

# The rhetoric of public speech in a digital era

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## Introduction

In the early Chinese tradition as well as in the Western tradition, rhetorical studies predominantly address one prototypical communicative setting; an orator delivers a carefully prepared speech to a well-defined audience on a well-defined occasion. Almost by definition such speeches had a largely argumentative content, meant to convince the audience that the standpoints taken were reasonable and just. Scholars studying this communicative practice paid attention to verbal as well as non-verbal means to convince, with an open eye for the person of the orator as well as the characteristics of the audience and the specifics of the situation.<sup>1</sup>



In later periods, rhetoric shifts its focus to written discourse, losing much of its interest in the specifics of oral delivery.<sup>2</sup> Written public speech is often designed for a more general audience not present in person. As a result of the shift to the written medium, style becomes a dominant category in rhetorical studies. Many rhetorical scholars tend to develop into literary critics. The focus on argumentative discourse, meant to convince the audience about a specific topic, tends to fade. Forensic speech

<sup>1</sup> For the history of Chinese rhetoric I rely on Kirkpatrick & Xu 2012 and Lu 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Kirkpatrick & Xu 2012; 146, 150 relate this for China to the American development at the turn of the century. In Europe, the beginning of this shift can be observed as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, maybe even earlier.

gets far less attention from scholars of rhetoric, at least in the Western continental tradition, than in the days of Cicero. Oral speech presented in courtrooms is read from paper to be handed over in writing. Oral public speeches are perceived as cursory, meant to raise spontaneous emotions; for the most part they belong to a specific genre, such as sermons, studied in homiletics.

Television brings back the visible. Interest in the orator delivering a ‘live’ performance revives. But argumentative speech on television remains rare, maybe because of the lack of a direct contact with the audience, maybe also because the language register that has become the standard for argumentative discourse is too complex and therefore not very adequate for this medium. The main exceptions are pre-announced public addresses by political leaders, occasions where orators count on maximum attention from their audience. Gradually, a branch of rhetoric focusing on oral media performances develops, and with it a practical application called *media-training*. The 1960 presidential debate in the USA between Kennedy and Nixon – videotaped and still available on the Internet – speeds up the rhetorical attention for television speech performances. New issues come up that have to do with the impact of the camera, especially the camera close-up. Many believe that Kennedy won the debate because he looked better on television. Orators on television have to deal with a hard-to-predict, general audience that is not present in person. But in contrast to written discourse, the audience is listening while the speaker is speaking, sharing (almost) the same moment together and the same historical circumstances, except for the rare instances where speeches are recorded on tape and screened later.

The digital revolution changes the characteristics of the rhetorical situation dramatically. In contrast to the classical situation, audiences prototypically view speeches and bites of speeches at moments and under circumstances that differ substantially from those at the time of the original delivery. *One cannot overrate the importance of this development.* Permanent registration of public speech was highly exceptional in the period of the early sound movie and only slightly more common in the period of television and videotapes. In the digital era, however, it rapidly becomes standard. Every individual person has access to registration equipment as well as to forms of public broadcasting, using multimodal discourse formats in social media. All captured speech performances are stored in numerous places, to be reproduced at many occasions, to be recycled in numerous ways, to be scrutinized and reinterpreted time and again. For officials in politics and business as well as for individual citizens, this development has changed their lives. In the context of drafting a new European privacy regulation, the right to be forgotten has become a serious issue<sup>3</sup>, although nobody has a clear suggestion as yet how such a right can be enforced in the digital era.<sup>4</sup>

This digital ‘revolution’ requires a new literacy and raises numerous questions to be dealt with by rhetoricians. Classical rhetoric is back, but under entirely new circumstances. In the School of Journalism and Communication of Xiamen University, we are developing an integrative approach, exploring rhetorical criticism, discourse

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the protection of individuals with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data (General Data Protection Regulation), COM(2012) 11 final, 25 January 2012, available at [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/data-protection/document/review2012/com\\_2012\\_11\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/data-protection/document/review2012/com_2012_11_en.pdf) (last accessed on 28.12.2012).

<sup>4</sup> On November 20, 2012, the European Network and Information Security Agency published a report entitled “The Right to Be Forgotten – Between Expectations and Practice.” The report reviews the technology currently available to “forget” data and discusses the complicated enforcement on a practical level.

theory, argument theory and semiotics to deal with the requirements of this new literacy.<sup>5</sup> In this paper, the urgency of this project is indicated.

### 习近平(Xi Jinping)



Those who want to learn about China's new leader Xi Jinping will most likely take a look at his first public address as party leader on November 15<sup>th</sup> 2012. They can subsequently watch Xi Jinping's performance during his visit to Obama on February 14<sup>th</sup> 2012, because a video recording of this event is available on many digital platforms. They can also view a CNN item dating from November 8<sup>th</sup>, which contains all kinds of even older material, edited into a portrait, merging Xi Jinping's voice and images with other voices and images.<sup>6</sup>

There are commentaries on and interpretations of Xi Jinping's November 2012 speech available on the Internet. In the ABC-News of November 14<sup>th</sup> 2012, commentator Jim Middleton does the voice-over in a clip showing images of Xi Jinping's first address after his election. Middleton's is the only voice we hear. The visual mode has been stripped from the audio mode and is recombined with Middleton's voice-over. In a similar way, the voice of Xi Jinping can be recombined with other images; images of happy Chinese people, images of his famous wife, or images of social unrest while he is speaking about social peace. This is a decisive characteristic of the digital realm; materials can easily be adapted.

The multimodal digital format is certainly the most influential format as far as public opinion formation is concerned. We know that Xi Jinping is a skilled public speaker and we may assume that he has been trained to perform in front of the media. Besides that he is surrounded by advisors and he can more or less control when

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<sup>5</sup> Compare Van den Hoven & Yang (to appear) and Van den Hoven (to appear).

<sup>6</sup> I have purposely refrained from adding references to Internet locations here; the important insight is that everyone will run into these materials and run into much more, using Baidu or other search engines.

cameras are rolling and when microphones are open. But even for him the digital realm has rhetorically relevant consequences that are beyond his reach. The captured materials are recycled time and again. An image is constructed and emerges from those materials, recombined in numerous ways with other materials, fair and unfair, correct and incorrect. Relevant or not, a large part of the world population will associate Xi Jinping immediately with his wife, singing in uniform in front of an audience. Even Xi Jinping has to accept that this is part of his rhetorical reality; it is beyond his control.

### 李彥宏 (Robin Li)



The CEO of Baidu, (Robin Li), can easily be traced on the Internet. Numerous platforms show videos of him giving speeches or public interviews. Robin Li too is a skilled and well-trained speaker in public media. On the Web 2.0 summit, held in November 2010 in San Francisco he is interviewed by John Batelle. John Batelle confronts him with a quote from Eric Schmidt, then CEO of Google and present in the audience. Schmidt described Google's retreat from China as "a great gift" to Robin Li's Baidu. Robin Li is asked to respond to this remark. He keeps full control over the situation. His answer is rhetorically adequate and witty. He tells the audience that when Google came to China, people asked him what he would do if he was Eric.

I said I would stay at least six months a year in China. Apparently Eric did not take my advice and eventually handed me a gift. So that happened.

Robin Li is sitting on a couch on the stage, relaxed and wearing a beautiful light suit that fits him perfectly. He faces the audience in the hall and appears quite approachable to the audience that is watching him on a computer screen. He is friendly and speaks in a quiet voice, each time indicating when he is done speaking,

clearly handing over the turn to his interviewer, prepared to receive the reply to his slightly provocative statement. One can feel the pleasant irony combined with considerable strength. In sum: rhetorically, a great opening.

But Robin Li is a public celebrity and therefore vulnerable. Suppose for a moment that a person manages to capture some footage of Robin Li, maybe just once, speaking in front of a camera, maybe even a simple smart phone camera, in a manner that is tense and somewhat irritated. It will be easy for a journalist to construct an item, showing “how the once friendly, self-confident Robin Li has changed into a grouchy tycoon”. The journalist can invite his audience to speculate about the reasons why this change has happened, suggesting maybe that Baidu is facing serious problems.<sup>7</sup>

### Generalizing the issue

Xi Jinping is at the center of the realm of politics. Robert Li is at the center of the realm of entrepreneurship. Looking at their public communicative acts and at the way such acts are stored, broadcast, and adapted, there are at least six features that deserve closer attention.

- The performances are oral and multimodal; gestures, facial expressions, prosody; setting, sounds; screen design, inserted banners, and so on; all may correspond to or be in conflict with the verbal content.
- The performances are often in front of a live audience, but simultaneously recorded on camera and therefore potentially available to numerous audiences, known and unknown to the orator.
- Apart from the historically present live audience, all other actual audiences are confronted with a mediated discourse. Mediation can be of any kind, but regardless of additional features there will always be at least the camera position, camera quality, sound quality, projection quality, projection situation that influence perception, as well the often neglected major factor that non-present viewers lack tactile sensation, smell, the sensations of immediate embodied involvement.
- The performances are permanently stored and distributed in ways that cannot be (fully) controlled by the orator; therefore they have a reach and life cycle beyond the control of the orator.
- The performances can be edited or sampled in numerous ways; modalities (images, sounds) can be split off and recombined, even manipulated.
- The discourse contexts in which digital registrations are re-issued or re-used are predominantly argumentative discourse; but the original discussion contexts can be very different from the discussion context in which this mediated and perhaps adapted discourse appears.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> I refer to the published analyses (see footnote 5) to indicate that such a ‘rhetorical’ use of existing samples is not exceptional. Also highly significant is a CNN news item that pretends to reflect China’s public position (represented by Hu Jintao as an icon) in the conflict about Huangyan Island. Yang Ying intends to present an analysis at the OSSA conference in Windsor, Canada, May 2013. This item opens with an inserted clip of president Hu Jintao inspecting troops at an entirely unrelated, earlier occasion, suggesting a framing ‘statement’ of Hu Jintao as an ‘orator’ about the island issue. The item can be found in several places, for example [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xqqd8b\\_china-philippines-feud-over-island\\_news](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xqqd8b_china-philippines-feud-over-island_news).

<sup>8</sup> The speech in which a leader argues for the necessity of a military intervention can reach many other actual audiences at a later point in time, when circumstances are totally different, at a time when alternative policies may have taken away the need for a military intervention, or after a successful military intervention has taken place, or a disastrous one has taken its toll. Less spectacular are the numerous examples of promises made by public officials, who can later be confronted with the fact that

Parallel to and related to the digital ‘revolution’ another development is rapidly gaining importance. Contemporary corporate communities rely on high degrees of creative participation and shared responsibility of well-educated and well-informed Internet generations. This results in the general and profound ‘public’ accountability demanded of almost every decision maker at almost every level. We recognize this development in the relationship between medical doctor and patient, between teacher and student, lawyer and client, even between civil parties and the judge. Authority is accepted, but the authority is expected to account for his or her interventions.

Decision-makers in politics and business are increasingly expected to defend their plans and decisions in public, adducing convincing arguments to support them. These public communicative acts, speeches as well as performances in a meeting or on the floor, as well as other forms of overt behavior that reflect their opinions and attitudes are often recorded digitally. Internet as a platform, connected to social media and to mobile technology, creates broadcasting facilities for everybody. A smart phone has apps allowing one to edit creative messages from existing materials and broadcast them immediately on many social platforms. As a result, the difference in the rhetorical situation of local politicians and local managers and other local ‘decision makers’ on the one hand, and key public figures such as Xi Jinping and Robert Li on the other has become a relative distinction only.

### **The new rhetorical situation, redefining kairos**

The changes that the digital developments cause in the rhetorical situation are considerable. Nevertheless we should not search for a new ‘grand theory’, but depart from existing theoretical frameworks, amending, developing and recombining these when crucial aspects of the new rhetorical situation give rise to do so. Obviously theoretical frameworks from very different backgrounds need to be integrated to deal with the new rhetorical phenomena, integrating rhetorical criticism, discourse theory, argument theory and the semiotics of specific modalities.<sup>9</sup>

Our point of departure is a redefinition of the rhetorical situation. We have to leave behind us the prototypical situation of an orator who speaks unmediated in front of a well-defined audience that shares time, place and occasion, in classical Greek rhetorical theory called the *kairos*. We need to turn to a prototypical situation in which there is a *multimodal discourse world* in which a *mediating narrator* presents an orator to an audience. This forces us to rethink the concept of *kairos*.

Mediated multimodal digital discourse is the standard format nowadays. The orator is placed in a discourse world by a narrator. This discourse world travels freely

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their current behavior violates these promises. An entirely new phenomenon that has developed in connection with the validity of statements made in public debates is the so-called fact check: an official makes a public statement with a factual content; this is registered; sometimes only minutes later, sometimes days later the statement is reissued combined with the information that makes clear whether the facts were correct or incorrect.

<sup>9</sup> I use the term *modalities* here to refer to specific combinations of sources of information, such as: written verbal languages, oral verbal language of a visible source, ‘oral’ language of an invisible source, diegetic sounds, non-diegetic sounds, either music or non-music, graphic structures, colors, elements of mise-en-scene, non-verbal symbols in general, cinematography such as camera positions and movements, and so on. We are aware of the fact that this summing up and the numerous combinations possible makes the concept of modality a rather loosely defined concept. This is indeed what we observe in digital rhetorical practice, although of course still over 90% of all discourse can be captured by a limited number of rather conventional modalities.

through time and space. Kairos can no longer be defined in terms of the original orator's public delivery. This is one of the most interesting consequences of the digital developments. Let us look at a number of possible situations.

- *Close to the classical speech is the digital discourse world in which Xi Jinping address the public as a party leader. An orator speaks in front of an audience. Most audiences viewing a video recording of the event will still be able to reconstruct and to evaluate the original context of delivery. The narrator<sup>10</sup> is hesitant to intervene. The dominant frame selected by the narrator is that of a camera positioned in front of this orator, and set to a middle close-up. The camera can be characterized as affording a perfect view, doing nothing that is impossible in the world in which the orator speaks. The camera does not jump out of the room towards a place 1000 kilometers away while the audience still hears the voice of Xi Jinping continue. There is no flying over the heads of the audience present. No 'bird's eye' views from some upper corner. Also, the sound is kept by the narrator as closely as possible to the sound that the historically present audience would have heard coming from the loudspeakers.*

Many aspects are more or less equivalent to the classical situation, but they are not the same. We should not forget that the actual audience in front of the screen is interpreting mediated discourse. The seats of this audience in front of the screen will be different from the seats in the hall in which Xi Jinping was speaking. The actual audience will not feel the tension and excitement that the historical audience shared with the newly appointed leader. The feel of the place, the smell, the temperature, the sensation of space will be different. This aspect of mediation is often overlooked or at least neglected, but it is crucial for the assessment of the speech of this orator.

- *As we saw with Robin Li, an orator can be staged in an interview setting, with an audience present, the interview being either more or less scripted or entirely spontaneous. The 'camera jumps on and off the stage where the interview is taking place, takes close-ups of the one or the other, looks into the audience, follows the eye line of the interviewer or the interviewee, and so on.<sup>11</sup>*

This is all still rather conventional, but it illustrates and underlines the importance of how the narrator goes about telling his story by selecting camera positions. Obviously, a narrator can also decide not to show the entire historical event but to edit out parts. This has two consequences: the audiences of the mediated discourse miss part of the historical speech and it see the remaining part in a different context. A boring four-hour speech can be turned into a five-minute clip of highlights. A one-hour, neatly balanced speech can be turned into a half-hour speech lacking coherence.

- *A narrator can decide to have parts of an orator's speech audible as a voice-over, while simultaneously showing images illustrating his words, maybe even with the orator himself visible in images that are shot at another time at another occasion.*

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<sup>10</sup> By narrator we do not refer to a person (although sometimes the narrator can be personified) but to a source of information that needs to be assumed as mediating between orator and audience. Often it is very useful and necessary for a rhetorical assessment to distinguish between several narrators with sometimes complicated relations of dependency and control (compare Branigan 1992, Chapter 4).

<sup>11</sup> Of course in actual fact, there is no single camera doing all these things, but a director in a direction room selecting and switching between images from multiple cameras.

*Thus the camera jumps out of the diegetic world of the orator who is giving his speech while the microphone stays in there.*

As a result, the totality of the discourse world that is presented to the audience no longer corresponds to a historical event; this combination of sound and image only exists in the discourse world. It is thus up to the audience to construct a relation between the discourse world it is confronted with and its own perception of its reality.

- *The orator can be filmed in some environment while he is busy doing all kinds of things, every now and then speaking into the camera or speaking to someone present, arguing his points of view. Such a sequence will require substantial editing for it to be turned it into a coherent discourse; rather than the orator, the narrator will most likely be the dominant mechanism to create this coherence within the discourse world. The result may be that the narrator creates an argument that is at odds with the arguments that the orator wants to be held accountable for.*

This is a crucial transition. We want to reconstruct argumentation conveyed by multimodal discourse to assess the accountability of *the person responsible for the standpoints defended*. Here we see that even the concept of the *orator* needs to be redefined. In one discourse, it may even be possible that certain standpoints are conveyed by the orator in the discourse world, while other standpoints conveyed are in fact (re)constructed by the institution or person that is accountable for the construction of the discourse world.<sup>12</sup>

- *A narrator creates a clip in which bites of the sound or images of an orator's speech acts are included in whatever way in whatever context.*

Step by step we move away from the more or less ‘immediate’ recording of the speaker by a camera (‘immediate’ of course being a bit of a contradiction in terms here) in the direction of a discourse in which the orator as a person hardly has any control anymore over the way his speech is viewed by an audience. The extreme end in terms of polyphony is where a narrator entirely takes over the orator’s role and responsibilities. The extreme end in terms of multimodality is an orator’s argument being conveyed without him being visible or audible at all, for example in the format of a documentary. These are indeed possible consequences of the multimodal digital formats. It presents rhetorical theory with a challenge. Showing replaces telling. The presented discourse world can have a many different, complicated relations to the perceived reality of an actual audience. The role of the narrative mechanisms can be quite complex.

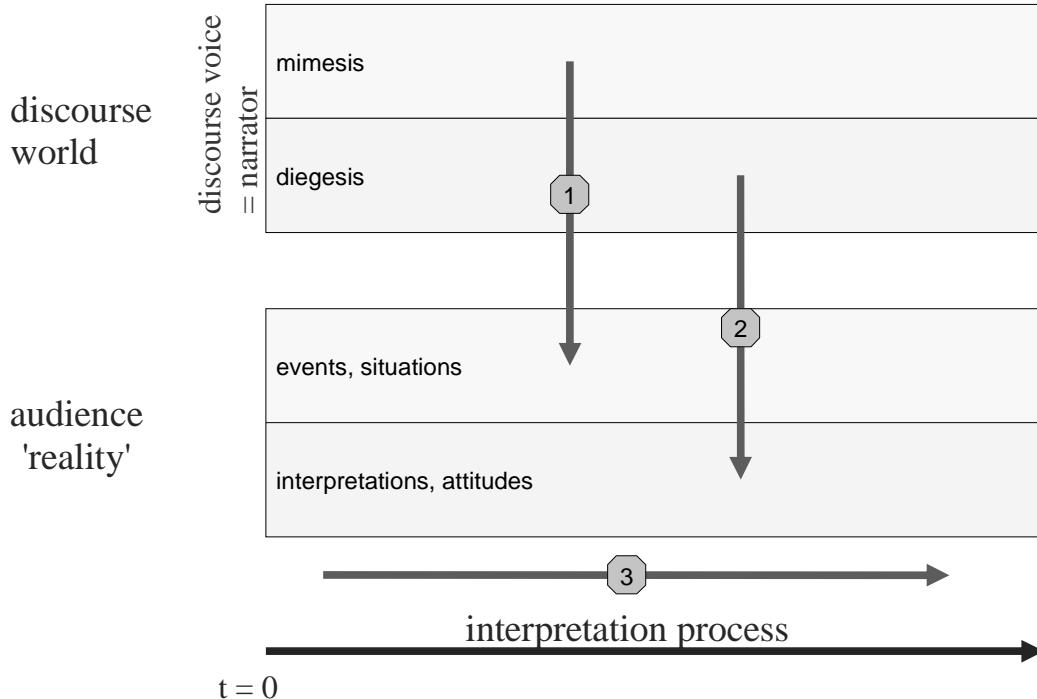
To get a clear view of the coherence of all modes deployed and the accountabilities in the often complex, polyphonic discourse world (there is at least the voice of the orator and the ‘voice’ of the narrator, but the situation can be much more complex), one needs to depart from an advanced analysis of the rhetorical situation. One needs to analyze (1) how by means of different modes narrators built a discourse world - we call this the *mimesis* - (2) how different narrative ‘voices’ comment in and upon this discourse world – the *diegesis* - and (3) how this discourse world is presented in relation to an audience’s perception of its reality.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> About the problem of the accountability for the reconstruction, see Van den Hoven & Yang (to appear).

<sup>13</sup> Using a dynamic and active concept of the audience – the discourse travels freely in time, space and among audiences – I actually prefer the formulation: (3) how an audience constructs a relation between the discourse world and its perception of its reality.

In a scheme that we take from Van den Hoven & Yang Ying we attempt to emphasize that always (1), (2) and (3) are relevant, even in cases of unedited, straightforward recordings.



For cognitive *discourse theory*, this implies that a theory has to account for simultaneous integration of modes and complex forms of polyphony. For *argument theory*, it implies that a theory needs to be receptive to modalities other than merely verbal utterances. For semiotic theories, it means that often modality-specific theories have to account for the argumentative force of discourse structures other than well-ordered propositions.

The rhetoric of multimodal discourse cannot be understood without accounting for intermodal interactions. A voice-over may show prior knowledge of the images coming up, but may also lack prior knowledge and comment afterwards; the rhetorical impact is very different, although the difference in timing may only be seconds. Sounds may reveal inner moods of characters but may also encode a diegetic evaluation of a situation. And so on, and so forth.<sup>14</sup> The possibilities, it seems, are endless, unlimited. To be able to understand these interactions we need to assume principles guiding the interpretation processes (compare Jiang & Van den Hoven 2011). We employ the assumptions of *coherence* and *relevance* of often simultaneously presented modalities, unless genre conventions or the specifics of the discourse indicate otherwise.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Branigan 1992, Chapter 3, gives several interesting examples.

<sup>15</sup> These are well-known principles in discourse theories (Halliday & Hassan 1985, Sperber & Wilson 1995), but they acquire spectacular productivity in the case of multimodal argumentative discourse (compare Van den Hoven & Yang).

Because of the relation between public speech and public accountability, we want to analyze the rhetorical situation from an argumentative point of view (which has been a dominant approach in the classical era, as we saw). We attempt to derive a reconstruction of the orator's position from the discourse as it is presented. As analysts we specify the argumentative commitments of the orator – or the narrator. Relevant information from all modalities is included in the reconstruction.<sup>16</sup>

The model of the rhetorical situation allows us to incorporate theories about specific modalities in our framework, theories that we need to analyze the discourse world, such as film theory when we are dealing with moving pictures, theories about multimodal metaphor when we are confronted with such metaphors, general semiotic text theories or specific theories about film narration, theories about multimodal graphics, music, and so on. Abstracting from school-founding controversies, this part of our approach might be summarized as social semiotics. Social semiotics, inspired by functional systemic grammar, constitutes an attempt to draw up an inventory of resources of meaning and to understand selections made from these resources in specific discursive situations.<sup>17</sup>

### A project

I repeat three major points.

- Oral public speech is reaching ever wider audiences than before the digital turn; the potential audiences of a speech are numerous and may be distant in space and time.
- Public speech is mediated at the moment that it reaches most of its audiences; unlike the situation in the classical era, it is increasingly subject to intricate mediation before it reaches others than those immediately present.
- A coherent oral presentation can be split up into samples, which can be re-used in endless combinations, the speaker still being recognizable and associated with ideas and intentions.

These developments are the result of a concurrence of social and technological factors and they are not going to disappear. It thus is an intellectual challenge for us to study them. We need to analyze these new rhetorical phenomena, reflect upon them, and develop insights that may help us advise both speakers as well as general and professional audiences on how to deal with these rhetorical phenomena in a constructive way.

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<sup>16</sup> Here we largely follow the dialectical insights of an argument theory named pragma-dialectics (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984, Van Eemeren 2011).

<sup>17</sup> An introduction to social semiotics with further references can be found in Van Leeuwen 2005. Specifically for reading images, see Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006. On multimodality, see Kress 2009.

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