

Virtual trust: Persuasion in social media

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Abstract: With this paper I aim to address the topic of trust on the Internet by associating it with the invention of classical rhetoric in Aristotle's thought. In particular, I will ask whether the influencer can be conceived as the addressee of virtual trust (trustee), by recurring to the *Rhetoric*. Aristotle had already discovered the close nexus between trust and bodily-oral performance. This connection was indeed one of the fundamental tasks of the classical *rhetor*. I claim that this Aristotelian nexus has been maintained through modernity and employed in the Web 2.0. In conclusion, I refer to Instagram celebrities ("influencers") to examine their use of bodily performance to promote purchases or ideas, and to gain the trust of users in order to gain real leverage over their on- and offline lives.

Keywords: trust; Internet; Aristotle, *Rhetoric*; persuasion; influencers

Trust has always been a fundamental keyword of our social life. Although human societies have gone through innumerable transformations, trust has never lost its primary role in every kind of social formation. To appear trustworthy, or to perform virtues in order to be trusted by others is something essential to our social life (Faulkner *et al.* 2017: 3). It follows that trust must be important even for the "artificial" occasions which constitute our social life. This is the case with the Internet. But how can the Internet – an immaterial, virtual reality – be a location of interpersonal relationships based on trust? How can the Internet be intended as a safe environment, where trust can flourish?

These questions are the starting point of this essay,¹ in which I argue that

¹ This paper is the result of a study which I conducted in 2019, thanks to my participation in the research project of the University of Pisa (PRA) "Ethics, Science, Democracy", coordinated by Prof. Adriano Fabris. The main focus of the project was the definition of trust, seen in its "prismatic shape." Essential to my research and to my decision to concentrate on the trust-persuasion nexus in social media were two issues of the journal "Teoria" (both entitled "The Prismatic Shape of Trust"; see "Teoria" 39/2019/1 and "Teoria" 40/2020/1) and the (homonym) cycle of seminars (held in Pisa in the same year), which were conceived in the context of this PRA. For these reasons, I would like to thank the entire scientific committee of the project, and above all Prof. Adriano Fabris, for the philosophical

the presence of influencers on the Internet can be understood through a reference to trust and ancient oratory.

1. *Can we trust people on the Internet?*

As Niklas Luhmann (1973; Eng. tr. 1979) said, trust is a basic human skill. It allows us to live, putting faith in the matter-of-fact of nature. It also permits us to determine “the correct and appropriate starting point for the derivation of rules” (4) so that we can orient ourselves in a world otherwise shaped by chaos alone. In short, trust is essential to human action. According to Luhmann, we could claim that trust is a necessary skill for both the natural and the artificial existence of human beings. We have to trust ourselves in order to carry on in a natural, obscure world, which completely hides from us every future event and consequence. In the same breath, we are supposed to trust others and to gain others’ trust so as to establish good relationships with them despite the high complexity of the reality of social human life. Complexity, a very abstract attribute of every kind of environment, has to do with our social dimension inasmuch as the increase in human interactions displays the potential infinitude of human possibilities. In other words: a good, functioning social system relies on trust-based relationships. The mechanism of a very complex structure, grounded in connectivity and human exchange, depends on the possibility of people to gain trust inside of it. A complex reality needs to be simplified in trust-based relationships (between trustees and trustors).

It follows that the need for trust must grow proportionally to the openness of our world. In a globalized world, trust becomes, if possible, even more essential for human acting. A world which displays a globally extended net of interactions must deal with a tremendous increase in complexity and with the following escalation of uncertainty. Consequently, a social system which is capable of growing more complex and opening itself to a global perspective must deal with its exposure to uncertainty in order to survive. This means that trust is something needed in such a globalized system, that it must flow inside of it, in order to lubricate its intricate junctures.

All this becomes even more evident when we consider the most extended, interactive social infrastructure of the contemporary world: I am referring, of course, to the Internet. In fact, the Internet has built a serviceable network of communications and information, nowadays actively used by more than half of the world’s population, which has increased its reach with enormous speed.

inspirations that this project gave to me. I would also like to thank Prof. Leonardo Amoroso for his support, and Irene Battaglia for her valuable suggestions.

A quick overview of the scientific literature on this topic from the past two decades reveals that trust has always been essential to the Internet as a high-complexity system; nonetheless, it has also been a significant problem. The general concern about trust in virtual communication was one of the leitmotifs of a book (Castelfranchi *et al.* 2001) conceived in 1998 on the occasion of the workshop *Deception, Fraud and Trust in Virtual Agents*. The introduction to this volume makes clear the reasons for this concern: even though the intention was already for the Internet to become a sort of golden goose for the market, it was also clear that its potential could only be exploited if trust flowed in it. The Internet could work as an interaction-based network only if it could sustain trust-based relationships. Or rather, in order for people who wanted to use the Internet as a means for profit, it was necessary to excogitate ways to gain trust from other users. At the end of the 1990s, when the current growth and distribution of the Internet was something still yet to come, the link between trust and the new electronic communication system, in which people exchange their data and share commercial transactions, was already undeniable.

The problem with the possibility of imagining trust-based relationship inside the Internet was broad. Its newness and unknown possibilities were only a part of the question. There was, indeed, another aspect that made the Internet something untrustworthy: its un-corporeality. It is difficult, says Castelfranchi, “to establish trust in an electronic network environment where you usually never meet your partner face to face” (XVIII). Anonymity and bodiless interaction appeared to be unavoidable attributes of this virtual reality. The Internet seemed an artificial, alternative and immaterial place where humans could interact merely with the help of written communication. This is why, in Castelfranchi’s perspective, it may be useful to improve the “external factors of trust” (XIX) of the virtual world (that is to say, to make the Internet a reliable environment) to remedy its anonymity or the difficulty of gaining “internal factors of trust” on the Internet – that is, to verify the ability, knowledge, motivation, morality, etc. of those who attempt to become the addressees of trust on the Internet (trustees). The author’s point lies in the complementarity of the external and internal factors of trust: “when I strongly trust X [internal trust], then I can accept a less safe and reliable environment [external trust]” (XIX), and *vice versa*. According to the author, one must consider the complementarity between the *external* factors that make reliable the whole environment, and the *internal* factors that make people trust their interactor or mediating agent – a physical person. We have to consider that, in a virtual network based on anonymity and bodiless interaction, as Web 1.0 was at the time, both internal and external factors of trust are very difficult to obtain. As we will see in this paper, Web 2.0 has allowed virtual trustees to overcome the difficulty of gain-

ing “internal” factors of trust and has accordingly allowed the Internet to appear to be a reliable infrastructure.

The postulate that the Internet’s anonymity provoked the absence of virtual trust led to the perspective which has been dominant for the past two decades, namely that the Internet was building a different kind of reality, one which was opposed to the material, phenomenal one; a bodiless reality, where trust could not flourish anyway. The strong antithesis between virtual and material reality was, according to Philip Pettit (2004), fundamental. Pettit claimed that authentic trust could not be provoked through the Internet because a virtual reality could not satisfy the conditions for trust. Trust must be based on a dynamic interaction between two agents. It must be addressed to real people (*persons*) and it must be provoked through a *performance*, in a certain, recognizable way. Like any social infrastructure, the Internet itself cannot be *trusted*: it is merely something we can *rely* on. Reliance is indeed something very different from trust: it is a static, intentional, unidirectional human activity, which can only be addressed to a soulless object and motivated by use. According to Pettit, the virtual interaction which takes place on the Internet does not involve real persons. If anything, this kind of interaction takes place between *personas*, i.e. virtual presences, whose faces I “cannot read,” who are more similar to ghosts than to real persons: “I cannot read the face of such a contact; the person is a spectral, not a bodily presence in my life” (118). Therefore, the untrustworthiness of *personas* on the Internet rests on a strong separation between virtual and material reality, which relies for its part on the absence or presence of the bodily dimension. In the phenomenal world, the attribution of trust is justified by the fact that I can *see* or *feel* the bodily presence of someone. Their bodily nature and physical proximity (Løgstrup 1956; Eng. tr. 1997) allow me to maintain an actual, dynamic relationship with them, which can also involve trust. To the same extent that it is impossible to trust a robot, as it is any artificial agent or AA (Fossa 2019), an avatar counts as a *persona*; a static picture in an email inbox cannot in any way be considered a trustee, an addressee of authentic trust. According to Pettit, in a virtual world ruled by disembodiment, “we all wear the ring of Gyges” (2004: 118-119). The question is: if an unknown, spectral avatar with all the power and privilege of anonymity cannot be trusted in any way, does it follow that virtual trust is impossible *tout court*?

In 2011, Charles Ess (*et al.* 2011) assumed that the duality between virtual and material reality was the main reason for skepticism towards the possibility of trust-based relationships on the Internet. If we think back to earlier computer-mediated interfaces, such as MUD or MOO, we find that the strong dichotomy between the virtual and the real simply retraced the Cartesian dualism of

mind and body (3). As we saw before, the early Internet seemed to establish a powerful duality between on- and offline dimensions, of a disembodied reality *versus* a physical, material one. The claim of a drastic distinction between the virtual and the real could even encourage an image of the Internet as a “minds only realm” (5), capable of erasing the differences and discriminations (based on ethnicity, gender, religion) which were apparently so hard to overcome in the real, offline world. A wide range of “techno utopian” perspectives have been based on this kind of dualism, from Barlow’s cyber-libertarianism to Gibson’s idea of cyber-freedom in the novel *Neuromance*. Ess (6-7) also noted that feminist perspectives on cyberspace (Braidotti 1996; Stone 1991; Kember 2003) made it possible to think about the risks of such a cartesian “trick” by anticipating the dependence of the virtual on the real and thinking of the online dimension as an extension of the offline dimension. In general, this pronounced dualism led to the illusion that the Internet could establish a radically different reality, without any dependence on the material world. On the Internet, humans could experience a bodiless identity.²

This inevitably means that existence online seems to have lost the essential feature of human embodied life: its materiality. We can already glimpse something which will become clearer in section two, namely the strong connection between trust, bodily performance and orality. The duality between the virtual and the material that dominated early Internet images led to the thought (or perhaps to the hope) that a *disembodied* reality could mean an *alternative* reality, a place of unlimited freedom, where users/*personas* could lose their material vulnerability – and, in this way, the possibility to build trust-based relationships.

The process of overcoming the “Cartesian” dualism which ruled theorists’ comprehension of Web 1.0 went hand in hand with the technological development of the Internet as a communication system. Furthermore, the increasing immersivity of online experiences, the standing-out of a “virtual *continuum*” (Milgram *et al.* 1994: 2), permitted also by the rapid modernization of interfaces, has allowed the boundaries between the virtual and the real to be demolished. The so-called Web 2.0 is a deeply interactive reality which finds its essential predicate in offering the possibility to share content with other people, as well as to modify and reproduce it. In Carusi’s view (2011), this opportunity to interact by manipulating content in every moment contributed to a very different perception of the virtual world. In the 2.0 era, a radical dualism between the virtual and the real no longer makes sense because our online experience has become inseparable from our offline life. Carusi speaks of an

² According to Kember (2003), the defeat of this kind of dualism between body and mind, operated by Web 2.0, is one of the reasons for the stagnation of cyberfeminism.

“interworld” (115) between physical and virtual reality as the ideal place where we conduct our social life.

Myskja’s (2011) argument takes a similar direction, in which the virtual dimension of human existence is seen as an artificial one. However, the fact that something is artificial does not mean that is not at all real. This clever insight is expressed by the analogy of virtual reality with Kant’s use of fictionality, or the “philosophy of ‘as if’” (121). This means that, on the Internet, as in every artificial (artistic, ritual and so on) context, we are all aware of the fictional character of the virtual reality we are helping to build. This is why in Myskja’s perspective, “virtual reality is a form of art in the sense described by Kant. We know that this is fictional, but we must treat it as a reality in order to make it work the way we intend. It is a deception where nobody is deceived” (131). Claiming the fictionality of the Internet does not make it less real than material life, just as is the case with regard to fictional places such as theatres, or stadiums of ancient oratory. Just as in art or other situations which require specific performances, fictionality leads humans to acquire specific behaviors, manners or attitudes to appear more attractive to others, in order to be trusted. With the arrival of Web 2.0, the social centered virtual reality known as the Internet ceased to be an untrustworthy, dangerous space; it had begun to become increasingly real. In other words, the need to imagine the Internet as a dimension which is completely alternative to the material one was decreasing. The Internet became a fictional part of reality where we could assume several different behaviors in accordance with the strategies adopted to gain the trust of others.

When Myskja’s paper was published, the Internet was still an almost disembodied environment. This was, like before, the major factor contributing to the untrustworthiness of virtual interactions between humans. However, Web 2.0 was on the rise and was constantly implementing a means to overcome the boundaries between the virtual and the real world and, in this way, to allow itself to sustain trust relationship – or, as Castelfranchi claimed several years before, to improve its external factors of trust in order to overcome its anonymity. For instance, the diffusion of chat rooms created realities which were still bodiless, but where it became possible to *perform* veracity, as well as many other virtues (Vallor 2010),³ in order to gain trust online. Former chatrooms showed us that the social rules of human interactions were not completely neglected on the Internet: they needed to be performed *as if* they were in the material world. Just think, as Myskja suggests, of interactive online games, such as *Second Life* (2011: 132) or *The Sims*, where users can interact by

³ According to Hawhee (2004), the nexus between the capacity to perform virtues, agonism and persuasion was at the core of Ancient Greek rhetoric.

displaying behaviors which are very similar to behaviors performed in the real world. The Internet became a place in which people could meet, discuss, fall in love, become friends, trust each other; all of this, without seeing each other. It follows that the supposed inability of the Internet to sustain trust-based relationships must be brought into question. We saw before that the reason theorists assumed that one could not gain a “virtual” kind of trust was the uncorporality of the Internet as an infrastructure grounded in connectivity. This was also why, paradoxically, the Internet needed to overcome its anonymity in order to allow trust to flow inside it and to simplify its complexity.

To summarize, we could say that the enormous potential of the Internet can only be realized with a constant reference to trust. Since the Internet is a very complex and unknown social system, in order for it to become a reliable infrastructure, it must create factors which allow users to trust each other mutually. Unfortunately, gaining trust without being seen, and only with the help of written messages, is very difficult. When reviewing the scientific literature on this topic from the last two decades, it becomes clear that the arrival of Web 2.0 provided several tools to induce trust despite the anonymity of the Internet. Namely, the invention of social networking permitted the introduction of body-like behaviors into virtual communication, which made computer-mediated interactions more similar to the oral ones – that is, more real. One could also argue that the evolution of the Internet consisted in a progressive promotion of the bodily dimension: passing over the strong dichotomy between the phenomenal and the virtual by promoting oral communication and bodily performance enables the former avatars to become actual trustees. The more the Internet can reproduce a physical proximity with its virtual means, the better it is able to promote trust relationships between users; the more the users are able to place trust in their mutual virtual interactions, the better the Internet’s (economic, social, political) potential can be expressed. Last but not least, the possibility to persuade one or more unknown persons and consequently to become a trustee is greater when the infrastructure we are relying on allows us to show ourselves in our bodily and oral dimension, since performing a certain kind of behavior will generate trust in others.

But why is performing virtues so essential to trust? And how is this linked to a bodily and oral dimension, which seems so essential in a new means of communication?

2. Trust and persuasion: performing virtues

To understand the reasons behind the connection between trust and the bodily/oral dimension, especially by reference to the trustees, we can turn

to Aristotle's philosophy. In his *Rhetoric*, the first systematic treatise on rhetorical argumentation, the Greek philosopher assigned to the rhetor a very clear purpose: to persuade his audience. Whatever the genre of the oration was, knowing the *rhetorike techne* had to lead the orator "to see available means of persuasion (*peitho*) in each case" (*Rhet.* 1355b; Eng. tr. 2007: 36). The verb *peithomai* constitutes the most important notion of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and presents, upon close inspection, a strong relation to trust. In fact, to the Greeks, persuasion was connected to the sphere of trust so firmly that words related to the verb *peithomai* – such as the substantive *pistis* and the adjective *pistos* – can also be translated as "loyal" and "loyalty," "credible" and "credibility," "trustworthy" and "trustworthiness" (Piazza 2008: 17). At first, the nexus between rhetoric and trust appears motivated by the fact that a rhetorical argument addresses itself to the developing of opinions (*doxa*) in the audience. Rhetoric is in fact an *art (techne)* which shows a strong analogy (*antistrophia*) to dialectic (*Rhet.* 1354a; Eng. tr.: 30). However, it cannot be defined as a dialectical practice, since it cannot produce certain knowledge (*episteme*) like philosophy does. In the realm of *doxa*, we have no assurance of the falsity or trueness of our reasoning. This is why the audience is inclined to "commit [itself] to trust our own opinions or convictions" (Piazza 2008: 18-19). It means that, in the realm of *doxai*, opinions are malleable: someone who masters the *rhetorike techne* can generate trust in the audience and, in this way, she can try to direct some other's view, attitude, vote, or preference. Rhetoric is, to this extent, the art of trust.

According to Aristotle, the art of rhetoric is founded on three different "technical *pisteis*" (*Rhet.* 1356a; Eng. tr.: 38) or technical arguments which must be known and well used by the speaker and be distinguished from *non-technical* ones: these are *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*. While understanding what *pathos* and *logos* mean turns out to be quite simple, considering also the wide space that Aristotle assigns to these technical *pisteis* in *Rhetoric*, we cannot say the same about *ethos*. This is one of the most mysterious aspects of *Rhetoric*. Aristotle devotes long chapters of his treatise to the methods of construction of *enthymemes* or to the strategies of provoking specific emotions, depending on certain factors such as age, origins etc. (*Rhet.* II, §§12-17; Eng. tr.: 149-155) and in general on the composition of the audience. Indeed, only a few lines are dedicated to the explanation of the *ethos*, although Aristotle admits that "*ethos* represents the stronger *pistis*"; *ethos* realizes persuasion inasmuch as "the speech makes the speaker *trustworthy (axiopistos)*" (1356a; Eng. tr.: 38).⁴ The audience is inclined to believe in a certain cause, to be seduced by an ex-

⁴ Kennedy translates *axiopistos* as "worthy of credence."

hortation or moved by a eulogy to a greater extent if the speaker can present himself as a trustworthy person.

The importance of *ethos* for persuasion derives from the centrality of the speaker's oral and bodily performance. Aristotle explains on several occasions that *ethos*, as the other technical *pisteis*, must shine through speech itself. Only through her rhetorical performance is it possible for the speaker to appear trustworthy: this is why *ethos* belongs to the technical argumentations. According to Jakob Wisse, *ethos* can be referred to as the "character" (1989: 30-33) of the rhetor,⁵ and must express the moral and intellectual qualities (virtues) of the speaker. These virtues, like good sense (*phronesis*), goodwill (*eunoia*) and goodness (*arete*), are fundamental for a speaker to be trusted, because in absence of such (moral) qualities one can doubt that the rhetor is telling the truth (32).⁶ That speech has to manifest goodwill, good sense and goodness means that these virtues count for the purpose of persuasion only if they appear through the speech itself, as we said. It follows that the previous reputation of the speaker must be irrelevant for the success of persuasion.

The rhetorical potential of the *pistis* grounded on *ethos* is, in this respect, very close to that of *pathos*. The speaker must establish emotional proximity to the audience, in which the listener "suffers along with the pathetic speaker, even if what he says amounts to nothing" (*Rhet.* 1408a; Eng. tr. 210). The listeners allow the speaker to provoke emotions in them and in this way to influence their process of opinion-making on the basis of the trust that the speaker's *ethos* can create. In this respect, certain authors have spoken of "inactive friendship" (Piazza 2008: 97), a concept that we could relate to the Kantian idea of "as if."⁷ In other words, the speaker moves in a fictional space, where she discovers the power of making extensive use of human emotions, verbal strategies and also her own virtues in order to persuade the audience. The rhetors act "as if" they are in the "real" world and employ strategies that can be used in ordinary life. All this, however, happens in the fictional space of an assembly, where a speaker can take advantage of emotions and virtues only if these are technical *pisteis*, contained in an oration. This means that even the speaker's character becomes persuasive only in the fictional space of the oration, of the spoken word (Ong 2012: 31-33; Hawhee 2004). The rhetor is hence an actual performer. The logical element of his speech is naturally so important that Aristotle dedicated the majority of his treatise to the *inventio*, *elocutio* and *dispositio* of persuasive speech, the branches upon which modern oratory also relies.

⁵ See also Di Piazza (2012).

⁶ See also Perelman (*et al.* 1958; Eng. tr. 1971); Hawhee (2004).

⁷ Piazza refers to *NE* (1167a).

There is no speech which can persuade without being performed. The most powerful ability of the rhetor lies, according to Aristoteles, in her technical capacity to make use of irrational components in rationally constituted speech in order to arouse trust in the audience. This Aristotelian idea is conceived not only against Plato's disdain for rhetoric as a non-philosophical discipline, but it is also an attempt to turn the irrational, socially "magic" aspects of rhetoric,⁸ highlighted especially by Gorgia, into something that could emerge in a *logos* assembled by specific rules. Just as the treatise on *Poetics* formulates criteria for evoking *eleos* and *phobos* (*Poet.* 1345b; Eng. tr. 2000: 18) in the audience during a tragic performance, the *Rhetoric* studies the process of arousing trust through the speaker's *ethos* in deliberative, judicial or epideictic assemblies.⁹

At the center of this strong analogy between the Aristotelian arts of rhetoric and poetry lies the *performativity* of the actor – the rhetor. In his treatises, the Stagirite depicts two of the occasions, such as theater and assemblies, which were essential for life in the Greek *polis*. They created a strong emotional cohesion between those citizens who could take part in the assembly or in the tragic performance. Actors and rhetors could manage the moods of the audience so well that they were even able to cause catharsis or induce trust when they wanted. In short, the democratic cohesion of the citizens depended on assemblies and tragic performances: these "fictional" places were indispensable for the political and social life of the Greek *polis*. Reading Aristotle, we note that the oral performer was a kind of orchestra leader in managing emotions and evoking trust in the audience. The *logos* on which Aristotle sets up the *Rhetoric* does not mean, for this reason, any (written) discourse, just as a Sophoclean tragedy could not be intended merely as a written text. The Aristotelian connection between *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* points to a wise management of the *spoken word* and, consequently, refers to the ancient Greek centrality of the staging performance.¹⁰

This comparison shows that the centrality of religious, cultural, judicial and political meetings was founded on the interaction between word and *praxis*. The political sense addressed to these occasions "demonstrates mutuality among performative sites that create their credibility by reiterating familiar patterns of language and actions" (Miller 2007: 60). Ancient performers had to insist on recalling the notion of community. Their speech had to focus on sharing emotions, creating an atmosphere of common feelings, but also on

⁸ See De Romilly (1975); Dodds (1951); Butler (1999).

⁹ See Miller (2007: 58).

¹⁰ See Bonanno (1997); Hawhee (2004).

recollecting a commonality of virtues and value patterns. In the case of the rhetor, this was essential in order to induce trust, and consequently to persuade the audience. When Aristotle writes that virtues like goodwill, goodness and good sense must be displayed in discourse, he is referring to affirmations and gestures which could both contribute to giving the speaker a virtuous (*Rhet.* 1418b; Eng. tr.: 245) and trustworthy image. Improving the style of oration is equivalent to increasing the capacity to express “emotions” (1408a; Eng. tr.: 210) in response to certain acts. These emotional expressions have to be appropriated, namely, respondent to socially accepted patterns of behavior, in order to expose the credible *ethos* of the speaker. In this way, the speaker becomes trustworthy and therefore able to persuade.

The centrality of the rhetor’s performance in Aristotelian *Rhetoric*, since it is produced through spoken and practical features, is something undoubtedly missing in written texts. As we have seen, the art of persuasion is, according to Aristotle, inextricably associated with the dimension of orality. The whole *rhetorike technē*, as Aristotle (and also the Roman Cicero) imagined it, could not exist without the central figure of the orator, seen as a performing figure, as someone who is able to vehiculate messages and feelings by means of gestures, tones and modulations of the spoken word. In order to better understand why the art of persuasion must, from an Aristotelian perspective, be linked to the public figure of the orator and to her capacity to display virtues, it can be useful to briefly consider what the Stagirite says with regard to the purposes of one of the three species (*eide*) of oratory. I am referring particularly to the *symboleutikon*, or deliberative rhetoric, which, according to Aristotle, must be distinguished from judicial as well as demonstrative rhetoric (1358b; Eng. tr.: 48). Among the three genres of oratory, the deliberative discloses the strongest nexus with the practice of *influencing* others’ behavior and opinions. Deliberative oratory consists of exhortations and dissuasions and refers to a specific “time”: the future, “for whether exhorting or dissuading [the orator] advises about future events” (1358b; Eng. tr.: 48). As the chapter 4 of the first book shows, the field of application of the deliberative oratory is wide. It deals with political, economic, legal exhortations or dissuasions (1359b; Eng. tr.: 53); but it also relies on essentially ethical goals. To become the addressee of trust, the deliberative orator must know the main values of human life. This means that, in order to persuade an audience and to influence people’s decisions about the subjects most important to public life in the polis, one must know human virtues, namely one must refer to ethical topics that can be universally shared by the listeners.¹¹ This is why chapter 5 begins

¹¹ Some of the ethical topics mentioned by Aristotle in chapter 5 can be more useful for epideictic oratory, while just a few of them can be employed in judicial oratory.

with a mention of happiness, the *skopos* of human life, which the orator must always keep in mind, since from happiness are derived all the goods that make a person trustworthy. Happiness is, according to Aristotle, having “success [in life; *eupraxia*] combined with virtue” or “self-sufficiency [*autarkeia*]” (1360b; Eng. tr.: 57), being in possession of the goods (which are listed through chapter 5) and having the ability to defend them. Aristotle proclaims that deliberative oratory is very much concerned with this definition of *eudaimonia* and with all the goods (*agatha*) and virtues (*aretai*) which are parts of it. But what does it mean to “know” what goods and virtues are? Is it sufficient for the orator to have the ability to define them? In my opinion, in the close nexus between persuasion and happiness as a performance of the possession of goods and virtues lies the reason why public speech, seen in its materiality and proclaimed in front of an audience, is able to influence the listeners’ actions.

Provided that happiness describes the ultimate *skopos* of human life, the deliberative orator recognizes her particular aim in the “advantageous”; she does not need to refer to happiness, but must address herself to the specific “means” (1362a; Eng. tr.: 61) to reach happiness, since it is these means which constitute the object of a deliberative assembly and which must be displayed in the speech of the orator. In other words, the sources of the persuasive argument for deliberative speech are the goods and virtues as a means of achieving *eupraxia*, and happiness. Virtues, as something that “are necessarily a good, [...] productive of good things and matters of action” (1362a; Eng. tr.: 62), are the ultimate and most relevant ethical goods to which the orator must refer. As the Stagirite clarifies, also in a famous passage in *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE 1105b-1106a, Eng. tr.: 28-29), virtues are *hexeis*: dispositions toward good actions, the *habitus* we adopt when we have to take a decision and act as good persons (1106a, Eng. tr.: 28).¹² Aristotle’s employment of the term *hexis* in this context suggests that virtues, namely the ethical goods which allow people to reach *eupraxia* and in this way to appear happy, are something which has to be embodied and performed. As a matter of fact, the term *hexis* designates a strong connection between the bodily dimension of *arete* and its theoretical

¹² See also: “And the virtues (*aretai*) are necessarily a good: for those having them are well-off in regard to them, and virtues are productive of good things and matters of action [...]. To speak of these one by one, the following are necessarily good: happiness [...], justice, courage, temperance, magnanimity, magnificence, and similar dispositions (*hexeis*), for they are virtues of the soul” (*Rhet.*, 1362b, Eng. tr.: 62). I do not mean here to express an opinion on the so-called inconsistency of Aristotle’s depiction of virtues in the *Rhetoric* and in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. I am merely using the notion of *hexis* to underline the performative aspect of the virtue, not to declare that virtue cannot be a *dynamis*. Regarding solving of this Aristotelian “inconsistency,” see Allard-Nelson 2001. This “bodily” sense of *hexis*, translatable with the Latin *habitus*, was famously understood by Pierre Bourdieu (1980, Eng. tr. 1990); see also Butler (1999: 116).

meaning. It is used also in *Metaphysics*, 1009b to describe a physical disposition capable of modifying the thought (*phronesis*) (*Metaph.* 1009b; Eng. tr.: 61),¹³ building a bridge between the bodily and theoretical dimension of virtue and confirming that *hexis*, “the Greek word for bodily conditions or bodily state, is indistinguishable from habits and practices” (Hawhee 2004, 58). Stating that virtue is a *hexis* and placing it at the core of a treatise on persuasion is equivalent to asserting that virtue must be *embodied* and *performed* by the orator who wants to be trusted. To become a trustee, the orator *must bodily display* her possession of such virtues, namely the means of achieving happiness, which are the primary objects of deliberative oratory.

The *pistis* which is designated to transform this necessity to perform and embody virtues in a technical, systematical way in order to produce a persuasive speech is certainly *ethos*. The close nexus between *ethos* and virtue (and consequently with *hexis*) can be recognized again in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle describes the character as something that absorbs or incorporates virtues by means of habits: “So virtues (*aretas*) arise in us neither besides nature nor before nature, but nature gives us the capacity to exhibit (*dexasthai*) them, perfecting them by means of the character (*dia tou ethous*)”¹⁴ (*NE* 1103a; Eng. tr.: 23). To answer the difficult question of natural origin of the virtues, Aristotle establishes a connection between *hexis* and *ethos*. Here the author seems to suggest that *ethos*, as a character made up of habits, is anything but the material and time-extended exhibition of virtues or, which is the same, that *ethos* consists of the visible embodiment of ethical dispositions, it is the domicile of their incorporation in our everyday life. Our character, interpreted as a performance of *habitus*, is something subject to our interventions – we can learn to be or to appear virtuous for many reasons, including appearing trustworthy – which becomes like a second nature with the passing of time. In *Rhetoric* I, 11, a section dedicated to judicial oratory, the Stagirite claims that, through habits, *ethos* becomes “natural; for habit (*ta ethe*) is something like nature (*physei*)” (*Rhet.* 1370a, Eng. tr.: 87).

The character to which Aristotle refers in *Rhetoric* is therefore that dimension of human being in which dispositions become “ingrained” (Hawhee 2004: 95) in a person’s performance to such an extent that they seem to be

¹³ The context in which the term is used in *Metaphysics* is indeed very different from that of *Rhetoric*. In this passage Aristotle is referring to Empedocle’s doctrine with regard to the production of *metis*. I only mean to underline that the term *hexis* is evident involved with the bodily dimension, as proved by this quick reference to another occurrence of the term. See also Hawhee (2004: 57-58).

¹⁴ Translation modified. Crisp translates: “nature gives us the capacity to acquire them, and completion comes through habituation”. I follow Hawhee (2004: 95) when I translate *dexasthai* with “exhibit” and *teleiomenois* with “perfection.”

natural; namely, that they are a spontaneous element of a bodily, visible way of acting. The *ethos* in rhetoric thus represents the visible and performative¹⁵ element of speech, which is capable of arousing the social magic of oratory which lies in persuasion and social influencing. Understood as a technical *praxis* of an orator's persuasion strategy, *ethos* consists of reproducing gestures, habits and words which are capable of making the orator appear trustworthy to the audience. One becomes a trustee by performing virtues as goodwill and *eupraxia*. To appear virtuous, good and independent means to be able to influence others' gestures, perhaps to make the exhibition of virtues reproducible among the listeners. What Aristotle claims with regard to deliberative rhetoric is suggestive of why bodily performance is so central in persuasion, and why gaining trust means first of all performing "virtues" or socially accepted patterns of behavior.

3. *A trustee in social media: the influencer*

It is obviously impossible for us to experience the enormous importance of assemblies and theaters to the Greek *polis*. This is something very difficult to reproduce in a chirographic culture, such as the one which has succeeded in modernity. This is why it seems so difficult to trust the authors of written texts.¹⁶ The transformation of the reference community, initially composed of listeners gathered together in a limited audience and then identifiable as an uncountable community of unknown readers, paradoxically arouse the need for trust. Indeed, the idea that the process of constructing opinions could be freed from persuasion strategies thanks to the promotion of written texts was soon revealed to be pure utopia. Every means of communication relies on performative means of persuasion, like the *ethos* discovered by Aristotle: even the authors of written texts must develop strategies to evoke trust (Miller 2007: 74-80).

But how are things with the Internet? As we have seen, the Internet is a means of communication which initially was not seen as being capable of sustaining trust relationships. Things changed with the arrival of "social web," which introduced bodily and oral elements into the virtual reality, initially marked by anonymity, and have allowed people to become the addressees of virtual trust. The innovations brought about by Web 2.0 brought allowed

¹⁵ On the performative as a crucial notion for aesthetics and rhetoric, see Fischer-Lichte, (2004, Eng. tr. 2008).

¹⁶ The spread of printed texts could, for one thing, promote an autonomous reaction to words and, so to say, protect readers from the more dangerous aspects of oral persuasion. As an example, we could take the chronological connection between the diffusion of printed texts and the Lutheran claim to understand God "*sola scriptura*" (Ess 2011: 15).

people to show themselves in a virtual environment without being limited by written texts. Nowadays, on the Internet one can finally show oneself in a complete way. One can be seen in one's body and gestures, in one's voice,¹⁷ in one's everyday life. This return to the centrality of body and orality on the Web can be seen as something that makes persuasion on the Internet easier than before, and can be observed especially in Web 2.0's most unique invention: social networks. Social networks such as Twitter (Fabris 2012; 2015), Facebook, Pinterest etc. have made connectivity their fundamental keyword. In these media, users can express their opinions in the form of brief statements and instantly receive feedback from their followers. Something even more interesting can be noted about social media which make use primarily of images and voice and which have invented a very productive way to reproduce physical proximity: the daily reiteration of videos which show the same person or events from the everyday life of that person. I am referring to blogs and vlog platforms,¹⁸ as well as to social media platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok, Tumblr and especially Instagram. The latter, increasingly widespread among teenagers and young adults, owes its popularity to its "images only" formula. At the beginning, Instagram was a social media platform in which the only content one could share was, precisely, images, eventually accompanied by a very short tagline and hashtags, that is, keywords which allow the posted image to be disseminated widely. This image-only social interaction has had important consequences in our ordinary life: just think of the massive diffusion of *selfie* culture, which is often interpreted as a sign of our "narcissistic" (Wendt 2014; Sheldon *et. al.* 2016) era.

More interesting for our analysis is the latest innovation from Instagram: the introduction of "live stories." This development occurred throughout 2016 and has changed with surprising rapidity not only social networking interactions between single users, but also marketing strategies. This kind of social media concept, based purely on the circulation of images and real-time videos, proves that the current immersive experience of the Internet integrates the bodily dimension and oral communication in a virtual space. The diffusion of Instagram Stories has led in a very short time to the evolution of a commercial figure such as the influencer, which actually already existed within customer services (Grenny *et al.* 2013), and transformed it into an actual "Internet celebrity." Thanks to Instagram Stories, live stories and recently to

¹⁷ See Ong (1971: 296), according to whom there is a progressive tendency of electronic technologies to introduce oral elements beside textual, written ones.

¹⁸ Vlogs, or video blogs, usually take advantage of other platforms, such as Youtube, Vimeo, etc.

IGTV,¹⁹ the promotion of “self-branding” can take advantage not only of the worldwide diffusion of the influencer’s image, but also of their voice, gestures, opinions, lifestyle and actions in everyday life. This is how the influencer figure started to become not only a marketing strategy, like the involvement of celebrities in television commercials in the early 1990s, but also a powerful addressee for trust in virtual communication and transactions which take place on the Internet. With the daily use of Instagram Stories, social media influencers can also give testimony to the value of a product inserting it into the frame of their lifestyle.

Upon close examination, the influencer’s role is seen to be extremely linked to the notion of trust, exactly because, as the orators of Aristotle’s time, it deals with persuading others to change their habits, to acquire goods or *hexeis* that the influencer shows herself to be in possession of. In this way, the fiction upon which the Internet rests as a reliable infrastructure becomes more successful: The Web ceases to seem like a disembodied and scary place, and acquires a realistic, almost “domestic” appearance. Experiences and relationships on the Internet are always “virtual,” non-material, but they look increasingly similar to the ones which happen “irl” (in real life). Influencers prove that, given the possibility to continually show performative skills thanks to the virtual exposition of gestures and orations, trust begins to flow massively on the Internet. An influencer can perform and exhibit her “ethos” online almost daily. In every moment of her life, she can profitably pretend to have certain qualities (such as goodness, goodwill, good sense and especially sincerity) to a potentially infinite audience. We know from Aristotle that recurring to *ethos* to appear trustworthy means in particular to exhibit good dispositions or at least the possession of something which is advantageous, something that the listener could desire for herself. For this reason, an influencer *performs* qualities and exhibit goods in order to be trusted by her followers. The strong interactivity promoted by this kind of social media allows followers to establish a real time communication with influencers,²⁰ which, for its part, allows the influencer to know exactly what kind of audience she has, in order to modulate her use of passions or arguments, as Aristotle suggested.

Within this framework, influencers represent those located at the center of the fictional arena of the Internet; that is to say, they are the addressees of our virtual trust. There is (still) no handbook of influencing like Aristotle’s treatise on *Rhetoric*, but we can see that contemporary influencers have learned

¹⁹ A video platform, created by Instagram, “intended to compete against Youtube” (Wikipedia).

²⁰ Instagram’s “direct messages (DM)” function enables users to give immediate, private feedback on Ig-stories and live videos.

his lesson. Performing trustworthiness is the best way to generate trust in an audience composed of unknown people. In order to do that, one must take advantage of their bodily means and, specifically, of an oral register of expression which can reproduce physical proximity to the audience. Overexposure of Internet celebrities on social media allows them to present their behaviors as evidence of their trustworthiness. They can provoke admiration among their followers, behaving as they would on a stage, interacting with the components of their “audience,” receiving immediate feedback and interacting with them, “as if” all this was happening in “real” life.

To summarize, the Internet’s former absence of a bodily and oral dimension was the element which made it difficult for us to trust each other inside of it. The Internet, being a fictional place, just as Greek theaters or assemblies were, must reproduce dynamics, relations, etc. which allow it to resemble the real world. By integrating the persuasive power of body proximity and oral communication in a virtual reality, social networks needed a figure that could inspire admiration, sincerity, goodwill and other virtues among users; someone who could behave as if the Internet were a real place to live in, in which people can feel real sentiments, such as admiration and trust. This is what influencers are for. They possess the power to condition lifestyles, purchases, and also the opinions and behaviors of social media users. Their work consists in finding a way to be trusted by a globalized audience. Just like the rhetors of Aristotle’s time, they try to exhibit goods and perform virtues in order to gain trust.

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