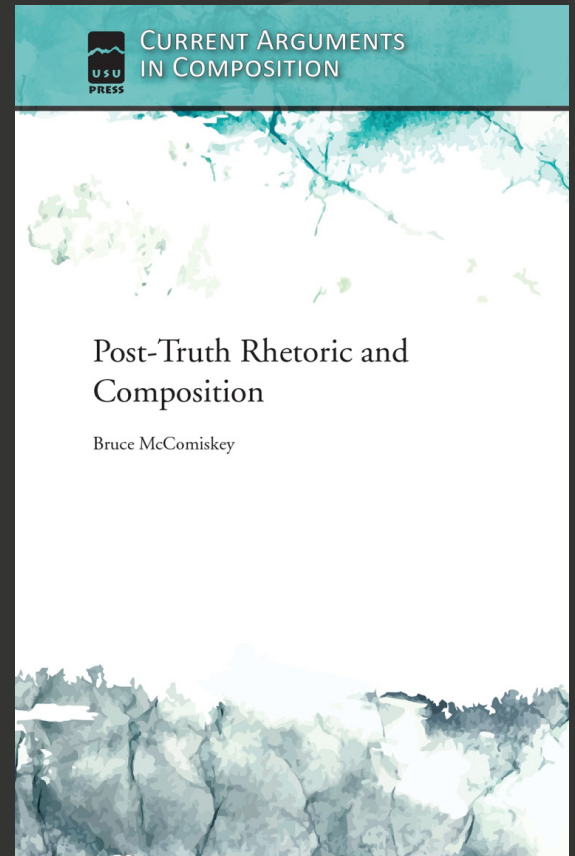


# McComiskey Bruce. Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition. University Press of Colorado, 2017. 58 pages. \$6.96 paperback.

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In the age where the authenticity of information, the credibility of sources, and the reasoning behind media productions are often rhetorical, the concept of truth in rhetorical studies has drawn significant attention. As rhetorical traditions deal with ethics of communication, rhetoric scholars regard lies, doublespeak, and fallacies as unethical rhetorical strategies (McComiskey 2017, 8). The Aristotelian rhetorical triad suggests that rhetorical traditions require ethos, logos, and pathos; namely, establishing credibility, appealing to reasoning, and appealing to emotion. Therefore, ethos, logos, and pathos make any communication persuasive, which is a major objective of rhetoric for verbal, written, or any other form

of communication. The absence of any of these elements—namely, ethos, logos, or pathos—raises questions about truth. The recent rise of digital technologies has made the notion of truth more of a relative matter, where the audience barely knows the authenticity of information and reasoning behind media productions and circulations. The lack of credibility and reasoning thus deepens the question about political biases behind digital media productions and circulations. In many cases, digital media heavily uses emotional manipulation—appealing to regional, religious, ethnic, and nationalist spirits—instead of backing up emotion with reasoning.

Bruce McComiskey, Professor of Rhetoric and Writing at Virginia Tech’s English Department, addresses these aforementioned concerns in his book *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition*, published by the University Press of Colorado in 2017. Citing Oxford Dictionaries, McComiskey defines “post-truth” as a circumstance where facts are less powerful than emotional appeals, and so emotional appeals shape public opinion (2017, 5). This definition would imply that post-truth rhetors use unethical persuasive strategies to maneuver public opinion in their favor. McComiskey highlights the 2016 United States of America Presidential Election resulting in the election of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States as an example—when digital media, including Facebook and Twitter (now, X), were found to be instrumental in manipulating public opinion through fabricated credibility. The 58-page book, in this way, provides some quintessential insights about post-truth media content and its profound effects on people. McComiskey argues that post-truth rhetoric promotes lies, fallacies, and doublespeak, which rhetoric scholars consider unethical rhetorical persuasion that inspires attacks on ethnic minorities, racial tensions, bullying, and microaggressions, to name only a few attacks.

The constant circulation of emotionally biased content on digital media affects the psyche of “netizens,” users of the internet, especially digital media, which ultimately influences social stability, universal suffrage, power structure, democracy, and human rights. The biased and fake content on digital media, more specifically, hinders the possibility of learning the realities, truths, and facts, as they tend to produce content devoid of substantial connections to facts and realities. McComiskey terms this circumstance as post-truth rhetoric, as he says that it “signifies a state in which language lacks any reference to facts, truth and realities. When language has no reference to truths, facts, or realities, it becomes purely a strategic medium” (McComiskey 2017, 6). This “strategic medium,” McComiskey adds, serves unethical rhetoricians by manufacturing consent and marginalizing the historically

underrepresented communities, particularly Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). He expresses deep concern about the effects of the strategic medium, noting how disinformation and misinformation play an instrumental role in reinforcing dominant ideologies and perpetuating systemic oppression through exclusionary mechanisms. Marking the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election campaign, McComiskey illustrates how politically motivated verbal attacks on BIPOC communities heightened racial tensions across the United States, affecting not only the adults but also leaving the younger generations vulnerable. Divided into three sections, McComiskey's book *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* not only identifies the issues in digital media but also proposes that writing instructors teach students critical literacy against digital lies, fallacies, and doublespeak.

In the section "Post-Truth Rhetoric," McComiskey unfolds what he means by post-truth rhetoric, examining the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, which he argues was influenced by unethical rhetorical strategies. While a solid transition from the age of "truth" to "post-truth" would be difficult to draw, a broad historical perspective would have enriched the audience of the book. However, in this section, McComiskey made some details on "Bullshit," "Fake News," "Ethos (at the Expense of

Logos)," and "Pathos (at the Expense of Logos)." All the subsections under this section quintessentially discuss that digital media technologies indulge in propagating disinformation to sow the seed of suspicion among the citizens and serve the purpose of vested interests, pushing people into tensions and violating human rights.

The next section, titled "Post-Truth Composition," advocates for critical writing instruction to fight against the politically motivated digital media content that dominates public courses. McComiskey believes that writing instructors can play pivotal roles in checking the negative consequences of post-truth rhetoric both in classrooms and public discourse. He suggests that writing instructors foster openness, creativity, engagement, and awareness among the students, adding that "bullshit" flourishes in the absence of these rhetorical skills, therefore teaching these skills is essential to challenge the success of unethical rhetorical expansion (McComiskey 2017, 41).

In the final section titled "Consequences of Neglecting to Act," McComiskey predicts the potential risks if post-truth rhetoric remains unchecked. I believe this section serves as a warning so that the audience can practice rhetorical skills in personal and public life. The section is concise, but I believe the weight of this

section is significant, so it deserves some detailed discussion.

In contemporary society, people rely on news media and social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter/X, TikTok, and Instagram as primary and easily accessible sources of information. However, users of these platforms barely get an opportunity to cross-check the facts. In this post-truth context, false and fabricated media content dominates the emotions of people at the cost of logic. In this connection, it is worth referring to Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018) as she argues that digital media also has systemic racism and classism, and so their algorithms are coded accordingly. Digital media thus feeds people with biased content to manufacture consent for certain communities while denigrating historically underrepresented populations. While much of the conversation in *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* is about systemic racism in digital technologies, it is important to recognize that McComiskey essentially focuses on some useful disruptive methods, too. He argues that fake news succeeds when the audience is not curious about the facts, adding that rhetorical knowledge empowers individuals to understand, analyze, and interrogate the politically motivated feeds. McComiskey anticipates that if the post-truth rhetoric persists, then the racial tensions and systemic classism will continue to prevail, as he says, "Xenophobia will replace social justice, isolationism will invalidate cultural freedom, shouting will trump listening, disruption will drown out response, insults will replace respect, exclusion will diminish diversity.." (2017, 43).

In conclusion, I must recognize that McComiskey's *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* is a kairotic contribution to understanding complex gestures of digital media technologies and their widespread influence on life, livelihood, law and order, democracy, and human rights. Although the book was written in 2017, its relevance has increased manifold in 2025. McComiskey illustrates how powerful rhetoricians rely on unethical rhetorical strategies—often devoid of logic—to advance personal and communal agenda, thereby marginalizing the interests of historically underrepresented communities. The global rise of autocratic tendencies, the waning status of democracy, and escalating ethnic and racial tensions compounded through digital media technologies make McComiskey's conversation more urgent than ever. Moreover, the recent electoral campaigns around the world offer some good examples of how digital media technologies facilitate powerful rhetoricians by manufacturing public opinion in their favor and denigrating historically underrepresented communities. *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* is academic by genre; however, I

believe the lucid language, real-life examples, and contemporary perspectives make it illuminating to general readers as well.



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