Special Issue

Reason and Rhetoric in the Time of Alternative Facts

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Introduction to the Special Issue

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1. Introduction

This special issue on *Reason and Rhetoric in the Time of Alternative Facts* is a response to the noticeable shift in the way reason and rhetoric are being employed in the public domain. For us as academics, it also constitutes our first step in fulfilling what we think is our obligation: to make sense of this new phenomenon and evaluate its contributions to or detractions from public reasonableness. The uniqueness of this time is hinted at by the fact that 50 years ago an expression like "alternative fact", used anywhere but in the legal domain, might have been considered nonsensical given its oxymoronic nature. Today, however, the term enjoys widespread usage by skeptics and supporters alike.

As history will have it, this time of alternative facts also happens to fall into what might be called the online era of the digital

age. In this online era, contemporary media that make use of the internet have undoubtedly contributed to the traction that a term like "alternative facts" and the arguments it is used in have found in popular usage. In all of the papers comprising this special issue, contemporary media, and notably social media, have played an important role. They enable the spreading of Fake News (Gelfert), serve in the broadcasting of powerful fables (Stevens), multiply the effects of Bullshit (Kristiansen and Kaussler), and make all of these easily accessible for the illustration of the value of critical thinking in the classroom (Sullivan).

In light of the uniqueness of today's use of reason and rhetoric, along with the contemporary media's effect on public discourse, this introduction will focus on the role of the media in order to contextualize the discussion in the articles of this special issue.

2. Argumentation and the media

It is hard to overstate the importance of the media on the development of informal logic and argumentation as academic areas of study. When informal logic was born, radio, television, and newspaper were the dominant media. The reasoning and arguments transmitted through these media quickly found their way into the classroom and were discussed around both the dinner table and water cooler. With an abundance of arguments to make sense of, students and researchers developed methods and theories for how to analyze and evaluate them. Indeed, as Ralph Johnson has noted on a number of occasions (e.g., 2006, pp. 247-248), the inspiration for developing informal logic as its own discipline came, at least in part, from his reading of Kahane's anecdote about a student questioning the applicability of traditional logic courses to President Johnson's decision to escalate the war in Vietnam. As a result, Johnson and Blair's textbook *Logical Self Defense* includes two chapters explicitly focused on the media—one on advertising and the other on news media.

In the intervening years much has changed for both argumentation and the media, and much hasn't. The previously dominant

media have not disappeared, but adapted (and continue to adapt) to the new dominance of the internet. While traditional radio listening has declined, it has been followed by dramatic increases in the consumption of streaming audio. Listeners now have music, news, comedy, and all kinds of other auditory content accessible, on-demand, through services like Spotify, iTunes\podcasts, and individual user live streams. Radio waves no longer limit the reach of audio transmission in terms of time or geographical scope: users no longer need to tune in, at a specific time, nor do they need to live within the boundaries of radio waves to have full access to these kinds of auditory transmission.

Traditionally printed newspapers have also evolved. In their new online homes, many now provide mixed-media services and expanded free content. *The Globe and Mail*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* have all developed expansive websites, offering audio, video, and text-based news. In addition, news sites leaning toward both sides of the political spectrum have sprung up and gained notoriety entirely via the internet (cf. *The Intercept* and *Breitbart*). Without the physical costs of paper and the limits of distribution imposed by it, these sites have been able to gain readership at unprecedented rates.

Finally, while traditional television remains widely available and viewed, online audio-video sources continue to grow in number. They offer on-demand viewing of everything from the latest blockbuster films, to entire university courses, to live streams of protests on the other side of the planet, provided by platforms such as *Netflix*, *YouTube*, and *Livestream*, respectively.

This evolution means that the way we receive arguments and the way arguments travel is now importantly different than it was when studies of informal logic and argumentation began. The internet is now the main source of news for people across the globe (cf. Newman et al. 2015; Newman et al. 2017) and people are using *Facebook* and *Google* as their top news sources. And, perhaps now more than ever, we are witnessing the impact of some of these changes even if we don't yet fully understand them.

3. Travelling arguments

Why does it matter if arguments travel? Several scholars of argu-mentation, informal logic, and critical thinking have exchanged the requirement that a good argument be true, with the requirement that a good argument be acceptable. The exchange is motivated in part by the insight that much of what we discuss is not a matter of truth or falsity. The question of whether President Johnson should escalate the war in Vietnam is better understood as one with a justifiably *supported* answer rather than a *true* answer. In addition, as a philosophical problem, capital T Truth is hard to come by. Making Truth a necessary component of a good argument would unnecessarily exclude a large number of good arguments from receiving a positive evaluation.

If arguments cannot or should not be assessed on the merit of truth, the next best thing is to assess them via challenge. For pragma-dialecticians (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004), the critical testing of a standpoint is an essential feature of good argu-ments. The best arguments withstand the most (ideally, all) chal-lenges. For the informal logical and rhetorical approaches, argu-ments, when not tested by real audiences, are imagined to face ideal (Blair and Johnson 1987) or hypothetical (Tindale 1999) audiences. The role of imagining these audiences is to put the argument to the strongest test possible. If we don't know the truth, the best thing we can do is test our arguments against the best of what we do know. And in Wohlrapp's theory of argument (2014), a thesis is valid if the argumentative structure supporting it can be used to answer all open objections.

If this is the way to evaluate arguments, then it is crucial that arguments travel, since one test does not say much about the quali-ty of an argument. You and I may agree that we have a good ar-gument, but as soon as it leaves our conversation and is evaluated by our friends in the United States, it could quickly turn out to be of a lesser quality than anticipated. The farther an argument can travel, the more it can be tested, the more it may also be improved. Ideally, at the end of the day, the travelling of arguments allows us

to recognize weak and strong arguments as what they are, and to place our trust in the strong ones.

Aside from face-to-face communication, the mass and social media constitute two main modes of argument travel. A nation-wide broadcast can literally move an argument from the steps of Parliament in Ottawa to the kitchen of a homeless shelter in Vancouver in an instant, while our interpersonal international connections, webbed together via social media, can allow less mainstream arguments to travel worldwide in a matter of hours.

Ideally, moving from context to context, and meeting the challenges of differing audiences, demonstrates an argument's strength or lack thereof. In other words, a strong argument should have public merit. As William Rheg has argued,

> An argument A has public merits insofar as A travels through a well-structured network of relevant technical and policy contexts by its ability (a) to meet challenges and (b) find uptake in topically relevant contexts and (c) find confirmation in materially relevant contexts. (2009, p. 56)

On his view, contexts are topically relevant insofar as members of the different contexts share expertise in the same field and experimental methods and they are narrowly materially relevant insofar as members have the expertise to test/confirm the quality of the argument content (2009, p, 51). In other words, cogent arguments meet the demands of, and are taken up and confirmed by, people familiar with the methods of arriving at the conclusion and with the expertise to confirm it.

Rheg also identifies contexts that are broadly materially relevant. And although he leaves the idea admittedly under-developed (2009, p. 57) it may be most important for present purposes. Using the evolution vs. divine creation debate as an illustration, he argues that two contexts are broadly materially relevant for each other insofar as each appears to address the same question (in the evolutionary debate, regarding the origin of species), but the elements of expertise—the technical vocabulary, methods of inquiry, and standards of cogent argument—differ (*ibid.*). In broadly materially relevant contexts, cross-context communication can become

quite difficult, making it seem as though the questions at issue fundamentally diverge (*ibid*.).

Rheg's ideas as expressed in his 2009 paper focused on the travel of scientific arguments. For those arguments, talk of experts and procedures is quite fitting. When moving to the social domain, however, where political arguments, primarily addressed to the voting public start to travel, notions of topical and material relevance become much harder to track. In the public domain of generally social and political argumentation, who counts as an expert becomes a difficult question. People seldom demonstrate humility regarding their expertise and indeed, as Rheg acknowledges, their standards of cogent argument can differ significantly. As the saying goes (often accompanied by an eyeroll), on social issues "everyone's a damn expert".

To be fair, although the general population (the editors of this issue included) could benefit from a greater recognition of the limits of their expertise pertaining to a number of arguments found in the political area, it is also understandable and even necessary that the lay person should form opinions on such topics. After all, they are being asked to do so, and insofar as they are members of the public, they need to form opinions on issues of public concern if they are to fulfill their civic duties. Whether people are qualified or not, in today's version of the online era the conclusions they come to on these issues will have a dramatic effect on the rest of the arguments they are presented with.

4. Divided publics

Despite the importance of argument travel, the abovementioned evolution in media means that the ability for arguments to travel has also evolved and, maybe counter-intuitively, been restricted in many cases. As Eli Pariser (2011) has argued, the evolution of the internet and social media has brought with it the creation of the "Filter Bubble". A filter bubble is the name attributed to the experience that a user of the web, and especially of social media, encounters after an algorithm selects and prioritizes the content s/he is presented with. In short, when you are surfing the web, the

clicks you make are tracked and used to create a personal profile of your interests and opinions. *Google* has been open about their attempts to personalize advertising, but less well known is that personalization also effects general search results as well as the posts you are more or less likely to see on social media platforms like *Facebook*. Since users are more likely to click things they agree with, they are presented with more things they are likely to agree with. This creates what Pariser calls a "You Loop" (*ibid.*, Ch. 4), which occurs when the platform shows you information. you agree with, causing you to click it, and thereby re-affirming for that platform that it is information you agree with. Since there is an indescribable volume of information available on the web, the prioritization of certain content means other content is restricted, filtered away from the information you receive on a daily basis.

A wide-ranging study from 2017 has shown that "More than half of us (54%) prefer paths that use algorithms to select stories rather than editors or journalists (44%). This effect is even more apparent for those who mainly use smartphones (58%) and for younger users (64%)" (Newman *et al.* 2017). In addition to algorithms, many of our favourite news sources now also provide the option to receive alerts for breaking news. Alerts like these keep us attached to sources we pre-approve and contribute to our physical attachment to technology. As *The Economist* (not so elegantly) explains, "Overall, Americans touch their smartphones on average more than 2,600 times a day (the heaviest users easily double that). The population of America farts about 3m times a minute. It likes things on *Facebook* about 4m times a minute" (*The Economist*, 2017 p. 20). Our reliance on our internet-connected technologies, especially those that purposefully filter our access to information (like *Facebook*), keeps us in our own information bubbles, regularly confirming—or at least not questioning—our basic assumptions about the social and political world and the way it ought to work.

These loops can become especially dangerous when they re-enforce harmful narratives. As Katharina Stevens has shown, fables used to mischaracterize American immigrants can be extremely powerful. If my search for "Trump speech" leads me to

the fable of the snake she discusses, and its persuasive force is effective, my next click may end me up on a link associated with the keywords "Trump", "snake", and "immigrant". Having learned of my interest in the topic, a later search for "American immigration", rather than presenting neutral statistics at the top of the list, may instead show me items related anti-immigration policy. Likewise, a search for "Trump speech" that lands me on a speech he made to business executives in the 1990s, may in the end prevent me from ever encountering his fable at all.

Of course, bubbles can be bigger and smaller. On the smallest scale, we each have our own bubble. But by virtue of living within a society, few of us are truly unique in a way that means we won't share interests and opinions with others. On a big enough scale, we might posit two to three huge bubbles, each tinted a certain colour, corresponding to the right, center, and left of the political spectrum. One way to identify which colour your bubble is, is to find your position on any number of central issues. Once identified, these positions can be understood as what you take to be starting premises—unquestioned assumptions upon which the rest of your views are based. Simply stated, those basic and shared assumptions of the political left, centre, and right mean that web users are presented with content generally in agreement with those basic beliefs/assumptions and generally not provided with information that contradicts it.

On this scale, however, the bubbles encompassing those with shared basic premises are so huge that within them we can still see how an argument could be said to have appropriately travelled and earned its public merit. Take, for example, the contemporary debate on gun control. Proponents of both sides of this debate (and those in between) can point to arguments that have traveled in the sense Rheg identifies as producing public merit—meeting challenges, while finding uptake in topically relevant contexts and getting confirmed in materially relevant contexts. This fact could be part of what keeps the left and right in eternal political opposition: both sides are able to produce demonstrations of how their arguments have cogently travelled, that is, have been tested, taken up, and confirmed across a multitude of relevant micro contexts.

Understood in this way, a term like 'alternative fact' starts to make some sense. One bubble has one set of facts, another bubble another set. Viewed from one bubble, the facts of another are 'alternative'. On this understanding, the tested premises and conclusions of the arguments in each bubble, become the truths—the facts—of that bubble. This could be why Kristiansen and Kaussler argue in their article in this special issue, "If something is thought to be true in the minds of audiences, then for them that belief might as well be true".

5. Reminding ourselves of the importance of an old debate

If our collective filter bubbles are so big that within them arguments can be seen to have gained public merit, but between them opposition remains, we end up in a position where different conclusions, seemingly equally well supported and worthy of acceptance, exist simultaneously. If truth is not a criterion of good arguments, and oppositional arguments all gain legitimate acceptability, we find ourselves at a deep impasse, not just between political views, but in how we should conceptualize the normative dimensions of argument and its evaluation (see Boger 2005). Similar to Stevens's contention that "We will reject an argument that makes use of inferences not allowed in the frame we have adopted" (see this issue), we can expect that we will reject an argument that makes use of inferences not grounded on the basic assumptions colouring our bubbles.

The problem that occurs when arguments circle around the same bubbles is that important premises are left unquestioned and certain conclusions are left unchallenged. Replacing truth with acceptability as a standard for argumentation evaluation works best when you have diverse and equally powerful voices contributing reasons. However, given our bubbles produced by the algorithmic tendency for things to be presented that we agree with, the acceptability criterion is met artificially easily. As Gelfert points out,

> Perspective matters. For the recipient of a piece of disinformation, or someone who is confronted with an instance of fake news, it

does little good to be told that they should only accept what they are told if, in fact, it meets the requisite criteria of veracity and truthfulness. To be sure, there may be an objective fact of the matter whether the purported information or news items represents reality, but from the perspective of the recipient, this relationship is epistemically inscrutable. (See this issue.)

One way out is to look back toward truth for an answer. Could truth be the all-encompassing bubble? Or could it be a spear, able to pierce each bubble to get to the heart of each argument? A golden arrow travelling through the otherwise tinted argumentative worlds? It does not seem likely. As Kristenssen and Klauster remind us, "Historically derived, contextually informed, subjectively determined, and ultimately distorted by innate inadequacies in the human sensory apparatus, the establishing of truth—or falsity for that matter—is a difficult proposition" (see this issue).

Another option is to encourage each other to break out of our bubbles. This means hunting for arguments against our basic assumptions and understanding what tints other bubbles and why. It means employing our critical thinking. As Stephen Sullivan emphasises, "critical thinking itself demands a willingness to consider diverse perspectives and is inconsistent with indoctrination" (see this issue). It thus means acknowledging that we must do the opposite of what we have been trained to do. While much of our effort has been aimed at resolving disagreements, the lesson here is that today, it might be just as valuable to try to find them.

6. Organization of the Issue

The rest of the issue is organized as follows. The first article, "The Bullshit Doctrine: Fabrications, Lies, and Nonsense in the Age of Trump" by Lars J. Kristiansen and Bernd Kaussler, aims to put real instances of Bullshit on the table. Although the concept of linguistic bullshit has been debated and evolved over time, the conversation has largely been restrained to the theoretical realm. Presenting a multitude of examples, Kristiansen and Kaussler show how the American president produces Bullshit that meets the characterizations provided by a number of different authors, there-

by providing a rare empirical analysis of Bullshit in political action.

In the second article "Trump, Snakes, and the Power of Fables" Katharina Stevens focuses on an oft (and still) used fable that Donald Trump tells to link snakes to the dangers of immigration. Using an argumentative lens, Stevens discusses the use of fables as argumentative source analogues and demonstrates their dangers when used for overly narrow comparisons. She then explores the further danger that can result from fables when they function as frame setting arguments—establishing premises that will remain unquestioned in later instances of reasoning and argumentation.

The third research-focused article in this issue, "'Fake News': A Definition" by Axel Gelfert, illustrates both the importance and difficulty of accounting for the phenomenon referred to as "fake news". Grounding his proposed definition in a survey of existing conceptions, Gelfert argues that the central feature of fake news is that it is produced by design. In so doing, he also explores how fake news capitalizes on our existing cognitive biases, causing them to become more prevalent even against our better judgement.

The fourth paper in this volume is a Teaching Supplement that provides valuable examples and reflects upon author Stephen Sullivan's experience of using "Donald Trump as a Critical-Thinking Teaching Assistant". Sullivan engagingly narrates his experience and groups his examples into useful categories for undergraduate instruction. He is also careful to provide wise warnings concerning the dangers involved in using Trump too much.

Taken together, this special issue of *Informal Logic* constitutes one early step in trying to make sense of the unique employment of reason and rhetoric that we are living with today. Our hope is that the articles presented here can be used as reference points for further analysis, discussion, and debate involved in the argumentative practices that are taking place now and that will almost certainly surprise us again in the future.

Finally, as guest editors, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to all of the reviewers who took their time to provide detailed comments on and suggestions for the manuscsripts submitted to our call. We are equally thankful to all of the authors,

who have worked over the past months to prepare and polish their thoughts on the complicated and sometimes downright odd issues emanating from the contemporary political environment. And we thank the Editors for giving us this opportunity and for their ongoing support.

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