

## **(Re)Inventing Trust: Rhetorical Strategies for Communicating in an Age of Suspicion**

### **Section Organizers:**

Maria Załęska, University of Warsaw ([m.zaleska@uw.edu.pl](mailto:m.zaleska@uw.edu.pl))

Monika Kostro, University of Warsaw ([mkostro@uw.edu.pl](mailto:mkostro@uw.edu.pl))

Daniel Ziembicki, University of Warsaw ([daniel.ziembicki@uw.edu.pl](mailto:daniel.ziembicki@uw.edu.pl))

### **Section language:**

English

### **Call for Papers:**

Contemporary societies increasingly operate under conditions of pervasive uncertainty and distrust. Public communication is shaped by epistemic instability, affective polarisation and a growing culture of suspicion. The rapid circulation of information in digital environments, the proliferation of misinformation and the erosion of traditional epistemic authorities have made it increasingly difficult to establish shared standards of credibility and interpretation. In such contexts, trust – once a relatively stable background condition of communication – has become a fragile and contested rhetorical achievement.

Against the backdrop of historically attested modes of credibility construction, this panel focuses on how trust is rhetorically negotiated, contested, and reinvented in contemporary discourse. Particular attention will be paid to the relationship between rhetoric and language, understood as the discursive practices through which credibility, authority and epistemic legitimacy are constructed. Trust is not merely a psychological or institutional phenomenon; it is also a discursive effect, emerging through linguistic choices, argumentative structures, narrative framing and rhetorical positioning within specific communicative situations.

The panel focuses on two interconnected problems. First, contemporary communicative environments demand a certain degree of epistemic vigilance. In a media landscape saturated with fake news, conspiracy narratives and strategic disinformation, distrust may function as a necessary protective mechanism. Suspicion toward sources, interpretations and communicative intentions often becomes a rational response to the instability of information.

Second, however, excessive or generalized distrust may undermine the very conditions of collective deliberation and cooperation. Democratic communication depends on the possibility of establishing discursive trust: trust in speakers, institutions, procedures of argumentation and shared interpretative frameworks. The challenge therefore lies in understanding how rhetori-



cal and linguistic practices can simultaneously sustain critical vigilance while enabling the reconstruction of credibility, authority and cooperative communication.

We invite contributions that explore how rhetorical actors respond to this tension: how language, texts and discourses are used to manage suspicion, negotiate credibility and (re)invent trust in conditions marked by epistemic uncertainty and affective distrust. Of particular interest are analyses of the rhetorical and linguistic strategies through which trust is discursively produced, challenged or restored in political, media, academic and everyday communication.

Possible topics include:

- classical and early modern rhetorical strategies of establishing trust in conditions of controversy and uncertainty
- rhetorical construction and negotiation of trust in public discourse
- language and credibility: discursive mechanisms of trust-building
- rhetorical strategies of epistemic vigilance in the age of misinformation
- suspicion, credibility and the rhetoric of verification
- narratives of credibility and rhetorical (re)construction of authority
- rhetorical responses to fake news and conspiracy narratives
- trust, argumentation and the legitimacy of expertise
- discursive strategies for restoring trust in institutions and public communication
- rhetorical authority and linguistic markers of credibility
- trust, language and cooperation in contexts of deep disagreement
- between suspicion and reliance: the rhetorical ambivalence of trust in Artificial Intelligence

The panel welcomes theoretical as well as empirical contributions from scholars working in rhetoric, linguistics, literature, discourse analysis, argumentation theory, communication studies, media studies and philosophy of language. We particularly encourage papers that investigate the discursive and linguistic dimensions of trust as a rhetorical phenomenon in contemporary communicative environments marked by uncertainty and suspicion.

### **Bibliography:**

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Gottschling, Markus & Olaf Kramer. 2025. "Persuasive Surfaces and Calculating Machines. A Rhetorical Perspective on Artificial Intelligence", *Global Philosophy* 35-15

Grant, Colin B. 2007. *Uncertainty and Communication. New Theoretical Investigations*. New York: Palgrave.

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Webb, Mark Owen 1992. "The epistemology of trust and the politics of suspicion". *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 73 (4), 390-400.

Weresh, Melissa H. 2012. "Morality, Trust, and Illusion: Ethos as Relationship". *Legal communication and rhetoric* (9).



## Associated Research Groups:

### Research group Ret-Net: Languages and Rhetorical Cultures

Members of the group explore a dynamic landscape at the intersection of rhetoric, language, and culture. Their work moves between general and intercultural rhetoric, encouraging reflection on language awareness, language ideologies, and the many ways persuasion is understood across different contexts. A central focus lies on argumentation and critical thinking, particularly in examining how language can both inform and mislead, and how rhetorical and linguistic mechanisms shape manipulation, polarization, and the spread of fake news across languacultures. Their research interests also include the evolving relationship between rhetoric and culture in today's digital world. The group is equally committed to innovation in language education, investigating how rhetoric can enrich Modern Languages curricula and support the teaching of foreign languages, literature, and translation.

