The editors first began using the phrase *the dark side of digital composing* in the aftermath of the tragic Virginia Tech shootings in 2007. Reflecting on the difference between the 1999 Columbine shooting and the Virginia Tech shooting, we discussed the intentional effort on the part of the VT shooter to send a digital portfolio of media work to the press in an attempt to use the press to amplify his digital texts. This digital media work, combined with the shooter killing thirty-two people before committing suicide, deeply troubled us as teachers of digital writing. We saw a clear intention on the part of the shooter to think about the rhetorical delivery of his texts in a way that previous school shooters had, to our knowledge, not done. In between the two sets of attacks, the shooter stopped at the post office to mail a package. It was a digital portfolio of the shooter’s photos, videos, and writing.¹ Sent to NBC news, the package contained photos of the shooter posing with weapons; several video clips, including one that became known as a “confession” video that now has over three million views on YouTube²; and other materials. He had spent quite some time planning not only the violent attack but also the way the words and images that characterize it and his own identity would be presented and circulated. The attacks themselves were “image events” meant to give the messages the shooter intended to circulate a massive media push. If the Virginia Tech shooter’s use of media offered a shift in how digital media was used as a weapon of terror in school shootings, we also saw another shift happening in how media was being used by insurgencies in Iraq.

Around the same historical moment the Virginia Tech shooting happened, we were also reading about the growing compositional changes to how attack videos were composed and distributed. As Daniel Kimmage and Kathleen Ridolfo reported on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty: “Insurgents’ willingness to forego a centralized brick-and-mortar production infrastructure and their reliance on the Internet as the primary distribution channel for their
media products have led to the emergence of a decentralized, building-block production model in which virtually any individual or group can design a media product to serve insurgent aims and goals. . . . One or more individuals working anywhere in the world can create everything else.”3 As teachers of digital rhetoric, the Virginia Tech shooting and reports on how insurgents were using digital media digital struck us together with a force similar to the powerful example Steven Katz (1992) provides in his article on the ethic of expediency in technical communication.4 As scholars, we saw that theorizing and understanding the ethical dimensions of digital composing must involve a careful examination of how digital composing intersects with violence. For us, questions arise from the massive increase in not only the available means of composition, but the potentially instant ubiquitous circulation of digital composition: what responsibilities do those of us who teach digital rhetoric and multimodal composing have to anticipate and prepare students to mitigate the dark side of digital composition and rhetorical operations that are imbued with digital media #RhetOps?

A question for us that emerged from our editorial conversations is how we should work toward articulating principles that guide our work as scholars and teachers of digital rhetoric as we see the ability for our disciplinary knowledge to become weaponized. These factors include new technologies and globalized markets, and we note that Laura Gurak’s Persuasion and Privacy in Cyberspace: The Online Protests over Lotus Market Place and the Clipper Chip (1997) helped to open this line of inquiry.5 Gurak’s analysis, guided by the work of rhetorical theorists such as James Zappen and Michael Halloran and the science and technology studies scholar Langdon Winner, revealed that rhetorical ethics could and would be embedded into the mundane objects of our everyday lives. Another early monograph in this area is Bernadette Longo’s Spurious Coin: A History of Science, Management, and Technical Writing (2000), a work that implicates technical writing pedagogy and textbooks in the project of the United States’ global cultural dominance, a project that is equal parts industrialization and militarization. Today, we suggest that the militarized deployment of digital rhetoric is now part of our everyday lives—that is, the production and proliferation of mass disinformation campaigns, or what’s been more recently called “fake news” in the popular press.

The line of inquiry into the broader social context of conflict Gurak and Longo helped to initiate continues today with works such as Mark Ward’s Deadly Documents: Technical Communication, Organizational Discourse, and the Holocaust (2014).6 Ward’s book continues the conversation first begun by Steven Katz in 1992 when his article “The Ethic of Expediency” was among the first published pieces to include rhetorical analysis of primary source doc-
uments from the Third Reich. By including a contribution from Katz in the afterword to *Deadly Documents*, Ward emphasizes that the ethical issues Katz highlighted continue to be salient. The takeaway from this rich exchange between Katz and Ward is generative for our collection: rhetorical knowledge is a substantive, not merely an instrumental, component to both totalitarian regimes and to the means of resisting and dismantling them. We both make and unmake systems of domination with words. More recently in rhetorical studies, we’ve been influenced by scholarship such as Edwards and Hart’s 2010 *Kairos* special issue on rhetoric and the military, William Marcellino’s 2015 “Revisioning Strategic Communication through Rhetoric and Discourse Analysis” in *Joint Forces Quarterly*, both of which make a strong case for how rhetoric and the military converge.\(^7\) By the time the call for papers went out in 2016, the work collected here was well underway as Philippe-Joseph Salazar published “A Caliphate of Culture? ISIS’s Rhetorical Power” in *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, examining how an alternate global culture spreads its power.\(^8\)

Outside of rhetorical studies, Zeynep Tufekci’s *Twitter and Teargas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (2017) presents relevant case studies of uprisings and protest movements from Tahrir Square to Occupy Wall Street, drawing parallels between the strategies and politics of technologically mediated organizing.\(^9\) *Twitter and Teargas* signals a shift away from the relatively benign portrayal of network technology as a force for positive social change typical in mainstream press coverage of events such as the Arab Spring. Tufekci’s book raises important questions about technology and social networks in particular as a means to undermine democratic institutions and empower oppressive forces. These same themes lay at the center of Cathy O’Neil’s best-selling *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (2017).\(^10\) O’Neil’s account puts technology in the crosshairs. She examines algorithms used in various kinds of systems that incorporate data mined from user activity in digital spaces to divide people from one another, perpetuate inequity, and disenfranchise the vulnerable.

Across all of these sources, what we see is a burgeoning tradition of looking at the military implications of rhetoric and technical writing that goes back to at least to Katz. In this collection, we build on this work by assembling a diverse group of authors writing about the contemporary use of digital rhetoric by both state actors and military organizations as well as by non-state actors whose motives include carrying out violence.

Just as digital rhetoric amplifies compositional and rhetorical trends that existed in print and manuscript culture (i.e., composing for recomposition), it also enables new and inexpensive ways to weaponize rhetoric in support of face-to-face conflicts. As with composing with recomposition, the role of
rhetoric in war is not new. Rhetoric has always had a well-documented role in arguments for and against war, arguments to acquire additional military resources, arguments to motivate and inspire troops, to strike fear in the heart of the enemy, and to spread disinformation and propaganda. However, what we think the evolving ways rhetoric can be digitally deployed, and how rhetoric or messaging is discussed as a critical tool worthy of military investment, is a new trend that the field should monitor.

Two broad themes therefore run through the chapters collected here: (1) increased interest in digital rhetoric by military organizations, and (2) the use of machine-learning and nonhuman agents in digital networks. To this end, we have assembled a broad group of researchers whose interests and experience range from scholars, researchers, and practitioners, including members of the RAND Corporation researching the Islamic State, a member of the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department working on a project to track graffiti through databases, to the war reporter Cheryl Hatch reflecting on the media, to a former National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency employee examining the role of rhetoric and the intelligence community. By striking a balance between analysis and practitioner’s stories, we think that this collection will help students, teachers, and researchers of rhetoric frame difficult conversations about the role of our field knowledge and its increasing use as a digital tool—not just to resolve conflict through deliberation but also to incite and exacerbate conflict. We have asked contributors to consider how should digital writers, teachers of digital writing and rhetoric, and scholars of rhetoric think about the world populated with networked, cyborg writers and their growing military applications? How should we talk about writing with machines as the ability of machines to deploy rhetorical strategies—often at humans’ explicit request—grows more sophisticated? What should we teach these machines to do? How should we teach them? We have long recognized the perils of a rhetorical education for humans that is devoid of ethical reasoning, but we now must take seriously a new set of responsibilities to teach machines what to do and what not do with powerful rhetorical strategies.

WHY DIGITAL MILITARY RHETORIC?

While rhetoric has always been valuable to states and militaries, we want to make the claim that rhetoric’s cost and use value to state and non-state conflict increases with the ubiquity and speed of digital delivery and large scale automated networks such as botnets. Ami Pedahzur, drawing on Theo Farrell, writes that the growth of special operations forces after World War II are due in part to their relative affordability, their ability to be constituted and dis-
banded quickly, and the way they are “alert, agile, and responsive to continual stimuli”—thus their human capital makes them an “ideal vehicle for exploration and innovation” of new tactics and capabilities.\textsuperscript{11} Here, we see a parallel between how Pedahzur discusses the proliferation of special operations after World War II and the growth of #RhetOps in the twenty-first century. As we look at recent RhetOps campaigns, such as Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election, this disruption work is relatively cheap when compared to advanced weaponry. As of February 2018, estimates are that Russia spent about $1.25 million a month on their efforts. Comparatively, the cost of one US Tomahawk missile is about $1.4 million. Building on Pedahzur’s understanding of the growth of special operations after World War II, after 2016 we expect to see increasing state and non-state calls for #RhetOps initiatives that are short-lived, highly specific to a certain mission, agile, and rapidly created and disbanded. In short, #RhetOps may be understood as a kind of special work of its own, as we see in the chapters by Jeffrey Collins, Gary Mills, and Angie Mallory in parts 1 and 3.

For two examples of how #RhetOps imbues asymmetrical conflict, in an analysis of Islamic State (IS) media operations, the Soufan Group, a private intelligence firm founded by the former FBI agent Ali Soufan, offers a compelling example. The Soufan Group notes in their November 2014 report that “The Islamic State is crowd sourcing its propaganda . . . in a counterintuitive move, The Islamic State has maximized control of its message by giving up control of its delivery.”\textsuperscript{12} Six months later, on July 6, 2015, President Obama discussed his strategy for fighting IS after a Pentagon briefing by top commanders, outlining not only airstrikes and supporting local forces on the ground but also placing a strong emphasis on rhetorical strategy online: “As I’ve said before—and I know our military leaders agree—this broader challenge of countering violent extremism is not simply a military effort. Ideologies are not defeated with guns; they’re defeated by better ideas—a more attractive and more compelling vision. So the United States will continue to do our part, by working with partners to counter ISIL’s hateful propaganda, especially online.”\textsuperscript{13} President Obama’s remarks suggest that to us what’s happening at the level of how states wage war in the twenty-first century is an important call for digital rhetoricians to pay attention. The digital delivery tactics suggested by the Soufan Group are not completely new to rhetoric; however, their application and context point to some of the alarming ways that digital rhetoric may be leveraged to make and maintain war. And so it is time for our discipline to be more directly involved in highlighting not only how the knowledge is used but also what its application can teach rhetorical studies. From examples such as this, we argue that there is a large volume of practitioner activity taking
place with relevance for our discipline. This is why in section 4 we’ve invited practitioner-scholars to talk about the work that’s happening in their area of praxis. However, this is only the beginning of what we see as a much longer conversation. As a field, we still must systematically explore how this new era of #RhetOps impacts our pedagogy in terms of ethics, information literacy, and tool understanding and construction. How do we teach our students to be critical consumers and creators of weaponized social media? How do we teach undergraduates and graduates to spot and trace influence campaigns in real time? These are some of the questions we still need to explore.

On July 9, 2015, US Central Command published an announcement that the United States and the United Arab Emirates had launched an “online messaging, engagement center to counter ISIL” called the Sawab Center. The center’s mission is to “create and share its content, including text, graphics, video clips and animations. Since they were formed in 2015, the Sawab Center has produced dozens of infographics, short videos, and tweeted almost 15,000 times in Arabic and English to an audience of almost 665,000 followers. Initiatives such as these were on former President Obama’s mind. In his April 2016 interview with President Obama in the Atlantic Monthly, Jeffrey Goldberg writes that President Obama “thinks rhetoric should be weaponized sparingly, if at all, in today’s more ambiguous and complicated international arena” although we’ve already seen some selective examples such as joint US-UAE initiative.

In current conflicts imbued with digital actors, it is sometimes difficult to discern the complexities of collaborative authorship and distribution, leading to what we call a fog of digital rhetoric. With this term, we aim to define the way that the digitally accelerated and distributed composing, delivery, and circulation of #RhetOps material by state and non-state actors creates literacy conditions ripe for doubt regarding the authorship, purpose, sponsorship, and motivation of digital texts, their compositionists, and amplifiers. A fog of digital rhetoric is a complicated set of digital circumstances related to volume of texts, speed of their travel, hazy ethos behind their delivery and circulation, and difficulty to track the full picture that require a combination of information literacy and understanding of digital rhetoric and compositional strategies to understand, decode, and potentially counter.

For example, in April 2018 the Intercept published a story about how the Guatemalan government has a “net center” that participates in concerted campaigns of “political social media manipulation.” For individuals on the newsfeed-receiving end of these “net center” influence campaign texts, the information literacy challenge to decode these texts is steep. Identifying the infrastructure of propagating messages, while only seeing a small sliver of a
text’s circulation, is a challenge itself. Beyond that, to identify who is composing and amplifying digital texts through human and nonhuman networks such as a combination of well-manicured social media accounts and botnets is even more daunting.

In addition, though not completely indistinct from military investments in digital rhetoric, we note here two specific trends that add urgency to the need for rhetoric studies to take up serious study of #RhetOps. The first is the massive, disruptive potential that social media provides to engage in what Jim Ridolfo has described elsewhere as a strategic act of delivery: composing for appropriation. This may be disruptive in the sense of sowing confusion about authorship and doubt over political messaging, a fog of digital rhetoric, or it may also amplify violence and terrorism. In their article on “rhetorical velocity,” Ridolfo and Devoss theorize the way networks provide not only the means to publish but also to push a message such that it spreads further and faster. Seeking this “push” or textual amplification—aiming for others to see and share a message in whole or with some modifications—is an act of multimodal composition. There are a number of reasons for achieving a text’s amplification, including the increasing appetite for sound and visual media in social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

Critical to understanding the fog of digital rhetoric, and an important contributing trend we want to identify is one that Ryan Omizo explores in his chapter: the rise of automated scripts and machine-learning technologies—combined to create robots (or bots) capable of carrying out rhetorical operations. The capacity to conduct large scale and contemporaneous corpus analysis in real time on social networks and to write back into these evolving discourses creates significant disruptive potential. We note that since the late 1970s, rhetoric and writing studies has taken artificial intelligence and its influence on human rhetorical activity seriously, but only occasionally. Carolyn Miller and Lynette Hunter are two significant voices in this conversation, along with Kennedy. Miller, in particular, has kept a very important question before us: wherein lies human rhetorical agency when machines and humans write together. These once-theoretical questions seem pragmatic today as social media users must ask: Am I interacting with a real person? Related questions may well be encountered by graduates of university digital writing and rhetoric programs during a job interview: “Can you help build a bot for us that will influence public opinion?” These are just a few of the foggy and ethical digital rhetoric situations we imagine our students encountering and negotiating.

This new landscape of machine rhetorics encompasses not a future but, to borrow an oft-cited phrase from the cyberpunk fiction writer William Gib-
son, the unevenly distributed present-day circumstances of “assistive writing technologies”—commonly known as bots—that are increasingly incorporated into the writing process. Advanced bots are already in use by newswire services to draft sports and financial reports. We may soon live in a world where most day-to-day writing tasks do not begin with a human creating a first draft, but with a machine assembling one from a personal archive of words. Robots may soon build new and rhetorically situated texts from a human’s previous lifetime activity as a writer. While this has practical implications for assisting people with mundane tasks such as managing their email volume, there are also military applications. In conflict situations or even in sales and marketing campaigns, robots are impersonating human actors, employing what appear to be popular movements on social media (practices called astroturfing or sockpuppeting), aggregating into large botnets for psychological operations and influence campaigns. Machine learning, data mining, and user profiling can also be employed to find military targets by locating “influencers,” human actors who hold significant persuasive power over others in a particular community, and target them with rhetorically tailored messaging.

The tactics employed in these kinds of operations can be familiar, but the tools to train these machine learners do not exist apart from the expertise and knowledge represented in this collection—both by the authors and those they cite. It is the formulations of rhetoric scholars and language researchers more broadly—our rubrics, our text corpuses, and our data sets—that are needed to proceed with a rhetorical education for malicious robots. The work we have done to monitor #RhetOps as a category of activity reported via social media tells us that rhetoric scholars may already be implicated in much of this activity by virtue of our work having influence and/or operational value in these contexts, whether most of us know it or not. As the contributors show in the next three sections, the application of rhetorical thinking to present-day conflicts, and, increasingly, our field knowledge, is already happening. For this reason, it is time for our field to be directly involved in how and if our disciplinary knowledge is used to wage war, engage in conflict, and clear the fog of digital rhetoric.

In chapter 8, for example, Michael Trice takes us on a tour of some of these related issues by closely examining the 2014 GamerGate hate campaign targeting leading women in video game development and journalism. Similarly, in chapter 9 William M. Marcellino and Madeline Magnuson examine how we may look at the digital social war talk footprint of the Islamic State as an aggregate corpus of texts in order to derive tactical and strategic countermeasures. In chapter 8 we see some of the tactical problems for those attempting to counter hateful internet speech. In chapter 9 we see a moment of hope in Mar-

cellino and Magnuson’s large-scale data analysis work in Twitter. In chapters 8 and 9 there’s a common thread of how ubiquitous digital delivery and robots are creating new opportunities for state and non-state actors to compose and take advantage of confusion surrounding the origins and circulation of texts but also of how those techniques may be countered, albeit with a temporal disadvantage, by the same digital fog.

**OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS**

In the next sixteen chapters, contributors with experience in academia, the US military, nongovernment agencies, and law enforcement discuss the role of digital rhetoric and conflict, not as a form of resolution but as an instrument with broad applications for how states project their power, police, fight wars, and engage symmetric and asymmetric adversaries. The book is organized into three parts.

In part 1, “Rhetorical Operations and Emerging Tactics,” authors outline how the military and intelligence community understand rhetorical theory and information warfare. In chapter 1, “The Rhetoric of Infrastructure: American Colonialism and the Military Telegraph,” Elizabeth Losh asks readers to consider the role the telegraph played in the coordination of intelligence, troop movements, resource management, and the suffering of Indigenous people that both built and were colonized by that infrastructure. In chapter 2, “A Soldier’s Guide to Rhetorical Theory: Intelligence Analysis in the Open,” Gary Mills reflects on the publication of his *The Role of Rhetorical Theory in Military Intelligence Analysis* (2003). Drawing on Benjamin Fountain, Mills advocates for a critical consciousness or empowered critical thinking to “detect and defeat influence operations.” In chapter 3, “Rhetoric and the US Intelligence Community’s Misuses of Theory,” Nate Kreuter argues that intelligence communities’ use and weaponization of theory often backfires against their own mission. Looking at the “extraordinary rendition program” developed by the Central Intelligence Agency, Kreuter questions how the intelligence community (IC) adopts and puts into praxis theory from other disciplines. In chapter 4, “Insurgent Rhetorics and Historical Materialism,” Mike Edwards asks readers to question the “blurring of the line between the open hand of rhetoric and the closed fist of force that occurs in rhetorical operations.” In chapter 5, “Minerva Rising: The Pentagon’s Weaponization of Rhetorical Knowledge,” John Gagnon examines how the military is developing tools for “information capabilities” as part of their military research.

In chapters 6 and 7 authors look at some of the recent historical practices that inform digital information warfare. In chapter 6, “Insurgent Circulation,
Weaponized Media: Waging the Late Sixties War Within,” Brad Lucas looks at Weather Underground and argues that social movement rhetorics in the 1960s serve “as a precursor for Rhet Ops.” In chapter 7, “GamerGate: Understanding the Tactics of Online Knowledge Disruptors,” Michael Trice takes readers into current events and outlines a concept called the dissentivist ethic, “a community ethic driven first and foremost by disrupting consensus” that’s “driving much of the current deliberative environment online, an ethic that played directly” into recent state Rhet Ops campaigns.

For part 2, “Digital Practices,” contributors provide a window into how digital tools may be used to gather, detect, and act upon or counter rhetorical operations. In chapter 8, “ISIS versus the United States: Rhetorical Battle in the Middle East,” William M. Marcellino and Madeline Magnuson draw on tools from digital rhetoric and corpus linguistics to show how ISIS “war talk” may be analyzed and understood. In chapter 9, “Stormwatch: Machine Learning Approaches to Understanding White Supremacy Online,” Ryan Omizo uses the faciloscope tool, a rhetorical analysis tool developed by Omizo and Hart-Davidson, to analyze discussion threads on a white supremacy website in order to see how hate is facilitated by white supremacist members. In chapter 10, “Dark Interactions: Interfaces and Object Arrays as Surveillance in Digital Rhetoric,” John Gallagher looks at how self-reported data may be weaponized by intelligence agencies. Similarly, in chapter 11, “Digital Surveillance of Gang Communication: Graffiti’s Rhetorical Velocity between Street Gangs and Urban Law Enforcement,” Seth Long and Ken Fitch show how the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department’s graffiti-tracking database is used to map and police the city.

In the third and final section, “Practitioner Stories,” we present practitioner stories of varying length from individuals and institutions that have experience with digital rhetoric and military conflict. We were especially interested in accounts that might serve as cases for further analysis, as well as situations that complicate conventional understanding of conflict and/or rhetoric. In chapter 12, “Digital Age Education: Preparing Warriors for Hybrid Conflict at Air Force CyberWorx,” Jeffrey Collins and Gary Mills discuss the implications for hybrid warfare and “rhetorical arsenals” and the blueprint for the Air Force CyberWorx, an initiative to train future soldiers to be “responsible for the protection, maintenance, enhancement, and use of cyber technologies—weapons capable of swiftly complicating or calming down the doomsday narrative.” Building on this theme in chapter 13, “Mapping the Rhetoric-Operations Divide: Considerations for the Future,” Angie Mallory discusses her road to rhetorical operations and some of the future concerns for people working at the intersection of both areas. In chapter 14, “Social
Media Strategy for the Military-Engaged American Red Cross,” Laura A. Ewing provides a compelling case example about how social media policy is created, enacted, and reconsidered in a nonprofit that works closely with the US military. In chapter 15, “Changing Technologies and Writing from and about War,” D. Alexis Hart and Cheryl Hatch draw specifically from Hatch’s own experience as a war correspondent, as well as her interviews with other conflict journalists. Finally, in chapter 16, “Military Wives as Rhetorical Insurgents: Resisting Assimilation as ‘Force Multipliers,’” Elise Dixon examines the rhetorical instructions she was provided as the spouse of a Marine.

NOTES

2. As of April 17, 2018.
5. Gurak, Persuasion and Privacy in Cyberspace.
6. Ward, Deadly Documents.
9. Tufekci, Twitter and Tear Gas.
13. Obama, “Remarks by the President.”
15. As of April 2018.
16. Currier and Mackey, “Rise of the Net Center.”
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From the Dark Side of Digital Composing to #RhetOps


