



INTRODUCTION: RHETORIC IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Rhetoric in the Digital Age brings together a selection of papers presented at the 9th *Rhetoric in Society* conference, held in Zagreb in June 2025. The conference theme was chosen to explore the role and status of rhetoric in the contemporary digital era. As an ancient discipline, rhetoric has endured centuries of social change, technological development, and scientific discovery; yet none of these transformations has diminished its relevance or significance. While its institutional standing and pedagogical prominence have fluctuated throughout history, rhetoric has never disappeared from the intellectual landscape.

Today, we are confronted with a range of challenges, including misinformation, fake news, the pervasive influence of social media, and the proliferation of hate speech. In this context, rhetoric proves to be not only relevant but essential for navigating the complexities of the digital environment. Many of the contributions collected in this volume address precisely this point.

This is particularly evident in the opening chapter, *Setting the Grounds for Discussion*, in which Jean Wagemans, one of the conference's keynote speakers, examines the role of rhetoric in his contribution, "The Role of Rhetoric in Defending against Weapons of Mass Persuasion". Wagemans argues that "properly understood, rhetoric is not the enemy of truth, not a bag of tricks or a toolkit for spin. It is the disciplined study of how meaning is negotiated, how arguments can persuade, and how public judgment is shaped." In this way, he establishes a conceptual foundation for discussing rhetorical theory and practice in the digital age.

The volume is further divided into three main sections: *Predigital Rhetorical Concepts*, *Rhetoric and Digital Media*, and *Rhetoric and AI*.



The section *Predigital Rhetorical Concepts* addresses a range of topics that predate the digital transformation. Although the central concepts explored in these contributions originate in rhetorical theory prior to the digital age, all the papers demonstrate their continued relevance by establishing clear connections to contemporary rhetorical challenges.

In their paper, “Self-Correction in the Contemporary French Novel: Rhetorical Effects of a Paradoxical Ethos Strategy”, Maud Armani and Thierry Herman examine the concept of self-correction. While self-correction may appear to undermine ethos, particularly in writing, where it can signal an initial failure to articulate the appropriate expression, they argue that it can also produce persuasive effects. From a pragmatic and rhetorical perspective, self-correction may function as a marker of sincerity. Thus, although it may weaken the communicator’s ethos by suggesting linguistic inadequacy, it can simultaneously strengthen personal ethos by conveying authenticity. Their analysis of contemporary French novels explores variations of self-correction with respect to frequency, semantic contradiction, reformulation types, and meta-enunciative evaluation, in order to assess its positive and negative rhetorical effects.

In “Rhetoric of Doxastic Systems: Metaboly and Systasis as Validity-Oriented Operations”, Fabian Erhardt develops a rhetorical theory of doxastic systems structured around the relationships between validity claims, validity criteria, and assignment rules (*Zuordnungsregeln*). He argues that the dynamics of such systems can be understood through three directional movements: the addition, subtraction, and transformation of relations among their components. Drawing on Jean-François Lyotard’s distinction between narrative and scientific knowledge, Erhardt demonstrates that narrative knowledge operates primarily *systatically*, through the re-actualization of supporting relations and the preservation of core validity presuppositions, whereas scientific knowledge operates *metabolically*, by introducing new, potentially disruptive relations and generating difference from established knowledge. Despite their structural opposition, both forms of knowledge share a common doxastic-rhetorical foundation.

Jonas Gabrielsen contributes with “Orality in Danish Courts”, in which he revisits a longstanding concern in rhetoric: the distinction between written and spoken discourse. He shows that this distinction also carries legal significance, particularly in the context of Danish courts, where oral proceedings are required to be delivered through “free presentation.” This requirement is generally interpreted as prohibiting the reading of written manuscripts during oral pleadings; however, its underlying rationale has not been thoroughly examined in legal scholarship, nor sufficiently discussed in relation to rhetorical theories of orality. Gabrielsen’s paper investigates the notion of free presentation, its interpretation in legal doctrine, and the reasons why such a mode of delivery is considered advantageous in judicial contexts.

In “Rhetoric in Times of Change: A Philosophical Defense against Epistemic Reductionisms”, Maurizio Manzin examines the enduring relevance of rhetoric within Western intellectual history, particularly during periods of epistemic transformation. The paper argues that rhetoric recurrently emerges as a corrective and mediating force whenever dominant epistemological frameworks attempt to monopolize truth. Drawing on Karl Jaspers’ concept of the Axial Age, Manzin identifies key historical moments in which rhetoric resurfaces in response to crises of meaning—from its origins in fifth-century BCE Sicily, through Augustine’s reconfiguration of discourse in Late Antiquity, Petrarch’s humanist critique of scholastic dialectics, Giambattista Vico’s challenge to Cartesian reductionism, and Chaim Perelman’s twentieth-century “new rhetoric” as a response to formal logic. The paper ultimately presents rhetoric as a bridge across disciplines, cultures, and historical periods, enabling communication where singular epistemic systems prove insufficient.



Chapter “*Wise people create proverbs and proverbs create wise people* – On rhetoric of proverbs and proverbs in rhetoric”, by Davor Nikolić, presents a preliminary study of his project research on the role of proverbs in rhetorical genres, with a special emphasis on proverbs as a tool of populism and a potential hate speech vehicle. The first part of the paper offers a concise overview of Classical rhetorical literature and its treatment of proverbs and maxims, reminding contemporary rhetoricians of the importance given to proverbial expressions by ancient authors and emphasizing folkloristic and linguistic insights about rhetorical power of proverbs. The second part of the paper offers a methodological frame for further research on rhetorical function of proverbs in political discourse.

In her contribution, “Rhetorical Topoi and Ethical Engagement in the Polish Oxford Debate: Understanding Teenagers’ Moral Reasoning”, Joanna Nowakowska offers insight into adolescents’ moral reasoning. The paper examines how Polish high school students identify and articulate ethical dimensions within the framework of the Polish Oxford Debate. The findings show that participants tend to introduce moral considerations even when debating propositions that are not explicitly ethical. Recurring motifs, such as justice, responsibility for the future, safety, freedom, and the common good, serve as stable anchors shaping argumentation on both sides. Moreover, the study indicates that both engagement and rhetorical quality increase when debate topics resonate with students’ lived experiences, generational concerns, and awareness of contemporary issues, including technological change and social inequality.

In “Reason, Reality, and Rhetorical Truth in the Digital Age”, Federico Puppo explores the relationship between rhetoric and truth in the context of the digital revolution and the so-called post-truth era. Drawing on alethic realism, he defends a conception of truth grounded in reality, broadly understood. On this basis, Puppo emphasizes the importance of Aristotle’s principle of non-contradiction as a necessary condition for meaningful discourse, rhetorical persuasion, and political life. The paper advocates restoring the unity of rhetoric, politics, and ethics, proposing a virtue-ethical framework capable of addressing the techno-moral challenges of the digital age.

Antonio Rauccio, in “Rhetoric and Law: An Insight into the Scholastic Doctrine of Legal Government”, examines the relationship between rhetoric and legal theory. His analysis centers on the concept of legal government and the relationship between legislators and citizens, as mediated through legal discourse. This discourse operates on multiple interconnected levels in which the three classical rhetorical *pisteis* can be identified. Law, he argues, influences citizens’ conduct simultaneously through the threat of punishment (appealing to fear), its directive force (guiding practical judgment), and its authority (eliciting respect and shaping the will), ultimately aiming to cultivate the civic virtue of justice. The paper highlights the explanatory power of this rhetorical framework for contemporary legal theory.

The section concludes with Charlotte van der Voort’s paper, “A Mass Medium and Its Ambiguous Message: Isocrates’ Literate Rhetoric”. This contribution examines how fourth-century BCE rhetorical texts negotiate the tension between oral and written communication. Van der Voort argues that Isocrates uniquely reconceptualizes the constraints of written discourse by recognizing its potential as a form of mass communication that shifts part of the interpretive burden onto the reader. Echoing Marshall McLuhan’s well-known axiom that “the medium is the message,” and building on Jeroen Bons’ insights into Isocratean composition, the paper suggests that the written medium enables the development of novel rhetorical strategies, such as *amphibolos logos* (ambiguous argumentation). As expanding media increase audience reach, such strategies become essential for addressing heterogeneous audiences.



The second part of the volume, *Rhetoric and Digital Media*, examines the pervasive influence of social media and digital platforms on contemporary rhetorical practices. Technological development and the expansion of digital media have profoundly transformed human communication and, consequently, the dynamics of persuasion across public domains, including health communication, advertising, politics, and science communication. Both professional and private communication have increasingly migrated to digital environments, and the contributions in this section analyze the rhetorical features that characterize communication in the contemporary media landscape.

In their paper, “From Frustration to Education: How Migrant Nurse-Influencers Use Instagram to Address AMR and Shape Trust in EU Healthcare Systems”, Maryam Alavi Nia and Gilda Seddighi focus on health communication in digital contexts. Their study examines how Iranian-born, Germany-based nurse influencers on Instagram construct rhetorical spaces for negotiating competing medical epistemologies surrounding antimicrobial resistance (AMR), and how migrant audiences within the EU engage with these narratives. Through a qualitative analysis of selected posts and their accompanying comment threads, the authors identify two key configurations: first, the fracturing of medical authority through embodied testimony, in which antibiotics shift between symbols of care and markers of neglect; and second, the use of satire to expose the semiotic instability of clinical logic, where humour and role-play challenge assumptions about Iranian “excess” and German “minimalism”.

In “Pop Culture, the Writing Classroom, and the Rhetoric of Hip-Hop”, Tejan Green Waszak explores hip-hop as a dynamic rhetorical form and a valuable pedagogical resource. The paper demonstrates how the genre has evolved into a productive site for research and discussion within the writing classroom. Waszak argues that hip-hop artists engage audiences in ways that are both rhetorically powerful and, at times, deliberately unsettling. She highlights the advantages of integrating hip-hop into teaching rhetorical strategies, emphasizing its capacity to help students critically examine diverse modes of communication that operate across both traditional and digital media environments.

The paper “Witchcraft in Your Lips? Prosody as Persuasion in Advertising”, by Gabrijela Kišiček, Agnieszka Bryła-Cruz, and Martin Hinton, investigates the role of prosodic features in advertising discourse. The authors emphasize the rhetorical and argumentative significance of elements such as accent, speech rate, and intonation. By analyzing the relationship between prosody and persuasion, the study offers insights that contribute to the interpretation of multimodal arguments, particularly those combining spoken and linguistic content, and demonstrates the adaptability and continued relevance of classical rhetorical categories in digital communication.

In “Is There a Speaker in This Post? The Eclipse of the Orator in Digital Social Networks”, Manfred Kraus addresses the changing role of the speaker in online communication. He argues that in digital environments, not only does the meaning of a text become unstable, but the traditional rhetorical role of the speaker, or orator as the identifiable source of a message, also becomes increasingly blurred. Kraus analyzes the mechanisms and consequences of this transformation, suggesting that the erosion of the orator’s role poses significant challenges to the possibility of balanced and reasoned argumentation in the public sphere.

Ivanka Mavrodieva, in “Rhetorical and Communicative Features of Podcasts in Bulgaria”, examines podcasts as an emerging and increasingly significant communication genre. She argues that podcasts have developed into a distinct communicative channel encompassing content produced by business organizations, cultural and educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, and other actors. Based on an analysis of selected Bulgarian podcasts, the study demonstrates



that podcasts do not constitute a homogeneous genre; rather, their rhetorical features are shaped both during production and in the post-communication phase, particularly through promotion on digital platforms and social media. Mavrodieva concludes that digital tools contribute to the development of podcasts as a specific form of virtual, multimodal rhetoric.

The third part of the volume, *Rhetoric and AI*, explores how the most recent technological developments have reshaped both rhetorical practice and rhetorical pedagogy. While artificial intelligence undoubtedly offers significant advantages, it also introduces new challenges and raises complex ethical questions. The contributions in this section engage critically with these issues.

In “Digital Objects in the Rhetorical Situation: A Peculiar Kind of Constraint”, Silvia Corradi argues that digital objects constitute a distinct type of constraint within the rhetorical situation. Her analysis highlights the specific characteristics that differentiate digital objects from so-called “natural objects”, focusing in particular on the features of digital or “third-order” technologies. Corradi further examines how the use of digital objects can influence legal practice, emphasizing the need for caution in contexts where such technologies shape decision-making processes.

Daria Evangelista, in “Translated with AI: How Are Specialized, yet Highly Rhetorical Texts Translated by DeepL? An Analysis of Preambles in Normative Texts”, investigates how AI-based translation systems handle rhetorical and genre-sensitive features in specialized discourse. Employing a qualitative, corpus-based approach informed by translation theory, rhetorical analysis, and text linguistics, the study assesses whether DeepL successfully captures rhetorical devices across different textual levels. The findings indicate that the system frequently fails to reproduce key rhetorical features essential for meaning and stylistic accuracy, particularly in normative preambles, thereby underscoring the limitations of current AI translation tools and the continued necessity of human oversight and expert post-editing.

In “Rhetoric in Crisis: The Value of Rhetorical Education in the Age of AI”, Heather Hill poses a central question for contemporary rhetorical studies: what is the role of rhetoric in the era of generative artificial intelligence, and what remains to be taught if systems such as ChatGPT can perform many of the tasks traditionally associated with rhetorical training? Her paper examines how rhetorical education must adapt to a rapidly changing landscape, with particular attention to the capacities that AI cannot replicate. Hill concludes that, although AI may transform the ways rhetoric is taught and practiced, rhetorical education is not diminished but, on the contrary, becomes even more essential.

Carlos Monteiro and Alexandra Kuzmina address another set of challenges arising from AI in their paper, “The Rhetoric of Prompts: Multimodality, Intent, and Ethics in AI Meaning-Making”. They focus on the interpretive and ethical complexities associated with synthetic media, whose origin, authorship, and intent are often ambiguous. These issues extend beyond misinformation to encompass the broader structures through which meaning is constructed, framed, and ethically justified. The authors propose a metatheoretical framework that draws on rhetoric and multimodality to reconceptualize AI-generated content, particularly visual outputs, as sites of ethical engagement and moral accountability.

Finally, in “Rhetoric as a Bridge between Ethics and AI in Predictive Justice”, Serena Tomasi brings together rhetoric, law, and artificial intelligence. Drawing on the case *Re A*, as discussed by Neil MacCormick, she illustrates how legal reasoning addresses ethical pluralism through justification and deliberation rather than mere rule application. Using this case as a lens, Tomasi argues that the central limitation of predictive justice systems lies not only in their technical opacity but also in their inability to provide normatively grounded, publicly contestable justifications. Even so-called



interpretable models tend to explain correlations rather than reasons. In response, she proposes a rhetorically informed model of legal AI, in which systems function as deliberative interlocutors—mapping competing considerations, disclosing value trade-offs, and enabling contestation—rather than as authoritative predictors.

Rhetoric in the Digital Age brings together twenty contributions that address the evolving relationship between rhetoric and digital society. The volume highlights the challenges that rhetoric and rhetoricians face in the twenty-first century across a range of domains within public discourse. At the same time, it offers possible responses to these challenges by proposing new analytical tools, exploring modes of engagement with artificial intelligence, and providing historical perspectives on the recurring difficulties rhetoric has encountered over time.

We sincerely thank all the authors who contributed to this volume for their insightful, valuable, and highly relevant chapters. Their work has made this book a significant resource for scholars of rhetoric and argumentation, as well as for students of rhetoric, communication, media studies, and related disciplines within the humanities. We also believe that this volume will be of interest to a broader readership, particularly those concerned with public communication, persuasion, and critical thinking. We are especially grateful to our distinguished reviewers, Mika Hietanen of Lund University and Blake Scott of the University of Tübingen, whose expertise in rhetorical studies provided invaluable feedback and constructive suggestions throughout the editorial process. Their insights greatly contributed to the quality and coherence of this volume. We would also like to express our appreciation to all the reviewers of the individual chapters. Their careful evaluations and thoughtful recommendations helped the authors strengthen their contributions and ensured the overall scholarly quality of the book. Their commitment and generosity were essential to the editorial process and represent an important contribution to the advancement of rhetorical scholarship.

Rhetoric has consistently proven to be a crucial resource in periods of profound social and intellectual transformation. Although it is inevitably shaped by ongoing technological and societal change, there is little doubt that it will remain an essential discipline in the years and centuries to come.

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