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SPRAWOZDANIE / REPORT

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Report: Rhetoric in Society 9: *Rhetoric in Digital Age*, 18–21.06.2025, Zagreb

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The ninth edition of the *Rhetoric in Society* conference took place in Zagreb from June 18 to 21, 2025. Organized by the University of Zagreb under the auspices of the Rhetoric Society of Europe, this is the largest and most prestigious rhetoric conference in Europe, bringing together scholars from across the continent and beyond. Over the course of two keynote lectures, three book presentations, two discussion panels, two roundtables, and 148 individual papers, Zagreb became, for several days, the capital of rhetorical art.

The event was officially opened by the main organizer, Gabrijela Kišiček, alongside representatives of the University of Zagreb's leadership. The opening session also featured a speech by Zvonimir Frka-Petešić, Chief of Staff to the Croatian Prime Minister, who offered insights into the practical applications of rhetoric in politics and expressed a level of enthusiasm for rhetorical research and practice that matched that of the conference speakers – earning a warm and sustained round of applause from the audience.

This year's edition was held under the theme *Rhetoric in Digital Media*, which was reflected in panels dedicated to rhetoric in digital and audiovisual media as well as in the context of challenges posed by the development of artificial intelligence. These included:

- four panels titled *Rhetoric in the Digital Age*,
- *The Rhetoric of Fraud and Scams in a Digital World*,
- two panels *Rhetoric and AI*,
- *Rhetoric and Social Media*,
- *Rhetoric and Media*,
- *Hostile Digital Architecture: Restricting Rhetorical Agency Through Technology*,
- *Rhetoric and Education in the Digital Age*,

- *The Species of Rhetoric as Contemporary Heuristics for the Digital Age*,
- and *Symbolic Screens and Digital Dreams: Reclaiming Aesthetics in Rhetorical Inquiry*.

Alongside the main thematic focus, participants also examined political speeches and public debate within the following topics:

- two panels *Rhetoric and Politics of the World*,
- *Mobilizing Bad Feelings: The Rhetorical Circulation of Affect in Public Discourse*,
- *Presidential Rhetoric*,
- two panels *Extremism in Public Discourse through a Rhetorical and Discursive Lens: American and European Scholars*,
- *Rhetoric and Civic Engagement in Conversation*,
- *Manifest, Embodiment, Backlash: On Different Stages of Activist Rhetoric*,
- *The Use of Competitive Debates in Ethical Education: Research Report*, and
- *Speaking with the Voice of the Future: Children and Childhood in Climate Activist Rhetoric*.

Scholars also examined the relationship between rhetoric and education, as well as explored developments in argumentation theory. Relevant sessions included:

- two panels *Rhetoric and Education*,
- two panels *Rhetoric and Argumentation*,
- and *Rhetorical Affects of Argumentation*.

Moreover, the program featured panels addressing rhetoric in cultural and interdisciplinary contexts and rhetoric during times of crisis. Attendees had the opportunity to engage with sessions such as:

- *The Rhetorical Subject in and Against Technocapitalism*,
- *Rhetoric of Law*,
- *Rhetoric and Controversy*,
- *History of Rhetoric*,
- *Rhetoric Across Disciplines*,
- *Rhetoric and Literary Discourse*,
- *Rhetoric and Healthcare*,
- *Multimodal Rhetoric*,
- *Rhetoric and Science. Feminist Power of Rhetorical Listening*,
- *Rhetoric Across Time and Space*,
- and *Rhetorical Challenges*.

The program also included a joint panel organized by two major associations: the Rhetoric Society of America (RSA) and the Rhetoric Society of Europe (RSE).

Among the publications showcased during the conference were three titles, all of which were released in 2025. The first, *Scientists, Politics, and the Rhetoric of Public Controversy*, edited by P. Pietrucci and L. Ceccarelli was published by Palgrave Macmillan. The second – *Ethos, Technology, and AI in Contemporary Society: The Character in the Machine*, edited by Aaron Hess and Jens Kjeldsen, and the third, Blake Scott's *The Rhetoricity of Philosophy: Audience in Perelman and Ricoeur after the Badiou-Cassin Debate* appeared with Routledge.

Two discussion panels addressed pressing challenges in contemporary rhetorical studies. The first, *Hard Listening in the Digital Sphere: From the Personal to the Public*, focused on the increasing political polarization and social division that shape today's public discourse. In response, rhetorical scholars emphasized listening as a vital strategy for engaging with conflict. The panel introduced and explored the concept of "hard listening" as a practice that calls for active, empathetic engagement across ideological divides. The second panel, *Using Transnational and Decolonial as Technologies to Address the Epistemic Crisis of Rhetorical Studies*, tackled the pedagogical difficulties of teaching rhetoric within academic environments that continue to uphold rigid East/West and Global North/South binaries. Drawing on Omedi Ochieng's work, the speakers advocated for viewing intellectual traditions not as isolated blocs, but as dynamic conversations that enable "participatory world-making." They argued that transcending dichotomous thinking through Pan-African perspectives is essential to the global future of rhetoric, composition, and communication studies.

Another section consisted of two roundtable discussions, which focused on the topics: *Persuasive Algorithms: Exploring the Intersections of Rhetoric and Generative AI* and *Digitizing Dialogue and Animating Actio: An International Roundtable Discussion*.

The plenary lectures by invited guests attracted particular interest. Jean Wagemans from the University of Amsterdam presented new perspectives on analyzing argumentation in mass media. He discussed how, in the digital age of misinformation and generative AI, rhetoric faces new challenges as persuasive texts can now be mass-produced by machines, enabling large-scale manipulation. Wagemans argued that rhetoric must evolve into a critical art – teaching individuals to analyze, resist, and "rhetoric-check" persuasive discourse to safeguard democratic communication. Katarzyna Budzyńska, affiliated with the Warsaw University of Technology, shared the results of her research on the application of artificial intelligence in rhetorical analysis and communication ethics. She introduced a research program called The New Ethos, which utilizes AI-powered

Rhetoric Analytics to examine large-scale digital communication and track rhetorical behaviors, including hate speech and misinformation. By analyzing patterns in online discourse, the project places ethos at the center of understanding how trust, responsibility, and persuasion function in today's digitized society. Both presentations sparked lively discussions, during the sessions and in informal conversations throughout the conference.

This wide-ranging program demonstrates the remarkable breadth of the conference, with speakers drawing on sources ranging from Plato and Aristotle to Kenneth Burke and Frans H. van Eemeren. In the warm and welcoming atmosphere typical of Rhetoric in Society, scholars at various stages of their careers met not only during panel sessions but also in casual settings – over coffee in the green courtyard of the University of Zagreb – exchanging experiences and sharing knowledge. The conference became a space for building new academic connections and initiating collaborative research projects, strengthening the integration of the rhetorical community across Europe and beyond. The event concluded with a heartfelt thank-you from the organizers and the official announcement that the next, tenth edition of Rhetoric in Society will be held in Warsaw, hosted by Maria Załęska and the team from the University of Warsaw and the Polish Rhetoric Society. After 12 years, RiS returns to Warsaw (the fifth conference in the series took place there in 2015 under the theme Rhetoric in the Knowledge Society [https://resrhetorica.com/index.php/RR/article/view/2015_4_9/65]. In two years, the conference will be organized by Polish scholars, which is both an important and prestigious recognition as well as a unique opportunity to promote the Polish rhetorical community and to herald the further development of rhetoric in the country.