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0:05 / 0:05

Photo from Trump's January 6, 2021, speech by Mark Peterson/New York Times. Animation by Stephen Paur.

NOTE

Have you been vaccinated yet? We don't mean against the novel coronavirus. We mean against the (semi-)novel demagogic rhetorical appeals employed by Donald Trump and other authoritarian figures in politics and the media. If so, good for you! If not, though, you're in luck. Because we, the Intrepid Fact-Checking Squad, worked overtime triple- and quadruple-checking the various claims, statements, observations, references, etc. that appear in the book review below, thereby inoculating our dear readers against any sneaky attempts, on the part of this webtext's author, Stephen Paur, to distort, mislead, or otherwise take unfair advantage of your readerly goodwill. We hope you appreciate the enhanced reading experience made possible by our truth-oriented interventions. **Simply hover your cursor over anything highlighted in yellow to reveal our commentary.**



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POST- TRUMP RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION

A Review of Bruce McComiskey's **Post-Truth
Rhetoric and Composition**

By Stephen Paur

12–19 minutes

INTRODUCTION

Forty-fifth U.S. President Donald J. Trump left the White House not with a whimper but a bang, and the ears of many of us are still ringing. For this reason and others, Bruce McComiskey's (2017) 50-page pamphlet-essay, *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition*, which urges writing teachers and scholars to double-down on efforts to identify and resist demagoguery and the corrosion of U.S. public discourse by what he calls the Trump Effect, remains timely and urgent—even if McComiskey inadvertently exhibits some demagogic tendencies of his own.



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Trump may no longer be president, but the forces that made his rise (and potential return) to power possible have not disappeared. Moreover, the political tensions, economic structures, technological conditions, and cognitive biases that together create a breeding ground for lies, falsehoods, and conspiracies (of which [QAnon](#) is one persistent example) are still very much with us. The question of what to do about this state of affairs, and how to preempt future attempts to sow division and hatred by scapegoating already vulnerable groups, remains at the forefront for those who teach and study civic discourse, digital rhetoric, and critical media literacy.

In this review, I discuss the strengths and limitations of McComiskey's argument. I then unfold an argument of my own about the general inadequacies of a Cartesian rationalist approach to resisting political propaganda and divisive fear-mongering, and about the importance of insights from social psychology about how emotional, material, and identity-based interests comprise the inner core of our belief systems.

SUMMARY

The majority of McComiskey's slim volume is devoted to describing and analyzing various forms of post-truth rhetoric. The first part contains five sections: "Bullshit," "Fake News," "Ethos (at the Expense of Logos)," "Pathos (at the Expense of Logos)," and "The Trump Effect." Then, in the final pages, McComiskey turns to post-truth composition, considering the general ways writing teachers might

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help students insulate themselves from some of the depredations that comprise the post-truth media and political landscapes, and clarifying the stakes of such a project.

McComiskey's central purpose is not to solve but to more precisely diagnose the problems posed by post-truth rhetoric, and to argue that writing teachers are uniquely positioned to furnish students with a set of knowledge and skills that is, in his view, a prerequisite (if not a guarantee) for defending against distortions and demagoguery. "Post-truth rhetorical strategies are anathema to every core value that writing teachers hold dear," he writes (p. 38).

THE TRUMP EFFECT

Drawing on [this report](#) by the Southern Poverty Law Center (Costello, 2016), McComiskey uses the term Trump Effect to refer to the coarsening of public discourse and the general spike in incidents of violence, harassment, and discrimination against women, immigrants, Muslims, Jews, racial and sexual minorities, and others that followed in the wake of the 2016 presidential campaign and election. Meanwhile, he uses the term "post-truth" to describe a cultural and historical moment wherein "language lacks any reference to facts, truths, and realities," with the ends (usually some version of "winning") justifying any communicative means, regardless of the harm done along the way (p. 6).



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McComiskey implies that both Trump's election and its various ripple effects are indicative, in part, of the collective failure of writing teachers (among many others, to be sure) to inoculate their students against the various cultural and political pathogens that circulate and multiply in a post-truth society. Rather than lay blame, however, McComiskey wants to rally writing teachers to decisively oppose Trumpism as a virulent political phenomenon.

"These are wonderful times for motivated reasoners. The internet provides an almost infinite number of sources of information from which to choose your preferred reality. There's an echo chamber out there for everyone."

MATTHEW HORNSEY

qtd. in "Why We Believe Alternative Facts" (Weir, 2017)

POST-TRUTH RHETORIC

Of particular interest to readers might be McComiskey's description of how post-truth rhetorical strategies differ from earlier examples of false or misleading language use, of which there has been no shortage, from the yellow journalism of Hearst's and Pulitzer's day, to the anti-communist

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propaganda of the McCarthy era. The philosopher Harry Frankfurt (on whom McComiskey draws) called such unethical rhetorical appeals "bullshit," which he defined as "pure strategic communication with no reference to [or concern for] reality or truth" (McComiskey, 2017, p. 10).

According to Frankfurt, the deployment of bullshit requires rhetors to conceal their disregard for what McComiskey calls the "epistemological continuum" (p. 7). To believe in the continuum means believing that facts, truths, and realities do exist (however partially knowable, provisional, situated, and historically contingent they might be), and that an awareness of their existence must guide any rhetorical practice —*even if that practice is essentially fraudulent*. Hence concerted efforts by the likes of Big Tobacco or the fossil fuel industry to sow doubt about inconvenient truths by funding what were meant to *at least seem like* credible critiques of climate science or cancer sticks.

In a post-truth world, all such pretenses go out the window. The reason, McComiskey says, is that now "even the audiences have no concern for facts, realities, or truths, thus relieving speakers from the need to conceal their manipulative intent" (p. 12).

ANALYSIS

If the quotation above sounds like an uncharitable characterization of the segments of the public thought to be most susceptible to demagogic rhetorical tactics, then you share my concern that

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McComiskey is coming dangerously close to engaging in a demagoguery of his own. As Michael J. Steudeman (2019) astutely noted in "Rethinking Rhetorical Education in Times of Demagoguery," "rhetoricians risk constituting the 'ignorant' as a category of second-class citizens—the scapegoats for our own type of demagoguery" (p. 301).

(Note that what Steudeman warned about with respect to "ignorant" routinely happens with respect to "illiterate." For one example, see the [recent Twitter feud](#) between conservative pundit Candace Owens and rapper Cardi B (Mamo, 2022). Notice Owens's repeated swerves into demagogic tactics when she tries to discredit Cardi B's values and politics by calling her "uneducated" [see link above] and "illiterate" [see [this Twitter clip](#); Owens, 2020]).

For teachers of writing, rhetoric, and literacy to cast ourselves as dispassionate observers, uniquely impervious to exploitative and/or emotion-driven appeals, only reinstates outmoded, pernicious modernist Cartesian dualisms, such as mind/body, fact/value, and self/other. It also risks disqualifying marginalized social groups whose current and historical exclusion from full and equal participation in democratic discourse is often rationalized by labeling them ["too emotional"](#) (Marcotte, 2019) to be granted access to the deliberative process (a process in which, according to certain [theories of agonism](#), emotion-driven conflict is actually both unavoidable and generative; Fiske, 2014).



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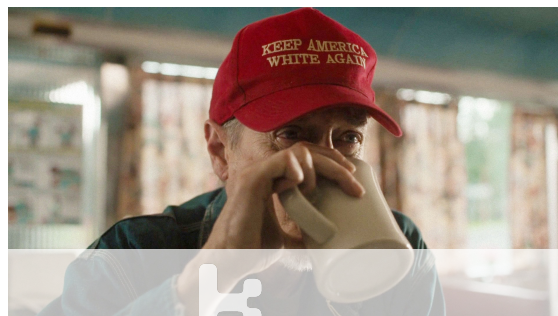
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McComiskey is certainly onto something when he posits the rise of a "post-truth public" for whom the truth-value of isolated claims is less important than the way those claims validate and legitimize this public's fears, resentments, and the underlying value systems those feelings are predicated upon (p. 18). It's crucial to recognize, however, that such audiences are not intellectually deficient or morally depraved. Rather, they represent a segment of the public that's struggling to reckon with its shifting place in the sociopolitical landscape.

Many of them are people who, as Todd Gitlin (1995) wrote in *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, "resent (and exaggerate) their relative decline not only in parts of the labor market but at home . . . and in the culture," and who are anxious and confused about how to respond to "the relative gains of women and minorities in an economy that people experience as a zero-sum game, in which the benefits accruing to one group seem to amount to subtractions from another" (p. 233). People who feel like they've been backed into a corner are especially vulnerable to rhetorical appeals (like the racist slogans "MAGA" and "KAG," exposed and parodied in the image below) that take unfair advantage of their desperation and perceived victimhood.



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Still frame from the 2019 horror-comedy film

The Dead Don't Die, directed by Jim

Jarmusch. Trumpian appeals to white racial

resentment are becoming increasingly [less](#)

[coded and more explicit](#) (Schertzer & Woods,
2022).

As McComiskey notes, this state of affairs poses a special challenge for rhetorical educators, journalists, and others intent on "exposing" falsehoods, since a post-truth public's "epistemological and political cynicism . . . is rooted not 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" (p. 9).

FACT versus INTERPRETATION

In other words, what matters more than the facts themselves are the moral/emotional foundations and social affiliations that predispose us to find some facts amenable to those foundations/affiliations, and other facts threatening to or otherwise incommensurable with those foundations/affiliations. What matters is that Trump—as well as other demagogues like Vladimir Putin (Russia), Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), Narendra Modi (India), Viktor Orbán (Hungary), Marine Le Pen (France), Boris Johnson (UK), Tucker Carlson (Fox News), Alex Jones (InfoWars), the late Rush Limbaugh (talk radio), etc.—"offer people meaningful and attractive *interpretations* of their current condition and future possibilities, however far-fetched, factually

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incorrect, or empirically biased they may be"
(p. 9, emphasis added).

Post-truth publics, in McComiskey's view, are constituted, in part, by political figures and media personalities whose dishonesty is, ironically, a form of truth-telling. False, xenophobic statements about immigrant criminality, for instance, are strategically calibrated to signal to the intended audience that their feelings of alienation and embattlement are valid. The key here is that such feelings, however unjustified, are nonetheless very real—a demagogue can't exploit fears, anxieties, resentments, and prejudices that don't exist, after all.

Manipulating such feelings is not, of course, the only thing a political figure can do with them. But to ignore or dismiss those feelings is to play into the hands of any opponent willing to employ unethical, self-serving strategies.

A key question left unasked by McComiskey's pamphlet-essay is what a responsible rhetor should do with such feelings *instead*—how to acknowledge them without endorsing them can be tricky. Psychology professor Matthew Hornsey says we need to pay attention to what he calls "attitude roots—the fears, ideologies, worldviews, vested interests and identity needs—that motivate us to accept or reject scientific evidence," arguing that "communicators must do a better job at identifying those roots and adjust[ing] their persuasion attempts accordingly" by engaging in what he calls "jiu jitsu persuasion: working with people's

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motivations rather than trying to fight against them" (qtd. in Weir, 2017). And for Steudeman (2019), the solution is not to "suppress resentment" but "to disperse corrosive sentiments over a wider range of explanations to dilute the emotional lifeblood of demagoguery" (p. 307).

CONCLUSION

Because of the primacy McComiskey affords to logos, reason, and argument, the following statement of his is understandable:

Writing teachers, perhaps better than anyone else, can prepare the next generation of voting citizens to recognize and fight against the kind of rhetoric that characterizes the current political climate, and we can teach students to use language that represents the values we already promote in our discipline, including those values described in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* and the *WPA Outcomes Statements for First-Year Composition*. (p. 38)

The [*Framework's*](#) habits of mind included curiosity, openness, engagement, and metacognition (Council of Writing Program Administrators et al., 2011), while the [*Outcomes Statement*](#) emphasized critical thinking, rhetorical awareness, and genre awareness, among other things (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2014). Such habits and tools, McComiskey claims, can insulate students from post-truth rhetoric, as well as make them less likely to resort to it in

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their own rhetorical practices. How, exactly, to teach and measure something like "openness" is (for space-limitation reasons) left to readers to figure out. Writing teachers will and should disagree about the best way to promote such values, anyway.



"What Is Politically Motivated Reasoning?"

[\(Read PDF of Transcript\)](#)

What McComiskey doesn't mention here (though surely he's aware of it) is that historically there's been much disagreement about *which* set of values the field should be explicitly espousing in the first place; how, precisely, those values should be interpreted and applied; and which ones should take priority. That such disagreements have occurred and are likely to continue is, of course, as it should be—it's part of what keeps our work challenging, invigorating, and relevant. It's what keeps us from getting complacent.

Perhaps most importantly, ongoing negotiations about the field's driving values, paired with rigorous, ongoing, critical self-assessments, are what can keep our work from veering into demagogic tactics of its own. As Steudeman (2019) noted,

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"Demagoguery weaponizes the liberal and republican languages of justice, identity, equality, and virtue in ways subversive to the best intentions of those intellectual traditions" (p. 306). To minimize the likelihood of this happening, consistent, honest self-questioning is key.

Indeed, it can be dangerous to assume that we, as writing teachers, are somehow uniquely resistant to demagoguery, or that our value systems are self-evidently good, or that we're incapable of slipping into what Bruno Latour (2004) called "critical barbarity": a logically inconsistent, selective style of critique, whereby people "debunk objects they don't believe in by showing the productive and projective forces of people; then, without ever making the connection, they use objects they do believe in to resort to the causalist or mechanist explanation and debunk conscious capacities of people whose behavior they don't approve of" (p. 241). Thus the importance of directing critique inward as much as outward. If we're not careful, puncturing the irrationality or hypocrisy of others can become little more than self-aggrandizement if all it does is help us rationalize our own ideas and values, and the various biases and blind spots they entail.

"[T]he internet can get you to information that would back up almost any claim of fact, no matter how unfounded.

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**It is both the world's
best fact-checker and
the world's best bias-
confirmer — often at
the same time."**

MICHAEL LYNCH (2016)

"Googling Is Believing: Trumping the
Informed Citizen"

EMPATHY versus SOCIOPATHY

The important thing, ultimately, is simply to *have* values in the first place—values that account for the well-being of others at least as much as that of oneself. The most dangerous thing about post-truth rhetoric is not, in fact, its indifference to truth, but its indifference to ethics. The most significant takeaway from McComiskey's essay is thus its essential reminder that to treat language use in unprincipled terms is to stoop to a rhetoric of sociopathy. This, of course, should be avoided; McComiskey's pamphlet-essay can help us appreciate why.

STRATEGIC DISCOURSE

How to proceed from there, of course, remains up to us. Going forward, it's worth remembering that Donald Trump was (and remains) an "effective" rhetor, by some standards, primarily because, as McComiskey points out, he's always keenly aware of the *performative* aspects of politics, personality, and persuasion. McComiskey faults him for this, but I'm not convinced that this type of "whatever works" mentality

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—an approach that prizes strategic, instrumental discourse, that is, whatever will help a rhetor achieve their aims—is *inherently* bad or dangerous.

Indeed, for some, strategic language use is the very definition of rhetoric. In his *Introduction to Rhetorical Theory*, for instance, Gerard Hauser (2002) wrote that "rhetorical communication occurs whenever one person engages another in an exchange of symbols to accomplish some goal. It is not communication for communication's sake" (p. 3). Strategic language use *becomes* dangerous when a rhetor's aims derive simply from self-interest—the egotistical pursuit of money, power, popularity, or prestige, with any casualties of that pursuit conveniently rationalized away as collateral damage.

The mark of an ethical rhetor, by contrast, is the willingness to *change* their approach if that approach does harm—direct or not—to others. The willingness to adjust and recalibrate stems, ideally, from a desire to cooperate and coordinate with others to solve shared problems (and avoid causing new ones), rather than from a desire to dominate, demean, or exclude. How to identify, assess, prevent, and ameliorate harm is, I think, a goal worth pursuing strategically and doggedly—which is to say, rhetorically.

POST-CRITIQUE

In his response essay, "Ideology and Critique in Composition Studies," McComiskey (2002) highlighted the insufficiency of a critical

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practice that doesn't offer preferable alternatives to replace the targets of its critiques:

In order for critical discourses to effect change in any real way (that is, beyond just a personal change in one's own attitude), it must, according to Gunther Kress, "move beyond critique as an aim in itself, to the proposal of alternatives as a new and necessary aim." Critique remains important, in other words, yet it must be the beginning, not the end, of rhetorical activity. (p. 172)

This is an essential insight. And it's a reminder that McComiskey's argument in *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* is not to be taken as anything close to the last word on the question of what writing teachers can or should do to promote a more sane, humane world. Instead, the essay should be read mainly as a defense of those democratic, empathetic sensibilities that make "the proposal of alternatives" possible and desirable.

RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS, STUDENTS, and/or SCHOLARS

ESSAYS and ARTICLES

Jason Stanley:

["Beyond Lying: Donald Trump's Authoritarian Reality"](#)

Michael Lynch:

["Googling Is Believing: Trumping the Informed Citizen"](#)

["Do We Really Understand Fake News?"](#)

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Elizabeth Kolbert:

["Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds"](#)

Kristen Weir:

["Why We Believe Alternative Facts"](#)

Gabriel Gatehouse:

["Facts Are Mere Weapons in the War over
US Capitol Riots Narrative"](#)

Alice Marwick and William Partin:

["QAnon Shows that the Age of Alternative
Facts Will Not End with Trump"](#)

Udi Greenberg:

["What Was the Fascism Debate?"](#)

Shaan Sachdev:

["Hysterical Empathy: On Identity and
Interventionism"](#)

Leslie Jamison:

["What Empathy Is Made Of"](#)

Matthew Hornsey and Kelly Fielding:

["Attitude Roots and Jiu Jitsu Persuasion:
Understanding and Overcoming the
Motivated Rejection of Science"](#)

Matthias Flatscher and Sergej Seitz:

["Latour, Foucault, and Post-Truth: The Role
and Function of Critique in the Era of the
Truth Crisis"](#)

Richard Rorty:

["The Contingency of Language"](#)

Friedrich Nietzsche:

["On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense"](#)

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Patricia Roberts-Miller:

[Demagoguery and Democracy](#)

[Rhetoric and Demagoguery](#)

[Deliberate Conflict: Argument, Political
Theory, and Composition Classes](#)

Michael J. Steudeman (Ed.):

[Teaching Demagoguery and Democracy:
Rhetorical Pedagogy in Polarized Times](#)

Anne-Marie Womack and Donald Lazere:

[Reading and Writing for Civic Literacy: The
Critical Citizen's Guide to Argumentative
Rhetoric](#)

Sharon Crowley:

[Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and
Fundamentalism](#)

Hilary Putnam:

[The Collapse of the Fact-Value Dichotomy
and Other Essays](#)

VIDEOS and SYLLABI

Jon Stewart and Gabriel Gatehouse:

["Why Do People Love QAnon?"](#)

Michael Winship:

["It Can Happen Here: 12 Movies about
American Demagoguery"](#)

Jennifer Mercieca:

[Syllabus for COMM 658: "Dark Arts of
Communication: Manipulation,
Propaganda, Demagoguery" \(and related
courses\)](#)

"Current media literacy
programs attempt to

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empower individuals by teaching them to 'think critically,' 'do their own research,' and evaluate their sources. This is often cited as a panacea for disinformation, fake news, and all manner of online toxicity. Yet our research shows that many Bakers [the term for QAnon researchers] *already* do these things, and defend the validity of the conspiracy on this basis. . . . By illustrating the gap between media literacy in theory and in practice, our research shows that simply encouraging people to 'think critically' and 'evaluate their sources' isn't a meaningful check against conspiratorial thinking—in fact, it may contribute to it."

Alice Marwick & William Partin
(2020)

"QAnon Shows That the Age of
Alternative Facts Will Not End with
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