

AFFECT, EMOTION, AND RHETORICAL PERSUASION IN MASS COMMUNICATION

EDITED BY
LEI ZHANG AND
CARLTON CLARK

For who is ignorant that the highest power of an orator consists in exciting the minds of men to anger, or to hatred, or to grief, or in recalling them from these more violent emotions to gentleness and compassion?

—Marcus Tullius Cicero

As regards appeals to the emotions, these are especially necessary in deliberative oratory. Anger has frequently to be excited or assuaged and the minds of the audience have to be swayed to fear, ambition, hatred, reconciliation. At times again it is necessary to awaken pity, whether it is required, for instance, to urge that relief should be sent to a besieged city, or we are engaged in deploring the overthrow of an allied state.

—Marcus Fabius Quintilian

Out of the marriage of reason with affect[,] there issues clarity with passion. Reason without affect would be impotent, affect without reason would be blind. The combination of affect and reason guarantees man's highest level of freedom.

—Silvan Tomkins



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Affect, Emotion, and Rhetorical Persuasion in Mass Communication

This volume examines the interplay between affect theory and rhetorical persuasion in mass communication. The essays collected here draw connections between affect theory, rhetorical studies, mass communication theory, cultural studies, political science, sociology, and a host of other disciplines. Contributions from a wide range of scholars feature theoretical overviews and critical perspectives on the movement commonly referred to as “the affective turn” as well as case studies. Critical investigations of the rhetorical strategies behind the 2016 United States presidential election, public health and antiterrorism mass media campaigns, television commercials, and the digital spread of fake news, among other issues, will prove to be both timely and of enduring value. This book will be of use to advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and active researchers in communication, rhetoric, political science, social psychology, sociology, and cultural studies.

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**Edited by
Lei Zhang and Carlton Clark**

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For our children, Charles Ming & Caroline Enhui Clark



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Introduction

Heartfelt Reasoning, or Why Facts and Good Reasons Are Not Enough

Carlton Clark and Lei Zhang

Following two surprising political events that occurred in 2016, the victory of the “Leave” campaign in the Brexit vote and the U.S. election of Donald Trump, we felt an increased urgency to understand how persuasion actually happens in contemporary, information-overloaded contexts. In putting together this collection of essays, we wanted to advance the understanding of persuasion—for two and a half millennia the province of rhetoric—across a wide variety of disciplines. We believe the issues discussed in this collection are urgent and deserve to reach a wide audience. Thus, the essays are written in a style intended to appeal to the well-educated generalist rather than to specialists alone. We have attempted to remove or translate academic jargon into language understandable across disciplines. But in addressing a wide audience, we have had to walk a fine line, seeking to produce neither an oversimplified, “affect and persuasion made easy” text nor an overly technical, jargony, narrowly focused book.

Affect or emotion, which we treat in this introductory essay as synonymous,¹ may serve as a disciplinary node where a wide range of research fields can meet. Thus, this collection ambitiously aims to establish communication between fields such as rhetorical studies, cultural studies, mass media and communication studies, sociology, psychology, philosophy, neuroscience, cognitive science, political science, gender studies, and various design disciplines (architecture, fashion design, urban design, etc.). Design is particularly important as these disciplines concern style and function and human beings respond emotionally to style.

Emotional appeals have become an increasingly important element of persuasion in almost every aspect of our lives. For example, in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, emotions such as fear, anger, and even hate played an enormous role in voter persuasion. When it comes to U.S. national elections, the conventional wisdom has long been that economic issues carry the most weight—recall the slogan adopted by Bill Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign, “It’s the economy, stupid.”² However, in the fall of 2016, with the U.S. unemployment rate at a seven-year low, the economy was not the top concern.

Donald Trump won the white working-class vote by roughly a 2 to 1 margin; however, it wasn’t fear for their jobs that motivated Trump voters.

According to The Public Religion Research Institute and *The Atlantic Monthly*, it was white working-class Americans' fear of cultural change, not economic distress, that put Trump in the White House. As Cox, Lienesch, and Jones put it, "White working-class voters who say they often feel like a stranger in their own land and who believe the U.S. needs protecting against foreign influence were 3.5 times more likely to favor Trump than those who did not share these concerns."³ Trump's message of exclusion of immigrants and restoring America to its former greatness resonated with voters who fear they are rapidly becoming a minority demographic in twenty-first-century America. On the other hand, Hillary Clinton lost the election, at least in part, due lack of voter trust,⁴ a powerful emotion in politics. Deep-seated sexism and misogyny also clearly played a major role, along with the fact that Clinton was successfully portrayed "the status quo candidate" in a time of change.⁵

Political campaigners know very well that campaigns cannot be fought with facts alone, especially in this digital age when campaign grounds have increasingly been moved to social media, online news, and blog sites. Cambridge Analytica, the firm that played an important role in the Brexit campaign and Trump's successful presidential bid, understands the role of emotions in propaganda campaigns exceptionally well.⁶ Mark Turnbull, Cambridge Analytica's managing director, acknowledged the firm's focus on manipulating voters' emotions in a candid private conversation recorded by British Chanel 4's undercover journalists:

The two fundamental human drivers when it comes to taking information onboard effectively are hopes and fears and many of those are unspoken and even unconscious. You didn't know that was a fear until you saw something that just evoked that reaction from you. And our job is to get, is to drop the bucket further down the well than anybody else, to understand what are those really deep-seated underlying fears, concerns. It's no good fighting an election campaign on the facts because actually it's all about emotion. The big mistake political parties make is that they attempt to win the argument rather than locate the emotional center of the issue, the concern, and speaking directly to that.⁷

There is nothing shocking in this revelation. Effective propaganda has always manipulated people's emotions, regardless of what age we live in. Online information wars among political candidates simply mean faster message delivery and more digital tools to understand what those underlying fears and hope are, allowing campaigns to better tailor their messages and microtarget crucial voters.

We might like to believe that human beings usually employ their reasoning capacity to find the truth or reach understanding. But in a much-discussed 2011 article, Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber argued that

the primary function of reasoning is argumentative. When engaged in a debate or discussion, we typically reason in order to find arguments to support a predetermined conclusion, not to discover the truth.⁸ Thus, argument tends to reinforce polarization of views rather than mutual understanding or the advancement of knowledge. But the news is not all bad. Mercier and Sperber write that “contrary to common bleak assessments of human reasoning abilities, people are quite capable of reasoning in an unbiased manner, at least when they are evaluating arguments rather than producing them, and when they are after the truth rather than trying to win a debate.”⁹ However, it’s hard to separate evaluation and production because when evaluating arguments we produce more arguments.

As indicated by Mercier and Sperber’s study, among others, it has become clear that facts and reason alone are not the answer to our problems. Where decision-making is concerned, access to reliable information does not always produce rational, sound decisions. Thus, the Information Deficit Model (IDM), which holds that lack of information is responsible for lack of understanding (of science in particular), has been declared dead.¹⁰ Today, thanks to information technology, we have more facts, more reasons, and more arguments at our fingertips than ever before. And tomorrow we will have even more facts and reasons and arguments than today. There are nearly 200 million active websites, meaning sites with a unique hostname that users are actually visiting, on the World Wide Web. According to Internet Live Stats, Google processes over 40,000 search queries on average per second.¹¹ We have information, but without some degree of emotional appeal, reasonable arguments supported by facts do not persuade or move us. For example, an August 2016 poll by NBC News found that 72% of registered Republican voters, despite all the evidence to the contrary, still doubted President Obama’s citizenship.¹² As long as an affective bias exists, we might not even *notice* an opposing argument; or if we do notice the argument, we won’t care enough to attend to it. As Silvan Tomkins put it, “A world experienced without any affect would be a pallid, meaningless world. We would know that things happened, but we could not care whether or not they did.”¹³

When analyzing our decision-making and openness to persuasion, we must realize that the human brain isn’t really just one organ. Neuroscience identifies four regions of the brain that evolved at different times. The most primitive region, sometimes called the “reptilian” brain, is responsible for vital functions such as heartbeat and respiration. Above the reptilian brain lies the midbrain, which contains key areas involved in regulating sleep, appetite, motivation, and attention. Surrounding the midbrain is the limbic system, which is critically involved in relationships and emotion. The outermost and most recent brain region to evolve is the cortex, which allows language, abstract thought, and planning. It is also critical to understand that “these brain regions work in concert, so it is impossible to separate ‘rational thought’ from emotion. Even the most sophisticated

decisions and analyses require positive and negative emotion; otherwise, it is impossible to determine which choice or idea is ‘better’ and which isn’t. Valuing anything—even an idea—as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ requires feeling.”¹⁴

Clearly, then, emotion is not simply a weakness or evolutionary vestige like the appendix, tailbone, or wisdom teeth—far from it. For instance, when it comes to moral reasoning—that is, making decisions on how a person ought to behave—it is now generally accepted that both rational and emotional processes come into play. According to the dual-process model, “a moral judgment is the outcome of a rapid, affect-laden process and a slower, deliberative process. If these outputs conflict, decision time is increased in order to resolve the conflict.”¹⁵ Consider parity products. For instance, when making a decision between several brands of shampoo that have very similar ingredients and sell for about the same price, the typical shopper may make a choice based, not solely on brand recognition, but on design features, such as the color or shape of the bottle, features that evoke a subtle emotional response. The concept of “sexy packaging” is based on this premise. For instance, in reference to packaging of perfumes and colognes, Gabriella Zuckerman, president of Gabriella Z Ltd., a beauty-products marketing and development firm, stated, “In a saturated market like fragrances, packaging is critical.”¹⁶ As one award-winning package designer said, when it comes to men purchasing a brand of cologne, “Hopefully he likes the fragrance and wants to wear it, but the initial purchase is because they like the bottle.”¹⁷

Of course, this is not really news. Professional organizations have been established to capitalize on this affective bias. For example, the Design & Emotion Society, based in The Netherlands, was established in 1999 as “an international network of researchers, designers and companies sharing an interest in experience driven design. The network is used to exchange insights, research, tools and methods that support the involvement of emotional experience in product design.”¹⁸ Novel, interesting design or style gets our attention.¹⁹ As Richard Lanham argued in *The Economics of Attention*, we are not living in an information economy but rather an attention economy. Economics is the science of managing scarcity, but there is no scarcity of information; we are drowning in it. The scarce resource is human attention, and we all end up competing for one another’s attention. As Lanham argues, in the attention economy, style moves to the foreground and “substance” recedes to the background. When the substance is pretty much the same, the packaging of the shampoo or cologne takes primacy over the substance inside the bottle.

Furthermore, if we do not incorporate emotional responses, making a trivial decision might take much longer and cause more stress.²⁰ With respect to decision-making, one area of research compares “neurotypical individuals” with individuals meeting the criteria for autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or alexithymia, a condition characterized by difficulties identifying and describing one’s own emotions. In the hypothetical

case of choosing a shampoo, a person on the autism spectrum might experience significant stress, especially if she feels pressured to make the decision quickly. One study found that decision-making in ASD was associated with anxiety, exhaustion, problems engaging in the process, and a tendency to avoid decision-making.²¹ Both ASD and alexithymia, also known as “emotional blindness,” have been associated with atypical decision-making²² as well as atypical moral reasoning.²³ Alexithymia and ASD are often co-occurring, as alexithymia characterizes under 10% of the typical population but approximately 50% of the ASD population, and co-occurring alexithymia, rather than ASD alone, may account for the observed atypical moral reasoning.²⁴ It appears that emotional signals are not perceived, and thus, not integrated into decision-making in persons with alexithymia.²⁵ Consequently, a person with alexithymia tends to make utilitarian rather than empathy-based decisions.²⁶ Other studies have supported the theory that neurotypical persons base their judgments of the moral acceptability of behavior on their emotional response to that behavior, while people on the autism spectrum show more logical consistency and rely on their own established rules to judge moral acceptability.²⁷

Temple Grandin, the well-known professor of animal behavior and writer and speaker on autism, described her situation this way: “Non-autistic people seem to have a whole upper layer of verbal thinking that is merged with their emotions. By contrast, unless I panic, I use logic to make all decisions; my thinking can be done independently of emotion. In fact, I seem to lack a higher consciousness composed of abstract verbal thoughts that are merged with emotion.”²⁸ For Grandin, the absence of abstract thoughts when making decisions is usually not a problem. She thinks in pictures and can make rapid choices between various visual scenarios. In life-and-death situations, this mode of thinking has distinct advantages. On the other hand, a trip to the grocery store may present significant problems.

Even for Grandin, however, thinking alone, even in pictures, is not enough to make a meaningful life. Grandin emphasizes that she does have emotions, but those emotions, being intense and fleeting, are more like those of a child than an adult. As she puts it, “My emotions are simpler than those of most people. I don’t know what complex emotion in a human relationship is. I only understand simple emotions, such as fear, anger, happiness, and sadness. I cry during sad movies, and sometimes I cry when I see something that really moves me. But complex emotional relationships are beyond my comprehension.”²⁹ Given that Grandin can describe her emotions, she appears to be autistic but not alexithymic. If Grandin were alexithymic, she probably wouldn’t have devoted her career to the humane treatment of livestock animals. Although Grandin clearly demonstrates empathy, deliberative or rule-based decision-making has been associated with increased perceived permissibility of accidentally harming others.³⁰ In other words, if harm accidentally results from well-intended actions,

the alexithymic individual is less likely than the neurotypical person to be emotionally troubled.

As Paul Stenner writes, “Alexithymia means, literally, the inability to assign words to emotions. Alexithymia describes a series of psycho-behavioural characteristics that are expressed in the etymology of the word itself: from the Greek *a-* (lack), *lexis-* (word) and *thymos-* (mood, feeling or emotion), alexithymia means literally without words for emotions.”³¹ The discussion of *thymos* brings us back to classical rhetoric.

We can draw a connection here with the Greek rhetorical concept of the enthymeme, which is often misrepresented as a truncated syllogism—that is, a syllogism where the audience fills in an unstated premise. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle, speaking of previous writers on rhetoric, states, “Now, the framers of the current treatises on rhetoric have constructed but a small portion of that art. The modes of persuasion are the only true constituents of the art: everything else is merely accessory. These writers, however, say nothing about enthymemes, which are the substance of rhetorical persuasion, but deal mainly with non-essentials.”³² Aristotle also calls the enthymeme “the most effective of the modes of persuasion.”³³ Clearly, the enthymeme is a big deal; therefore, it would not make sense for it to be nothing more than an incomplete syllogism, which could be “fixed” by inserting the unstated premise. The common misrepresentation of the enthymeme as an informal logic or quasi-logic³⁴ has served to subordinate the ethical and affective appeals to the logical appeal, and it ultimately leads to a very restricted view of argumentation. This is a view that, Jeffrey Walker argues, “leaves little room for the affective dimensions of argumentation, or for argumentational procedures that cannot be resolved into straightforwardly ‘syllogistic’ ... representations.”³⁵ Enthymeme derives from *thymos*, “meaning ‘heart’ or ‘mind’ or ‘spirit’ as the seat of emotion, thought, wish, desire, intentionality, or will. In one’s *thymos* one considers things, draws inferences, becomes impassioned, forms desires, has intentions, and makes plans.”³⁶ As a form of heartfelt reasoning, then, the enthymeme negates the reason/emotion dichotomy. The ancient Greek arts of rhetoric, drama, and poetry were all forms of argumentation; they addressed arguments to an audience in the form of heartfelt reasoning. The goal was to stir the thoughts and feelings of an audience. This is where affect fits into rhetorical argumentation. Thus, contemporary psychology and neuroscience, along with the affective turn more generally, appear to be turning (not necessarily turning back, but just turning) to ancient Greek poetics and rhetoric.

Overview of the Chapters

The book proceeds in four parts. Part I offers an overview of affect theory and the “affective turn.” Part II considers affect within the contexts of rhetorical theory and cultural studies. Part III considers the role of affect and

affective appeals in the mass media, and Part IV focuses more narrowly on how affective appeals were deployed in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

More specially, in Part I, the contributors present an overview of the “affective turn,” questioning some of the now taken-for-granted positions. In Chapter 1, Kevin Marinelli argues that the burgeoning study of affect offers a potential node of interdisciplinary collaboration; yet, its heterogeneity can also undermine a coherent framework of analysis. Marinelli aims to facilitate an interdisciplinary, collaborative approach to research on affect by tracing its respective discussions across the disciplines. To this end, Marinelli provides an introduction to affect theory by surveying its three dominant paradigms: classical rhetoric, cultural studies, and neuroscience. Paul Stenner, in Chapter 2, draws on three decades of work as a social psychologist to outline three key sources of the affective turn, each of which presents a different concept of affect (affect as autonomous virtual intensity, as drive amplification, and as unconscious psychic energy). Stenner also comments on the widespread view that affect and emotion are two very different things. Stenner is not in principle opposed to making an affect/emotion distinction. His concern is with *the way* this distinction has been drawn by influential advocates of the affective turn. Although the affective turn has often been represented as a turn away from the discursive turn—an umbrella term covering the linguistic turn, rhetorical turn, social construction, semiotics, and various interpretations of postmodernism and poststructuralism—Stenner argues that the turn to affect is not a rejection but rather an extension or deepening of the discursive turn. In Chapter 3, David Stubblefield also observes that the contemporary affective turn has been framed as a reaction against the discursive turn. From the perspective of the affective turn, the discursive turn privileged symbolic representations, and thus, had little to say about the role of matter, bodies, and the affects that circulate between them. While Stubblefield sees much that is new in the contemporary turn to affect, he argues that affective experience has always played a central role in Western thought. To support this claim, he discusses two earlier positions on affect: the moral interpretation and the romantic interpretation of affect.

The contributors to Part II demonstrate that a rhetoric that relies solely on logic, evidence, and facts usually fails to persuade. In Chapter 4, Samuel Mateus shows how the mid-twentieth-century establishment of argumentation as an academic field conspicuously omitted any serious discussion of the emotions. He argues that, in contrast to classical treatises on rhetoric, major modern texts such as Toulmin’s *The Uses of Argument* (1958) and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s *The New Rhetoric* (1958, original French edition) limited the scope of rhetoric by paying little attention to affective appeals. In Chapter 5, Michael Mayne analyzes white nationalism as a rhetoric of nostalgia. He argues that nostalgias are intrinsically reactionary, not because they always define a conservative social order, though

they usually do, but because they always insist that an ideal order once existed, and our uncritical longing for an idealized past prevents a critical analysis of the present and restricts possibilities for progressive social transformations. Extending the examination of ideology, in Chapter 6, Phil Bratta questions the separation affect and ideology, arguing that ideology and affect often work in a symbiotic way. Bratta argues that many ideologies are saturated with affect and many affective experiences are ideological. Using Donald Trump's defense of Confederate statues as a case study, Bratta argues that Trump's rhetoric draws on an ideology (a system of ideas, concepts, or theories) and manipulates a culturally situated affect—fear. Although much of Trump's rhetoric rests on logical fallacies—and fallacious arguments are ubiquitous in contemporary society—we should give greater attention to how an argument breaks through the fallacy to convince an audience. Merely documenting reasoning fallacies does not get us very far in confronting pressing public issues.

In Chapter 7, Julie D. Nelson takes a close look at the affective rhetoric surrounding North Carolina's House Bill 2, better known as the Bathroom Bill. Through a survey of queer affect scholarship, Nelson identifies four functions of affect: attaching, accumulating, creating public spaces, and generating public sentiments. More than just personal feelings, affects circulate among people. Nelson examines how attaching negative affects like shame and fear to queer and transgender bodies shaped the public debate, contributed to the relative success of HB2, and turned the bathroom into a symbolic cultural, affective site. In the final chapter of Part II, Lara Lengel and Adam Smidi extend the analysis of the circulation of affect, arguing that the circulation of negative affects contributes to “post-truth” affective politics. Lengel and Smidi trace the rise in dis/misinformation about Muslims in the United States and argue that anti-Muslim rhetoric constitutes some of the most dangerous forms of post-truth affective politics. This chapter looks closely at how the mass media amplified and intensified the circulation of post-9/11 affects, particularly anxiety, anger, and fear.

The authors featured in Part III analyze affect as it circulates in the mass media, including television commercials, film, and public health and anti-terrorism campaigns. In Chapter 9, Lewis Knight and Chad Chisholm explore the role of affect in beer commercials. They argue that producers of select beer commercials construct narratives that produce affective responses in consumers by appealing to unconscious, internalized archetypes. In particular, Knight and Chisholm argue that American men who “came of age” before the turn of the millennium are targets for beer commercials that invoke Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee archetypes. Next, Jaimee Bodtke and George F. (Guy) McHendry, Jr. critique a public health campaign designed to raise awareness about sexually transmitted infections (STIs), arguing that the campaign utilized affective rhetorical appeals of disgust and abjection to promote feelings of shame and, thus,

stigmatized and marginalized sufferers of STIs. Bodtke and McHendry also describe how they actively intervened in this public health campaign and ultimately persuaded the organization behind the campaign to make changes. In Chapter 11, Charlotte Kent critiques the New York Metropolitan Transit Authority's (MTA's) "If You See Something, Say Something" public awareness campaign, which fueled feelings of fear and paranoia as it recruited ordinary citizens into the war on terror. Kent goes on to discuss, as cases of "aesthetic politics," three works of art that appropriated the MTA's slogan. Kent argues that these artistic efforts questioned the rhetoric and affective limitations of the patriotism, vigilance, and caution promoted by the MTA campaign. Next, Charles (Chuck) F. Aust explores the perhaps counterintuitive fact that "tearjerker" movies often bring comfort and consolation to viewers. Aust argues that viewers of tearjerker movies experience, temporally contiguous to their crying, comforting feelings associated with their own memories, which are activated by pivotal emotion-laden events involving film characters with whom they have developed a parasocial relationship. Aust's chapter intersects nicely with Chapter 2, where Stenner discusses a study led by Hertha Sturm that found that young children described a particular short film as both sad and pleasurable. Brian Massumi discusses the Sturm study in his often-cited 1995 article, "The Autonomy of Affect,"³⁷ but Stenner finds a number of problems with Massumi's interpretation of Sturm's research.

Finally, in Part IV, the contributors analyze how strong affects/emotions were aroused and manipulated in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Jeffrey St. Onge draws connections between affect theory, meme theory, and democracy as a way to explain the political rise of Donald Trump. St. Onge argues that memes functioned to spread anger/rage through digital media and, in so doing, created an ideal condition for Trump's populist candidacy. Next, in Chapter 14, Lucy J. Miller argues that Trump makes rhetorical appeals to fear and anger to drive his audience away from designated others and toward himself. While Trump's appeals to emotion are not new in politics, what is interesting is his disregard for credible supporting facts; therefore, fact-based argument alone is not effective in countering Trump's rhetoric. Miller goes on to present an example of a productive response to post-truth discourse: Emma Gonzalez's speech delivered on February 18, 2018 in the aftermath of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, a speech that combined genuine emotion with credible supporting facts. Extending the discussion of the "post-truth era," in the next chapter, Kayla Keener considers how specific instances of fake news concerning the 2016 election and the Trump presidency have circulated through digital media and popular discourse, highlighting the ways that fake news is consumed, spread, and believed by individuals on *all* points of the ideological spectrum. Fake news is able to deceive news consumers across partisan lines by specifically targeting preexisting fears and beliefs, mimicking the aesthetics of