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Trump's speeches are chaotic, rambling and extremely effective. Aristotle can explain why

Loren D. Marsh, a Research Fellow at the Humboldt University of Berlin, explains how Aristotle's narrative theory of mythos reveals how Trump's chaotic and rambling speeches are a strategic rhetorical approach that effectively conveys his outsider status and defiance of the establishment.

By [___](#)

In recent news cycles, there has been a persistent and growing narrative that Trump's appearances are [undisciplined](#), [meandering](#) and [damaging his chances](#) in the election. Trump's critics believe he is [narcissistic and impulsive](#), and that there is no consistent strategy or larger plan behind his rhetoric. Indeed, in many outlets this view is [ubiquitous](#) and practically [unquestioned](#).

However, with half of the US electorate on his side, Trump's chaotic speaking style is clearly no barrier to success. If his public appearances are indeed so shambolic, why do they continue to fire up his supporters, and even attract new ones?

Trump's critics are obviously missing something about how his rhetoric works. They may rationalise that many of his supporters don't take him literally or assume that it's "[just an act](#)", but if this were the case, why would so many voters follow someone they don't actually believe?

Evidently, explaining Trump's appeal requires a different kind of tool for analysing political messaging. It is here that we can turn to ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who invented the science of storytelling, and gave us precisely the tools we need

to understand Trump's rhetorical success.

As a classics scholar, my [research](#) has cracked the code of Aristotle's seminal narrative theory of mythos in his Poetics, written in the 4th century BC. Mythos is a timeless theoretical framework that can [reveal the inner workings](#) of any narrative – even Donald Trump's.

Mythos in a nutshell

Aristotle recognised that any story or narrative contains two kinds of events: mythos and episodes.

The mythos is a small, limited group of events that are tightly connected by cause and effect (lightning struck the tree, then the tree caught fire). With these events, it is necessary or probable that each will cause the next. They are the core of the story and crucial for its emotional impact.

Because each event in the mythos leads directly to the next, none of them can be changed, eliminated, or reordered without changing the essence of the story itself. You can imagine these central mythos events like billiard balls on a table. A person hits the first ball, which then hits the second ball, which hits third ball, and so on until the balls come to rest. To reach their final arrangement, they must hit each other in a specific way, meaning the number of these events is inherently limited.

The “episodes” are the narrative's other events, which are only loosely connected by cause and effect (lightning struck the tree, then it started to rain). These are related, chance or tangential events that do not necessarily have to occur as a direct effect of what happened before.

While not as central to the core story and its emotional appeal, the episodes are in no way less important or interesting. In fact, since they don't necessarily follow from previous events or directly cause the following ones, they are often the most sensational and visible part of the story.

Both mythos and episode events are crucial for building a narrative with maximum impact. But narratives are by no means confined to the realms of fiction.

Trump's narrative: episodes feed the mythos

A presidential campaign itself can be viewed as a story, with

both mythos events and episode events that play out in the media.

Trump's candidacy has often been criticised for its chaos and drama, featuring an endless series of sensational or suspenseful distractions: brazen lies, incendiary campaign promises and court cases, to name but a few. However, to his supporters these events are not the real story of Trump's candidacy, they are just the episodes. Beneath all the lurid drama, Trump carefully maintains a very coherent mythos: that he is an outsider defying a corrupt establishment.

Trump's story can be summed up as follows. The US is run by corrupt insiders (Democrats and their ilk) who attack an outsider (Trump). By defying the insiders, the outsider proves that he cannot be corrupted.

In order to defy and defeat the insiders, they have to first attack him, and Trump deliberately provokes these attacks. Much of his erratic, unpredictable behaviour serves this exact purpose. It could be something as serious as refusing to admit he lost in 2020, as offensive as insisting Haitian immigrants have an appetite for Ohio cats, or as mundane as exaggerating his crowd sizes. Those are episodes.

His reactions to the attacks he provokes form his mythos – while his behaviour seems erratic, Trump never changes his behaviour, alters course, or apologises in the face of establishment attacks or criticisms of his own attacks. This convinces his followers that he cannot be corruptly manipulated or pressured to act as the insiders want.

Trump's consistently defiant actions and statements are the events in his narrative that make it necessary or probable that his followers believe he is an anti-establishment outsider. They are the mythos parts that sit at the heart of his story.

The Madison Square Garden rally: a case in point

This means that much of a Trump speech – such as his recent Madison Square Garden appearance – is aimed not only at his audience, but also at the establishment.

Since his audience has been following his story, they know when Trump is trying to provoke fresh establishment attacks (“Kamala has imported criminal migrants from prisons and jails, insane asylums and mental institutions”), defiantly [doubling-down](#) in the face of previous attacks (“they are indeed the

enemy from within”), or when he is actually communicating his message directly like a conventional politician (“are you better off now than you were four years ago?”).

What Trump [himself calls](#) his “weave” is not just an improvised patchwork of remarks, grievances and musings – it’s a narrative that combines mythos and episodes to tell and retell the story of a defiant and uncompromising outsider fighting a corrupt system.

The media narrative of Trump’s chaotic and impulsive speaking style is, therefore, actually part of his story. For those who understand and follow his story, the establishment’s attacks on his speaking style become one more episode that Trump can use to tell his defiant outsider mythos .

Far from being a liability or an indication he is incapable of staying on message, Trump’s “weave” may well be his intuitive rhetorical strategy, a way of taking control of the media narrative.

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