

# **What Pizzagate Teaches Us About Literacy**

Lauren Burgess

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Mark Longaker  
Department of Rhetoric and Writing  
Supervising Professor

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Diane Davis  
Department of Rhetoric and Writing  
Second Reader

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# CHAPTER ONE

## Biases in Human Behavior

The tendency to believe information without verifying its truth is a human trait founded on both evolutionarily-based psychological processes and sociological groupings. Many readers do not realize they are sharing information that is not completely true or perhaps exaggerated, and often do not devote more than a glance to a headline before sharing an article on social media. These readers may not realize that the articles they share could be fabricated. People often fail to check the legitimacy of the information they readily believe. Some may be even reluctant to do so. Indeed, if everyone were to check the accuracy of the articles they share on social media, they may realize that the content they promote is hyperbolic at best. In other instances, articles capture nonpartisan issues in an inflammatory light, affixed with an ideological spin. Whatever the case, there seems to exist an implicit sense of trust in people's perception of information, which can become especially dangerous when information is disseminated from unreliable sources. Furthermore, an internal alarm system does not seem to exist in the human mind that warns against believing particular information. Humans seem to do the opposite.

For the purposes of this discussion, a distinction between what is true and what is false will not be made. The goal of this thesis is threefold. It will first survey the cognitive processes which our brains use to think and perceive information in certain ways. It will additionally analyze how these cognitive processes use ideological preconceptions to

understand information from a specific perspective. Lastly, it will explore the rhetorical strategies used in the construction of information which attempts to deceive people's judgment of truth. In effect, the following discussion will attempt to unveil why people believe information, and, later, how they can become skeptics of the information they so readily believe.

To accomplish this analysis, I will use Pizzagate as a case study. I chose Pizzagate because of its evolution from underground speculation to a widespread, full-fledged belief. Our case study provides us with ample examples of how biases and literacy can affect understanding of information, but it does not cover everything. To address a few more concepts of misleading rhetoric, I will introduce some smaller examples later.

### **Cognitive Biases**

Cognitive biases are the product of evolutionary processes existing to improve the fitness of humanity. They are often defined as a mistake or a distortion of objective reality, but they serve an important purpose in our daily lives. The mind could not possibly process all of the information it is exposed to in a given moment, so it takes short cuts, or heuristics, to filter out important information (Haselton, Nettle, and Murray 2015, 968-974).<sup>1</sup> For our ancestors, this trait proved useful for survival. Unfortunately, it now works against our best interests in some cases.

It is not possible to completely overcome cognitive biases, but it is necessary to become aware of these natural tendencies when evaluating information. Cognitive biases often work in conjunction with ideological opinions, and the two tend to re-affirm one

another. Without constant skepticism, we are ignorant of the rhetoric that can be used to prey on these natural biases. To combat this ignorance, we must first talk about some of the processes that work to confirm biases.

It is not abnormal for people to disagree with one another on what appears to be a straightforward issue because, oftentimes, pre-existing biases cloud objective judgment. This confirmation bias can be described as the process of “seeking or interpreting evidence in ways that are partial to existing beliefs, expectations, or a hypothesis in hand” (Nickerson 1998, 176).<sup>2</sup> Confirmation bias is particularly troublesome as the majority of Americans — 62% to be exact — receive their news from social media platforms that have a tendency to promote news in favor of an individuals’ biases (Gottfried and Shearer 2016).<sup>3</sup> Within popular social media-news conduits, such as Facebook and Twitter, any sort of factual accountability or regulation of reality remains to be seen. People are free to post any thoughts, opinions, or news articles they want to. While this aspect of social media ensures freedom of speech, it can have dangerous consequences when human cognitive biases go unchecked.

### **Facebook’s Role**

In addition to confirmation bias, other propensities in the human mind prohibit us from analyzing information objectively. For example, in social media settings where there is a perceived social presence, people are much less likely to fact-check statements than when they feel they are evaluating these statements without this social presence (Jun, Meng, and Johar 2017, 5981).<sup>4</sup> This behavior is found on Facebook, where acceptance is

found in the form of “likes” or “shares.” The platform contains a large network of people that can elevate a person’s opinion to a widely held belief through a high number of likes and shares that provide the opinion authority. This collective affirmation could persuade an undecided individual into taking a side on an issue or believing a piece of exaggerated or misleading news. This virtual peer pressure can unintentionally manifest in the passive reader’s mind. The passive reader being someone who readily believes information without verification of this information’s truth. Those who get most of their news from social media are especially vulnerable in this community of agreement. Additionally, passive readers may glance through their Facebook newsfeed and see an article where only the headline is visible. Since seeking out reliable news information is not a primary goal for many social media users, it is likely that some would believe a news article solely based on its headline. These headlines tend to misrepresent but have found success in social media settings.

Social media often provides selective access to information because the only posts displayed on a user’s Facebook feed, for instance, are those shared by a user’s “Facebook friend.” With 18% of adults getting their news exclusively from social media platforms, it is reasonable to assume that some people rely on these networks as credible sources of information (Mitchell et al. 2016).<sup>5</sup> Adding to social media’s credibility is the influence of users’ friends and family contributing to the constant news-like stream of information prevalent on many social media platforms. It is important to understand the circumstances within the networks that promote certain kinds of news, as the selection of information is often limited.

Complete with an algorithm that tracks a specific user's political leanings, the newsfeed presents information to encourage users to interact with the platform by liking or sharing a post. This backfires in circumstances where users see information that agrees with their views, but no news articles that offer an opposing view. Facebook has even implemented a news bar on the side of its newsfeed that automatically generates popular news for users. This news, however, is not consistent for all users and varies depending on their interaction with certain pages. This means users see news depending on their interests, and, often, their political leanings. As mentioned earlier, such a one-sided view of information without cross-ideological discussion can lead to extremist views.

Facebook's design has optimized its platform for the most amount of interactions between its users. Facebook's newsfeed is usually agreeable to users because people naturally befriend those who have similar beliefs as them (Bromwich and Haag 2018).<sup>6</sup> Facebook is not completely at fault for the echo-chamber set up as it exacerbates human nature's tendency to favor agreeable information. Facebook users often view content shared by people with whom they have some sort of real-life connection, effectively building a second layer of filtering into their Facebook newsfeed. In these cases, one-sided opinions are prevalent, leaving little room for other perspectives.

One may think that, because Facebook reflects real-life social circles, there is nothing wrong with the setup of the platform. However, when users have the option to block people with dissimilar opinions, an artificial filtering of information is again created. Additionally, the algorithm and news bar that present users with one-sided information omit the whole truth and encourage bias to judge the accuracy of information.

Most importantly, Facebook functions as a source of news for many people. Whether it is news about friends, or news about current events, Facebook dictates much of what its users see. Moreover, Facebook presents all shared content in the same format. Whether a person is sharing a source from a reputable source, or from a highly biased blog is difficult to tell. Little more than a picture and headline are offered, and, on Facebook, few people read articles past their headlines. Facebook's powerful status as a social media platform, coupled with a fast-paced format for processing information produces an intrinsically biased environment.

### **Ideological Biases**

Now we begin our discussion of ideological bias — but not without a joint discussion of the cognitive biases that reinforce them. News organizations often frame their stories to affirm the opinions of their target audiences. This is dangerous in highly biased news organizations that tailor content based on their audience's beliefs. Many of us fall prey to biased information because it confirms what we already believe to be true and supports our preexisting beliefs that the opposing viewpoint is false. The more support we have for our own subjective views, the more we believe in what can often be a one-sided perspective. This pattern can sometimes continue until we believe in a subject to such an extreme degree that we exaggerate what we know to support our argument, leading to fabricated evidence and hyperbolic statements that blur the original meaning of the supporting information.



It is important for viewers of partisan television shows to be cautious of the ways information is framed in their favor. Live settings present information under unique circumstances. Live arguments do not have time for fact-checking or in-depth analysis of a certain point. They are rushed and often dramatized by the host, constantly interrupting their guest and vice versa. Furthermore, the guest is likely to be preselected as a person unable to adequately defend their view of an issue. Guests are often interviewed beforehand to ensure that the show's host can easily defeat an "inferior" guest opinion in a debate. Lastly, the show's host is always given the last word in a discussion, so viewers are satisfied with an agreeable, triumphant opinion (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2011, 34).<sup>7</sup> Partisan television offer viewers a sense of correctness and superiority, much like the discussion encountered on social media. Those unaware of these highly specialized industry details are not informed of the whole truth in a show's debate.

Biased, one-sided opinions often flourish in heated, politically charged debates held in comment sections of platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Oftentimes the discussion is more impassioned than reasoned and the support for arguments are more embellished than based in fact. This obviously does not only occur in digital environments, as heated debate occurs outside of the internet. However, an undecided and perhaps naïve individual may believe the convincing and emotional, albeit misleading and unfounded arguments had in these platforms. This is especially harmful when you consider that people often exaggerate their own knowledge of issues with unjustified confidence. A 2012 study additionally shows that this confident behavior begets extremist opinions. In the study, these extremist views were quickly moderated when people were asked to explain said issues (Ferbach et

al. 2013, 6-7).<sup>8</sup> People realized that many of the assertions made were unsubstantiated. In depth discussion is needed in many cases to understand the intricacies of an issue — one that is not easily had by emotionally biased keystrokes.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Pizzagate.com**

Untrained readers are prone to believing appealing rhetoric due to the way information is phrased. Journalists may view news as black and white, but, in rhetoric, it is difficult to draw the line down the middle. Issues often hover within the gray area of true and false, possibly not completely one or the other. It is not the purpose of this paper to make this distinction, however, but to understand what qualifies certain information in this proverbial grey area. There are numerous underlying causes, and I will touch on just a handful.

An extreme case of unchecked biases can be seen in the theory of Pizzagate, which holds that a pedophile ring operates out of a Clinton-linked, Washington D.C.-based pizzeria called Comet Ping-Pong (LaCapria 2016).<sup>9</sup> The analysis of the theory will focus on the various internet platforms on which Pizzagate was discussed. Before we address the theory's evolution, we can look at Pizzagate.com to understand how such a theory could possibly gain traction. Once the central website relaying information about the theory, Pizzagate.com is no longer in existence. Pizzagate.com appeared about a month after the beginning of Pizzagate's first discussion, around November 2016, when the theory reached widespread media attention.

It is worth noting that Pizzagate and Pizzagate.com began at the end of the 2016 Presidential Election, a time particularly swamped with hoaxes and "fake news." Merriam-

Webster doesn't define "fake news" as a term but states that it is a phrase "frequently used to describe a political story, which is seen as damaging to an agency, entity, or person" ("The Real Story of 'Fake News'").<sup>10</sup> Although people have long been misrepresenting events in the media, the term "fake news" has only recently entered public knowledge. When the public noticed the widespread dissemination of "fake news," a huge backlash resulted, and many websites spreading the news became stricter about sharing verified news (Kosoff 2016).<sup>11</sup>

Now, there remains few websites documenting arguments supporting Pizzagate, so finding content to analyze is somewhat difficult. One of the ways to access the history of Pizzagate during its heyday and uncover pertinent information about its discussion is to use the digital archiving website, The Wayback Machine. A useful tool that holds people accountable to information accessible via the internet, The Wayback Machine gives us screen captures of Pizzagate.com's previous activity. I have chosen a sample of the website from the day January 8, 2017, a date during the peak of website traffic on Pizzagate.com.

We will look at the implications of the appeals made by Pizzagate from a rhetorical perspective, and how these appeals are further enabled by cognitive and ideological biases. We will first discuss how the purveyors of the theory gave themselves credibility, played on the inherently emotional topic of Pizzagate, and curated the detailed explanations in support of the theory, which many found plausible.

Paying attention to the three devices first introduced by Aristotle, ethos, pathos, and logos, I will dissect the systematized appeals which persuaded Pizzagate's audience into believing the theory. I will also analyze why was it so easy for Pizzagate's audience to be

persuaded of the theory. The rhetorical appeals played on the audience's cognitive and ideological biases, appealing to what they wanted to hear in a convenient and convincing manner.

In my analysis of Pizzagate I will discuss the three Aristotelian appeals as independent of each other's influences. I will do this for the purposes of understanding how each appeal uniquely affects readers' thought processes. The three appeals are almost never independent of one another, however, as logic, emotion, and ethical reasoning are naturally related. By separating the three appeals, I am artificially deconstructing the heavily interrelated appeals within the following examples.

The case of Pizzagate differs vastly from the typical strategies used by politicians and advertisers to persuade audiences. The story is supported in part by unrelated truths strung together to form a highly unrealistic, consistently debunked narrative. Although, the writer of Pizzagate.com would disagree with this. The website's loyal and large following likely believed in the narrative, with the help of biases, of course.

Although many websites hosted discussion of Pizzagate, Pizzagate.com is a unique platform for analysis of the theory. It takes the form of a website, or a source of information purporting as reliable. The author creates an elaborate argument from random internet clippings such as Instagram pictures, website screenshots, and public information. The website has no discussion forum, and no space for opposing or omitted information to make itself known. Its purpose is to convince, and, for those who already believe, to increase confidence in the belief of the theory.

Ethos can be defined as an appeal to credibility and goodwill. The rhetor makes this appeal by assuring the audience that she is an authority and has their best interests in mind. The ethical appeal on Pizzagate.com, however, relies primarily on self-referential credibility to establish an ethos. In doing so, the author fails to cite any secondary sources providing outside discussion of Pizzagate's validity and relies solely on themselves for credibility (“#PIZZAGATE” 2017).<sup>12</sup> Pizzagate.com refers to primary sources, such as pictures from Instagram or leaked emails from WikiLeaks, to form its argument, but any commentary regarding the theory is entirely contained within the article. The primary sources are sparse. There are no interviews with people who may have been involved in Pizzagate, and little investigation outside of public images pieced together to form the author's narrative. The omission of secondary sources shows the author's intent to craft a story based on speculation, without the added discussion from others.

The ethos is further established in the author's claims that \$25,000 will be given to anyone who can successfully disprove Pizzagate and provide evidence in support of their disproof (“#PIZZAGATE” 2017).<sup>13</sup> This includes one stipulation — none of the provided evidence can originate from “mainstream media.” In effect, the website's author challenges people to an impossible argument — one that could only be had with conjecture — and one that could again be disproven through further conjecture. The author does not plan to give \$25,000 away to anyone. Additionally, by disqualifying “mainstream media” as sources of reliable information, the author dispels any news sources claiming Pizzagate is a hoax, as well as the evidence they provide against it. The author does this to further establish self-referential credibility, guarding against what she and her audience perceive

as biased news sources. The author and her audience would likely discredit any news source speaking against the theory they vehemently support.

It is worth noting that the author of Pizzagate.com has never revealed their identity, and probably never will. This is may be because of Pizzagate's controversial nature, and the subsequent backlash the author could face in their public life. The problem with an anonymous author is that, as readers, we have no idea who or what is producing the information we read. It is impossible to check the credibility of a website's information if the credibility comes from the website itself, and no author exists to publicly defend their theory. However, the website's lack of verifiable credibility is an easily ignored ethical quandary to those already in support of Pizzagate.

The audience of Pizzagate is likely one opposing Hillary Clinton, and perhaps the Democratic Party. Someone in support of the two might have a hard time believing such a far-fetched theory, but those in opposition may not be as hard to convince. As we previously discussed, the mind tends to believe in that which agrees with its pre-existing opinions. You do not see many Pizzagate supporters questioning the validity of their sources. It is easier for them to believe what they are being told is true than to seek out the truth and contextualize the information they are given. It is much more agreeable to blame "mainstream media" for manipulating the truth than to understand the idea of Pizzagate from a realistic perspective. Anything contrary to one's beliefs is uncomfortable, but the implicit emotionality engrained in such a troubling subject is likely to prevent Pizzagate believers from changing their opinion regardless.

Pizzagate evokes emotion without much effort when the horrific thought of children being held against their will and subjected to unspeakable acts enters readers' minds. Emotion, the second of Aristotle's rhetorical appeals, means to invoke sympathy in the reader and make them feel a certain way. The author of Pizzagate.com invokes a sense of emotion-fueled justice among its readers. As readers fall into a rabbit hole of codified WikiLeaks emails and Instagram pictures, they become more disillusioned with what is reality, and readily believe the narrative being fed to them. It seems the website's slogan even denotes this emotional message of justice as it reads: "We do it for the victims" ("#PIZZAGATE" 2017).<sup>14</sup> The power behind such an emotionally charged topic can cause readers to disregard the improbability of Pizzagate and become interested in the investigation for "truth."

Ideological bias runs rampant in emotional arguments of all kinds. In the case of Pizzagate.com, the author's use of pathos is particularly effective for Conservative readers who have a realized hatred of Hillary Clinton or the Democratic Party. It is easy to dehumanize those who do not agree with you, and even easier to believe that those people who you already perceive as inhuman participate in such heinous activities. In the case of Pizzagate, this bias causes people to believe in a highly unlikely situation.

The third of Aristotle's rhetorical appeals, is logos. This appeal to logic and reason can strongly convince a reader and may sometimes be harder to argue against than ethos or pathos. Pizzagate.com presents a picture with circumstantial, yet thorough arguments. The website systematically argues that Comet Ping Pong is at the center of a child



prostitution racket run by Hillary Clinton, and participated in by members of her campaign committee.

One of the logical arguments put forth by the author suggests that food-related WikiLeaks emails contain a hidden code, allowing members of the racket to communicate about child prostitution. When Comet Ping Pong happened to cater for the Clinton campaign, proponents of Pizzagate decided that these child prostitutes were kept in the D.C. Pizzeria. The author gives a vague translation for the encoded language found in the emails of Hillary Clinton's former campaign chair, John Podesta, to support her original claim. The author presents a screenshot of a leaked email from John Podesta stating, "The realtor found a handkerchief (I think it has a map that seems pizza-related)" ("#PIZZAGATE" 2017).<sup>15</sup> Pizzagate.com's author then goes on to describe handkerchiefs as a code used to determine one's pedophilic sexual preferences. There is no evidence to show that this is anything more than a mere coincidence. In order for the reader to accept the author's argument, they must assume that the author is correct in his translation of a highly ambiguous code. A code that was likely created in the event of a leak, such as this, that could jeopardize the privacy of highly sensitive government information.

It is difficult for skeptics to believe that a coded language definitively translates to talk of a pedophilic sex ring, so more than logic is needed to believe Pizzagate. When cognitive biases come into play, we are more likely to overlook flaws in an argument which support our preexisting opinions. Our ideological biases that shape these opinions are only reaffirmed when an argument convinces us we are correct. Logical reasoning falls victim

to these biases just as easily as our emotion and our tendency to believe credible sources does.

Even when readers are aware of the biases that influence information processing, they may still be influenced by the rhetorical appeals attempting to persuade them to think a certain way. If we understand the ways in which rhetors use these appeals, we may be able to better understand when the appeals are used to manipulate or spin information. Without this knowledge, it is extremely difficult to critically analyze an issue fraught with such appeals.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **The Evolution of Pizzagate**

Pizzagate originated as a fabrication of presumptively inconsequential online murmurs. People fed into a highly improbable situation because it happened to agree with their political leanings. Collective agreement discouraged fact-checking in the internet's community of users ready to believe heavily shared posts. They trusted a story defaming Hillary Clinton that originated from websites supporting her opposing presidential candidate, Donald Trump. The theory first appeared in the form of a post on the primarily Conservative online forum, 4chan, which also saw discussion from the far-right fringe communities on Reddit, an online news-aggregator.

4chan's software is constantly deleting content because its forums, or boards, are usually limited to ten pages ("Frequently Asked Questions").<sup>16</sup> Similarly, access to original Reddit posts regarding Pizzagate is limited. The community, or subreddit, of r/Pizzagate has been banned from Reddit for violating the website's content policy. Due to controversy following the popularization of Pizzagate, which prompted the removal of documents in support of the theory, the lack of primary sourcing of information regarding Pizzagate is to be expected. Furthermore, it seems that The Wayback Machine excludes itself from capturing 4chan's content and is restricted from storing banned discussion from Reddit. Due to these factors, I was not able to pull information from the Wayback Machine or any other internet-archiving service for analysis. To circumvent these limitations, I will use

screenshots published by *The New York Times* captured during the peak of Pizzagate's discussion to analyze the origins of the theory.

4chan has an obvious right-leaning user base, and, although Reddit has a left-leaning user base, certain subreddits like r/the\_donald have far right-leaning biases. The subreddit r/the\_donald focuses on topics solely related to the current president, Donald Trump. By association, topics opposing former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton have been frequently discussed in the subreddit. The origins of Pizzagate already show ideological bias, as the creation of the theory likely had political motivations to slander Hillary Clinton. After much speculation about Pizzagate, the theory became popular enough to warrant its own subreddit labeled r/Pizzagate.

After personal emails from John Podesta were released to the public via WikiLeaks, many 4chan and Reddit users searched the data for wrongdoings from the Clinton campaign. Instead, they found obscure references to pizza and other food that seemed to mean something beyond simple references to food. We have established that the code was probably meant to conceal private information in a leak such as this one, so now we can look at how Pizzagate's supporters interpreted it.

Apparently 4chan users had developed a language relating cheese pizza to child pornography long before Pizzagate, so many believed it was not out of the question for food-related diction to play a part in Pizzagate. *The New York Times* shows one post translate terms like "hotdog" and "pasta" to "boy" and "little boy" respectively (Aisch, Huang, and Kang 2016).<sup>17</sup> One leaked email references a fundraiser held for former

president Barack Obama at Comet Ping Pong. Apparently Comet Ping Pong's owner is connected with other Democratic figures as well.

During Pizzagate's formation, a theme of Satanism was related to the theory after pictures of controversial art pieces owned by Podesta circulated through 4chan ("DC Pizzagate: A Primer UPDATED 07/07/17" 2017).<sup>18</sup> It is quite a stretch, however, to assign the themes of a person's art collections to the person themselves. One of Podesta's pieces was painted by an artist named Kim Noble, an artist with Dissociative Identity Disorder (Noble 2012).<sup>19</sup> The artist, who depicts much of her trauma through her paintings, portrayed what appears to be a crouched, bloodied body standing between five figures. Although some may find the images of the art disturbing, there is no reason to believe that a concept which comes from the machinations of another person's mind represents any motives in the buyer. Art is open to interpretation, and in the case of 4chan, the users' confirmation bias interpreted what they were looking for.

Among evidence provided to support Pizzagate includes the use of symbols with supposedly double meanings. For instance, *The New York Times* presents a 4chan post with a picture representing the moons from the Comet Ping Pong logo circled in red (Aisch, Huang, and Kang 2016).<sup>20</sup> The theorists somehow equated the highly ambiguous symbol of a crescent moon with the devil. 4chan users also reference a separate WikiLeaks-released FBI translation showing specific pedophile symbols which only marginally relate to certain symbols used by Podesta and Comet Ping Pong. These other ambiguous symbols like triangles, hearts, and butterflies are not always symbols of pedophilia, but, rather, common symbols that existed far before they were assigned a darker meaning. So, it is

unrealistic to assign such specific meaning to such general symbols as context is the most important determinant of these symbols' meanings. However, it is convenient to assign subjective meaning to anything that supports your claims when making an argument.

Through extensive discussion, many users of 4chan and Reddit were able to develop the highly complex and detailed theory that is Pizzagate. The themes of Satanism, food-encoded language, and symbols of pedophilia are just a few examples of how specific the theory becomes the more you read the discussion surrounding Pizzagate. The process of reading Pizzagate's discussion can be compared to going "down the rabbit hole," as many readers became more and more convinced the further they investigate the details of Pizzagate. The more time believers of Pizzagate spend reading into the theory may translate to the more they believe in Pizzagate as ideological and confirmation biases are continuously confirmed. Moreover, little rebuttal is tolerated in these topic-specific forums because they are dedicated to the discussion of proving the theory, not arguing its existence.

The patterns of discussion found in the forums of 4chan and the subreddits of Reddit have striking similarity to the style of argumentation found in Pizzagate.com. In both settings, cognitive and ideological biases drive logical reasoning and make users more susceptible to believing what is told to them. Many users fail to question the validity of the information, or even attempt to understand the evidence in relation to the claims they support. They accepted vague references to cryptic symbols that matched the popular narrative that fit in with their political leanings.

Topic-specific discussion boards were necessary to the development of Pizzagate as they focused on the belief of the theory, allowing internet users to encourage one another

to find greater connections and further expand Pizzagate. Such a specific level of detail was able to logically appeal to 4chan and Reddit users, vastly amplifying the implicit emotional appeal within the subject of child prostitution. In Pizzagate's beginnings, logical appeals did the most to generate support for the theory as people were able to understand an argument that made sense to them, and simultaneously affirmed their biases. Any user can argue anything if they are able to logically connect evidence with their assertion.

In highly anonymous websites such as 4chan and Reddit, there is little community besides the community formed over mutual discussion of a topic. Consequently, with anonymity, there is less ethical appeal as no reputable figure with reliable information is promoting the theory. Many of the arguments made on these forums claim that anonymous sources in the FBI, police force, or some other governmental agency gave them information pertaining to Pizzagate, but, since there are no public identities, this is a weak means of ethical appeal. In communities where known sources are trusted, such as Facebook, it is easier to believe information based on who is saying it. Without a more trusted community setting, however, ethical appeals are not as convincing in internet forums.

Both 4chan and Reddit have anonymous platforms, allowing for an unfiltered honesty between users. It makes sense that a theory as far-fetched as Pizzagate would have its origins on a website where users' identities are not known. Fringe views congregate on these forums and grow as users affirm one another's ideas. Pizzagate gained traction first as an anonymous discussion, perhaps too controversial for mainstream sharing. But the theory did not gain popularity from remaining in the dark corners of the internet on underground discussion forums. Once Pizzagate gained an audience, it became more

believable to many people and travelled to more easily accessible and widely-used platforms.

Part of the reason why Pizzagate gained such an audience was its mere introduction to popular social media platforms. Forums typically discuss niche topics and have a limited audience willing to entertain such discussion. When Pizzagate moved to Twitter and Facebook, it was introduced to a platform with constant dialogue about a number of subjects and a significantly larger user base willing to discuss the theory. To the average person, Pizzagate likely appeared more believable on Facebook than the message boards of 4chan. As I mentioned earlier, such a huge population of users get their news from social media, with some getting their news exclusively from social media. And with Facebook's uniform post formats, how does one distinguish a headline from *CNN* from a Pizzagate.com discussion with just a cursory glance down a Facebook newsfeed?

Pizzagate flourished in Twitter's truncated posting format and fast-paced style of information sharing. Twitter functions as an intermediary between the complete anonymity found in Reddit and 4chan, and the online community found in Facebook. By this, I mean there is both socialization of users who know each other in real life, and users who interact solely on the platform. Additionally, Twitter pioneered the hash-tagging function, allowing its users to insert a pound symbol before a word or phrase related to their post. Hashtags allow easy access to posts related by this keyword, so posts of related content often grow in popularity from this ease of access. With enough tags, a post could reach millions of people and spread information more rapidly than many other platforms.



Pizzagate got widespread exposure as its discussion originating from anonymous platforms became accessible to a network of interconnected users with real identities through hashtagging. It grew in popularity from countercultural forums to mainstream social platforms with the help of “#pizzagate.” Sadly, a large amount of the shares on Twitter tagged with “#pizzagate” weren’t even human (Robb 2017).<sup>21</sup>

Bots traced back to the Czech Republic, Cyprus, and Vietnam were posting a disproportionate amount of Pizzagate hashtags compared to U.S. users. Whoever paid for the bots wanted Pizzagate to gain traction and provide the theory with an artificial crowd meant to entice others into sharing. These bots, or fake Twitter accounts created through computer programming, automatically shared prewritten posts tagged with “#pizzagate.” Although the bots helped get the theory trending, human Twitter users fell into the trap of communal belief (Robb 2017).<sup>22</sup> The users saw the thousands of shares associated with the hashtag and decided to share it themselves. The shares progressed into discussion of Pizzagate, and the discussion regressed into heated debate with extremist opinions. The more extremist, the better for those who bought the bots. These are the people who favor sensationalized and emotionally-charged gossip to better their cause and tear down the opposition.

By the time Pizzagate spread to Twitter, it had gained traction on Facebook as well. As previously discussed, Facebook can make its users particularly prone to believing in agreeable information. Facebook caters heavily to users wishing to connect to people they know in real life in an online setting. So, now that Pizzagate has gained popularity, people can comfortably and openly support the theory as so many of their peers do.

## **Pizzagate in Social Media**

The Wayback Machine does not consistently capture pictures from social media accounts as user information and posts take up too much space. So, we must look to alternative sources for our analysis. In order to analyze examples of Pizzagate's discussion on Facebook and Twitter, we will look to accounts and posts from media outlets.

Many media outlets have covered the subject of Pizzagate and tracked users promoting the theory while the users' accounts existed. *Rolling Stone's* Amanda Robb discusses how Cynthia Campbell, posing as Facebook user Carmen Katz, fed into discussion of Pizzagate likely planted on the internet. Campbell wrote:

'My NYPD source said its [sic] much more vile and serious than classified material on Weiner's device. The email DETAIL [sic] the trips made by Weiner, Bill, and Hillary on their pedophile billionaire friend's plane, the Lolita Express. Yup, Hillary has a well documented [sic] predilection for underage girls.... We're talking an international child enslavement and sex ring' (Robb 2017).<sup>23</sup>

Campbell, an unassuming 60-year-old cat lady from Joplin, Missouri, likely did not arrive at this conclusion herself. She was, however, quick to share the theory with her internet peers whom she likely believed would agree with her opinions. Keeping this in mind, we can break down the rhetorical appeals within Campbell's argument, or, rather, the argument Campbell repeats.

The logical argument Campbell pieces together claims that, because Anthony Weiner, the husband of Huma Abedin, Hillary Clinton's campaign vice chair, has lewd material of a minor on his phone, Clinton, herself, participates in pedophilic activity (Robb

2017).<sup>24</sup> Campbell connects Hillary Clinton with Weiner's crimes by claiming a confidential email shows evidence that Hillary and Bill Clinton rode on a plane named the "Lolita Express." Campbell then purports that because the Clintons rode on a plane owned by a convicted pedophile, they are guilty of taking part in an international child prostitution ring.

The short post is dense with charged diction and disconnected argumentation. It will be easiest to understand Campbell's assertions if we break them into pieces and analyze how each piece relates back to the whole puzzle. To do this, I will provide background information and explain the rhetoric behind Campbell's terms and logical appeals. Going in the order of the post's discussion, we begin with Anthony Weiner's relationship to Pizzagate.

Weiner has a long history of inappropriate behavior while in office. During his run as New York's Democratic member of congress, suggestive photos of him surfaced on the internet. He stepped down from his position as congressional member after the controversy persisted, but information regarding his promiscuity continued to appear (*CNN Staff* 2016).<sup>25</sup> Weiner has now pled guilty for his sexual communication with a minor and will serve two years in prison for his crimes (*Connor* 2017).<sup>26</sup> During the FBI investigation surrounding Weiner, emails from Hillary Clinton were found.

The probe analyzing Hillary Clinton's emails was then re-opened and the association of Weiner and Clinton was formed (*Zapotosky* 2018).<sup>27</sup> Much of the emails released to the public were redacted, and the extent of Clinton and Weiner's communication is not clear. Abedin, however, claimed in an interview conducted by the

FBI that Clinton was not directly communicating with Weiner (Associated Press 2017).<sup>28</sup> She said Weiner was forwarded some emails from Clinton and received other emails from a backup drive storing Clinton's communications with Abedin.

Traces of a relationship between Clinton and Weiner are proof enough for Campbell to connect to her argument. In fact, Clinton and Weiner's previous controversies allow Campbell to discount any credibility had by the politicians and allows her to weave her story together with less doubt. These politicians' controversial histories, however, are not the focus here, but, rather, the backdrop for Campbell's narrative. The introduction of Weiner's crimes provides a connection between Clinton and pedophilia in Campbell's arguments. This evidence, however, only offers circumstantial proof that Clinton and Weiner have a link outside of their mutual relationship with Abedin, and certainly does not link Clinton with child prostitution. Keeping in mind the source Campbell claims to have obtained her information from, we move to her next assertion.

Campbell states that Weiner had made trips with Bill and Hillary Clinton on a plane known as the "Lolita Express," owned by a "pedophilic billionaire." The plane is owned by Jeffrey Epstein, a billionaire associated with the Clintons who plead guilty to soliciting a minor for prostitution (Gerstein 2017).<sup>29</sup> It is important to note that the name "Lolita Express" is a phrase mostly used by Conservatives likely to demonize Democratic individuals who rode on Epstein's plane. This partisan terminology is evident as Conservative websites such as *Fox News* (Zimmerman 2016) and *Info Wars* (Watson 2017) refer to Epstein's plane as the "Lolita Express," but left-leaning news organizations such

as *Politico* do not validate the term.<sup>30, 31</sup> With a single phrase, Campbell introduces an entire backstory and an additional scandalous layer to Pizzagate.

Now that we know this, we can look at the phrase “Lolita Express” on a deeper rhetorical level. The name “Lolita” came to symbolize a “sexually precocious young girl” after Vladimir Nabokov’s 1958 novel, *Lolita* (“Definition of LOLITA”).<sup>32</sup> In the book, an adolescent girl named Lolita has an ongoing sexual relationship with her middle-aged stepfather (Johnston 2006).<sup>33</sup> The story conjures up images of pedophilia that have become widely known to the public. The second term, “express,” almost implies the image of an express delivery train, complete with a product in tow. This meaning implies that the “Lolita Express” is a service of sexual relationships with underage girls, used by anyone who joins Epstein on his private jet.

Campbell then goes on to claim that Clinton has a “well-documented predilection for underage girls” (Robb 2017).<sup>34</sup> Campbell’s argument asserts more than what her evidence backs up. One example of a far-fetched claim does not equate to a well-documented record of proof. Campbell stretches her claims to further her argument, but in doing so, weakens her logical appeal. Again, this is something easily overlooked by those agreeing with Campbell. If anything, Campbell’s supporters are likely to believe she is referring to the “Lolita Express” as just one example of many. However, we cannot give Campbell the benefit of the doubt without a statement explaining this.

The term “Lolita Express” carries meaning beyond what it seems and plays a crucial role in connecting Campbell’s argument. It provides the link to establish Clinton’s role in Pizzagate and provides a little more than just circumstance. The “Lolita Express” gives

concrete evidence of Jeffrey Epstein's participation in lude acts with minors, so maybe this detail makes Pizzagate more believable to its readers. But, where is the evidence that Clinton participated in pedophilic activity on Epstein's "Lolita Express"? Here lies the assumption Campbell's audience is forced to make.

Campbell's audience overlooks this crucial omission of evidence and readily believes her line of reasoning. She relies heavily on information that happens to be part of the highly confidential FBI investigation that searched through messages on Anthony Weiner's mobile phone. Her information is inaccessible to the common people, but Campbell justifies her authority to announce this highly confidential information anyways. Campbell's assertions are backed up with as much evidence as hearsay, but she purports them to be true.

Campbell establishes herself as a credible source to those already in support of her views in many ways. A disdain of the controversy surrounding Weiner and the negative connotations of the phrase "Lolita Express" work to relate popular Conservative opinions into a believable narrative. Campbell's assertions are not believable to skeptical or Liberal audiences, and likely weaken her credibility as a rhetor to these groups. She offers ideologically biased evidence to support her claims, while overlooking discrepancies and omitting certain confounding information from her argument. For example, Epstein had connections to President Trump and other Republican figures, not just the Clintons and other Democratic figures (Gerstein 2017).<sup>35</sup> It is easy for Campbell to leave out this detail because it weakens her assertions and calls into question half of the evidence she provided.

Campbell further establishes herself as a trustworthy source to her audience when she mentions the ““NYPD source”” that this classified information came from (Robb 2017).<sup>36</sup> Campbell is supposedly the intermediary between this anonymous source and the public. A police department is likely to be an authority most of us can trust, so, given that police departments are trustworthy, so is Campbell. Confidential information can sound appealing to those already sympathizing with Campbell’s beliefs but offers little solid support for those who have no bias towards her views.

Here we arrive at a flaw in Campbell’s argument. To establish credibility, Campbell offers an anonymous source from within the New York Police Department. But, as discussed earlier, further research into Campbell’s claims shows that much of the information regarding Weiner’s emails was redacted. The investigation was conducted by the FBI, an organization that has federal jurisdiction. So, how does a cop from a city-specific police department have access to such highly classified information only accessible to government employees in a higher-ranked federal organization? They likely do not, so Campbell’s source is invalidated.

The unreliability of Campbell’s claims casts doubts on her credibility as an ethical source. Campbell’s reluctance to provide a known source and the incongruities found in her statements may make one wonder whether the cited source is Campbell herself. It is difficult to hypothesize what Campbell might provide as a counter-argument, since the stated flaw is so glaring and withdraws any sort of basis for her claims. Campbell and her supporters would likely overlook this inconsistency anyways or make some excuse about the source having connections to high levels of government. This circular reasoning pushes

readers further down the “rabbit hole” of conjecture and becomes weaker with increased critical analysis.

Pathos is perhaps the strongest of the appeals used to argue Pizzagate and remains powerful in Campbell’s claims. The emotional appeal Campbell’s argument puts forth is implicit within the subject of pedophilia. More specifically, the diction ““child enslavement”” impacts readers and persuades her audience into believing the possibility of gross injustices that Campbell is taking a stand against (Robb 2017).<sup>37</sup> Such charged language could influence a reader to support Pizzagate because, if they do not, do they support child enslavement or pedophilia? Supporters of the theory may claim so. This line of thinking is flawed, however, because, although there is no definitive evidence to disprove the theory, there is far more evidence against it than in support of it. Also, it is difficult to completely disprove anything because people can always think of alternative explanations to support their own beliefs, no matter how flawed or far from reality this reasoning may be. As we have seen before, once the mind fixates on an opinion, it is not easy to convince it otherwise, but exceedingly easy to convince it further. So, the emotional appeal used in Campbell’s argument functions to both passionately reaffirm the beliefs of Pizzagate’s supporters, and to guilt-trip anyone doubting her assertions.

There is another level of emotion laden in the belief of Campbell’s supporters, which is their general passion for conservative ideals and subsequent disapproval of liberal ideals. The behavior of opposing a conflicting opinion is natural, and people who subscribe to liberal ideology similarly reject conservative ideals. But, in our example, we only see the former. The argument made by Campbell is not only persuasive to her supporters



because of its controversial nature, but also because it shows an extreme claim against the party and its representatives that Campbell's readers already disapprove of. We know that Campbell's supporters are inclined to believe her assertions because these assertions fit in with their preconceived ideological biases. But, it is important to note the pathos that appeal to her audience.

Campbell is not a scapegoat to blame for every instance of false reporting on the internet but offers a useful example for our analysis. Campbell is not alone in her unsubstantiated claims and is perhaps not completely at fault for her naïveté. The same *Rolling Stone* article offers the expert opinion of Clint Watts, a cyber and homeland-security expert at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. Watts claims that Pizzagate's dissemination follows a classic blueprint for the spread of disinformation. According to Watts, Fabricated stories are often posted to various social platforms by fake accounts, intending to entice readers to support or oppose something. These bot accounts need to a "human touch," or someone susceptible to believing disinformation for the story to take off (Robb 2017).<sup>38</sup> Campbell brought Pizzagate out of the realm of artificial social media interaction to the highly communal space of Facebook.

Automated bot accounts were heavily used to spread the theory of Pizzagate, with bots often posing as real social media users. Twitter user "Eagle Wings" was a popular bot that took the theory from the anonymous message board Thee Rant, to the Twitter masses. Now that we understand the circumstances surrounding Campbell's willingness to share information about Pizzagate, we can explore how bots contributed to the theory's dissemination.

It can sometimes be difficult to tell if an account is run by a human or a bot. But, you can recognize a nonhuman account by the sheer number of posts shared in a given period. Bot accounts have the programming to systematically and consistently post on social media and share disproportionately more than human users. This allows bot accounts to gain a large following of Twitter users looking for a constant stream of bias-confirming information. According to Samuel Woolley, an expert in online propaganda, Eagle Wings tweets far too often to be human. With 50,000 tweets in a two-year span, Woolley believes this account is part of a network of automated accounts controlled by organizations aiming to trend certain topics (Robb 2017).<sup>39</sup>

Many bots accounts automatically follow other bot accounts, giving accounts like Eagle Wings an abnormally large number of followers (120,000) for the two-year period it was active (Robb 2017).<sup>40</sup> This high following conveys to Twitter users that Eagle Wings has an established online presence, instilling an ethical appeal in those who tend to follow popular accounts over unpopular ones. People are naturally going to be more drawn to an account that appears to be a widely accepted source of information by other Twitter users. Campbell may have even gathered elements of her argument from a bot account like Eagle wings. Given this context, we can understand how bot accounts appealed to Twitter users' ethical reasoning.

A self-described forum for "New York City Cops speaking their minds," Thee Rant is comprised of users purporting to be policeman under the veil of anonymous screennames ("THEE RANT").<sup>41</sup> There is authority imparted on the casual reader who believes they are

reading the opinions of New York City policemen. This ethos has similar power to the anonymous “NYPD source” that Campbell cited in support of her argument for Pizzagate.

Pizzagate was first introduced to Thee Rant by anonymous user “Fatoldman,” who detailed a rumor surrounding Hillary Clinton’s FBI investigation. The news of Pizzagate was soon after shared to a law enforcement group on Facebook. Eagle Wings posted the information from the Facebook group to their Twitter account, that, by this time, had a large following of both bot and human users. Some of these human users were people of power — namely, President Trump’s former deputy assistant, Sebastian Gorka, and former national security advisor, Gen. Michael Flynn. The two political figures have even shared posts from this bot account, although the posts were not related to Pizzagate (Robb 2017).<sup>42</sup>

Michael Flynn has, however, shared other information in support of Pizzagate, with tweets reading, “NYPD Blows Whistle on New Hillary Emails: Money Laundering, Sex Crimes w Children” (Carroll 2017).<sup>43</sup> The mere proximity of these political figures to Pizzagate is a troubling sign of how unchecked biases and passive reading can propel unrealistic information to the public eye. Pizzagate travelled from anonymous forums to the social media of political figures who have an audience of loyal voters, and the power to affect the lives of people on a large scale.

The discussion of Pizzagate on social media was paramount to its creation and promulgation, and prompted several websites to publish articles about the theory, substantiating it beyond online chatter. Many popular media outlets discounted Pizzagate and explained why they the theory was ludicrous. Those who believed in Pizzagate were, of course, unphased by this “mainstream media” attempting to disprove Pizzagate. Fringe

Conservative media took full advantage of the Conservative leaning, capturing the attention of Pizzagate's supporters through an even more prominent medium than social media.

Alex Jones, the host of the right-wing radio broadcast, *The Alex Jones Show*, and operator of the Internet news website, Infowars.com, is known by the public for his penchant for conspiracy theories. Among claims describing 9/11 as an "inside job" and the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting as a hoax, Jones is often described as having fringe views (Rosenberg 2017).<sup>44</sup> Jones's style of reverberating existing discussion complements his stream of consciousness argumentation. His often-illogical ramblings are presented as logically reasoned conclusions backing up mostly disproven topics. Jones relies heavily on the ethical appeal of his position as a recognized news host. He capitalizes on the audience, who agree with his unique and often-controversial opinions that appeal to extreme biases. In the case of Pizzagate, Jones relies on the same implicit emotional appeal that many others have used to persuade listeners.

Jones was a vocal supporter of Pizzagate during its heyday and addressed the theory both on his radio show and website. He has since apologized for expressing support of the theory and removed most of the content claiming that Pizzagate is real from his website. This occurred shortly after a Pizzagate-inspired shooting at Comet Ping-Pong. However, it appears that Jones has not removed all of the commentary discussing the possibility of Pizzagate from his platforms.

For my analysis, I will use clips of Jones's deleted Pizzagate commentary that have been re-uploaded to the internet via YouTube by a user independent of Jones. In a video

titled “Alex Jones: ‘Pizzagate is real,’” numerous clips of the radio host expressing his belief in Pizzagate are spliced together (mediamatters4america 2017).<sup>45</sup> The video mashup does not seem to have a bias in support of or against Jones’s argument, and the video’s editor does not offer any commentary. Even the title is objective as it uses a quote from Alex Jones himself.

Jones frequently connects unrelated ideas to support his claims and, in the case of Pizzagate, misrepresents evidence to support the theory. A notable example is Jones’s depiction of a leaked email sent by Podesta, which he summarizes instead of quoting verbatim. Jones, speaking for Podesta, states, “We’re going to have the six-year-old, the seven-year-old, and eight-year old in the hot tub for your entertainment down at the ranch house. They can be a little persnickety, but they are also willing and enjoy it” (mediamatters4america 2017).<sup>46</sup> Jones then goes on to describe the large amount of emails like this one, stating numbers in the thousands.

The context of the actual email written by Podesta appears to be the plans of a pool party with friends and families of friends. The verbatim text, which Jones failed to read, states, “We plan to heat the pool, so a swim is a possibility. Bonnie will be Uber service to transport Ruby, Emerson, and Maeve Luzzatto (11, 9, and almost 7) so you’ll have some further entertainment, and they will be in that pool for sure” (mediamatters4america 2017).<sup>47</sup> The message seems like nothing more than plans to carpool children to a pool party between friends. Whatever transpired likely had nothing to do with Pizzagate. Jones manipulates the actual quote to fit his narrative, and effectively changes the original

meaning of the leaked email. Just like Pizzagate.com, circumstantial evidence is gathered and manipulated to support Pizzagate based on what fits preconceived notions.

The similarities of Jones's discussion to Pizzagate.com's logical appeals are apparent as both derive specific meaning from obscure messages. Pizzagate.com's translation of food-encoded language to mean communication about a pedophilic prostitution ring is largely speculative, and notably similar to Jones's iteration of Podesta's email. The conspiratorial argumentation only goes so far, however, as the audiences of both Jones and Pizzagate.com rely on similar sources and discussion.

Even Jones's ethical reasoning is often unsubstantiated. He rarely refers to sources, often misusing them, and giving what few sources he does use an unrealistic amount of reliability. Among the sources Jones cites to back up his arguments about Pizzagate are Wikileaks and the website of the FBI. He specifically cites Wikileaks after refuting large news organizations' accusations of InfoWars.com as "fake news," and calls these news organizations "fake news" in response. Jones claims that he did much of the research himself, rather than "just believing" what people say on the Internet, even though Pizzagate originated from people believing others in internet forums. Jones believed Pizzagate in the same way many other Internet users have, but, within his platform, Jones may have the most power to persuade others.

Jones's style of ethical reasoning is also similar to the ethos used in Pizzagate.com. As we discussed earlier, Wikileaks coded messages and anonymous, yet knowledgeable FBI sources were some of the figures Pizzagate.com used to ethically substantiate its claims. The website also had a similar style of refuting naysayers and was incredibly

limiting in the sources one could use to successfully disprove Pizzagate. Like Jones, Pizzagate.com was doubtful of the validity and accuracy of news presented by the “mainstream media.”

Perhaps among the most dangerous of ethical appeals involved in supporting conspiracies, *The Alex Jones Show* and Infowars.com assert unproven conjecture as established claims. Jones’s audience overlooks the lack of logical appeal in exchange for the authority present in a trusted news source whose slogan reads: “There’s a war on for your mind!” Is Jones the person who is supposed to guide us through this war? Many of his followers likely believe so as Jones uses his platform to discuss ideas rejected by “mainstream” opinion.

Also troubling in Jones’s dedication to conspiracies is his façade of justice. In one broadcast, Jones recommends that his supporters go to “one of these pizza places” and see Pizzagate for themselves. Jones stated he was going to take a week off of work, hop on a plane, and do the same (mediamatters4america 2017).<sup>48</sup> To public knowledge, Jones never followed through on this statement, but, nonetheless, instilled this sense of heroism in his listeners.

Before Jones, Pizzagate’s discussion had been largely sheltered from the world outside of social media, only appearing as an example of “fake news” by news outlets. InfoWars.com is used by many people as a source of news and is perhaps more believable than a discussion on Reddit or Pizzagate.com. Jones’s words can have lasting impacts on those who trust him as a news source. The extent of Jones’s influence is unclear, but the power of his words nonetheless has the potential to influence his impassioned listeners.

Edgar Welch believed in Pizzagate to the point where he entered Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria with a gun under the belief that he was going to save harbored child “sex slaves” (Freed 2016).<sup>49</sup> It is unclear where Welch got the idea to attack Comet Ping Pong, but his action shows the authority Pizzagate’s discussion had on Welch’s thought process. Welch did not present signs of mental illness and did not use the insanity defense in the court case that sentenced him to four years in prison. Welch later expressed remorse over his actions as he described them as “ill-advised,” and even wrote a handwritten apology to the court admitting he was “foolish and reckless” (Haag and Salam 2017).<sup>50</sup>

Welch truly believed he was going to Comet Ping Pong to liberate enslaved children, and thought he was justified in taking a gun to the pizzeria. Welch fell victim to the appeals and biases used to propagate Pizzagate and committed an irreparable mistake as a result. This is not to say that Welch is completely blameless as it is highly abnormal for a conspiracy theory to result in a shooting. But, Welch likely fed into the online discussion of Pizzagate, and even reported to the *New York Times* that he was a listener of Alex Jones’s radio show. Welch stated that although Jones is “a bit eccentric.... He touches on some issues that are viable” (Goldman 2016).<sup>51</sup> I will not speculate about the influence of Jones’s words on the gunman’s actions, but I believe it is important to note Welch’s news sources leading up to his attack on Comet Ping Pong.

Jones had an interesting reaction to the gunman’s purported inspiration from *The Alex Jones Show*. Jones apologized and stated his involvement in the theory as merely commenting on what media outlets had already written about, telling those discussing Pizzagate to leave Comet Ping Pong out of the conversation (Doubek 2017).<sup>52</sup> Furthermore,



the apology came within the span of time Jones had to avoid a potential libel suit. Jones does not retract his claims against Pizzagate itself but removes his accusation of Comet Ping Pong to escape punitive damages (Farhi 2017).<sup>53</sup> He does this all while placing the blame on “many media outlets,” which he never lists. Even after Welch’s attack, Jones only minimally revises his narrative by retracting certain incriminating pieces of his argument, while diverting blame to other outlets and maintaining his own credibility.

Throughout his discussion of Pizzagate, Jones relies primarily on appeals to ideology, citing other fringe right-wing media such as *Breitbart* (Doubek 2017).<sup>54</sup> He gives little original insight on Pizzagate, and echoes much of what originated in online discussion. In the case of Pizzagate, Jones relies on the same implicit emotional appeals that many others have used to persuade listeners.

Jones gives us an opportunity to put back together some of the appeals that we have separated for the purposes of our analysis. Jones has a way of asserting ethical, emotional, and logical appeals all at once. His thoroughly crafted arguments are confidently orated with emotional tones and sympathetic side notes as Jones yells his message into the camera, sitting behind his news reporter desk in his studio setup. Every example we have discussed also have interconnected appeals such as these, but they are far more nuanced and too complicated to discuss within the confines of this thesis. Emotion, however, is the appeal that seems to underlie all discussion of Pizzagate.

Pizzagate elicits emotion by the nature of its content. Throughout all platforms, the thought of children being held against their will by a powerful group of political figures for such purposes brings chills to any reader. This emotional appeal is perhaps the strongest

of the three Aristotelian appeals found in support of Pizzagate. A subject as sensitive as Pizzagate is likely to convince many readers that the theory is true due to the mere possibility of such a horrific scenario. The emotional appeals are undoubtedly compelling for many readers, but when combined with ethical and logical appeals in various online platforms, the theory grows to be more convincing.

Appeals that started out in specialized discussion boards depended heavily on logical appeals to gain traction. Ethical appeals were also commonly used but were not easily verifiable because they came from anonymous figures with self-declared authority and knowledge. As the discussion moved toward more communal platforms like Twitter and Facebook, Pizzagate's audience was already established. At this point, anonymity was not necessary for users looking to share information about the theory. In fact, identity was paramount in the ethical appeals used to convince Facebook friends and Twitter followers to believe in Pizzagate. The logical argument becomes looser and shorter for ease of sharing with friends and family holding similar views.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Other Persuasive Tactics**

Since the 2016 Presidential Election, society has become frustrated with the increased proliferation of disinformation. The issue is not simply dictating what should be said as “true news,” but, rather, changing behavior that so readily accepts information without critical analysis or understanding of context. If information sounds appealing, you must ask yourself why. Is it the authority of the person saying it? The ideological belief it supports? Our mind does not subconsciously look out for these appeals, so a conscious effort is needed to figure out what information is trying to say and why.

Rhetoric often complicates objectivity and it is difficult to distinguish black and white in the grey area that the discipline creates. With hundreds of devices equipped to convince readers one way or another, a responsible reader should at least know the more common rhetorical strategies. Ethos, pathos, and logos, some of the more essential forms of argumentation addressed earlier in the paper, certainly do not cover the entire scope of common rhetoric.

Here, I will address a few more rhetorical strategies which have become common in modern advertising and politicized media. Pizzagate’s situation covers a lot of rhetorical ground, but there are a few more things that are necessary to keep in mind while analyzing information on media platforms. I introduce case studies that give examples for rhetorically charged “code words,” framing, and deception. I then offer a two-fold solution for avoiding

situations like Pizzagate, and other events which have been deemed “fake news.” The examples I introduce are by no means a comprehensive list of rhetorical strategies, and I encourage the mindful reader to do independent research exploring more of these strategies.

### **Rhetorically Biased “Code Words”**

News with impassioned headlines mean to elicit powerful emotional responses from viewers (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017, 212).<sup>55</sup> “Code words” and phrases represent topics that may not accurately or wholly represent a word’s true meaning. They are usually catchy and aim to engrain meaning into topics. They can be politically charged and attempt to convince viewers to think of something in a negative or positive light. Oddly grouped words structured in memorable phrasing are a clear sign of this. Original meaning of a topic is blurred to euphemize the meaning of a harsher phrase. In the following case, a technical phrase is changed to sound more ominous.

The “death tax” was a term coined to impart a negative subtext onto a proposed estate tax (Jackson and Jamieson 2007, 40-43).<sup>56</sup> In this case, a public uneducated on the implications of this tax became interested once the phrase “death tax” caught on. Although many had never heard of the proposed estate tax before, and perhaps did not realize its relevance, a great deal of people took interest in the tax once it was associated with death. After people voted against the tax, which was alleged by many outspoken individuals to destroy family farms (small, family-owned farms were exempt from the tax), many gained

tax breaks. The public may not have completely understood the implications of the “death tax,” but their emotions convinced them to decide against it.

“Code words” may encourage people to think a certain way about a subject, but, oftentimes, they are used to garner support or opposition for something. The term “death tax,” and its promoted definition, break down highly specialized knowledge into an easily understood and readily believed term. Its original term, “estate tax,” has a connotation of wealth. An estate tax might be something that only rich people would be concerned with, and therefore the general population should not care to vote for or against such a tax. Moreover, the meaning of an estate tax is probably unclear to the public. When you change this term to “death tax,” it automatically becomes more recognizable and important to all voters. Not everyone knows they have an estate, but everyone knows that they die (Jackson and Jamieson 2007, 40-43).<sup>57</sup> And who wants to be taxed for dying? Likely no one — so it is important to look out for misleading ideas propagated by hyperbolic wording.

### **Framing**

This is not to say that the rhetoric of media headlines is inherently and consistently deceitful. Newspapers would not be purchased, and online articles would not be clicked on if sensational phrasing did not exist. Exciting headlines draw readers in and drum up interest for the topic of the day. Journalists often frame specialized terminology in digestible ways and entice readers to expand their knowledge of a subject, and perhaps take a side in a politicized debate. Responsible journalists know where to draw the line between persuasion and deceit, but, without regulations, who is upholding the standard of

responsibility in journalism? The only people we can hold accountable to how we understand information is ourselves. It would be in a reader's best interest to read more than one article, and do research from reliable sources, before deciding his or her opinion on a topic.

There are many news sources who attempt to sway the way people think about information. News sources such as CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News are inherently biased in their political leanings and frame their discussion of issues accordingly. The latter example's bias, however, has become especially egregious since its support of Republican presidential nominee, Donald Trump. As a news source for Trump voters in 2016, the network heavily favors conservative ideology. Fox has recently presented misleading rhetoric, however, to defend Trump and his campaign. Sean Hannity, one of the network's hosts, frames some of his discussion to excuse the action of Republicans, that, by themselves, do not have anything to do with republicanism (Conservative Citizen 2017).<sup>58</sup>

In one instance, Hannity allowed Alabama Senate nominee, Roy Moore, endorsed by President Trump, on *The Sean Hannity Show*. The two framed Moore's multiple allegations of sexual misconduct with a minor as a political attack by the left aimed to boost public support of Moore's competing Democratic Senate nominee (Silverstein 2017).<sup>59</sup> Hannity's disillusion extended so far as to berate Moore's victims, claiming "thou shall not bear false witness." The subsequent backlash caused Hannity to lose numerous advertisers (Darcy 2017).<sup>60</sup> During the show, Moore contradicted his statement many times, and made himself appear even guiltier than before the show aired. Moore could not get his story straight, but Hannity at least eventually called him out on this. Hannity has had to defend

many more conflicting stories as Trump's politics become more and more erratic. That being said — this behavior has no partisan majority and is seen throughout all political ideologies.

An example of this behavior from Liberal rhetors can be seen in media reporters centered in predominantly Liberal cities. *The New York Times* even addressed the perceived Liberal slant of its content in an op-ed written in 2004 by Daniel Okrent. In this op-ed, Publisher Arthur O. Sulzberger Jr. calls the paper's viewpoint "urban," stating that it is difficult to separate the *Times* from the pervading political ideology of the city around it.<sup>61</sup> Biases will always exist in any context where information is introduced, and it is up to the reader to be cognizant of the context in which they receive this information.

### **Rhetorical Tactics Meant to Mislead**

For responsible rhetoric, full disclosure is necessary. Otherwise we have deception, or outright dishonesty, misrepresentation, and a lack of respect for facts. There cannot be an omission of facts that would lead to a different conclusion than the one offered. Additionally, the framing of information must not be done in a misleading manner. One can string together related facts and offer an argument based on a pattern, but one cannot manipulate information to form a technically illogical argument.

Considering the recent school shooting in Parkland, Florida and the subsequent debate had by both national politicians and young victims, I will look at commentary made by the National Rifle Association (NRA). The NRA is a major political influencer with a Conservative bias and a financial motivation to encourage looser gun laws, and,

subsequently, increased gun sales. It is important to know the motivations of the people trying to convince us.

The NRA's response came after March for Our Lives, a student-led demonstration supporting tighter gun control that took place in Washington D.C. I chose this example not out of political bias, but because of its topical nature and the NRA's frequent use of deceptive argumentative styles. This is not to say that the NRA has no legitimate arguments, or that it has any legitimate arguments. I am merely examining a more egregious claim the organization has made to defend its political beliefs.

NRA talk show host, Grant Stinchfield, stated he would expose "the violent, even deadly history of these people behind this weekend's March for Our Lives, anti-gun fraud of a protest," later claiming the movement "is backed by radicals with a history of violent threats, language, and actions" (Greenberg 2018).<sup>62</sup> Stinchfield is the host of *The Stinchfield Report*, which is hosted on the NRA-backed television channel, NRATV. Stinchfield acts as one of the NRA's many vocal representatives in the gun control debate, so his claims have the power to influence many people.

Now, we will look at the support Stinchfield offers to substantiate this claim. He describes the Women's March as "a major force" behind March for Our Lives. The Women's March was a worldwide protest held the day after President Trump's election. It was hosted by activists who found Trump's campaign rhetoric to be misogynistic (Malone and Gibson 2017).<sup>63</sup> Stinchfield cites Madonna's address to a crowd at the Women's March, where the singer states she "thought an awful lot about blowing up the White House but knew it wouldn't change anything" (Kreps 2017).<sup>64</sup> Regardless of the hypothetical



nature of Madonna's comments, Madonna's views do not represent the Woman's March, nor do they connect the Woman's March to March for Our Lives. Perhaps the second piece of evidence will shed some light on Stinchfield's reasoning.

Stinchfield attempts to connect Women's March organizers Tamika Mallory and Linda Sarsour to March for Our Lives, but the publicists for March for Our Lives have responded saying the two were not associated with the movement. Furthermore, another NRA spokesman, Andrew Arulanandam, noted how the Woman's March promoted gun control as a 14<sup>th</sup> point in its page promoting a school walkout, expressing its support for March for Our Lives. This point does indirectly link the Women's March to March for Our Lives, but still fails to connect March for Our Lives with a violent history.

Much of the commentary presented by the hosts of this NRA-sponsored segment uses a familiar style of linking indirect and distant evidence to a strong claim. These claims demonize groups of people opposed to the organization's political beliefs. Here, rhetoric is used dishonestly and weakly. Evidence which does not realistically support an argument is used for political gain. The hosts rely on the audience's pre-established ideological biases along with the authority and namesake of the NRA to ensure those listening that their statements are true, and that the hosts are a reliable source worth believing.

These hosts attempt to persuade their audience by deceiving them, and the NRA lets them get away with it. Stinchfield's opinions are aligned with those of the NRA, so it is impossible to disassociate his comments with the views of the NRA. Stinchfield and his cohosts act as the mouthpiece for the powerful organization, and any misleading

communication by these hosts is misleading communication coming directly from the NRA. As we have seen in this thesis, misleading rhetoric is too often successful.

### **Media Literacy**

Now that we have assessed some of the underlying cognitive and ideological biases, as well as environments and rhetorical strategies that exacerbate these biases, we can explore solutions. I will only offer suggestions for personal accountability. Advice to journalists to produce objective, non-biased news is futile, as there will always be demand for agreeable reporting. However, as individuals in a democracy with freedom of speech, we must be critical of the unchecked information we every day and keep journalists in check.

Although all people can fall victim to psychological biases, certain groups of people are particularly vulnerable to believing misleading rhetoric. Media literacy seems to be a feasible way to teach critical analysis of information, but the applications are complicated. For example, older generations often need assistance when using digital devices for the first time. In a survey conducted by Pew Research Center, 56% of seniors surveyed said they would consider using social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter but would need someone to walk them through the process of using it (Smith 2014).<sup>65</sup> Once taught the introductory lesson of social media, it is not guaranteed that new users will seek out further instruction regarding responsible use of these platforms. Many users undoubtedly check the reliability of the information they view, but trustworthiness of online media news differs vastly from the Walter Cronkite era of objective reporting. Additionally, these

generations are beyond the age to receive required media literacy training from the educational system and may be reluctant to voluntarily enroll in classes offering said training.

One might assume that since young “digital natives” have a better grasp on technology, they also have a deep understanding of online media literacy. Surprisingly, this is not the case. One Stanford study characterized students’ understanding of information on the internet as bleak. Apparently, middle school, high school, and college-aged students are unable, on average, to identify misleading articles or sponsored ads purporting to be articles (“Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning”).<sup>66</sup> This is the generation of people with the most training in media literacy. So, how do those with minimal or no media literacy training fare? It is hard to tell which demographic groups can better assess information without a wide-reaching study comparing diverse populations. However, one can safely determine that media literacy training at least helps to reduce belief of media bias by teaching people warning signs that may indicate fabricated or misleading information (Kamerer 2013, 4-5).<sup>67</sup>

It is obvious that generational differences play a large role in individuals’ perception of information, and many people fail to recognize the extent of their biases. Additionally, neither younger nor older people adequately recognize deceptive information. Having established this, we may wonder how other groups fare in media literacy. Are people with a certain level of education or members of a particular political party less susceptible to cognitive and ideological biases? There is little evidence for either of these.

There is also no evidence that uneducated people tend to believe in conspiracy theories more often than educated individuals. A recent study showed that those who score high on logic and intellect tests nonetheless have faith in disproven theories (Stahl and Prooijen 2018, 162).<sup>68</sup> This pattern ties back into the emotionality and embedded confirmation bias of many news articles. If a person believes wholeheartedly in an issue, they may reject forms of information that stand in opposition to their belief, no matter how factually grounded the dissenting information. As a result, many chose to believe and propagate unfounded news stories because they attach strongly to the ideas these stories convey.

Unfortunately, media literacy does little to prevent against the distrust of popular media outlets, even if said outlets are reliable to many. Political ideology plays a major role in individuals' responses to a media and its presentation. In a 2009 study exposing participants to media literacy training, people who identified as Liberal appeared considerably more open to a change in attitude than their Conservative counterparts. Furthermore, the Conservative participants seemed to have less trust in the media and perceive it as more biased (Vraga, Tully, and Rojas 2016, 79-80).<sup>69</sup> This distrust in major news outlets often drives people towards outlets with more partisan and extremist views. When people seek out agreeable information, the truth of this information diminishes and can sometimes border on conspiracy (Martin 2016).<sup>70</sup>

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Literacy as a Solution

To prevent against the decline in skeptical reading on social media platforms, it is important to learn media literacy. Media literacy helps people orient themselves on the Internet, teaching them how to recognize a reliable website and where information comes from. This education is needed for users of all ages, whether they are “digital-natives” or elders using the Internet for the first time. The complex messages conveyed to Internet users can be overwhelming to all, and media literacy may not even be enough to make users more critical of the information they read, but it is a good first step.

Media literacy helps to understand the platform that displays complicated information but does not help in the understanding of this complicated information. So, rhetorical literacy is needed in conjunction with media literacy. This way, individuals will be well equipped to break down the complicated appeals in the complex ideas briefly introduced in such a fast-paced environment. Logical, emotional, and ethical appeals are used in arguments both within the Internet and in day-to-day life. It is necessary to combine rhetorical literacy with media literacy to prepare users for specific argumentative nuances unique to the Internet.

At this point in your reading, this thesis has covered the basic appeals used in argumentation. It is not difficult to understand them, but critical readers must first know what they are to be able to recognize them. If more people were to understand the basic

appeals of rhetoric, perhaps they would recognize why they are susceptible to believing in theories like Pizzagate in the first place. Rhetorical literacy teaches a basic understanding of argumentation, and helps people learn to think about the appeals that influence opinion making before they so readily accept information. But, with any form of human thought, rhetoric, too, is subject to bias.

To overcome our biases, we must be in a constant state of questioning. We know nothing, and we must always keep learning to understand how to read information, contextualize events, and accept other people's perspectives. Otherwise, we fall prey to our mind's hubris, and decide our assumptions about the information we read are always correct. In this case, we fall prey to those who attempt to exploit us, rather than inform us.

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