

Contents

Post-Truth Rhetoric	6
<i>Bullshit</i>	9
<i>Fake News</i>	13
<i>Ethos (at the Expense of Logos)</i>	20
<i>Pathos (at the Expense of Logos)</i>	27
<i>The Trump Effect</i>	33
Post-Truth Composition	37
Consequences of Neglecting to Act	43
<i>Notes</i>	45
<i>References</i>	48
<i>About the Author</i>	51

Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition

ON NOVEMBER 8, 2016, THE UNITED STATES OF America elected real estate mogul Donald J. Trump to be its forty-fifth president. Trump did not win this election in the usual way, with an occasional negative ad but in general using sincere argumentation and ethical persuasion in order to demonstrate that he has the most relevant experience and the best plan to move the country forward. Instead, Trump won the election using unethical rhetorical strategies like alt-right fake news, vague social media posts, policy reversals, denials of meaning, attacks on media credibility, name-calling, and so on. All of these unethical rhetorical strategies, constantly televised and repeated throughout the year-long campaign and election cycle, have deeply affected public discourse in general, not just Trump's personal use of it. The Southern Poverty Law Center and others call this negative influence of Trump's rhetoric on social institutions and cultural interactions "the Trump effect," or a generalized increase in violence and hatred throughout the country.

Trump's campaign and election represent a rhetorical watershed moment in two ways: first, there has been a shift in the way that powerful people use unethical rhetoric to accomplish their goals; and, second, there has been a shift in the way that public audiences consume unethical rhetoric. Not surprisingly, the organizations that are most committed to promoting

and teaching ethical rhetoric and writing have viewed this rhetorical watershed moment as a direct challenge to their missions and as an exigence for calls to rhetorical action.

On November 21, 2016, Gregory Clark, president of the Rhetoric Society of America (RSA), emailed a message to all RSA members on the organization's listserv, and this message was subsequently posted on the RSA website.¹ In this statement, Clark identifies the rancorous election as a powerful exigence for an ethical response. Clark's response to this rancor, which was also rhetorically successful (resulting in Trump's election), emphasizes RSA's core values: diversity, inclusion, and respect. The very fact that Clark felt the need to reaffirm these values signifies a certain anxiety that Trump's successful rhetoric represents a direct challenge to RSA and its rhetorical mission.

On the very next day, November 22, 2016, Susan Miller-Cochran, president of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), sent a message over the WPA-L listserv, reaffirming that organization's core values and condemning the negative rhetorical strategies that were so divisive and so successful throughout the 2016 campaign and election process.² The CWPA statement is similar to the RSA statement since it reinforces CWPA's core values—diversity and inclusiveness—in the wake of a campaign that succeeded by exploiting latent xenophobia. The CWPA statement is different from the RSA statement, however, since it directly condemns institutionalized inequality, and it calls upon its members to “explicitly act against the structures that cause injustice today.” The CWPA statement is a call to rhetorical arms. The exigence of this statement (like RSA's) is a general anxiety among writing teachers that their core values have been called into question, and the intent of the statement is to reinforce support for any action writing teachers and program administrators might take to

oppose the unethical rhetorical values that were so successful in the 2016 election.

A couple of weeks later, on December 6, 2016, the weekly *NCTE Inbox* email, sent to all members of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), contained a link to a new statement from the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), the “Statement on Language, Power, and Action.”³ Like the other statements, the CCCC statement reinforces the core values of the organization: the power of language, commitment to diversity and justice, responsible inquiry, and ethical communication. The same general anxiety that fuels the RSA and CWPA statements also fuels the CCCC statement—demeaning and disempowering, though ultimately successful, rhetoric and writing. Although the CCCC statement does not directly promote action against oppressive institutional forces (like the CWPA statement does), the CCCC statement is clear that language is powerful and must be used and taught responsibly, not just strategically, with the intent to win at all costs.⁴

Although not one of these three institutional responses uses the term *post-truth*, it is clear that the rhetorical strategies associated with post-truth politics and rhetoric are at the heart of their exigence. In November 2016, Oxford Dictionaries announced *post-truth* as its word of the year. The Oxford Dictionaries web page defines *post-truth* as an adjective “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” Although the word *post-truth* is not new, Oxford Dictionaries selected it as word of the year because of a “spike in frequency” following the UK’s Brexit and the US presidential campaign and election.⁵ During the past year, Oxford Dictionaries explains, “*Post-truth* has gone from being

a peripheral term to being a mainstay in political commentary, now being used by major publications without the need for clarification or definition in their headlines.” There is nothing post-truth about the word *post-truth*; it is a fact of life, it is here to stay, and, as rhetoricians and teachers of writing, we’re going to have to deal with it.

In its current usage, *post-truth* signifies a state in which language lacks any reference to facts, truths, and realities. When language has no reference to facts, truths, or realities, it becomes a purely strategic medium. In a post-truth communication landscape, people (especially politicians) say whatever might work in a given situation, whatever might generate the desired result, without any regard to the truth value or facticity of statements. If a statement works, results in the desired effect, it is good; if it fails, it is bad (or at least not worth trying again). In *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition*, I describe the unethical rhetoric that has emerged in our post-truth world, and I discuss some of the consequences of post-truth rhetoric for composition studies. My intent is not to solve the problem of post-truth rhetoric, but only to define and describe it. We as a community of writing teachers will have to solve the problem of post-truth rhetoric collectively and over time.

POST-TRUTH RHETORIC

In their most powerful forms, rhetorics deal with sound arguments and reasoned opinions, not certain facts, foundational realities, or universal truths. When positivist science determines certain facts and foundational realities, and metaphysical philosophy reveals universal truths, there is not much work left for rhetoric to accomplish, other than to dress scientific facts and realities and philosophical truths in beautiful and persuasive

words. However, the very notions of sound arguments and reasoned opinions require facts, realities, and truths as epistemological counterparts, as references and standards against which adjectives like “sound” and “reasoned” may be compared. Thus, all rhetorics (until very recently, that is) have existed on an epistemological continuum that includes certain facts, foundational realities, and universal truths, even when these rhetorics do not themselves participate in those facts, realities, and truths.

In Plato’s works, for example, misleading sophistic rhetorics, bent on success, can only be understood as such within the context of an epistemological continuum that includes metaphysical truth and universal ethics. Sophistic rhetorics are misleading only in comparison to truth, which cannot mislead. In Aristotle, arguments and opinions can only be understood as sound and reasoned within the context of an epistemological continuum that includes truth and ethics. An argument is only sound and an opinion is only reasoned if it approaches (without reaching) truth on the epistemological continuum. More recently, Stephen Toulmin and Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca situate rhetoric within practical reasoning and against the foundational epistemological claims of philosophy and science. Practical reasoning can only be understood as such in relation to the universal claims of philosophy and science (i.e., reasoning is practical in part because it is not universal or abstract). Thus, probabilities, sound arguments, and reasoned opinions are understandable as such only because they can be plotted on an epistemological continuum that includes universal truth and foundational reality, even if the rhetorics that are based on contingent terms (probability, opinion) do not themselves participate in truth and reality.

Rhetoric has always dealt with unethical language in relation to an epistemological continuum that includes truth. Lies,

fallacies, and doublespeak are recognized as false and unethical rhetorical strategies because they can be compared unfavorably to reasoned opinions and universal truths. Rhetors must *know the facts* in order to mislead through lies; they must *recognize the truth* in order to deceive through fallacies; and they must *understand reality* in order to manipulate through doublespeak. But what happens when facts, realities, and truths become overrated and disappear from the epistemological continuum? Without facts and realities as a reference or truths as a standard, then their opposites (lies, fallacies, and doublespeak) also disappear from the continuum. In this post-truth world (without truth *or* lies), language becomes purely strategic, without reference to anything other than itself. In this world without truth, a public description of sexual assault becomes “locker room talk” because that is what a powerful person calls it; a public expression of xenophobia becomes “telling it like it is” because ideologies dominated by fear suddenly find a voice; a public display of aggression and violence becomes “the enthusiasm factor” because ideological extremism will likely translate into votes.

The ultimate goal for the post-truth rhetor becomes, according to Benjamin Tallis (2016), “the destabilization or even the destruction of the notion of Truth as such” (8). Tallis explains that post-truth politicians “play to a widespread and increasingly cynical, anti-expert and supposedly anti-establishment and anti-authority mood, but one that clearly also still craves leadership and ambition” (9). And this epistemological and political cynicism is difficult to address rhetorically because it is not rooted in individual claims that can be challenged, but is instead rooted in larger ideological systems of belief that hold firm even when supporting claims are proven false. Tallis writes: “[C]orrecting the falsehoods of the post-truthers will never trump Trump or put Putin in the shade because it will

not dissuade many people from ‘believing’ in the bigger, more compelling post-truths they offer. They offer people meaningful and attractive interpretations of their current condition and future possibilities, however far-fetched, factually incorrect, or empirically biased they may be” (10). While other politicians may be implicated in the rise of post-truth rhetoric, one single event has ushered in post-truth posthaste: “The election of Donald Trump has seen the flowering of the post-truth landscape” (Marcus 2016, A17).

Bullshit

Harry G. Frankfurt published his book *On Bullshit* in 2005 (which is actually a reprint of an essay he published earlier), well before Brexit and the rise of Trump, so it is unclear exactly what Frankfurt would have said about post-truth rhetoric today. But there is one thing about Frankfurt’s discussion of bullshit that stands out in my mind: he disassociates bullshit from the epistemological continuum, thus relieving it of any reference to reality or responsibility to truth. Frankfurt writes that bullshit is “unconnected to a concern with the truth”; it “is not germane to the enterprise of describing reality”; and it proceeds “without any regard for how things really are” (Frankfurt 2005, 30). This is why Frankfurt says that bullshit “cannot be regarded as lying,” because bullshitters do not “presume” to “know the truth” and thus cannot be accused of promoting a false position or describing a false reality (33).⁶ Frankfurt writes, “The liar is inescapably concerned with truth-values” (51), while the bullshitter is not. According to Frankfurt, it is “this indifference to how things really are” that is “the essence of bullshit” (34). The bullshitter “does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose” (56). If that purpose happens to be victory in a