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Engagement Beyond Fact-Checking: Ciceronian Stasis Theory as a Response to Fake News

Abstract

In this paper, I suggest that the phenomenon of fake news may be more productively understood if considered within the context of Ciceronian stasis theory. Whereas much of rhetoric and writing's response to fake news consists of appeals to fact-checking, it is by engaging fake news stories as arguments of quality rather than fact or definition that we may develop a more productive understanding of the relationship between fake news and personal belief. Taking the case of Edgar Maddison Welch and the fake news story Pizzagate as illustrative examples, I conclude that, by more seriously attending to the thoughts and feelings of the believers of fake news, we not only make it possible to better appreciate what it is that leads citizens to embrace and circulate and even act on such narratives. We better position ourselves as scholars and educators to more persuasively respond to fake news' deception and harmful effects.

Keywords

rhetoric, fake news, Cicero, stasis theory, Pizzagate, writing

Cover Page Footnote

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The phrase “alternative facts” was coined by Kellyanne Conway, Counselor to President Donald Trump, in a January 22, 2017 interview with *Meet the Press*’s Chuck Todd (NBC). In this interview, Conway defended Press Secretary Sean Spicer’s assertion that those who gathered to witness Trump’s inauguration made up “the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration, period, both in person and around the globe” (NBC, 2017). In response to Todd’s criticism of the President’s decision to have “the White House press secretary . . . come out in front of the podium for the first time and utter a falsehood” by making statements about crowd size that could easily be contradicted through photographic evidence, Conway asserted that, far from lying or distorting the truth, Sean Spicer merely offered “alternative facts” to those presented by media outlets such as NBC (NBC, 2017). Though it is difficult to say what Conway actually believes, her statements imply an understanding of communication as, not the discovery of truth or even a process by which common understanding is produced through critical-rational debate, but a process in which anyone can say anything and it becomes true by virtue of being uttered and believed. Far from being exclusive to Conway, the phenomenon of alternative facts has gained increased traction within public discourse in the United States and helps to illustrate the increasingly difficult nature of democratic discourse in a society in which citizens often seem to lack even the most basic shared understanding.

Understandably, teachers of rhetoric and writing have expressed alarm at the increasingly divisive nature of public discourse and the accompanying erosion of shared understandings of reality which help to make meaningful public discourse possible. In short, the increased interchangeability of facts that has accompanied Trump’s rise to political power constitutes for rhetoric and writing professionals a direct threat to core principles of democracy by eating away at citizen’s ability to engage in consistent, logic-driven, deliberative discourse in response to the problems facing our nation. From the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC)’s “Statement on Language, Power, and Action” to Linda Adler-Kassner’s “2017 CCCC Chair’s Address,” the prevalence of alternative facts and the related phenomenon of fake news have faced decisive rebuke by rhetoric and writing professionals with much of this criticism centering on the need for writing teachers to cultivate classrooms as what Rosa Eberly has called “protopublic spaces” of civic discourse and to instruct their students in fact-based deliberation and research and even to provide students with the tools necessary to identify and resist the persuasive attempts of fake news (2017, p. 175).

Calls to resist fake news become all the more immediate when we consider the great harm that fake news continues to inflict upon citizens. One especially worrying example of the consequences of fake news is the case of Edgar Maddison Welch, who, on December 4, 2016, arrived at the Comet Ping Pong pizza restaurant with an AR-15 assault rifle and proceeded to fire live rounds in the crowded restaurant because he thought it was the site of a child sex trafficking ring (United States v. Edgar Maddison Welch, 2016, pp. 3-4). Welch’s decision to arm himself and investigate the restaurant was informed, in part, by the fake news video “Watch PIZZAGATE: The Bigger Picture on YouTube” (United States v. Edgar Maddison Welch, 2016, p. 4). This is one of many stories in which fake news has shaped a distorted view of reality

that, in turn, engenders misunderstanding, fear and anger, even to the point of violence. Given the complex mixture of logical and emotional appeals contained within many fake news stories, it is difficult to know how rhetoric and writing professionals might most productively respond to this profoundly troubling feature of public discourse.

In this essay, I consider rhetoric and writing professionals' responses to the rapid spread of "post-truth" orientations toward facts, which, like the exploding of an atomic bomb, has decimated the landscape of deliberative discourse, fostering a chimeric relationship to reality that has populated Trump's America with fake news and all the monstrous and hateful attitudes and actions that squirm and writhe in its wake (Krugman, 2011). I attempt to chart this devastated landscape in order to salvage a means of engendering mutual recognition and communication despite the deep, complex mistrust and resentment that prevails. Building upon and extending the thoughts and strategies of rhetoric and writing professionals and organizations, I suggest that the phenomenon of fake news may be more productively understood if considered within the context of Ciceronian stasis theory. By beginning to interpret and even respond to the often emotion-laden narratives of fake news as arguments of quality rather than fact or definition, rhetoric and writing professionals may develop a more productive understanding of the relationship between fake news and personal belief. By more seriously attending to the thoughts and feelings of the believers of fake news, we not only make it possible to better appreciate what it is that leads citizens to embrace and circulate and even act on fake news. We better position ourselves as scholars and educators to more persuasively respond to fake news' deception and harmful effects.

Rhetoric and Writing in the Aftermath of Trump's Election

Since Trump's November 8, 2016 presidential victory, rhetoric and writing professionals have been struggling to come to terms both with the increasingly divisive nature of national discourse and the increased levels of overt prejudice and inconsistent logic that are such dominant landmarks of the post-election landscape. As Bruce McComiskey (2017) recounted in *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition*, the Rhetoric Society of America (RSA) was one of the first rhetoric and writing-related organizations to respond to the increased hatred embodied in Trump's election (p. 4). In his November 21, 2016 statement (McComiskey, 2017, p. 4), RSA President Gregory Clark issued the following appeal: "At a time when political rhetoric has been so divisive, it is important for us to come together around the values we share as a society with a scholarly mission to advance responsible discourse" (Clark, n.d.). Significantly, Clark's statement positions the work of advancing "responsible discourse" as a shared labor that unites members of the field and, through our work as instructors and scholars, society as a whole (Clark, n.d.). This call for unity in resistance to the violence and hatred that marks Trump's America was quickly taken up by the president of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), Susan Miller-Cochran, who, on November 22, 2016 (McComiskey, 2017, p. 4), stated that the CWPA is "committed to explicitly acting against any programs, policies, or other structures in society and schools that produce inequality, division, exclusion, or unfair advantage to any one group by luck of birth" (as cited in McComiskey, 2017, p. 45). Like

Clark, Miller-Cochran suggests that rhetoric and writing professionals share an obligation to resist discrimination and hatred. Also in November, the CCCC released its “Statement on Language, Power, and Action” (2016), in which it observed that “[t]he recent election provided examples of language being used to disempower and demean. In light of these events, CCCC stands strongly for the use of fact-based reasoning, writing, and communication to build a better, more ethical, more engaged nation.” As with Clark and Miller-Cochran, the CCCC’s statement positions the work of rhetoric and composition as intimately bound with the cultivation and advancement of ethical civic discourse, discourse that stands in stark contrast with that which has marked Trump’s rise to political power. More so than the statements released by the RSA and CWPA, however, the CCCC explicitly defines ethical public discourse as discourse that is grounded in a shared empirical reality.

The CCCC’s statement articulates one of the crowning features of public discourse as a liberal enterprise of critical-rational debate by suggesting that questions of the public good are to be deliberated primarily through the interplay of fact-based deliberation between citizens. According to Jürgen Habermas’ narrative of the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere, democracy is contingent upon the ability of citizens to engage in “rational-critical debate,” a process that allows for citizens’ personal viewpoints to come into contact with each other and, through this contact, be continually negotiated and refined until a “public opinion” emerges that is then, ideally, enacted by the State (1991, p. 219). Though critiqued by scholars of public rhetoric such as Nancy Fraser for deemphasizing the ways in which participants in the bourgeois public sphere denied participation to women and other groups even as they ostensibly embraced universal participation, the notion that the citizens of a nation can debate questions of the common good in public ways that have the potential to impact policy continues to have salience and is often an object of appeal within rhetoric and writing professionals’ critiques of fake news (1994, p. 126). Such appeals have gained traction in the confusion and disagreement that has accompanied Trump’s rise to political power and can be seen in the Conference Program Committee’s assertion at TYCA-West’s 2018 regional conference that “[e]very day seems to bring new challenges—ones that we as English, reading, journalism, and creative writing instructors are all too familiar with: dangerous discourse, extreme pathos, faulty logic, fake-news” (as cited in Priebe et al., 2018, p. 312). Like the CCCC’s “Statement on Language, Power, and Action,” the Conference Program Committee associates productive communication with the conventions of critical-rational debate and its reliance on reason and facts, a move that participates in the historical de-privileging of emotional appeals as an acceptable form of deliberative discourse.

In her 2017 CCCC Chair’s Address, Linda Adler-Kassner echoed many of the problems that have been pointed out by the RSA, the CCCC, the CWPA, TYCA and others since Trump’s election. Interestingly, Adler-Kassner’s address pointed to an underlying tension in how rhetoric and writing professionals understand and respond to fake news and “the circulation of non-fact based evidence” (2017, p. 319). On one level, Adler-Kassner recognized that Trump’s election has revealed how deeply divided citizens are regarding the role of fact-based reasoning in public

discourse (2017, p. 319). In response to this political and social maelstrom, Adler-Kassner emphasized the value of “discomfort” in learning and suggested that “discomfort is critical for changing one’s mind” (2017, p. 323). On the surface, such statements seem to indicate a call for mutual recognition between rhetoric and writing professionals and the students and other members of the public who have fallen prey to the emotional and narrative lures of fake news. However, while Adler-Kassner did suggest that rhetoric and writing professionals should attempt “to make connections between our values and principles and those held by others,” any attempt at such bridging is already limited by “our disciplinary identity to fact-check” and “to ensure that assertions being made about students, writing, or writing classes are based in evidence and not what an official associated with the current administration called ‘alternative facts’” (2017, p. 335). While Adler-Kassner gestures toward mutual recognition across lines of empirical and cultural difference, such recognition is always already mitigated by a persistent, almost reflexive appeal to fact-checking and the conventions of critical-rational debate, an appeal that is not exclusive to Adler-Kassner, but pervades much of rhetoric and writing’s response to the proliferation of fake news in the wake of Trump’s presidency.

Ciceronian Stasis Theory as a Response to Fake News

Adler-Kassner’s suggestion, however tentative, that rhetoric and writing professionals may respond to fake news and its believers by attempting to understand the worldviews embodied within certain fake news stories helps to open up the possibility for common understanding to emerge out of division. This emphasis upon meeting audiences where they are has much in common with Cicero’s own view of rhetoric as an inherently democratic enterprise. According to Cicero, while other “arts,” or fields of knowledge and practice, seek to obscure their operations by making themselves sites of discursive privilege, “the procedures of oratory lie within everyone’s reach, and are concerned with everyday experience and with human nature and speech” (2001, p. 60). Cicero also stated that “in oratory it is the worst possible fault to deviate from the ordinary mode of speaking and the generally accepted way of looking at things” (2001, p. 60). Throughout *On the Ideal Orator*, Cicero emphasized, via the polyphonic interplay of Crassus, Antonius and other historical figures, the vital role that audience-awareness plays in rhetorical action. If there is to be any chance of rhetoric and writing professionals engaging in meaningful conversation with the believers of fake news, it is likely that we must first attempt to understand what it is that fake news believers find so compelling about the narratives they embrace and, in the case of Edgar Maddison Welch’s response to Pizzagate, may even act on in potentially violent ways. Welch’s case helps to illustrate how Cicero’s emphasis upon audience awareness, combined with his articulation of stasis theory may be helpful as a rhetorical context in which to consider fake news narratives and those who believe them.

According to Welch’s statement following his December 4, 2016 arrest for firing an AR-15 assault rifle inside the crowded Comet Ping Pong pizza restaurant, “he had learned about ‘news’ reports concerning a child sex trafficking ring that was being conducted in hidden rooms at the . . . restaurant, which allegedly involved high-profile individuals” (United States of America v. Edgar Maddison Welch, 2016, p. 9). The news that Welch refers to promulgated “a

conspiracy theory, which linked the supposed ring to Hillary Clinton, because [the restaurant] owner had corresponded with the Clinton campaign about a fund-raising dinner” (Goldman, 2016). Like so many fake news stories, the timeline of Pizzagate is difficult to trace, but it appears to have begun with Wikileaks’ decision to publish hacked emails from the Hillary Clinton campaign, which were then mined by far-right social media users “for evidence of wrongdoing” (Aisch et al., 2016). Eventually, these users discovered what they believed to be covert references to pedophilia (Aisch, et al., 2016). These discoveries helped fan a narrative that circulated through fake news sites such as *YourNewsWire*, which published a web article on October 31, 2016 stating that, “[a]ccording to an NYPD source, emails found on Anthony Weiner’s laptop detail trips made by Weiner, Bill and Hillary Clinton on convicted pedophile pal billionaire Jeffrey Epstein’s plane ‘Lolitta express’ to a place known as ‘Sex Slave Island’” (Adl-Tabatabai, 2016). Due, in part, to social media assertions that references to “cheese pizza” within the Wikileaks emails are in fact code for child sex trafficking (Aisch, et al., 2016), this narrative expanded to identify the Washington, D.C. Comet Ping Pong pizza restaurant as the site through which the Clinton-orchestrated child sex trafficking ring was supposedly being operated (United States of America v. Edgar Maddison Welch, 2016, p. 4). According to court records, it was only after consuming a variety of YouTube videos on the subject of Pizzagate, such as “Watch PIZZAGATE: The Bigger Picture on YouTube,” that Welch decided to investigate the rumors further, a decision that led to his use of an assault rifle within the Comet Ping Pong restaurant and his subsequent arrest (United States of America v. Edgar Maddison Welch, 2016, p. 4).

In many respects, Welch’s journey down the rabbit hole of fake news and the disastrous consequences of his inability to differentiate between credible and non-credible sources helps to reinforce the importance of logical thinking and fact-checking that rhetoric and writing professionals have argued for. According to these arguments, the problem of fake news is most productively understood as a problem of false information and incorrect understanding, one that can be resolved through exposure to facts and logical thinking. This perspective approaches fake news as what Cicero called a “question of fact” and a problem of “definition” (May and Wisse, 2001, p. 33). According to Cicero’s stasis theory, the deliberation of a judicial case first requires all parties involved to arrive at mutual agreement about the category of the case itself, whether it concerns a disagreement over “what happened” (2001, p. 151), “what word should be used to designate something” (2001, p. 152) or the “character” of the action, itself (2001, p. 151). In other words, the parties involved in a deliberation must first decide if the dispute centers on a “question of fact,” a question of “definition” or a question of “quality” (May and Wisse, 2001, p. 33). Whether it is the CCCC stating that it “stands strongly for the use of fact-based reasoning, writing, and communication” (2016), TYCA bemoaning the “new challenges” of “dangerous discourse, extreme pathos, faulty logic, [and] fake-news” (as cited in Priebe et al., p. 312), or Adler-Kassner associating rhetoric and writing professionals’ “disciplinary identity” with the need to “fact-check” in an increasingly post-truth world, rhetoric and writing professionals have frequently approached the problem of fake news as a problem of fact and definition, one that can

be solved by holding false belief and misinformation up to the light of logic and careful research (2017, p. 335). However, by paying closer attention to the narratives of fake news believers, we come to see that fake news is not exclusively a problem of fact and definition, but also a question of quality.

In the case of Welch's response to Pizzagate, examination of Welch's own statements suggests that Welch's attraction to and ultimate decision to act on fake news was not simply a problem related to misinformation or misunderstanding, but embodied a yearning for purpose that cannot be addressed through the practice of fact-checking. Analysis of Welch's statements prior to and following the incident indicate that Welch likely believed he was engaging in a just cause. For instance, in a text sent on December 1, 2016, approximately three days before Welch entered the restaurant, Welch informed his "girlfriend . . . that he had been researching 'Pizzagate' and that it was making him 'sick'" (United States of America v. Edgar Maddison Welch, 2016, p. 4). Later that day, after watching more YouTube videos on Pizzagate, Welch received a text from a friend, named "C" in court records, who wrote, "Tell me we r going to save the Indians from the pipeline," to which Welch replied, "Way more important, much higher stakes' and 'Pizzagate'" (United States of America v. Edgar Maddison Welch, 2016, p. 5). C's reference to saving "the Indians from the pipeline" suggests that Welch had engaged in prior discussion about the possibility of joining the then-unfolding protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock (Healy, 2016). These texts suggest that, while the decision to target Comet Ping Pong was influenced by the circulation of fake news that implicated, however falsely, the restaurant in a child sex trafficking ring, Welch's actions were not solely influenced by the content of the fake news articles but were also informed by a desire to enact meaningful social change and combat corruption, a quality of Welch's actions that is likely to be overlooked by those who approach them as merely the consequence of misinformation and misunderstanding.

A later tweet from Welch provides further insight into the motivations behind his actions and illustrates even more profoundly how Welch's decision to act on the false information of fake news belies a more deep-seated desire to be an instrument of justice in what Welch positions as a corrupt nation and world. In an effort to articulate "the cause" he was asking his friend C, as well as C's Army friend, to join him in, Welch texted the following:

Raiding a pedo ring, possibly sacraficing [sic] the lives of a few for the lives of many. Standing up against a corrupt system that kidnaps, tortures and rapes babies and children in our own backyard... defending the next generation of kids, our kids, from ever having to experience this kind of evil themselves[.] I'm sorry bro, but I'm tired of turning the channel and hoping someone does something and being thankful it's not my family. One day it will be our families. The world is too afraid to act and I'm too stubborn not to[.] (United States of America v. Edgar Maddison Welch, 2016, p. 5)

These statements suggest that the fake news Welch acted upon had tapped into a deep mistrust of society and the rule of law. Far from believing in society's ability to enact justice and serve the common good, Welch positions society as "a corrupt system" that constitutes an enemy of such values (United States of America v. Edgar Maddison Welch, 2016, p. 5). Welch's statement indicates a feeling of hopelessness in the face of this perceived corruption, hopelessness that drove, if only in part, Welch to record a video of himself as he traveled to Comet Ping Pong, in which he "told family members that he loved them . . . and that he hoped he would be able to 'tell [them] again,'" a statement that suggests Welch was prepared to sacrifice himself in what he believed to be a mission to rescue victims of child sex trafficking from the clutches of corrupt elites (United States of America v. Edgar Maddison Welch, 2016, p. 6).

Approached as a question of fact and definition, such statements are irrelevant. From a fact-checking perspective, Welch's actions are the consequence of a lack of information literacy that led Welch to be deceived and then act on false information, a problem that can be best remedied by providing the Welches of the world with correct information and the literacy to identify and resist the appeals of fake news. However, as Dana Cloud has observed in *Reality Bites*, such an overly-stringent emphasis on fact-checking overlooks "bigger questions of value" (2018, p. 60). By moving beyond a fixation on the categories of fact and definition and engaging Welch's narrative at the stasis of quality, we begin to appreciate the complex reasons for Welch's actions, namely a desire for purpose and meaning combined with a deep distrust of social structures and a resulting fatalism regarding the potential for meaningful change to occur within institutional frameworks.

Conclusion

In his December 7, 2016 interview with the *New York Times*, Welch stated that he "just wanted to do some good and went about it the wrong way," and, looking back on his actions prior to his arrest, Welch admitted that "[t]he intel on this wasn't 100 percent . . ." (Goldman, 2016). Significantly, despite conceding that there were no children "inside that dwelling," a fact that he was able to confirm through first-hand investigation, Welch refused to concede that the Pizzagate news stories were, in fact, false (Goldman, 2016). Far from constituting a question of fact or definition, the perceived problem of child sex trafficking at Comet Ping Pong is, for Welch, indicative of a larger tendency to exploit children in ways that, read in light of Welch's statements to investigators, no one is able to stop. For Welch, there is something about the world that is rotten; a sense of justice and goodness is absent from the structures through which national and global power flows. While the fake news that circulated around Comet Ping Pong provided Welch with a target for his mistrust and disillusionment, it likely did not invent these feelings and beliefs. These feelings and beliefs become visible only when Welch's story is engaged at the stasis of quality.

The composition classroom offers a valuable opportunity to engage the rhetorical complexity of fake news even as fake news narratives challenge the conventions of critical-rational debate. One strategy for fostering such engagement is to assign projects in which students not only research the evolution of a particular fake news narrative, but respond to that

narrative at the stasis of quality. While the inclusion of credible research and fact-based reasoning should not be discouraged, one of the goals of such an assignment is to help students more effectively interpret a given rhetorical situation so that they “can respond with arguments that are appropriate to that situation” (Carter, 1988, p. 100). By closely studying the circulation of fake news, students come to see how adherence to such narratives is often motivated by feelings and beliefs that have little to do with the facts of the fake news story itself. To illustrate this point, instructors may direct students to the #Pizzagate conversation that continues to unfold on Twitter. Scanning this discussion, students will recognize that many Pizzagate believers express feelings of having been abandoned and dismissed by corrupt social elites and interpret attempts to fact-check Pizzagate as yet more evidence in support of the theory. This tendency for fact-based appeals to alienate fake news believers is illustrated by MAmericaaa’s (2018) tweet regarding the media response to the Pizzagate incident: “I’ll never forget their way of ‘debunking’ #pizzagate --- by simply saying it’s not true and anyone that says otherwise is crazy.” By analyzing the discourse produced by fake news adherents such as MAmericaaa and Edgar Maddison Welch, students may come to appreciate how attempts to engage such believers in debate must acknowledge the quality of the argument being debated. In the case of Pizzagate, the argument seems to have less to do with what did or did not occur at Comet Ping Pong and more to do with adherents’ frustration with their perceived inability to exert meaningful control over the nation and world. Having become more sensitive to such complexity, students may leave the composition classroom prepared to engage fake news narratives as metonymic representations of deep seated frustrations that often transcend the details that make up the fake news stories themselves.

If rhetoric and writing professionals are genuinely concerned about the rise of fake news and the ways in which it both embodies and perpetuates division within public discourse, we would be wise to engage fake news believers in ways that address the quality of their beliefs as much as their factualness and accuracy. Like Adler-Kassner, I admit that such engagement is “risky” (2017, p. 335). To engage fake news believers at the stasis of quality asks us to step outside our reliance on liberal democratic conventions of critical-rational debate and seek to understand the values and beliefs of citizens even when those values and beliefs may seem irrational and frightening. The irrational and frightening nature of fake news becomes especially apparent in cases like Pizzagate, when fake news producers manipulate the mistrust and despair of large swaths of citizens in order to further partisan ideologies, potentially to the point of violence. However, Welch’s actions help to illustrate what is at stake in the fight over fake news and help to reinforce Cloud’s assertion that “progressives and the Left should adopt a standpoint of greater humility when engaging conservative discourses, to recognize the strength of their strategies and to criticize our own defensive habits of response” (2018, p. 72). Cicero’s stasis theory, combined with his emphasis upon audience awareness and engagement, provides a helpful place to begin to more openly and thoroughly engage the complex values and beliefs that circulate through fake news stories. Far from constituting a concession, such broadened engagement will better position rhetoric and writing professionals to understand and respond to

the concerns of those citizens with whom we seek shared understanding. Such a prospect may be frightening, but, as Cicero reminds us, one of the indicators of a productive rhetor is the fear they feel prior to rhetorical intervention (2001, p. 85). Such trepidation highlights the great responsibility we feel to our students, our communities and our field.

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