

Online Petition as a Type of Persuasive Discourse

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“Remember that what pulls the strings is the force hidden within; there lies the power to persuade, there the life – there, if one must speak out, the real man.”
(Marcus Aurelius)

It is well known that the innovative technologies and telecommunication means have enabled and accelerated new forms of human interactions through instant messaging and social networking. Nowadays people tend to spend more and more time online and do their best to catch up with the digitally driven world. This has promoted creation of a completely new, collaborative and universal culture called social media. It is a form of mass media that provides a new functional domain which allows development of public relations, creation and exchange of information through cyberspace. It refers to the means of Internet-based interaction among people in virtual communities, social networking sites.

As a matter of fact, social media is relatively new as a concept and media format. Since it includes a diverse collection of tools and services, few linguists have attempted to define, classify or categorize this sphere of communication. According to Kietzmann, social media employ mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platform via which individuals and communities share, cocreate, discuss, and modify user-generated content. It introduces substantial and pervasive changes to communication between organizations, communities and individuals (Kietzmann 2011:241-251). One thing is for sure: social media has become one of the most fast, relatively inexpensive and accessible as well as the most effective and powerful source for netizens worldwide, i.e. citizens of the Internet, to promote distribution of news, transfer of information, exchange of ideas and positions utilizing social media (Crystal 2004; Zappavigna 2012).

Petition writing is a way of social networking which has created new opportunities for millions of netizens from all over the world not only to publish, access and share information, but also to unite for a particular cause, to promote changes in order to make the world a better place to live in. Broadly, a petition is a request or demand directed to a government body or public entity to change something. However, it is first and foremost addressed to the public, persuading them to get together in support of a common cause in the form of electronic signatures.¹ Petition writing enables people to build social authority in order to achieve influence on the ruling system of the country. Its mission is to “close the gap between the world we have and the world most people everywhere want”. At present, there are numerous social networks, social communities that “empower millions of people from all walks of life to take action on pressing global, regional and national issues, from corruption and poverty to conflict and climate change, [...], allow thousands of individual efforts, however small, to be rapidly combined into a powerful collective force (<www.avaaz.org/en/about.php>). Thus, online petitions are one of the

boldest manifestations of persuasive attempts in our Internet-driven world to control and direct public opinion, to call for change (Earl & Kimport 2011).

The study of persuasive discourse dates back to the field of classic rhetoric that involved the comprehensive study of the art of persuasion, i.e. the power of discovering the available means of persuasion in the particular speech situation. It is not surprising, thus, that classical rhetoric has much to offer the modern study of persuasive communication and that the exploration of persuasion should be based on the time-testing principles. It is well known that one of the fundamental principles of classical rhetoric introduced by Aristotle is that there are three general means or processes of persuasion: **ethos**, i.e. the source's credibility, the speaker's/writer's authority, **logos**, i.e. the logic used to support a claim, also the facts and statistics used to help support the argument, **pathos**, i.e. the emotional or motivational appeals, emotional language and numerous sensory details (Bernet & Bedau 1993; Berger 2003; Aristotel' 1998). Aristotle suggests that in a persuasive communication it is vital to use logos as much as possible; incorporate ethos and pathos as needed (Worthington 1994).

The present article is an attempt to show that the persuasive processes of logos, pathos, and ethos are well amplified in online petitions. Our aim is to prove that success of the persuasive intent of an online petition is dependent largely upon the effective use and integration of these three forces of persuasive communication. The basic questions raised in the paper are whether an argument should be entirely a matter of reason and logic, to what extent an appeal to emotions is necessary, and in what way emotional appeals contribute to the persuasive intent of the online petitions as a modern variant of persuasive discourse.

Pathos (Greek for *suffering* or *experience*) refers to the emotional and the imaginative impact of the message on an audience. It means persuading the audience by appealing to the audience's emotions, sympathy and imagination. The emotions strongly assist, sometimes even determine persuasion. Writing about ethos, R. Smith notes that persuasion through an appeal to an audience's emotions encompasses two separate aspects: emotional substance, i.e. persuasion by arousing an emotional reaction in the audience regarding the substance of matter under consideration and medium mood control, i.e. use of the medium of a message to generate emotional reactions in the audience (Smith 2008: 11). Actually, by emotional substance he means an appeal to emotions through the use of linguistic means, and by medium mood control he means the emotional impact on the mood of the recipient through various extralinguistic factors, such as graphics, images, illustrations, audio records and video or links to the videos that are attached to the verbal text and supplement words. Linguistic means of persuasive communication appeal to the mind, while the visual material moves the feelings of the peripient. Hence, two essential pathetic strategies used in online petitions ensure success and convince the receiver to take a particular action: the wording of the arguments and visual material.

Petitioners can please the readers by using simple, understandable and grammatically accurate language, whereas the struggle through complicated or grammatically inaccurate writing style can annoy, frustrate or simply distract the reader's attention.

Therefore, in order to make the reader more receptive to the arguments, the language of petition should be devoid of condensed stylistic devices and techniques which will convey clarity and ease to the arguments. Instead, words bearing connotative overtones in the given context are largely used in online petitions. It is connotation that helps the writer to construct emotionally-colored persuasive speech, that helps to produce picturesque and vivid images in the mind of the reader. “Emotive language reveals the author’s approval or disapproval, assigns praise or blame – in other words make a judgment about the subject” (Rottenberg 2000:240). This in its turn heightens the impact of the persuasive message and encourages the reader to accept the offered position.

The use of an emotive and colorful language in online petitions has the power to express and arouse deep and sympathetic feelings that draws the readers into the scene and allows them to share mentally the same experience of happiness, comfort, love or pain, fear, horror, panic, etc. Words with positive connotation are used to show the subject in an attractive light, meanwhile words with negative connotation help to describe the subject in a less favorable way. For instance, the literal, denotative meaning of the word “*home*” is “a place of residence” but in a specific context it may reflect attached feelings that have accumulated around the word. So, in the sentence “*don’t deprive white bears of their home*” the word “*home*” is actually used with the meaning “*love, warmth, security*”. Similarly, words that are associated with people are often used to refer to animals or even to nature, to show much care and sympathy for them, as well as to stress their vital role and significance in human life, like *death/killing of dolphins; torture/suffering of animals; deportation of animals; curious and charming sea otters; to control sea otter populations, animal welfare; keep animals captive under inhumane conditions; environmental consciousness; beauty of natural landscape; fragile ecosystem; turtles make arduous journey; to ruin wildlife; polystyrene foam is an environmental menace; extraction will jeopardize countless lives of animals, etc.*

The emotive charge of the message in online petitions is also increased due to the extensive use of intensifiers. These are modifiers, words that quantify the idea they modify, like *very, so, quite, just, mostly, really, extremely, drastically, dramatically, awfully, terribly, remarkably, moderately, deadly, slightly, totally, utterly*, etc. They help to make the statement or a particular idea sound more exciting. The source can also make something sound less exciting by saying “*this is somewhat useful*”, downplaying the usefulness. These adverbs can manage the listener’s feelings about the concept.

The extralinguistic factors grab the attention and hold the interest of wider audience, provide basis for the perception of the persuasive message and make them more receptive to the substance of the message. Due to emotional images, such as e.g. *photos of bloody corpse of animals, animals being tested for research, a child crying of pain, pictures of barren land or frozen wasteland* and the like, the message becomes more impressive, dramatic or thrilling which gives a warm feeling, stirs anger or pity for the victims, brings a tear to their eyes. The extralinguistic means can in some situations effect a successful outcome of a persuasive communicative situation where words alone would have had little effect.

For instance, the claim that “*the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is no longer a home*

for poor wildlife, notably polar bears because of global warming” may not mean much until it is reinforced with heart-breaking image of the poor animals; or the statement *“Most of ANWR land is barren”* may not mean much until it is corroborated by a black and white image of hollow and bleak bodies of land; or the claim *“Chimpanzees are humankind’s closest genetic relative, sharing 96-98% of our DNT and now an estimated 1000 chimpanzees are currently held in U.S. laboratories for research, of which approximately half are federally owned”* will not have the desired effect without the image of a fearful and painful expression in the eyes of the poor animals, looking straight into the eyes of the viewers; or the statement *“Hundreds of dolphins die every year in the hunts from trauma and blood loss.”* will not touch reader’s heart so deeply without the video showing a child swimming and playing merrily with a dolphin and then showing dolphins being killed in a manner which any human being may find extremely distressing and brutal, etc.

Images of sufferings, human or animal, can be immensely persuasive and may play a substantial role in increasing public pressure to end, for example, violence or mass slaughter of wildlife. The emotions most often appealed to in online petitions are patriotism, loyalty to mankind, love of nature, desire of getting clean and beautiful environment. Other emotions frequently appealed to, as opposed to positive emotions, are threat for shortened and unhealthy life, pity for endangered species of animals, anxiety for contaminated environment, polluted air, harmful food, fear for human evil, etc. The petitioners do their best to encourage the reader to take actions to ban human or animal right violation and to take better care of Mother Nature.

Another important component of medium mood control technique is graphical design. Visual persuasion in online petitions is frequently obtained with the help of numerous graphic design markers within the verbal text, such as font size, font type, word spacing, capitalization, underlining, highlighting, adding colors to words or phrases, italicizing or making them bold and the like. These techniques help to make the key words or phrases stand out which, in its turn, maximizes their persuasive impact. Besides, the focus on graphic design is brought in order to establish the raised question firmly in the memory of the reader in an almost subconscious way.

It should be noted in this connection that one should be careful with the usage of highly emotional language as it will not necessarily be in a direction desired by the source. In this connection Bettinghaus states that for the receiver who holds relatively moderate views about the topic, a message that uses very extreme language is likely to have a kind of boomerang effect and attitudes may be changed less. There are, of course people, who respond favorably to the use of highly emotional language and its use in certain situations is justified. However, in most persuasive situations the receivers may tend to react negatively toward the use of extremely emotional, highly intense language. It will sound embarrassing and the message will simply be rejected (Bettinghaus 1979).

Nevertheless, one should bear in mind that though the visual means of persuasion have great impact on the readers, they are never self-supporting. They may serve as evidence for the arguments, but they are not arguments themselves. They should be well explained and integrated into the verbal text that provides the logic and principal support of the thesis.

The second aspect of aristotaelian rhetoric, **Logos** (logical appeal, Greek for “word”) refers to persuading through reasoning, logic and rational argument. It concerns the internal consistency of the message - the clarity of the claim, the logic of its reasons, and the effectiveness of its supporting evidence. The impact of logos on the listener/audience is called the argument’s logical appeal. Giving effective, persuasive reasons to back up the source’s claims is the heart of argumentation. It is common knowledge that persuasion is closely tied to argumentation. Bernet and Bedau draw a distinctive line between persuasion and argument, regarding argument as one form of persuasion that relies on reason; it offers statements as reasons for other statements. Meanwhile, persuasion has a broader meaning; to persuade is to win over the interlocutor by giving reasons and appealing to the emotions. Still, for an argument to be effective, it must be presented persuasively, i.e. the writer’s/speaker’s tone (attitude toward topic, audience) must be appropriate if the discourse is to persuade the reader (Bernet and Bedau 1993).

The process of persuading through logical arguments is the decisive key to the persuasive communication and plays a vital role in structuring an effective persuasive message of the online petition. The creator of the online petition is supposed first and foremost to state his/her position clearly, make use of arguments based on definition, claims about the nature of things, demonstrate the benefits of his/her position and, if possible, back up the assertions with data (experience, statistics, etc.), appeal to cause and consequences, make analogies or comparisons, cite parallel cases, produce authority by citing the received opinions of experts or public opinion as support for his/her position and, finally present “call to action”, i.e. what the source wants the argument to achieve. The recipient of the message is invited to take an action and the source’s task is to make it easy and desirable for the audience to take that action.

A well-organized structure of the persuasive message is of utmost importance for an argumentative discourse, and online petition is not an exception. An effective introduction, like a key, not only opens the persuasive communication, it opens the audience minds by arousing interest. It can make or break the rest of the discourse. The words used in the introductory part of the persuasive message have to paint a picture making the persuasive communication become more than just words. The body of the speech needs to be constructed logically. It needs to be coherent. It needs to flow. The conclusion is created so as to reinforce what has been said in the body to gain the desired response. The call to action is presented in the conclusive part of the message which will encourage the audience to act in a specific way.

Having studied the overall structure of online petitions posted on different sites, we can state that a well-organized online petition should involve the following five basic questions:

1. What is X?
2. What is the value of X?
3. What are the causes (or the consequences) of X?
4. What is the evidence for my claim about X?
5. What should (or ought or must) be done about X?

The first point implies that an argument will be most fruitful if the interlocutors are well aware of the topic being discussed, if they perceive on what is being written about. The best way to secure such agreement is to produce a clear and precise definition of the key idea i.e. to state the essence of the theme. Besides fulfilling the basic function of defining the theme, the opening statement should also be bold and informative enough to arouse the reader's interest, to stir curiosity and prepare his/her for the rest. For this purpose mainly declarative sentences of affirmative type are used:

e.g. Bees are dying out of the landscape; Hunting is a completely cruel sport; The United Nations report in 2006 found that livestock cause 18 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions; The otter is an apex predator; The cost to the UK of rabies or other new diseases becoming established in UK wildlife is huge; The illegal release of otters is posing a potentially disastrous threat to the wildlife; The U.S. Navy has been using our oceans as a staging ground for target practice for more than 30 years; Day by day our wildlife is in increasing danger, etc.

The second point implies that the discourse should have an evaluation concerning the significance of the topic or theme. It normally has two purposes: to set forth an assessment and to convince the reader that the assessment is reasonable. The topic is the problem, its definition, whereas the thesis is the argumentative theme, the author's primary claim or contention, the proposition that the rest of the argumentative discourse is about to explain and defend. It is advisable to formulate briefly a basic thesis, i.e. a claim, a central point, a chief position in the opening paragraph. Here the petitioner states his/her position towards the claim and supports the claim by giving evaluation to the theme. The evaluation should sound objective in order to gain the trust of the reader:

e.g. Our dogs, cats, and children would be under constant treat because of rabies; Smoking should be prohibited in all enclosed public places; The use of GM and cloned crops & livestock should be considered positively; Hunting can easily decrease wildlife population and make species endangered; It is believed that most bee's are dying as a result of loss of habitat and malnutrition; Merely ingesting GM crops will not change any one's own genetic makeup; No local or national government body should carry out, fund, or allow lethal measures to control Red Foxes which live in urban areas; The international trade in animals for food should be on the hook and not on the hoof, etc.

Very often the theme or the thesis of the petition is introduced with the help of the rhetorical questions, adding expressive-emotional overtones that have a great impact on the reader. It assumes that only one answer can reasonably be made, and that the readers understand and agree with the questioner's unstated answer. In fact, this is another way of capturing the readers' interest and encouraging them to go on reading, and in the end,

making the necessary post-communicative steps, i.e. giving their e-signatures in favour of the given online petition:

e.g. Are human activities linked to global warming?; How far will we allow to spread?; Why is it that most food options involve frying, grease, and overall unhealthy component?; Do we need to fight for domestic oil and gas Co's?; Why do we need to fight back against the environment?; What is the Trans Pacific Partnership between countries for?; Is it possible for companies to manufacture ingredients, combination of ingredients and final formulations of cosmetics without animal testing?; Will you want your life taken away cruelly by someone else the way people have killed these turtles? etc.

Generally, the definition of the theme and the production of the thesis compose the introductory part of the online petition. Besides establishing a common ground, a rapport between the reader and the petitioner, it helps to attract the reader's attention by setting a dramatic and effective tone for the overall petition so that they feel compelled to read further.

The third principle refers to the presentation of the possible causes and consequences the problem can bring. It should be noted that the third and the fourth points are closely interconnected with each other and should be treated together. The petitioner is supposed to present and identify the evidence for and against the claims. It is not enough for an argumentative piece of writing to state the opinion, belief or position, and online petition is not an exception. The bare fact of the sincere belief in what you say or write is not itself any evidence that what you believe is true. One needs to be able to support his/her proposition or the claim in a persuasive and effective way to make his petition really work. In addition, the petitioner must be assured that the arguments provided do not include confidential, false or defamatory statements.

These two principles comprise the main factual background of the online petition, and it is in this part of the petition that the above-mentioned logos should be manifested to the best. However, as different from other kinds of argumentative writings, arguments backing the claim in online petitions is presented in a brief way. Often each argument is enveloped in a single sentence and is presented as an enumerated list of arguments. Hence, this accounts for the reason that arguments should be great in number and be strong, precise and to the point:

e.g. Our large human population is squeezing wildlife towards extinction; bumble bees, honey bees and many other species are threatened by loss of habitat due to human building; The demise of the eel population means that eels are not available as food, so otters have turned to other species of fish and birds including domestic species, as well as wildlife; Though the ecological effect of GM crops are not entirely clear, they are unlikely to be physiologically harmful, as unlike pesticides and weed

killers, specific genes introduced to GM crops produce known natural non-toxic compounds; etc.

The fifth point involves policy offering proposal of how to act, what measures should be taken to solve the problem. When submitting an online petition, the author should be aware of the fact that all online petitions should contain a proposal, a call for specific action from the government. In case the online petition does not include a clear statement explaining what action the creator of the petition wants the government to take, it will be rejected. For this purpose the constructions with the modal verbs *should*, *must* and modal words expressing certainty, *such as surely, certainly, of course, no doubt, undoubtedly, apparently, etc.* are used which make the statements sound more alarming and perturbing:

e.g. The government should surely withdraw all plants for wind turbines in the southwest of England; The government should immediately take advice from vets, scientists, and others with relevant expert experience and review the potential diseases that pet quarantine protects against, etc.

The persuasive intent of the petitioner is often achieved by the use of performative verbs, such as “urge”, “insist”, “request” and the like, which explicitly name the illocutionary act being performed. Though the petition is primarily addressed to the government, the construction *third person pronoun+ should* or *passive constructions with introductory it* are used to express his/her decision or suggestion. This is done with the aim to avoid sounding rude and imperative. These statements are generally placed in the closing paragraph of the petition in order to make the petition more sound and persuasive, and to leave all the responsibility of the cause on the shoulders of the government:

e.g. We urge the Environment Agency to tackle the existing population of otters in the best way possible; We urge the government to reduce immigration into the UK as wildlife has a right to thrive here; It is proposed that the government amend the Act, to resolve these impasses for Bats & other protected species; It is supposed that the government to subsidize animal-free food as it is more ecologically sound than meat, dairy and eggs; To effectively solve global crises and problems, in particularly environment, energy, global warming and climate change, it is necessary for the global community to adopt a comprehensive and effective plan and actions, etc.

It is worth noting that our study showed that not all the online petitions were exactly alike, and not all of them followed these basic principles concerning its structure. Throughout our analysis we came across cases when these succeeding steps were intermingled into each other and mixed. Some of the petitions were very short in length, consisting only of a single paragraph, others were too long with an elaborate language and tactics of persuading. Some were produced in the form of a letter, car-

rying the characteristic features of an open letter, some were close to the style of formal documents.

Finally, the third aspect of aristotelian logic, **Ethos** (Greek for “character”) often referred to as the argument’s “ethical appeal”, is the trustworthiness of the source, which involves efforts on the part of the persuader to inspire confidence, to establish credibility in the eyes of the reader/listener. According to Aristotle, our perception of a speaker’s/writer’s character and credibility plays a significant role in how that audience will respond to the message presented. The more credibility the speaker or writer has, the more receptive the audience will be. The idea is that effective source of the message should convey the idea that they are informed, intelligent, benevolent and honest. Bernet & Bedau suggest that “when we read an argument we are often aware of the person or voice behind the words, and our assent to the argument depends partly on the extent to which we can share the speaker’s/writer’s assumptions, look at the matter from the speaker’s/writer’s point of view – in short, identify with the speaker” (Bernet & Bedau 1994:242). We are naturally more likely to be persuaded by a person who, we think, has personal warmth, consideration of others, a good mind and solid learning. We tend to believe people whom we respect.

One of the central problems of argumentation for the persuader is to project an impression to the receiver that he/she is someone who is likable and worthy of respect. Often recipients know the character of speakers/writers ahead of time. They come with a reputation, with the so-called extrinsic ethos. People, whose education, experience, and previous performances qualify them to speak on a certain issue, earn the special extrinsic ethos of the authority. But, ethos is often conveyed through the actual text we hear or read, i.e. through the tone and style of the message, the way it is written or spoken and what it says. This impression created by the text itself is the intrinsic ethos. The only way to inspire confidence in written discourse is to compose the thoughts so that nothing causes a reader to doubt the writer’s intelligence, honesty, and goodwill. As we know, different circumstances call for different language styles. Thus, depending on the topic, audience and the speech situation, the writer’s way of presenting attitude towards the self, the audience, the subject changes.

Ethical appeal is also important for creating a persuasive petition. Extrinsic ethos in online petitions is obtained due to the support of well-known people or organizations. Many online petitions are either created or sponsored by famous people, like actors, celebrities or companies that are known to the public for their good deeds or high moral features and are respected, even if they are not experts knowledgeable in the given field. Intrinsic ethos achieved through the verbal message itself plays a more decisive role in online petitions. It is obtained due to the above-mentioned factors hinting that the author is well-informed, a person of goodwill or that s/he is greatly concerned with the problem being discussed.

To conclude, we can state that much of human action seeks to change feelings, intentions and position, to direct public opinion, to influence public behavior by numerous communicative means. In the world of new technologies and in democratic society, online petition is the best and, probably, the most effective way of achieving this goal. It

is a way of democratization of the Internet, the purpose of which is to provide an easy way for the public to engage in people-powered politics in the country and the way online petition is promoted has a critical impact on the outcome of the campaign.

Notes:

1. Nowadays it is largely used especially in the US government system. The right to petition the US government is guaranteed by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Throughout the history, Americans have used petitions to organize around issues they care about from ending slavery, to guaranteeing women's right to vote, to the civil rights movement. In the 21st century, the Internet provides a new means for such petitions to be made. In September 22, 2011 Obama administration launched a social platform called "We the people" with a slogan "Your voice in our government", giving all Americans the chance for their voices to be heard. In this connection the US president Barack Obama stated that "When I ran for this office, I pledged to make government more open and accountable to its citizens. That's what the new "We the People" feature on WhiteHouse.gov is all about – giving Americans a direct line to the White House on the issues and concerns that matter most of them" (<www.gov20.govfresh.com/white-house-offers-we-the-people-online-petitions-at-whitehouse-gov>).

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21. <www.avaaz.org>

Առցանց էլեկտրոնային խնդրագիրը որպես պերսուազիվ դիսկուրսի տարատեսակ

Հոդվածի հեղինակն ուսումնասիրում է պերսուազիվ նպատակի իրագործումը առցանց էլեկտրոնային խնդրագրերում՝ հաշվի առնելով դրանց լեզվական և արտալեզվական առանձնահատկությունները: Առցանց էլեկտրոնային խնդրագիրը դիտվում է որպես պերսուազիվ դիսկուրսի ժամանակակից ձև, որում սակայն, պահպանվել են դեռևս անտիկ հռետորական արվեստում Արիստոտելի առաջադրած համոզման գործընթացի երեք կարևոր բաղադրիչները՝ էթոսը, որը վերաբերում է խոսողի/լսողի հեղինակության միջոցով իրագործվող ներգործությանը, պաթոսը, որը վերաբերում է լեզվական, ինչպես նաև արտալեզվական միջոցներով հաղորդակցի ցզացմունքային դաշտի վրա իրագործվող ներգործությանը և լոգոսը, որը վերաբերում է խոսակցի բանականության վրա փաստարկների միջոցով իրագործվող ներգործությանը: Հոդվածագիրը քննության է առնում, թե սույն բաղադրիչ տարրերը ինչ լեզվական միջոցներով են արտահայտվում առցանց էլեկտրոնային խնդրագրում, և թե որքանով են արտալեզվական գործոնները նպաստում պերսուազիվ ներգործության հաջող իրականացմանը: