The Persistence of Strong Rhetoric in the Information Age

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Statement of Research Objective

For decades, researchers have been studying how the background of a person influences their current viewpoints, including the views of their parents, friends and even the television programs they watch as go through early life. However, a new factor has come into play due to the rise of the Internet and social media. People can now look up information at a moment's notice, and fact check any information that seems incorrect, with sites like Snopes.com often populating the first few search results that come up whenever a misleading article or piece of information is typed into a search engine. Despite this, there is still a noticeable amount of Internet users who will believe and share without a moment's notice whatever comes up on their dashboard or in their email. This study aims to understand why by exploring peer-reviewed articles from recent social media movements, behavioral studies, and ideologies to piece together how the identity of an internet user offline can help define the type of person they are and could convince others to be, online.

Textual Analysis

The idea of this proposal is that an individual will flock to their established circles or ideologies on social media based on their social or political background. This research was built from a pamphlet called "A Practical Program to Kill Jim Crow" by Charles Jackson, which begins by listing out the grievances of black people during Jim Crow to gain the attention of its intended audience. To further gain the attention of the reader, the pamphlet even uses allusions to the fact that "To them a Negro is just a dog. You can give him a pat on the head once in awhile… but don't neglect to give him a kick in the rear to remind him that he is still a dog." (Jackson 3). The front-loading of this pamphlet with pro-black, anti-Jim Crow statements was designed to be a call to action for those tread upon by the oppressive power structure, and no

doubt was deliberately used to get the average reader to want to pick up the pamphlet and come to the meetings. However, this opening is only to endear Jackson to the readers as he introduces the actual nature of the pamphlet, with the statement "Divide and rule is nothing new in the tactics of the ruling class. It has been used time and again throughout the history of the exploitation of man by man. Nor is the color division in America the only variant of this stinking practice." (Jackson 14). It is here that the paper even discards its focus on Jim Crow to discuss the problems with capitalism, "The real cause of Jim-Crowism." (Jackson 15), and states that anyone who fights Jim Crow without adopting socialism is "supporting the system that breeds it (Jim Crow)." While the paper also goes on to decry the current practices of Communism in the Soviet Union, its rhetoric is clear and definable: this opinion is the correct one and if you do not agree you have no true desire to change the world. However, the most telling examples of the pamphlet's rhetoric can be identified from the images printed inside, which showcase pictures of the oppression and alienation black people at the time would be feeling under Jim Crow. Naturally, as the subject changed, the images changed as well, with an image of a black worker and a white worker shaking hands as a banker walks away in disgust and an especially fear mongering image of a black man being strangled by an octopus with the words "Capitalism State" written on the head and punctuated with a dollar sign. It was from here that the idea of examining the Internet, and those who use it, as a sort of new influencer of a person's ideals came about. With Time.com reporting 3.2 billion users of the Internet in 2015, information and rhetoric now have more people to be exposed to in an even faster way than pamphlets ever could. In addition, with the introduction of social media newsfeeds, internet users are now more informed about any subject or story ever recorded by audio or video, or posted digitally on the social media platform directly or linked to from another website. It is with this power that the

identities of Internet users, who already have backgrounds established, would attempt to gather in groups and persuade others that their ideas are correct with whatever means they can.

Review of the Literature

The concept of one's background being the influence of their ideals is not new to the subject of research at all. Deborah Brandt's "Sponsors of Literacy" introduced the world of writing to the idea in the form of sponsors, which "are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy - and gain advantage by it in some way." (Brandt 166). This idea can be applied to those who help define a person's background in one way or the other, a sort of 'sponsor of identity.' Parents seek to teach their children so that they can survive in the world they are growing up in and from there these children find friends who share the world views instilled in them in order to feel validated and to confirm that their beliefs are correct. Other factors like significant others, superiors and even mass media like television programs and music continue this path of identity searching that continues throughout their life, even as they themselves are teaching their children the ideals they have learned over the process of their lives. In the past ten years, Internet users have become more and more involved in the formative process of identity by providing those seeking information the ability to find it easily. With the rise of social media, any person who has a profile on platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr has the potential to become a 'sponsor of identity' for anyone who even glances over their dedicated web page. What's more, this enables anyone with a computer and a stable connection to the Internet to interact with any other person who has the same, leading to a much greater connectivity between identities and the ability for such identities to form into groups. These "identity politics," as they are referred to in Lance Bennett's "Personalization of Politics: Political Identity, Social Media, and Changing

Patterns of Participation," vary widely due to the specific opinions or ideals instilled into a person. "The group based "identity politics of the "new social movements" that arose after the 1960s still exist, but the recent period has seen more diverse mobilizations in which individuals are mobilized around personal lifestyle values to engage with multiple cases such as economic justice, environmental protection, and worker and human rights." (Bennett 1). And these mobilizations show that the ideals of a person are not one side versus the other, as many would believe, but as multifaceted as the personal identities of those who hold these opinions.

As stated in "Discovering Civil Discourse: Using the Online Public Sphere for Authentic Assessment," in reference to the public sphere theory, which views "the public sphere as an opportunity for individuals to share their views with one another freely, question any claims, and form public opinion." (McGowan/Soczka 171), people have the freedom and ability to discuss and argue their points of view in a public forum. As the Internet expands further and more social media platforms are developed, these opinions follow and the Internet users are provided with the ability to feel validated in their views and influence others'. Rowell detailed this with article "The Conviction-persuasion Duality," in which he called back to a previous study he had authored. The article, which stated that knowledge and persuasion "stand for two sets of values of great importance to mankind" (Rowell 474), is about the duality and focus of human interest and gives definition to the dual concepts of knowledge and persuasion. Rowell defines knowledge as truth or certainty, which is what someone is given based from his or her background. The 'sponsors of identity' that every person feels influence from are often what define how said person's interacts with those with similar or differing worldviews and give a purpose of persuasion, a desire which Rowell also refers as the act of moving others to the desire beliefs and actions through discourse. Persuasion is often used by those with strong rhetoric from

a point of conviction, with the idea that their idea is correct focused from the current viewpoints that shape their identity. Scarantino's "Persuasion, Rhetoric and Authority", which linked the persuasive process to the beliefs and emotions of the person being persuaded introduced the idea of an audience into the persuasion-conviction duality, which is described as "constitutive of the persuasive process" (Scarantino 23) of what is detailed by Giulio Preti as "the basic situation in which all discursive acts are grounded". Those who view discourse or strong rhetoric are as involved in the discussion as those whose opinions are on display, and it is this audience that finds their own opinions bolstered or undermined by the strength of the persuasive language of others. Despite being identified as a fraud earlier this year, a prominent purveyor of anti-Islamic hysteria Wayne Simmons had a significant impact on how the 24 million viewers of Fox News saw Muslims post 9/11. His made up 27 year career in the CIA and frequent appearances on Fox News as a "terrorism expert" reinforced his identity as a 'sponsor of identity' for those who see Fox News as a trusted resource for information about the world and lead to his tall tales about the "Islamic threat" being treated as fact for years by those who viewed the programs during the early and mid 2000s. As Matt Zapotosky states in his Washington Post article reporting this incident, "the purported former CIA operative spoke authoritatively about terrorism and clandestine intelligence operations, which he claimed he helped run for nearly three decades." (Zapotosky) and, as such, Fox viewers come away from the program with this information being not just relevant but backed up factually by a reputable source. Similarly to how Jackson used rhetoric to convince the downtrodden masses that socialism was the only way to break from segregation, it is the rhetoric that gives power to the influence a 'sponsor of identity' can have. The expanded amount of 'sponsors of identity' that social media provides adds to the spread of misinformation that can occur. In July, the website Newscatch33 published an article titled "Jay-

Z and Beyoncé Attempt to Buy Rights to Confederate Flag to Prevent Further Use." This story came on the heels of the Charleston church shooting, which would lead to images being released of shooter Dylann Roof shown posing with the flag and stating his desire to 'begin a race war' with his actions, and the temporary removal of the Confederate flag that hang in the center of South Carolina's Columbia courthouse 10 days later by Bree Newsome, an educator and activist from Charlotte and quickly spread on Tumblr due to its timely nature with discussions on the flag as a racist symbol. Despite the original post being hashtagged with 'I'm not positive if this is real pls dont (sic) attack me", the post exploded due to its emotionally timely and seemingly credible source and has currently responded to on the platform through the use of 'likes' and 'reblogs' 242,877 times, with many posting their positive thoughts on the subject as they shared it with their followers. As the post continued to spread, it was eventually disproven and the website that published it was shown to be a frequent provider of false news, but up until the Confederate Flag was actually taken down from the Columbia courthouse by the state government it continued to gain traction and still has the potential to spread across the site due to amount of times it has been shared and the amount of Tumblr users it has been shared with. In addition, the entire basis of the post was proven false as part of the Snopes write-up the following day, which states that "the rights to the symbol in question could not be bought up by any party, as no one holds a legitimate trademark to the design of the Confederate flag." (Mikkelson). The spread of misinformation and strong rhetoric by focusing on the information that one knows and emotionally engaging them enough to support the view shown is a dangerous tool on social media, but not all persuasion is represented by this, as persuasion can also be classified by the social media movements that have been growing in popularity since early 2011, where world was exposed to what is considered to be the first social media-based protests from

Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab Spring. Zeynep Tufekci and Christopher Wilson observed in their article "Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations From Tahrir Square" that the ability to produce and disseminate information through social media like Facebook and Twitter was essential in getting other countries and people who weren't even involved in the protests on their side, even when the internet in Tunisia was shut down over the course of a week (from January 25th to February 2nd). And thanks to the increase of use of Facebook in Egypt in 2009, "political activists could have pointed, broad, and semipublic political discussions across vast social networks" (Tufekci & Wilson 366). This actually lead to the internet being more reliable a source of information than the televised news, as the news would be reporting information that had already been shared through social media platforms. The influence of this movement is monumental, as it was for many the first time that they had been exposed to and shown images and videos of atrocities committed by these nations' governments as they were occurring. Social media movements have since increased due to the hashtag, which has seen increasing use and popularity on social media platforms since Twitter made it a centerpiece of their experience in 2009, when the website began to hyperlink hashtags in order to further engage users in discussion on any topic they desire.

Research Methodology

Many have researched the field of rhetoric over the years, as well as how ideals held by adults are based from their background and upbringing. The research that this paper focuses on began from the annotation and inspection of a pamphlet created in the height of Jim Crowism in the South and seeks to bridge these aforementioned studies with a closer analysis on how the internet has increased the amount of sources, referred to in the research as 'sponsors of identity', that influence a person's worldview. This research will also take into account the fact that there

are those who will actively seek out information that relates to their often emotionally based ideology, even if that information turns out to be misinformation or fraudulent at a later date. Despite modern technology giving people the ability to fact check using the latest up to date information, the Internet's ability to easily disseminate information has lead to the search for credible sources for the information that people are looking for to become a bit murkier. The question is then posed, how much does a person's background affect their beliefs, in particular with the ease of information of the 21st century playing a factor? And going from there, would a person ignore facts provided for as long as they can still find a semblance of their truth, which is often built from the standpoint of their upbringing and their emotional attachment to such values?

My textual analysis of my initial artifact has proven to be effective for my original choice of research, focusing on analyzing sources critically. It is through the critical lens of analysis that I've been able to identify my main goal, as viewing the sudden shift from focus on Jim Crow to Socialism in the pamphlet (which went as far to "the people who own and control the factories, the railroads and all the other means of production and distribution, stand to gain because interracial prejudice diverts the attention of both the black and the white workers away from their true foe." (Jackson 13) And "This policy of divide and rule…has been used time and again through the history of exploitation of men by man. Nor is the color division in America the only variant of this practice" (Jackson 14), implying that racial prejudice and segregation would be simply fixed with the aid of socialism) fascinated me and became the impetus for my further studies.

If I were to continue my analysis, I would hope to try and discover more clues towards the shift in rhetoric presented by the textual artifact. This would involve the collection and

analysis of other pamphlets put out during that time to bring marginalized groups towards socialism, as well as further installments of Charles Jackson's work to see how he would continue to use strong rhetoric, as this was a monthly column in the pamphlet. I would hope to discover a connection between the background of those who were affected by such pamphlets in the context of the time, while also finding similarities between the rhetoric used in each pamphlet to identify the processes behind the methods. In addition, I would study strong and emotionally based rhetoric from stronger examples, like Marxism, in order to fully understand how people get involved in, and in turn share, movements formal or informal. There would also be a concerted effort to identify more articles on behavioral development to round out my knowledge of the mental processes that lead to the influence of specific opinions on people.

To continue from the modern day standpoint, the choice of a few divisive issues that have in the past been poorly reported by mass media but extensively cataloged by the growing information bases would be necessary. For example, those who view Fox News and have been doing so for the past few years would recognize Wayne Simmons, a 'terrorism specialist' for the network and purported CIA operative who turned out to be a fraud. However, according to an article by The Washington Post, "Simmons was able to briefly get actual security clearances and real government contracting work" (Zapotosky). It is because of his presence and claims of practical experience in the Middle East on the network many viewers would find it hard to disagree with his statements, especially when they would reinforce their own beliefs, fears or biases about a specific topic. Another example comes from Halloran's "Rhetoric Online: Persuasion and Politics" review, which provides Rush Limbaugh's radio program and website as an example. These examples and more are being considered for the study.

The research would require subjects entering or in their early 20's, around their freshman or at latest their sophomore year, and would be focused on a one on one interview basis as not to skew their opinions. Their responses would be recorded digitally at first, as to react and respond to their views as soon as they share them, but would also be recorded in writing afterwards. The questions will begin after the oral history has concluded, which is necessary to acquire a firm grasp of the person's background and how they perceive the world. As mentioned before, the participants will be in their early years in college as this is the time when their influences from home are freshest in their minds and will lead to a wider range of opinions on the topics presented. In addition, freshman and sophomores have not yet chosen a major, nor are typically involved in campus clubs early in the semester, making them an ideal choice regarding accessibility and involvement. As it is an easy area of access, the UCF library study rooms would be the ideal areas to hold these interviews, as it is important to hear the respondent clearly and be able to gauge their reactions to the questions asked without distraction. Afterwards, the respondents can be coded and analyzed for similarities in opinions based on background influences. There will be a concerted effort to analyze anomalies that fit outside the stated theory, that background influences opinions, and what kind of answers fit outside a specific pattern. If the Internet plays a larger part in influencing social media users more than upbringing, or proves to be less of a 'sponsor of identity' than background, the nature of the research would have to change along with this discovery.

The ideal outcome of this research being collected is to evolve the study of correlations between the use of strong rhetoric and the background of those being presented it by bringing the Internet into the equation. Despite the fact that factual information is more accessible than ever before, many people will still use their emotional responses and entrenched beliefs as a way to

define the truth for themselves, and it is from here that dangerous opinions can rise. Drawing parallels to current behavioral research and past research on movements and ideologies will provide a way for further research to be done on social media behavior, which could shed light on how the interactions of people have evolved and how misinformation and strong rhetoric find their place even in the information age and how people's offline influences lead into their online ones.

Appendix A: Schedule

Description of Work	Activity	Date				
		Feb	March			
		22-26	3	8	12	14
1.	Gathering respondants	▓				
2.	Screening Interviews		▓			
3.	Oral History			▓		
4.	In Depth Interview			▓		
5.	Coding and Analysis				▓	
6.	Conclusions					▓

Appendix B: QUESTIONS

Oral History Section

Background:
- When & where were you born?
- Did you grow up at this location?
- Where have you lived? What section?
- What was the most common group in the area?
- What year are you?
- What is your major?

Family:
- What was a typical weekend like growing up?
- Were you or your family members involved in the community?
- What kind of things?
- What are your parents' occupations?
- How much would you say your parents' views represent your own?
- What was the highest educational attainment of your parents?
- What role did your parents play in your education?
- How supportive were they about you going away to college?

Friendships:
- Your friends growing up, what background were they?
- How much would you say your friends' views represent your own?

University Experience:
- Why UCF?
- How was it when you arrived?
- Did you find people like you?
- Do you feel more comfortable around some groups than others?

Internet Access/Usage:
- How many hours a week would you say you spend on the Internet?
- What are the typical websites you tend to visit?
- Do you participate in commentary/discussions online? If so, how much of these discussions would you say are focused around political or social debates?
- How passionate would you say you are in these discussions?
- Do you often fact check stories that you've seen on the news or online? If so, about how long does it take after viewing a story for you to check it?
- Do you often post stories on social media? If so, have you ever deliberately posted or shared information that wasn't credible to get attention to your web page or blog?

Research Section

Research Template:

After information about a story is provided, the participant will be asked questions on how the stories made them feel. Examples provided will include serious stories on Black Lives Matter and The Iraq War, as well as more hard to believe actions like Beyoncé's attempts to buy the rights to the Confederate Flag, with misinformation and fear mongering sticking out like a sore thumb. From there, the participant will be allowed time to search the story online in order to fact check, before being asked about how learning that the story or rhetoric behind it is false made them feel. From there, a discussion can be had talking about what about the story made them believe it was true or false and how they operate day to day with similarly strong rhetoric affecting them.

Appendix C: INFORMED CONSENT

Title: The Changing Nature of Rhetoric As a Means of Persuasion

Institution: University of Central Florida

Principal Investigator and Contact Information: Dr. Marcy Galbreath

Email: marcy.galbreath@ucf.edu, Phone Number: (xxx) xxx-xxxx

Student Researcher's Name: Alexander Rolette, University of Central Florida, Junior

Purpose of Study:

Hello. I am a Writing and Rhetoric major at the University of Central Florida. This semester, I am conducting a research project as part of my ENC3502 class. I was hoping that you would be willing to participate in a study focusing around how convincing particular people can be in specific situations, which will be used in a greater study focusing on how the use of deception or persuasion in rhetoric has changed over the course of the Internet age.

Procedures:

You will be asked to participate in a focus group, which will ask you to read through a pamphlet and let the research assistant know how the rhetoric of the pamphlet makes you feel towards it. You will be allowed to use your current knowledge and Internet access to review and discuss the information provided and will participate in a limited commentary on the pamphlet's information.

Confidentiality:

All the information and answers you provide will be strictly confidential and your name will not be used in the study itself. Once you have concluded the discussion, you can leave.

Information:

You will have the opportunity to ask, and have answered, your questions about the study after the focus group has concluded by emailing or calling the principal investigator. All inquiries are confidential.

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