Introduction to Volume One.
Image and Reality: The Declining Role of Evidence in Public Discourse

Over thirty years ago, Michael Launer and I submitted a manuscript on the 1983 Korean Airliner tragedy to a major national newsmagazine. The rejection came by return mail. Not surprising, perhaps, but what really caught our attention was a margin comment from one of the editors: “No one cares about evidence anymore,” the comment read. Well. Perhaps this was (and is) so. Certainly, there was little in the public domain then and even less now to refute that statement. Indeed, the manuscript we had submitted—in fact our entire book-length study of the shootdown of Korean Air Lines flight 007 by a Soviet fighter pilot ([480], excerpted in this volume)—addressed the use and misuse of evidence by both the United States and the Soviet Union to advance their perspective. So perhaps the editor was right.

Nevertheless, disturbed by the implications of the comment, I originally wrote this essay in 1990 for presentation at a national conference. (474) At that time, I certainly didn’t anticipate that it would become more and more salient as the years went by, until we found ourselves living in a “post-fact” world. In preparing to write this introduction, I came across that paper, and, rereading it, I realized how pertinent it still is; I decided to adapt it as the Introduction to this volume. Contemplating that editor’s comment, the obvious question—it seemed to me then and now—is “Why would no one care about the evidence?” And the important question from our perspective is “What does this mean for the future of public discourse regarding issues of importance like the tragedy of KAL 007 or the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant?” Or, for that matter, any issue of national or international significance? In approaching the latter question by means of the essays in this book, we examine the intersection of argumentation theory and criticism within the cauldron of public policy decision-making.
The ascent of logic, and therefore evidence recognized as such, began with seventeenth-century rationalism and the impact of Cartesian rationality on the conduct of public affairs. (186)¹ The apotheosis of Cartesian influence is, of course, the scientific method with its ability to predict and test causal relationships and to discover the ordered patterns of nature. But the value-free nature of the scientific method has never transferred happily to the volatile arena of human interaction; and it has had dubious effect when adapted to the public policy decision-making process. Witness the decisions to build and use nuclear weapons during World War II (more on this below) or, more recently, the approaches to containing the spread of the novel coronavirus in 2020.

Thus, it should not be surprising that people address questions of evidence with such an ambivalent attitude. Indeed, it would appear that we have something of an approach–avoidance relationship with evidence in human affairs. We like the trappings of reasoned decision-making and tend to produce “reasons” to support the decisions we make, giving the appearance of induction (adducing evidence, constructing arguments, trying to show we “arrived at a conclusion” based on evidence). But all too often these reasons are developed after the fact rather than before, and are usually reached deductively or unthinkingly, often based on the opinion of a perceived leader. Since it should be the function of evidence to generate the reasons for decisions, one wonders what role, if any, evidence actually has to play in the decision-making process: generator or validator. This is true whether we are discussing the public realm of policy decisions or the private realm of personal decisions.

It might be that our society no longer engages in public argument—as that term is ideally conceived—at all. Even using the broadest possible definition of argument—a claim backed by evidence—there is little in the public realm to contravene this notion. A case in point could be the “Pizzagate” scandal that arose during the 2016 US presidential election campaign in the United States. Alex Jones, the Info-Wars host, reported that Hillary Clinton was sexually abusing children in satanic rituals … in the basement of a Washington, DC, pizza restaurant! Despite having absolutely no basis in fact, the story prompted someone to drive from Salisbury NC to Washington, enter the pizza parlor that was the center of the purported crime ring, and shoot up the establishment. The claim that Hillary Clinton was a pedophile started in a Facebook post, spread to Twitter and then went viral with the help of far-right platforms like
Breitbart and Info-Wars.\textsuperscript{2} It took the better part of a year (and two teams of researchers) to sift through the digital trail. “We found ordinary people, online activists, bots, foreign agents and domestic political operatives. Many of them were associates of the Trump campaign. Others had ties with Russia.”\textsuperscript{3}

In the early days of the internet, the Web was thought to be a democratizing force because it opened space for previously silenced voices. Instead, by turning the emphasis away from traditional argument forms, especially evidence, the internet appears to have become more of a force for suppressing reasoned discourse. This trend is reinforced and even exacerbated by the combination of the visual and discursive elements endemic to television and the internet.\textsuperscript{4}

Consider, for example, advertising—a form of persuasion, if not argument. And while we would not automatically support the notion of deciding consumer purchases on the basis of a purely logical evaluation of advertising claims—lest such a practice destroy the economy—some ads are clearly argumentative, and all ads try to make a case for buying a particular product. Yet more and more the “reasons” given for wanting the product have no clear relationship to the thing being sold. One ad that comes to mind opens with a man in running attire jogging along a hilltop. The product is not running shoes or gear, however; the ad is selling a heating and cooling system. Similarly, a series of television ads for BMW convertibles bills the expensive automobile as “The Ultimate Tanning Machine,” a play on the words of the traditional BMW slogan “The Ultimate Driving Machine.” These are not the exaggerated claims with which we are familiar; these are “proofs” that have nothing to do with the argument at all!

A variant of this process occurs when the central focus of an advertising campaign is a celebrity or athlete who endorses a product and presumably uses it. Regardless of the discursive reasons given by the spokesperson, the real message is the subtext: purchase this product because so-and-so uses it—so it must work (a type of fallacy known as \textit{argumentum ad verecundiam}, or argument from inappropriate authority).\textsuperscript{5} Or, even, “use such-and-such a product and you just might begin to look (or act) like (this celebrity).”

What we have here is not “argument,” but association. Association/dissociation is one of the most powerful tools of persuasion and the most basic of human thought processes (491) and, when elevated to the level
of sign reasoning, association becomes a process of rationality. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca explain that the absence of a precise connection in the association/dissociation leaves the auditor “free to imagine … a relationship that by its very lack of precision, assumes a mysterious magical character.” (358: 157) Once an association of this type is accepted, it operates subsequently as though causality were proved.6

What happens when the disconnect between image and reality in advertising migrates to actual arguments? A cogent example may be found in political campaign advertising, which, while still a form of advertising, is more clearly an argument for or against a particular candidate and/or a set of policies. As I write, we are in the midst of yet another round of name-calling and negative advertising in which data are transformed into enthymematic arguments: an argument structure where one or more elements is not explicit, but is supplied by the audience. This is not a new phenomenon. In 1990, the incumbent governor in Florida wrote his Democratic challenger a letter in which he pointed out that the challenger had met with an officer of a failed savings and loan company back in 1987 (remember the S&L scandal?). In the letter, the incumbent demanded to know the purpose of the meeting and the content of the conversation. No allegation is made—no argument in the traditional sense. Yet the governor’s campaign staff released the letter to the print media, thereby creating an enthymeme allowing the public to fill in the actual argument.

In the 2016 US presidential campaign similar forms of campaign discourse occurred, indicating the resilience of such tactics. In one example, Hilary Clinton, the Democratic nominee, had been accused of mishandling sensitive material by storing it on a private server while she was secretary of state; finding no real evidence, the FBI closed its investigation. Then, shortly before election day, FBI Director Comey reported to Congress that another trove of emails had been located on a laptop belonging to the husband of Clinton’s aide. Clinton was effectively considered guilty of revealing national security data without any hard evidence, and this is believed to be a major reason for her surprising loss to Donald Trump. Later, after the election, it was revealed that the FBI found no evidence of wrongdoing (the “new” emails, it turned out, were not new at all, but were copies of material the FBI had previously evaluated) and, once more, the case was closed. Proving once again that allegations can have real impact, even without the presentation of any evidence.
In the 2020 US presidential election, the tactic reached a new level. The incumbent, President Trump, began “warning” his followers of the likelihood of voter fraud intended to deny him a victory. In the aftermath of a close election, Trump’s followers cried foul, particularly in a handful of states where the margins were very small. The perception was exacerbated by the order in which some states counted day-of-election ballots versus mail-in ballots or those from early voting. The Democrats had mounted a vigorous campaign urging people to vote early or—in states where it was allowed—by mail, due to the pandemic that was raging at the same time. But some states counted mail-in ballots first and some counted them last. In a few of the states where the race was particularly tight, Trump supporters saw the late surge by Joe Biden, the Democrat nominee, as evidence of fraud, despite the insistence of election officials (some of them Republicans) that there was no such evidence; that this was merely an artifact of the order of counting. Poll watchers from both parties, whose job it is to ensure against both fraud and errors in counting, reported no such problems. While Trump supporters were not convinced by these denials, the rest of the electorate was left to wonder whether there was any evidence. None was ever presented, either to the public or to the courts. Still, for some, the belief that the election was “stolen” from the incumbent persisted. Thus, in this iteration, both the rhetor (Trump) and the audience refused to acknowledge the validity of the evidence, insisting on the truth value of the claim alone, arguing that the evidence of fraud should be obvious to all.

As far back as the 1988 presidential campaign a similar phenomenon occurred—posing arguments under the guise of mere factual statements. For example, the George H. W. Bush campaign aired an ad that sought to demonstrate that the Democratic nominee, Michael Dukakis, did not support a strong military. (This was the frequently aired spot that showed Governor Dukakis riding aimlessly in a tank.) Amidst a listing of facts and opinions the TV viewer was told that Dukakis “even” opposed the 1983 “rescue mission” to Grenada.

The use of a word such as “even” is a powerful rhetorical implement. In our opinion, it transforms a factual claim into an enthymeme by setting up the association necessary to the enthymematic process. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca have discussed the argumentative functions of such “variations in expression” at great length. (358: 163) Earlier, Weaver had singled out the adverb as “peculiarly a word of judgment” because it is
used frequently to express an attitude which is the speaker’s projection of himself” (451: 133).7

Despite a certain amount of predictable semantic loading (a less sympathetic observer might have described this military action as an “invasion” rather than a “rescue mission”), the claim that Governor Dukakis opposed the Grenada mission represents more than a statement of purported fact. It invites voters to utilize this purported fact as the basis for their choice between the candidates.

Opinion (semantically loaded): The US military action in Grenada was a rescue mission—a good action for America to undertake.

Claim (purported fact): Governor Dukakis opposed the US action in Grenada.

Fact (implied): Vice President Bush supported the US action in Grenada.

Assertion: This is a voting issue; you should vote for Bush on this basis.

A variation of this tactic is the implied relationship between two juxtaposed, but unrelated facts about a candidate. Again, the conclusion is left to the audience to supply—another enthymematic construction. These constructions would be accompanied by visual material that “supports” the innuendo, which is the source of the enthymeme, substituting for evidence.8

Corresponding examples can be found in the Soviet government’s responses to the Korean airliner tragedy in the 1980s (discussed at length in this volume) and Russian reactions to events occurring in the 1990s and 2000s, after the fall of Communism (which will be addressed in subsequent volumes). The impact of these sorts of enthymematic arguments is to shift responsibility for the negative implications to the recipient, relieving the arguer of responsibility.

The interaction of evidence and fallacy is of paramount concern because most of the so-called informal or rhetorical fallacies refer to the insufficiency or inadequacy of evidence. Indeed, the underpinning of all argument is evidence, whether overtly expressed, embedded in an enthymeme, or found in the underlying assumption(s) of the argument itself. It is the presence of evidence that turns a claim (or assertion)
into an argument; in the absence of evidence, there can be no argument. Indeed, the evidence/claim link is what we term “reason.” The process of mental movement from evidence to claim is made through the reasoning process, an acknowledgement of connectivity. Toulmin, in his model of argument, made this connection explicit by introducing the notion of the “warrant,” a mental step that illustrates how the connection occurs. (424)\(^9\)

In the absence of this reasoning process, what one has is not argument, but exhortation. Over fifty years ago, Black defined exhortation as a genre of discourse where emotion not only precedes the acceptance of belief, but produces it. (75: 138–139) Black continues, “Exhortation is that type of discourse in which the stirring of an audience’s emotion is a primary persuasive force rather than—as in Aristotle—a derivative one, and is extensively rather than incidentally used. … Exhortation finds its end in radical conversion.” (75: 142)

One of the casualties of divorcing evidence from claims is the concept of “burden of proof.” While this is a legal concept, it is also the basis of public argument—the notion that the party bringing the claim has the responsibility to produce evidence to support that claim. The absence of evidence means that the challenging party fails to produce a *prima facie* case—a case that will stand “on its face” before the opposition has an opportunity to rebut. In 2020, the Trump campaign’s legal team challenged the results of the presidential election in multiple jurisdictions, arguing that the election should be overturned. They generated emotional claims and convinced many of the President’s followers but failed to produce any evidence of fraud or error that would support their challenges, and all such claims were dismissed by the courts. This result did not, however, diminish the belief among the President’s devoted following that the election had been “stolen.” One person involved in the campaign even asked on national television, “Where is the evidence that the election was fair?”—thus completely divorcing the concept of burden of proof from the functioning of the argument. (501)\(^10\)

A second concept that is often lost is that of the credibility and sufficiency of the evidence. To be persuasive, evidence should be both credible and sufficient. The evidence presented in support of a claim must be credible—believable—in order to be persuasive. Typically, credibility is assessed on the basis of the source, the methodology, and (in some cases) the chain of custody. But credibility of evidence is not, or should not
be, enough, in and of itself. Evidence should also be sufficient—that is, there should be *enough* credible evidence to support a claim in the face of counter-argument and evidence. For example, in claiming “election fraud” in the 2020 presidential election, the Trump campaign insisted that votes—particularly mail-in votes—be audited or recounted by hand. In that process, a few ballots were found to be invalid for one reason or another. But the number of incorrect ballots was not sufficient to establish fraud or to overturn thousands of votes.

Thus, if the public and its policy-makers are to have any hope of assessing the arguments they hear, they must be able to evaluate the evidence underlying, supporting, those arguments.

Visual argument, used in most political argumentative ads, can be put forth in a predominantly nonverbal manner, with the “visuals” often substituting for actual evidence. One instance can be seen in a recent political campaign for state office in Florida. The well-known Democrat running to fill an open seat in the state legislature began her campaign with a very strange ad, one that relied almost entirely on visual association to make an argument for her candidacy. The ad depicted the candidate training for a triathlon: running, biking, swimming. The apparent takeaway was that, if elected, the candidate would put similar effort into working for the people of her district. In a decidedly “blue” district, the Republican challenger relied on print and television advertisements that also eschewed verbal statements about policy or platform. These ads capitalized on the one described above, and the Democrat, a Caucasian attorney, was depicted as an elitist who rode a six thousand dollar bicycle in triathlon competitions. On the other hand, the African American Republican was promoted primarily through an assemblage of still photographs: I grew up a poor orphan; “I am a mom; I am a cop; I am a preacher;” I am like you. Although never stated explicitly in any of the ads, the challenger was vehemently pro-life (opposing any and all abortions, including when the mother’s life was in jeopardy), pro-gun (allowing public school teachers to wear weapons in class), pro-law and order (opposed to public demonstrations against police brutality), and a supporter of prayer in public schools—all values held by her prospective constituents in outlying counties. But one learned this only from the negative advertising developed in support of her opponent or from the unspoken subtext of the visual ads. It was a fascinating campaign, both in the reciprocity of the advertising and in the reliance on visual rather than verbal arguments. Although the
Because forms of argument and standards of proof may vary from discipline to discipline, a persistent issue in the study of public policy argument is the problem of talking across disciplinary fields, making it difficult for non-specialists to evaluate both evidence and argument. One example of the frustration experienced by both experts and non-experts—with resultant consequences for public policy—is the worldwide antivaccination movement; another was the refusal of many Americans to wear masks during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. Pertinent to this volume, a number of illustrations can be found in the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear accident.

As one instance, consider the legacy of splitting the atom. In a special issue of *The Journal of the American Forensic Association* (now *Argumentation and Advocacy*) devoted to “Argumentation and the Nuclear Age” (3), two essays addressed the question of the use of evidence in the nuclear arms debate. In one of the essays, Hynes considered the role of evidence credibility and noted that questions of credibility were resolved by the participants in favor of positions already held: “evidence is systematically processed to match prior beliefs.” (215: 155) Certainly this is not a new observation; Holsti drew a similar conclusion about John Foster Dulles and discrepant evidence regarding communism. (210) In the other essay, Dauber addressed situations where strategic theorists produced mutually exclusive interpretations of the same data, noting that “the standards for evidence, the criteria for what constitutes a valid reason … are themselves drawn into the dispute.” (129: 169)

There is nothing wrong with challenging evidence or the criteria for valid reasoning in an argument: establishing the credibility of evidence and the validity of arguments from that evidence is part of the argumentative enterprise. In fact, both Hynes and Dauber demonstrate that it is possible to assess evidence in the arena of public policy. The problem is the assumption that there is only one correct answer, a problem that has grown worse in the years since those articles were published. Much of the hostility and division that marks current politics and political policy arguments in the United States, in both the international arena and domestically, can be attributed to this certainty—which itself is a product
of the power of prior beliefs to shape the perception of evidence—and the concurrent unwillingness to entertain countervailing evidence or to compromise.

In authoritarian societies, such as the USSR was, the concept of the “public sphere”—where policy arguments are generated and deliberated—simply does not exist. Authority resides with the state, which often results in a closed deductive system that excludes contravening evidence. This approach, in turn, results in a sense of infallibility, wherein the state cannot be wrong, which in turn produces what Hugo terms “cant,” the attempt to cover up the lack of true rational processes. (213: 17–31) Indeed, in the Soviet Union, what passed for a public sphere was so constrained that it was close to the technical argument described by Goodnight (499) and therefore not susceptible to counter-argument by either the public or experts.11

One of the major drivers of the current unwillingness to credit evidence that does not conform to one’s preconceived view is the growth of conspiracy theories around domestic and world events. Conspiracy theories have long been a part of the human experience, perhaps as far back as Greek and Roman times, if not longer. The Greek and Roman Gods were seen as interfering in human affairs on a regular basis, bringing disaster—often natural disasters—when displeased. Thus were many natural and human tragedies explained. And so it remains today, except that the Gods have been replaced by evil actors bent on world domination. Even this incarnation has a rather long history in America and beyond. Numerous groups were labeled as conspiring against the status quo, including Jews, Catholics, Masons, the Illuminati, to name a few. Jews have been the most frequent target of conspiracy theories; the most notable example is The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion, a discredited document that purports to demonstrate the Jewish plan for world domination. Despite having been shown as fake many times, this insidious forgery continues to circulate among those who believe in powerful conspiracies.

The presence of conspiracy arguments in contemporary political and policy argument is disconcerting, as it not only undermines faith in the political system, but also undermines faith in the use of reasoned argument and evidence in solving social problems. Yet belief in conspiracies persists and seems to have moved into the mainstream of political discourse in both the West and in authoritarian and quasi-authoritarian countries. In the Soviet Union and now Russia, as well as parts of Eastern Europe, some
conspiracy theories become part of the official political discourse. For example, the Great Purges at the end of the 1930s and the “Doctors Plot” in the early 1950s are vivid examples of the Soviet government creating conspiracies to promote its policies. Similarly, in the early 1980s, the government claimed that the shootdown of the Korean airliner, KAL 007, was the result of a conspiracy involving the US Central Intelligence Agency.

Conspiracy beliefs appear to gain ascendancy primarily in times of upheaval and rapid social change. As events appear to spin out of control and people begin to feel disaffected, the appeal of the insular world of conspiracy theory grows and often becomes irresistible. This is not to suggest that there are no conspiracies that have impacted human history. There have been many. But true conspiracies are usually designed to achieve a precise end and are confined to actions that promote that goal. The overarching, far reaching conspiracies of those who see the entire world through that lens are what dominate the far-left and far-right airwaves and social media today. And they claim to be connected somehow. Conspiracy theories that stem from ideology are closed deductive systems, much like that in the Soviet Union, which do not admit outside evidence.

The role of evidence in conspiracy theories is particularly interesting, for such theories are—as Zarefsky points out—self-sealing; that is, discrepant evidence is subsumed as further proof that the alleged conspiracy exists. In the 1950s and 1960s, purveyors of the communist conspiracy against the United States relied heavily on the appearance of evidence supporting their claims; yet the “evidence” brought to bear was tangential and/or typically relied on association and innuendo (similar to that described earlier in this Introduction). Some of the conspiracy theories advocated today don’t even attempt to present evidence, relying instead on the fallacy of argumentum ad ignorantiam (see note 10).

The fundamental problem with assessing evidence, especially as it relates to public policy—whether public health, military arms, or any other controversial issue—is that it is sometimes difficult if not impossible to agree on what constitutes proof; in other words, how does one determine if the evidence adduced is credible? What happens if the source of evidence is automatically unacceptable to one’s opponents? This is especially noticeable in politics, but as so many arguments over what should be nonpolitical policies become political, this problem can become divisive, as we saw in 2020, a year beset by a pandemic and a contentious presidential election in the United States. What is needed is a rubric for evaluating
evidence, for determining what evidence is credible and what should be discarded. While standards exist in specific fields (especially scientific and quasi-scientific fields) and generally in textbooks about argumentation and public speaking, there is little in the way of advice for non-experts trying to decide on a course of action, which may make obtaining agreement through argumentation impossible.

What should happen in argument development (if one is reasoning inductively ...) is argument constructed on facts/evidence/interpretation. In policy argument, determining the facts is sometimes difficult (i.e., can the Strategic Defense Initiative work? what will COVID treatment cost?), but is nonetheless necessary. Next, one has to decide what proofs (facts and other evidence) are relevant to the discussion (evidentiary). One then needs to use those facts to form a judgment/develop an opinion.

What does happen, as we noted earlier, is that people, including policymakers, come to issues with preconceived notions (interpretations, stories, beliefs) that they use to select facts and determine relevance. For example, in the 1990s, when the United States was trying to encourage democracy in Russia, some in the US government thought the whole “Russia thing” was a ruse and that some semblance of Communism would be reinstated at the earliest possible opportunity. Thus, regardless of countervailing evidence, these policymakers opposed any and all aid that sought to encourage the development of democratic institutions in Russia. In fact, this echoed an old theme from the post-WWII years, when every proposed treaty with the Soviets was opposed by some politicians on the grounds that it was a smokescreen that would allow the USSR to develop weapons—while the United States abided by the terms of the treaty and therefore fell behind its dominant enemy. The durability of this frame of reference is reminiscent of the situation with John Foster Dulles as described by Holsti and mentioned earlier in this essay. Indeed, remnants of this belief impact US-Russia relations even today.12

Similar in many ways to the problems encountered in assessing the argument over nuclear arms negotiations are those difficulties encountered in resolving the dispute over nuclear power, fueled by the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine. Included in this volume (chapter 21) is an introductory essay I wrote for an edited volume on nuclear power; in that essay I discuss the development of what Weart has termed “nuclear fear”—an irrational fear of atomic power in all its forms brought on by the fusion in the public mind of nuclear weapons
with nuclear power production. (449)\textsuperscript{13} Thus, each time there is a nuclear accident of any kind, that fear is reinforced and expanded regardless of the nature of the accident itself. The first such event was the accident at Three Mile Island, a nuclear generating plant in Pennsylvania. Despite the fact that the secondary containment vessel prevented the escape of much nuclear radiation, fear ran rampant in the region; ultimately, the company that operated the plant paid out millions in compensation for dubious claims.\textsuperscript{14} Few, if any, new nuclear facilities were built in the years following the accident. Like Chernobyl, it is an event recognizable by a single term: Three Mile Island or, simply, TMI.

The nuclear accident at Chernobyl has had a similar impact worldwide; this despite the fact that it was not really a nuclear accident at all, but rather an explosion caused by accidentally superheating the reactor cooling water. Because the Soviet style reactor had no secondary containment (unlike reactors in the United States), when the roof blew off the reactor building, radiation was released into the atmosphere, contaminating the surrounding area and carried by prevailing winds into Belarus and around the world. Many believe that Chernobyl was the final nail in the coffin of nuclear power, and a number of countries turned away from that renewable source of energy in the aftermath of Chernobyl. Reinforcing the fear of nuclear power was the tsunami that struck Fukushima Nuclear Plant in Japan—again, not really a nuclear accident but a tragedy brought about by a tidal wave that followed an offshore earthquake, overwhelmed the plant, and drowned the emergency diesel generators that were (poorly) placed in spots vulnerable to flooding. Again, no one was interested in the arguments or evidence that pointed out the difference between Chernobyl or Fukushima and Three Mile Island. And, at a time when the world is seeking to replace fossil fuels with renewable energy, even research into safer nuclear technologies was cut off. Although many believe that nuclear power is necessary to a viable green energy strategy, at least in the short term, one rarely hears it mentioned in discussions of the world’s energy future.

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As noted above, the question posed at the beginning of this Introduction—“Why would no one care about the evidence?”—underlies the essays in this volume, as we explore the use and control of information in the USSR
in the years leading up to that country’s dissolution. And the important question from our perspective is “What does this mean for the future of public discourse regarding significant issues like the tragedy of KAL 007 or the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant?”

No change event occurs in a vacuum. The Soviet system itself laid the groundwork over many years for the impact that the events discussed in this volume had on the Soviet way of life. This is not to deny the profound ramifications that tragedies in the 1980s had on the 1991 dissolution of the USSR; it merely indicates that these events alone did not cause that dissolution—it was many years in the making. The Soviet war in Afghanistan, for instance, proved unsettling, as body bags returned from the front lines in contravention of the official line on the fortunes of the war. Nonetheless, it is our contention that both the shootdown of KAL Flight 007 in 1983 and the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986 exposed the system and its failings in a way that had not occurred before. In so doing, they opened a kind of public sphere, space for arguments over policy to arise, a claim we make in another essay included here, “The Final Days: The Development of Argumentative Discourse in the Soviet Union.” (489) In that essay we explore the ramifications of the decision not to contest environmental arguments that grew out of the Chernobyl accident.

In the case of Korean Air Lines Flight 007, information being broadcast via Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) contradicted the official story published in Pravda and Izvestia about the fate of the airliner and provided greater detail about the tragedy. Izvestia, for its part, initially wrote that the airliner “continued its flight toward the Sea of Japan.” Even though only a few people were brave enough to listen to the short-wave broadcasts from RFE/RL or one of the other “radios,”15 information spread quickly via word of mouth and other traditional conduits. Thus, Soviet citizens were confronted with information about the fate of the airliner that directly refuted official pronouncements (or, in this case, official silence), something that rarely happened in the USSR.

The nuclear accident that occurred when the Unit 4 reactor at Chernobyl exploded—and the government’s initial response to it—broke the increasingly fragile social compact that existed between the Soviet people and the government of the USSR. I have always believed that the accident itself revealed a great deal about the state of life in the Soviet Union. Consider that just a few miles from Pripyat (the town that housed those who worked at the power plant) a major explosion occurred, one that
literally blew a large hole in the roof of the reactor building, and no one noticed, everyone kept about their business. For two days, the inhabitants of Pripyat behaved as though nothing had happened; they continued their normal routine, children played outside in the warm spring sun. Then, two days after the explosion, hundreds of buses arrived to evacuate everyone from the contaminated zone. At that point, people began to panic; some in Kiev to the south of the plant threw their children onto any train leaving the area, without regard for its destination. Virtually everyone felt betrayed by the government. “They didn’t tell us!” people cried. “They didn’t tell us we were in danger!”

That betrayal, coupled with the crushing economic blow of the anticipated health consequences of the accident and its aftermath, ultimately sealed the fate of the seventy-year-old system of government in the USSR. At the same time, however, it opened a potential path to a more democratic form of government, which we will examine in a later volume.

In the information-constrained society that was the 1980s USSR, evidence provided by the state increasingly lacked believability and came to be seen as untrustworthy. Once people decided the government had lied to them, or had withheld vital information, no credibility was extended to the evidence offered in support of its claims—first about KAL 007 and then, more impactfully, about Chernobyl. This kind of “credibility gap” contributes to a decline in the use of evidence: if no one believes it anyway, why bother?16

At the same time, little in the way of training in critical thinking was available to the Soviet people, and they were not able to evaluate either the evidence or the claims that this evidence purported to support. In a rational world, evidence precedes belief. In the 1980s USSR, as a result of the loss of credibility after Chernobyl, Soviet citizens, acting at an emotional level, rejected the claims made by the Soviet state. Strikingly, in a bold move, the Soviet government attempted to counter the emerging lack of faith among the populace by authorizing the production of two documentaries—Chernobyl: A Chronicle of Difficult Weeks and Warning. Although unsuccessful, this strategy, which we detailed in a 1991 article (included in this volume) entitled “Redefining Glasnost in the Soviet Media: The Recontextualization of Chernobyl” (483), is further evidence that Mikhail Gorbachev understood the important changes taking place in Soviet society and the growing need to address popular concerns at some level.
There was a third incident that impinged on US-Soviet relations in the late 1980s: the 1988 shootdown of an Iranian airliner, Iran Air Flight 655, by the USS Vincennes, which was on patrol in the Persian Gulf. The international media immediately began making the comparison to the Soviet shootdown of KAL 007 some five years earlier. Surprisingly, the Gorbachev government chose not to use the potential comparison to galvanize world opinion against the United States. Gennady Gerasimov, speaking for the Soviet government, commented, “the wild anti-Soviet howl raised by the US Government and mass media concerning the South Korean plane was a bad example, and we are not going to follow it.” (172) We continue to believe that the aftermath of this tragedy gives insight into the final years of the Gorbachev government and of the USSR and that the treatment given it in the international arena by both governments reflected a “significant change in relations between the superpowers.” (266: 305) This incident also gave us an opportunity to refine our method of composite narrative as a means of uncovering the connected message across multiple texts issued by governments, in this case the governments of the United States and the USSR.

While texts are usually associated with specific rhetors, we prefer to think of “rhetor” in broader terms; today a “rhetor” can range from a single individual to a collectivity of individuals speaking on behalf of an organization, institution, or administration. Thus, when using composite narrative, a “text” can consist of several discrete elements/utterances if the set of such elements was conceived as a unified whole (e.g., an advertising campaign) or if all the set members aim to achieve a common purpose. While such a construct does not deny the instance when members of a collectivity speak as individuals, it recognizes the tendency of such entities to speak with a unified voice, permitting the collation of individual voices into a representative single voice for purposes of analysis and allowing the examination of those voices as a collective whole. More importantly, this construct recognizes the discourse of a rhetorical situation “as a complex episodical conception wherein the entire constellation of rhetoric surrounding a specific event is treated as the rhetorical text.” (475)

These three events presaged the opening up of the Soviet Union in ways that are discussed in some detail in the chapters that follow. The shooting down of the Korean airliner was the first impetus, as Soviet citizens were able to get more detailed news about the tragedy from the Western radios broadcasting into the Iron Curtain countries. While Russians,
like citizens of many countries, were naturally skeptical of much that their
government told them, it was difficult, if not impossible to get counter-
vailing information in 1980s USSR. We believe that this event represented
a crack in the façade of information impermeability that had enveloped
the Soviet Union since WWII. By the time of the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986, Gorbachev had initiated the reforms that shook up the
country: glasnost, perestroika, and uskorenie. The accident itself forever
changed the face of news broadcasting in the country, as reporters finally
made their way to the site and live broadcasts were shown throughout the
country. Once foreigners arrived to assist in the cleanup and the medical
emergency, it was impossible to fully contain the flow of information. The
Iran Air incident, as indicated above, signaled a new era in Soviet relations
with the West.

We examine each of these events in the essays, reviews, correspond-
ence, and excerpts included in this volume, focusing on the rhetorical
strategies, successes, and failures, as the Soviet Union began to transform.
Many of these studies were written contemporaneously; others are more
retrospective. Because they were written at different times—and for dif-
f erent audiences—there is of necessity some overlap and redundancy. But
each attempts to examine the rhetoric, the arguments, and the evidence
brought to bear on, first, the instinct to control information flow, and then
on the use of greater freedom of speech and press to influence the future
course taken by Russia.

Marilyn J. Young
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NOTES

1. See also (Clines, 114). Clines points out that the emphasis in Aristotle is on rhetoric,
rather than logic—hence the notion of all of the available means of persuasion.
2. The irony of the name Info-Wars should be lost on no one, as the site has a reputation
for spreading false information and bogus conspiracy theories.
3. The information in this example was reported in (383), following an investigation by
the Investigative Fund and the Center for Investigative Reporting. A recent Google
search for the terms “pizza Hillary children” found more than six million hits.
4. Until the dawn of the internet age, the biggest challenge in doing research was the
availability and access to information. The internet has changed that forever; if any-
thing, both researchers and the public at large are in a situation of “information
saturation.” Yet, information is not the same as evidence; in fact, information is not evidence until it is used in an argument to prove a claim.

5. *Argumentum ad verecundiam* is a rare type of fallacy—not because it is seldom used, but in that it can also be a type of legitimate argument. The determination as to whether a particular argument is valid or a fallacy turns on the authority cited. One can imagine, in this day and age, the complexity of this determination.

6. For a fuller discussion of this point see (491). While the discussion in (491) deals primarily with the function of associative/dissociative constructs in conspiracy argument, there is no reason to assume that such constructs, once accepted, would function differently in other narratives, including the economic narrative that occurs among manufacturer, advertiser, and consumer.

7. In contemporary linguistics this phenomenon is called “deixis.” It is specifically the sum of linguistic resources available to express the speaker’s point of view and assessment of truth value. Recent rhetorical theory seems to have bypassed such language studies. See also (481).

8. There are a number of recent examples of this tactic, most notably in the December 2020 senatorial campaign in the state of Georgia. In particular, television advertising by the Purdue and Loeffler campaigns relied heavily on innuendo reinforced by visual material designed to discredit their opponents.

9. See also (500).

10. This is also an example of the fallacy *argumentum ad ignorantiam* (appeal to ignorance), the fallacy that a proposition is true simply on the basis that it has not been proven false or that it is false simply because it has not been proven true.

11. Compounding the severe sociopolitical disincentives facing anyone who would challenge the government in an authoritarian state, the closed nature of such information-constrained societies means that citizens there face the same obstacles as do people in more open societies who would challenge technical experts in the policy arena.

12. However, in the 1990s, this attitude allowed nascent democracy in Russia to flounder; thus, this fear became something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading to chaos followed by the discrediting of democratic institutions and the rise of Putin. This is a discussion for a future volume.

13. See also (450), Weart’s follow-on work.

14. Of course, in the public mind the fact that the claims were paid was proof in itself that the claims were valid.

15. Other foreign broadcast stations that regularly beamed into the Soviet Union from Europe included Deutsche Welle and the BBC.

16. In the United States, this attitude toward government information about specific events probably has its origins in the 1950s, when then President Eisenhower denied that the United States had sent the U-2 on a mission over the USSR, even after the plane had been shot down by Soviet anti-aircraft missiles and the pilot (Francis Gary Powers) captured.