) and, more significantly, *pathos* (appealing to emotions by invoking acts of genocide and humanitarian crises—Figure 5), 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 focused on key historical events such as purported breaches of the Minsk Accords (Figure 6, left) and, more significantly, the eastern expansion of NATO (Figure 6, center 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 (Figure 8). While utilizing elements of both *logos* and *ethos*, this messaging was focused on *pathos* by appealing to fear, long considered one of the most powerful means of persuasion (Aristotle, 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 optimize 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 (Figure 7). The latter of this messaging, that of portraying insecurity in the West (Figure 9), was part of a broader goal to influence opinion in the West, particularly the United States, and had the aim of focusing 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 United States, 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 utilized 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 utilizing aspects of both *Chronos* and, more significantly, *Kairos* ensuring messaging was synchronized 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 utilized these (see below) in a variety of innovative ways to legitimize issues.

To be persuasive, language should be compact and clear (Aristotle, 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 capitalized 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 (Figure 5). This may have been a deliberate strategy as research has shown that Tweets within the range 71–100 characters get the most retweets, and those with supporting multimedia are furthermore likely to be retweeted—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. Utilizing 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 correlates with retweetability.

Aristotle (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. Capitalizing on the short nature of Tweets, @RT_Com delivered a style of messaging that appeared focused 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 appeared 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 (Figure 5). 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 (Figure 6).

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 in Russian activity. This messaging was invariably short and threatening, highlighting not only Russia's nuclear capability but also its 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 emphasize the seriousness of the threat (Figure 8). As previously discussed, to elicit desired emotions, @RT_Com also frequently layered messaging with transgressive humor to contradict Western assertions of such things as an impending Russian invasion and to troll Western nations and leaders. For example, in Figure 4, a Russian Foreign Affairs spokesperson is quoted as asking the West to advise on the schedule for the invasion so the Russians could plan their vacation. Similarly, in Figure 10, humor is used to troll the UK Foreign Minister, likely to damage her credibility. Humor 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 2500 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 focused around the five key arguments discussed above, and continually repeating these (see Figures 1 and 2) 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. Conceptualizing 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 focused on how messages are circulated to engage the audience in a multitude of ways to enhance their persuasive effect. Given @RT_Com's inability to utilize 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 highlights 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 synchronized with key events was likely to have an enhanced effect on influencing the target audience. For example, immediately prior to the invasion, the 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 (Figure 5).

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) have 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 and 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 utilized 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 June 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 the 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 behavior 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 the delivery of information. Delving into the details 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 favorable to Russia, and, in doing 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 NATO's 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 that 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 also caused significant damage to it 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 & Starck, 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 United States 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 United States 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 (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 also be 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 utilize 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 utilizing this approach. Indeed, in undertaking this research, the relatively small number of organic messages analyzed 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.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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

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