

The Rhetoric of Digital Presentation Tools in Politics: The Case of Visual Knowledge in President Obama's Enhanced State Of the Union

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A political speech seems to be the last holdout for oral communication that does not use digital presentation tools, such as PowerPoint, Keynote, or Prezi. At least it used to be. When President Barack Obama delivered his State of the Union (SOTU) speeches, the White House offered so-called "Enhanced" versions of the speeches online. Here, the television images of President Obama delivering the speech were accompanied by pictures, graphs, and tables. These speeches contain particularly interesting instances of information design because they combine the rhetoric and epistemology of visuality with the rhetoric and epistemology of traditional political oratory.

I explore this change in political communication and demonstrate how the online Enhanced SOTU is a hybrid genre using visuals to create a rhetoric of reification and reality, which seems not to argue but to establish facts. Thus, the Enhanced SOTU is an example of the *scientification of politics* and the *politization of science*. It also illustrates the trend of fragmentation of political communication, and the dispersing of the traditional discrete political speech into different parts for different audiences

The SOTU as a Rhetorical Genre

The use of digital presentation technologies has changed our ways of communicating since they were first introduced in the mid-1980s.¹ Such technologies are ubiquitous in business, education, and research. However, one kind of oral communication appears to have escaped the grip of electronic slides: political speechmaking.²

Strangely, one of the most eloquent and traditional orators of our time, President Barack Obama, chose to accompany his online version of the SOTU addresses with slides. President Obama delivered a traditional speech to Congress, speaking from a prepared manuscript, and the communication staff added visuals, such as imagery, figures, numbers, and graphs, to the online video

- 1 Jens E. Kjeldsen, "The Rhetoric of Powerpoint," *Seminar.Net* 2, no. 1 (2006): n/p, see: http://www.seminar.net/files/Kjeldsen_powerpoint.pdf); and Edward R. Tufte, *The Cognitive Style of Powerpoint* (Cheshire: Graphics Press, 2003).
- 2 Jens E. Kjeldsen et al., *Speechwriting in Theory and Practice* (London: Palgrave, 2019); and Hubert Knoblauch, *PowerPoint, Communication, and the Knowledge Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 180.

version, which was simultaneously broadcast live. After the speech, this Enhanced version was accessible on www.whitehouse.gov and YouTube.³ Imagining Marcus Tullius Cicero, Winston Churchill, or Martin Luther King with slides seems laughable, and one would have thought the same about an oratorical speaker like President Obama. However, the Obama Administration created innovative approaches to the traditional political speech, adapting it to a contemporary, fragmented, and mediatised world.

President Obama is not the first politician to use slides. In Norway, for instance, several politicians and ministers have regularly used slides.⁴ Some use slides in connection with a written manuscript; others prefer to use them with so-called *fresh talk*, meaning that they “talk through the slides,” without relying on a manuscript.⁵

Among the well-known instances of politicians’ use of presentation technology is Vice President Al Gore’s presentation on climate change and Secretary of State Colin Powell’s presentation in the United Nations arguing for the invasion of Iraq in 2003.⁶ Even though both are political speeches, they do not deal with party politics. They do not seem to argue politically, but only to try to prove the case factually and logically—even scientifically.

That the political speech chosen by President Obama to be accompanied by slides in an online version was the SOTU is no coincidence. It is a speech largely meant to inform and convey the state of affairs to Congress. Also, important to note is that the Obama SOTUs were delivered in the Capitol without the visuals. Thus, the networks’ televised broadcast of the speeches did not show the enhanced version. The Enhanced versions were exclusively an online phenomenon.

Even though national broadcasting networks broadcast and provide commentary on the SOTU, it has been delivered in the same manner for almost 200 years. The president reads the speech from a prewritten manuscript, and the audience in Congress listens and applauds, as they have done for two centuries. The genre still has the same rhetorical aims and functions. Three processes characterize the SOTU as a genre: First, it articulates and mediates underlying values of the United States, celebrating a certain national ethos and expressing what it means to be an “American.” Second, the speech assesses present issues and information. The mediation of values naturally leads to a taking stock of enduring national issues and linking past and present to address issues that persist through time. These assessments then lead to a need for change, which are addressed in the third rhetorical process of the speech: the recommendation of legislative initiatives and their justification. Although SOTU speeches seem to have remained mostly the same in both

3 See, e.g., Obama’s 2015 SOTU here: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2015/01/20/watch-president-obamas-2015-state-union> (accessed December 28, 2020).

4 See, e.g., a short presentation by Dag Terje Andersen, Norwegian Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion: <https://www.slideserve.com/ivy/policy-response-the-case-of-norway-power-point-ppt-presentation> (accessed December 31, 2020).

5 Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk. University of Pennsylvania Publications in Conduct and Communication* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 171ff, 188.

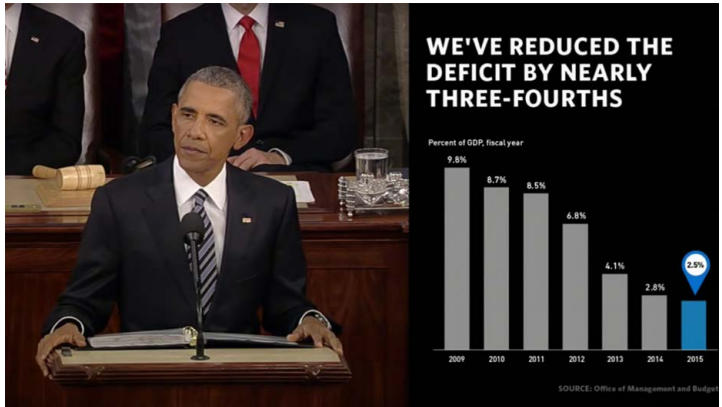
6 For the former, see Jens Kjeldsen, “Strategies of Visual Argumentation in Slideshow Presentations: The Role of the Visuals in an Al Gore Presentation on Climate Change,” *Argumentation. An International Journal on Reasoning* 27, no. 4 (2013): 425–43.

7 Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, “Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism An Introduction,” in Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, eds. *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action* (Falls Church, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1978): 139–46.

Figure 1
Split screen with photograph (SOTU 2016).



Figure 2
Split screen with bar graph (SOTU 2016).



form and content, new media and technology have changed the dispersion and reception of the speech, thereby changing the character and rhetorical functioning of the speech.

George Washington delivered the first SOTU in 1790. It was merely an enumeration of the issues that he believed required congressional attention; but he delivered it with the pomp and formality of the British Speech from the Throne. From the beginning, the speech was meant to report the state of the union to Congress and to invite elected officials on both sides of the aisle to work together on important issues. The SOTU has not always been delivered as a speech. Some presidents, including Thomas Jefferson (1745–1826), chose to inform Congress in writing. He found the oral tradition too royal and wanted to distance himself and the United States from England. He probably also decided not to speak because he was a rather poor orator. The last president to deliver the SOTU in writing was President Jimmy Carter in 1981. The written SOTU addresses were much longer than the ones later broadcast on television.⁸

In the century after Washington's first SOTU, citizens had to read about the speech in the newspaper; in 1923 Calvin Coolidge (1872–1933) had his SOTU speech transmitted on the radio. In 1947

8 Kathryn Dunn Tenpas, "The State of the Union Address: Process, Politics, and Promotion," in *In the President's Words. Speeches and Speechwriting in the Modern White House*, ed. Michael Nelson and Russel L. Riley (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 149.

Figure 3
Graph (superimposed over Obama at podium)
(SOTU 2016).

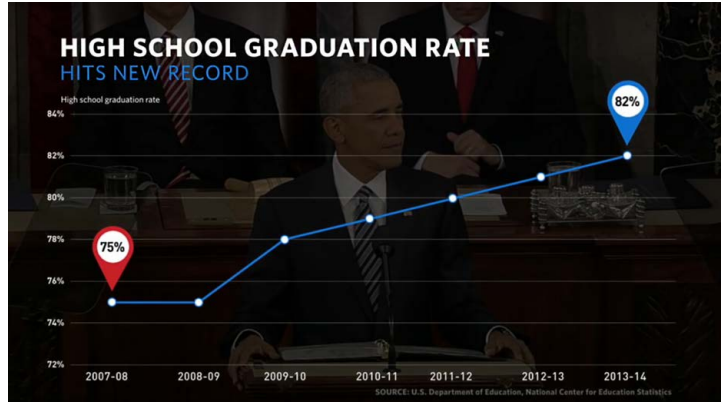


Figure 4
Split screen with statement (SOTU 2016).



people who owned a television set could watch Harry S. Truman (1884–1972) deliver his televised SOTU speech. In 1997 President Bill Clinton became the first president to transmit the SOTU directly on the Internet. The Clinton Administration also initiated a tradition of a post-SOTU road show, where the President traveled around the United States after delivering the speech.⁹ Thus, although the speech originally was a clearly demarcated text directed at the members of Congress, it has developed into an address—or rather a fragmented formation—directed at the citizens of the United States. For instance, in 2015 the accompanying slides of the enhanced version allowed online viewers to see graphs and data and to read the script after the transmission.

The Obama Administration arguably made the biggest change to the SOTU speech in recent times. Since 2011 the Enhanced SOTU was made available on the White House homepage (www.whitehouse.gov). Here, most of the live speech was transmitted on a split screen, where one half transmitted the pictures of the president speaking and the other half showed slides supporting the speech through four main types of slides: photographs (Figure 1); bar graphs (Figure 2); other graphs (Figure 3); and verbal statements and assertions (Figure 4).¹⁰

9 Tenpas, “State of the Union, 153.

10 All material from the Obama SOTU speeches (e.g., images, slides, and videos) are considered to be in the public domain and are used accordingly in this article.

The Obama Administration's Enhanced SOTU and its pre- and post-activities for the speech are the most recent changes in a trend that has moved the speech from primarily addressing Congress to primarily addressing the U.S. population. While Obama is addressing Congress in the House of Representatives, the Enhanced SOTU online directly addresses the country's citizens.

The Hybrid Genre of the Enhanced SOTU

In genres where presentation tools are most used—such as teaching and business presentations—the aim generally is to transfer information. In such settings, knowledge and information about the issue is superior to the ethos of the speaker. Logos is considered more important than pathos. But in political speechmaking, the reverse is true. The main aim of political oratory is not transfer of information, but deliberation, persuasion, and negotiation of values. Furthermore, both ethos and pathos are generally acknowledged as necessary and beneficial in politics.

This difference between oratory and presentations represents a risk in using presentation tools in politics: Politicians risk transforming their ethos as a leader into an ethos of a presenter. They risk subordinating themselves to informing about the issue, instead of taking a stand, mediating values, and proposing political solutions. Hubert Knoblauch defines PowerPoint presentations as a *communicative genre*.¹¹ This genre, he argues, works through a triadic structure of interrelation between three elements: speaker, technology, and audience. This view of genre is different from the traditional rhetorical definition, which is based on recurring situations that exhibit similar kinds of rhetorical exigencies and evoke similar kinds of rhetorical responses.¹²

Still, Knoblauch's triad is beneficial for analysis of the rhetorical use of presentation technologies to explore how the three elements of the triad are related. For instance, we may consider how the elements are ordered physically: In a meeting format, the organization will often be informal, even provisional. The speaker will generally be standing on the floor, only a few feet from the audience, which will sometimes be seated in a way that allows them to see each other's faces and even be able to talk together. The conference format is more formal. Generally, this format has a larger audience, which is further removed from the speaker. The audience generally sits in rows, facing the speaker, who often is on a stage or at a speaker's rostrum.

The SOTU is most comparable to the conference format—at least seemingly: A speaker on a rostrum addresses a crowd assembled in the House chamber. This audience is attending a traditional, formal speech without access to slide projections. However,

11 Knoblauch, *PowerPoint*, 4.

12 Kahryl Kohrs Campbel and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency. Deeds Done in Words* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), 22 ff.

the majority of the full audience is watching the speech mediated either on television or online—and the latter members of the audience have access to the enhanced version.

On the one hand, it would be misleading to cast the SOTU as just a piece of oratory. On the other hand, Knoblauch's triadic constellation of presenter, technology, and audience, which constitutes a *PowerPoint presentation*, also does not apply because no presentation technology is present for the audience members who are in the speaker's presence. The Enhanced SOTU is simultaneously a speech and a presentation. As a rhetorical formation, it serves as an example of how technology changes traditional genres and rhetorical situations. Instead of looking at the text, the speech, or the slides, we must look at the *communication situation*. Thus, we cannot primarily study the speaker's situation, but must consider the different audiences' different situations.

The Enhanced SOTU has contributed to the increased fragmentation of communication and the traditional speech.¹³ The speech that the president delivers verbally in the House is a discreet text with a clear beginning and end, and we can label this "text" as "the speech." However, this "text" is not the one that most people experience as the SOTU. Different people experience a different "text." Some see the whole speech on television; some experience the online Enhanced SOTU; some see edited versions and the comments they receive on YouTube; and some only experience fragments in news reporting or on social media. In short, different audiences experience different speeches.

The Obama White House actively tried to convert the speech into an interactive experience. For instance, in 2014 the Obama Administration labeled the SOTU as the "most accessible and interactive SOTU yet" because a "responsive" homepage allowed "users" (not viewers or listeners) to use their mobile devices to "RSVP for the speech and receive dedicated updates, dig deeper and learn more with exclusive content." The Obama Administration also "made it easier than ever to share this content with your social networks—particularly during our exclusive enhanced live broadcast—to help you spread the word."¹⁴ Thus, the SOTU became more than a speech: It was developed into a formation of multimodal rhetoric, working through the homepage of each SOTU address.¹⁵

Rhetoric of Reification and Reality

Besides the new ways of creating accessibility, interactivity, and sharing, the most obvious change that the Enhanced SOTU has created is the visual rhetoric of the slides. Interestingly, the Enhanced SOTU also seems to be both a more "scientific presentation" and a more partisan speech compared to previous SOTU speeches.

13 Michael Calvin McGee, "Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture," *Western Journal of Communication* 54, no. 3 (1990): 274–89.

14 The White House, "The Most Accessible and Interactive SOTU Yet" (blog): <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2014/01/27/most-accessible-and-interactive-sotu-yet> (accessed December 28, 2020).

15 The White House, "State of the Union Address: Enhanced" (video), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sotu> (accessed December 28, 2020). Compare <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/share/all> (accessed December 28, 2020) for "shareables." President Obama delivered his final SOTU address on January 12, 2016.

The scientific parts are used rhetorically, and thus, the Enhanced SOTU is characterized by a *scientification of politics*, as well as a *politicization of science*. Rhetorically, the use of scientific data leads the speech—and policy—away from what is perceived as values and toward what is perceived as facts. Simultaneously, in the context the “facts” themselves become politicized.

Slide presentations and visualizations are a communicative form of knowledge. This communicative genre is simultaneously constituting and being constituted by the information and knowledge society, argues Knoblauch.¹⁶ He states that knowledge is intangible and depends on being “objectivated by communication, that is, as word, sentence or diagram,” and that the knowledge society depends on processes by which knowledge can be “objectivated, fixed, and made transferable.”¹⁷ The use of slides contributes to the reification of knowledge, and in this way, the Enhanced SOTU is part of a more general trend in which political rhetoric is “technicalized.”¹⁸ This change in political and public discourse emerged in the late seventeenth century and developed further in the modernist age during the first part of the eighteenth century, where simplicity, purity of information, and the use of certain typefaces (e.g., Gill Sans and Univers) sought to impress a sense of neutrality and of expressions seemingly free of rhetoric.¹⁹

The period also introduced new forms of information design, such as charts and graphs, which are visual genres that initially require education in visual literacy to be understood. However, the conventional uses of these semiotic systems have “become so familiar that we don’t question their conventional status as genres,” argues Kostelnick.²⁰ The process of enculturation creates rhetorical efficiency “because readers come to regard conventional forms as natural direct representations of fact unmediated by the artificial lens of design.”²¹ The Enhanced SOTU is an example of these rhetorics of reification and reality. The rhetoric of projection slides is a *rhetoric of reification* because it turns thoughts and arguments into visual things, and it is a *rhetoric of reality* because this visual projection makes the reified thoughts and arguments appear as self-evident entities.²²

This *rhetoric of apparently presenting reality itself* has been one of the most prevalent and powerful forms of rhetoric since the ancients. Rhetors like Quintilian recommended to orators that they paint pictures with words to put events vividly in front of the audience, as though the audience members experienced it with their own eyes.²³ In contemporary persuasion through design, this kind of influencing is equally prevalent and influential.²⁴ Like the ancient art of persuading through *evidentia* and *enargeia*, such visual rhetoric works by appearing not to be rhetoric at all, but just an engaging report of events and facts.

16 Knoblauch, *PowerPoint*, 15.

17 Knoblauch, *PowerPoint*, 17.

18 Thomas G. Goodnight, “The Personal, Technical, and Public Spheres of Argument: A Speculative Inquiry into the Art of Public Deliberation,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 48, no. 4 (2012): 198–210.

19 Robin Kinross, “The Rhetoric of Neutrality,” *Design Issues* 2, no. 2 (Autumn 1985): 18–30.

20 Charles Kostelnick. “Melting-Pot Ideology, Modernist Aesthetics, and the Emergence of Graphical Conventions: The Statistical Atlases of the United States, 1874–1925,” in *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, ed. Charles A. Hill and Marguerite H. Helmers (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004), 215–42, 225.

21 Charles Kostelnick. “Melting-Pot Ideology, Modernist Aesthetics, and the Emergence of Graphical Conventions: The Statistical Atlases of the United States, 1874–1925,” in *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, ed. Charles A. Hill and Marguerite H. Helmers (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004), 215–42, 225.

22 For more on about the ability for of visuals to function as arguments, see Jens E. Kjeldsen, “The Study of Visual and Multimodal Argumentation,” *Argumentation* 29, no. 2 (2015): 115–32; and Jens E. Kjeldsen, “Visual Rhetorical Argumentation,” *Semiotica. Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies* 2018, no. 220 (2018): 69–94.

23 Kjeldsen, “Visual Rhetorical Argumentation”; Jens E. Kjeldsen, “Talking to the Eye: Visuality in Ancient Rhetoric,” *Word & Image* 19, no. 3 (2003): 133–37.

24 Kinross, “Neutrality.”

The rhetorics of reification and reality are enacted in two ways: first, and primarily, through the visualization of thoughts, events, developments, and other phenomena; and second, by contextualizing and verbally anchoring a representation as indisputable fact. In the former, to make visible is to objectify because, in representational imagery, humans can only see *entities* and *things*. An idea (e.g., democracy), a development (e.g., increase in jobs), a state of affairs (e.g., the economy), or a fact (e.g., the combined or average wealth of the wealthiest 3 percent of citizens) cannot be seen; these phenomena can only be represented. However, the visual representations of these phenomena make them appear as independent objects in themselves. Looking at the bar graphs indicating the changing numbers of jobs in the Enhanced SOTU (see Figures 5, 6, and 7) invites us to see these numbers as discrete, factual entities. This visual reification provides the development of jobs with a physical presence that seems beyond refutation: It is there as a thing to observe. In the latter form of enactment, the representation is contextualized and anchored verbally and grammatically as indisputable fact. Consider the following phrases using the definite form and formulated as ontological metaphors²⁵: “the more than one million private sector jobs created last year” (2001); and “more than 14 million new jobs, the strongest two years of job growth since the ‘90s, an unemployment rate cut in half” (2016). Jobs are *created*, they are *new*, and the unemployment rate is *cut in half*. The *verbal statements and assertions* seem not to express opinions, but to state indisputable facts.

The *photographs* in the Enhanced SOTU generally show three images: 1) ordinary people, 2) famous people that can be considered role models, and 3) Obama pictured with either ordinary people or famous people considered role models. Through their semiotic, iconic nature and their vividness, the photographs present persons and events to us as if we were experiencing them ourselves in reality. They offer vibrant representations of reality and create rhetorical presence, *evidentia*. Meanwhile, the *figures, graphs, and charts* have two main functions in presenting reality: 1) They establish *comparisons* between different groups of U.S. citizens, or between the United States and other countries; and 2) they document a *development or comparison over time*, such as changes in the deficit, in the U.S. dependence on foreign oil, or in the unemployment rate in the United States.

Such figures are meant to work rhetorically as demonstrative or documentary representations of reality. From a semiotic point of view, the photographs and the figures are iconic because they exhibit an analogical relation between the signifier (e.g., the photograph) and the signified (e.g., U.S. citizens). The rhetorical power lies

25 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 25ff.

in this assumed analogical relation between signifier and signified. Both the vivid and demonstrative representations function as instances of evidence for a successful policy. The graphical representations provide evidence for the general level (e.g., that more jobs are added), and the photographic representations provide evidence for the specific level (e.g., by showing vividly that citizens are positive and happy). The rhetorical task of the first is to show that something is the case in general; the second shows that something is the case in specific instances. The first relies on logos and the second on pathos and ethos, but they both appeal to a state of reality.

The rhetorical strategies of reification and reality—of naturalization and statements of apparent scientific facts—do not invite participation or discussion. They invite only observation and ascertainment—only taking notice of the facts. In this sense, the representations are a discourse of power and postulate. Unless audience members have knowledge about the statements put forward, they would have difficulty refuting them as facts. Instead, audiences are forced either to accept the claims, to negotiate their meaning, or to reject them all together.

The rhetorical and persuasive power of the slides with graphs and tables lies in the apparent “objectification” of knowledge because they turn claims and political arguments into “communicative things.” Putting such “communicative things” on the screen detaches them from the speaker (Obama) and puts them forward as independent truths. Thus, that President Obama as the speaker does not himself control the technology is rhetorically significant. In the online SOTU Enhanced version, he stays in the role of a political speaker, presenting “communicative things” as “objectified” facts.

No Explicit Deictic References to the Slides

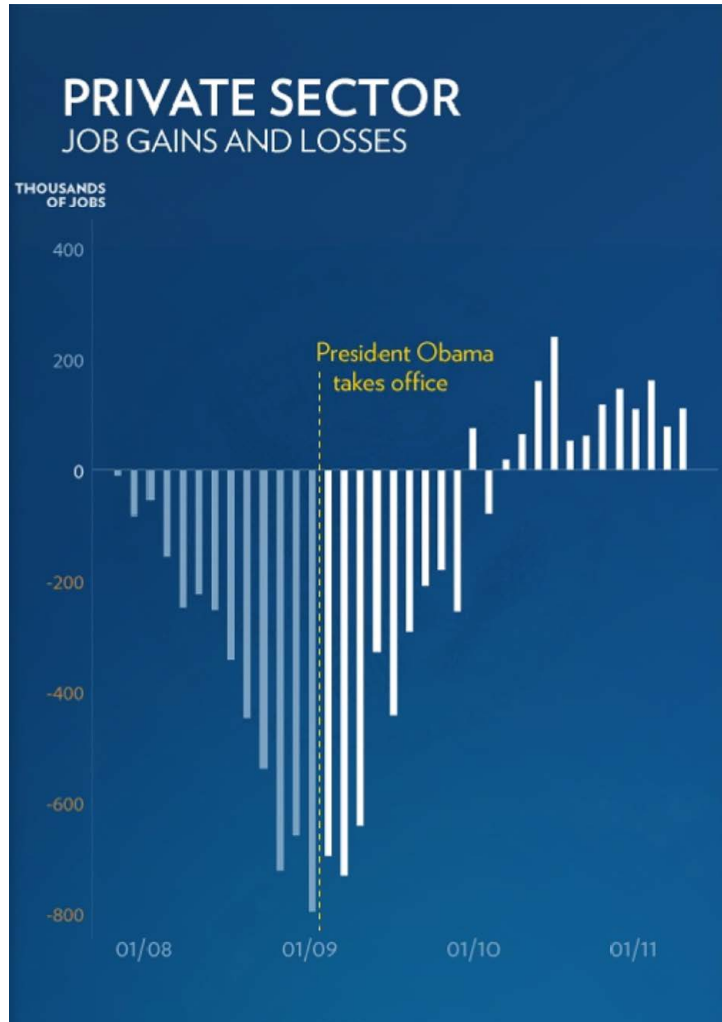
The objectification of political substance in the Enhanced SOTU speeches is supported by the absence of pointing or gesturing toward the slides or their content (i.e., deictic indicators). The pointing gesture is a common act in PowerPoint presentations, either through the use of actual pointing with the arm and index finger, through body movement and gaze, or through the use of a laser pointer.²⁶ However, in Congress, Obama delivers a script without mentioning or explicitly connecting to the slides in the Enhanced SOTU. Because no slides are shown in the room, he delivers his talk without any pointing or explicit deictic gestures—verbal or otherwise. Presenting slides in the House of Representatives would have been a remarkable genre breach.

Instead, the connection to the slides is offered to the online audience simply because the slides deal with the same issues the President is talking about. For example, one slide that Obama

26 Knoblauch, *Powerpoint*, 102ff; and Hubert Knoblauch, “Die Performanz des Wissens. Zeigen und Wissen in Powerpoint-Präsentationen” [The Performance of Knowledge. Showing and Knowing in Powerpoint Presentations], in *Powerpoint-Präsentationen. Neue Formen der gesellschaftlichen Kommunikation von Wissen* [Powerpoint Presentations. New Forms of Social Communication of Knowledge], ed. Bernt Schnettler and Hubert Knoblauch (Konstanz: UVL Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2007).

Figure 5

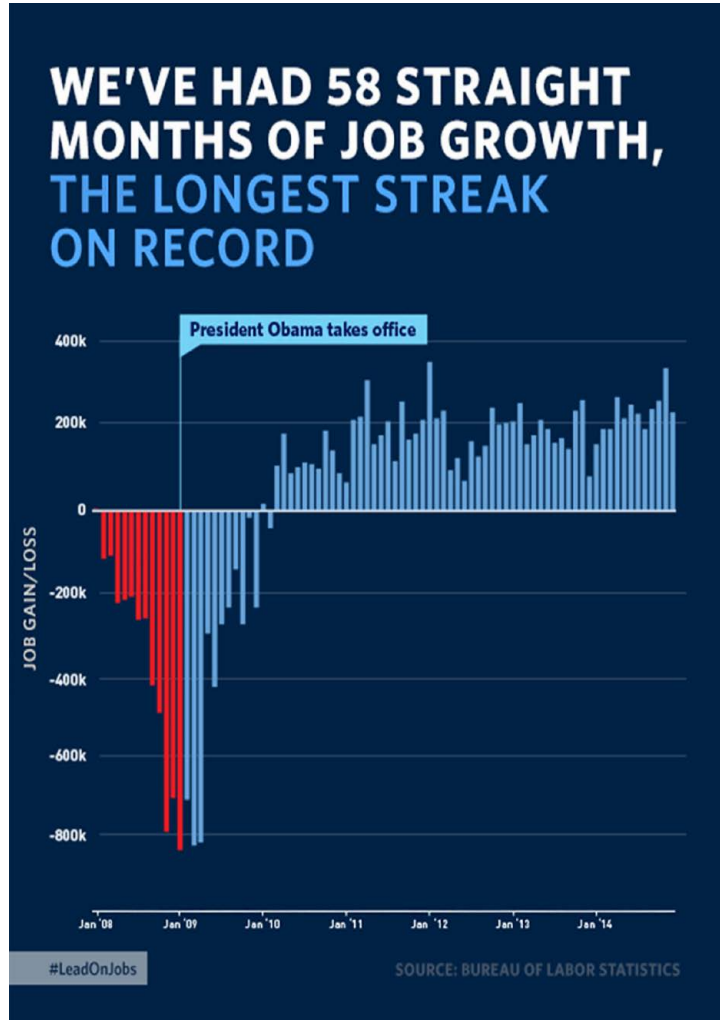
Slide showing job gains and losses in private sector (SOTU 2011).



used, in different versions, beginning with the SOTU of 2011 presents a bar graph illustrating the growth of private sector jobs. In 2011 President Obama commented on the slide (see Figure 5) with the following words:

Thanks to the tax cuts we passed, Americans' paychecks are a little bigger today. Every business can write off the full cost of new investments that they make this year. And these steps, taken by Democrats and Republicans, will grow the economy and add to the more than one million private sector jobs created last year. But we have to do more. These steps we've taken over the last two years may have broken the back of this recession, but to win the future, we'll need to take on challenges that have been decades in the making.

Figure 6
Slide showing job growth (SOTU 2015).



The 2015 version of the slide, shown in Figure 6, was accompanied by the following comment from Obama:

We believed we could reverse the tide of outsourcing and draw new jobs to our shores. And over the past five years, our businesses have created more than 11 million new jobs. (Applause.)

The 2015 slide was preceded by a slide stating in words that “American Businesses have added 11.2 million private sector jobs in the past 58 months.”

Finally, the 2016 slide (see Figure 7) added job counts through the preceding 70 months. In the Enhanced SOTU, while the slide was shown, Obama said:

Let me start with the economy, and a basic fact: The United States of America, right now, has the strongest, most durable economy in the world. (Applause). We’re in the middle of the longest streak of private sector job creation

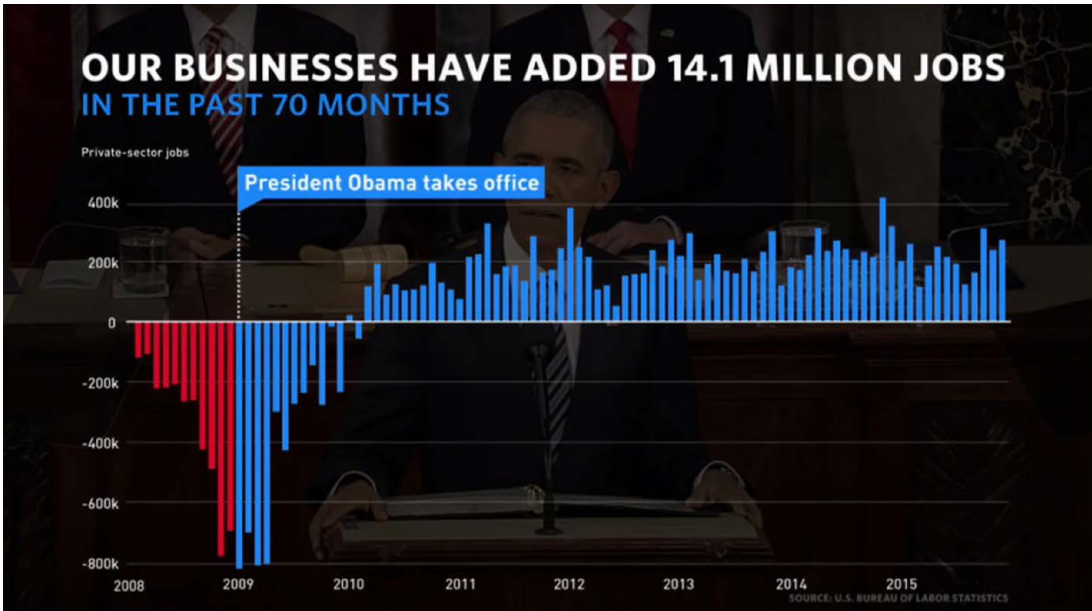


Figure 7
Slide (superimposed) with job growth during the past 70 months (SOTU 2016).

in history. (Applause.) More than 14 million new jobs, the strongest two years of job growth since the '90s, an unemployment rate cut in half. Our auto industry just had its best year ever. (Applause.) That's just part of a manufacturing surge that's created nearly 900,000 new jobs in the past six years. And we've done all this while cutting our deficits by almost three-quarters. (Applause.)

The absence of explicit deictic reference is significant because it illustrates how the Obama Administration in practice produces two different SOTUs in two different genres: the *speech* in Congress and the *presentation* online. The lack of deictic references is also significant because it supports the impression that the information, stats, and graphs speak for themselves: They seem to present plain facts and not an attempt at persuasive rhetoric. This apparent factual representation is also echoed in Obama's claims of the "basic fact" that the United States has the strongest, most durable economy in the world.

Rhetoric of Contrast and Consequence—Implied Causality Through Broken Inertia

The added-jobs slide also illustrates how two prevalent and interconnected topoi work rhetorically through the design of the slides: the topoi of *contrast* and *consequence*. The slides create temporal contrasts between the bad times before President Obama took office, and the better times after he took office, thereby enthymematically implying that better times are a result of the policy lead by the administration. This is an instance of the rhetoric of apparent reality through visual design.

Even though the added-jobs slide is slightly different in different years, the basic elements are the same. First is a sentence stating the number of jobs added in the private sector since Obama took office: “Our businesses have added 14.1 million jobs over the past 70 months.” Second is a bar graph showing the changes in private sector jobs from 2008 to the present day. The change goes from approximately 800,000 jobs lost around 2009, to about 250,000 jobs added annually from around 2011 to 2015. Third is text and a line marking the beginning of 2009, when Obama took office.

The colors/shades of the bars clearly distinguish between the year before Obama took office, marked in red (those to the left of 2009), and the eight years Obama was in office, marked in blue (those to the right of 2009). Incidentally, the time when Obama takes office also appears as the exact turning point for going from losing jobs to adding jobs, which is the point at which the colors change from red to blue. The length of time represented by the bar graph is important because the long rows of blue bars suggests that the creation of jobs is a lasting trend.

The elements of the slide and Obama’s words seem simply to line up the facts, but in context, they constitute a rhetorical argument based on a visual argument scheme (topos); I call this visual argument *implied causality through broken inertia*. The concept of inertia comes from physics, where it denotes the fact that an object in motion will continue in the same motion (or non-motion) until influenced by an external force. In *The New Rhetoric*, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca develop a corresponding rhetorical concept of inertia, claiming that people will continue holding on to the same attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors through habit until influenced by an external rhetorical force.²⁷ Even though Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca apply this physics concept on verbal rhetoric, it is equally valid for the visual rhetoric of graphs and charts that include temporal dimensions. We see this in the added-jobs slide, which implies that Obama’s policies have made the economic situation better.

This implied causality occurs in several places in the Enhanced SOTU speeches. For instance, one slide (see Figure 8) shows the troop levels in Iraq, and it implies that Obama has contributed to a significant lowering of the troop levels. In the same way, the slide showing the Dow Jones Industrial Average (see Figure 9) implies that President Obama’s policies somehow are connected to the reinvigoration of the stock markets. Although these slides all imply that policy has improved conditions, slides also can imply that policies have worsened conditions. For instance, the visuals in the 2015 Enhanced SOTU imply that policies beginning with the Reagan Administration made the playing field uneven. The visual shows lower earnings for most people and significantly higher earnings for only a few (see Figure 10). In all these slides, the visual marking of a changing point is rhetorically relevant. The dark blue (top 1% income

27 Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 105–07.

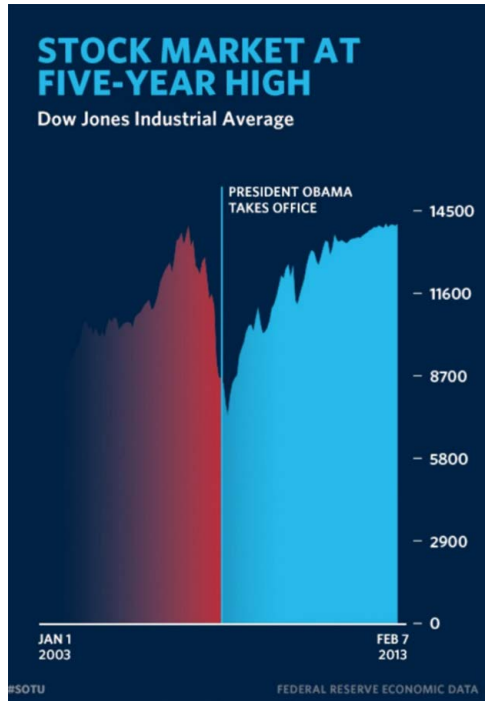
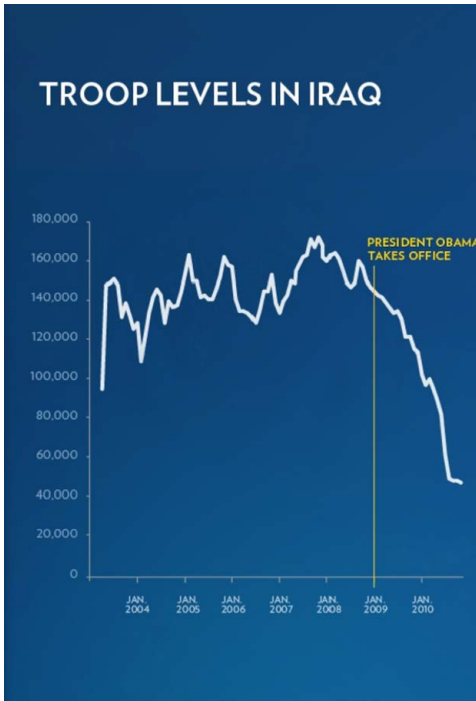


Figure 8 (top left)
Slide showing Troop levels in Iraq
2004-2010 (SOTU 2011).

Figure 9 (top right)
Slide showing the Dow Jones index
2003-2013 (SOTU 2014).

Figure 10 (right)
Split-screen showing fraction of income
earned by top 1 percent and bottom 90
percent (SOTU 2015).



share) marking of the period of the Reagan administration in Figure 10, for instance, clearly coincides with the change in fraction of income for the bottom 90 percent of the top 1 percent. In the slide including a visual of stock market performance (see Figure 9), the shift is marked not only with a line, but also with a change in color from red (before the Obama Administration) to blue (after President Obama took office).

Statistics as Facts—or as Political Claims: Arguing About Numbers

The visual rhetoric included in the Enhanced SOTU presentations is, of course, as much political as it is scientific. *Correlation is not causation*. As Edward R. Tufte points out: “[D]escriptive chronology is not causal explanation.”²⁸ He also warns that “*descriptive narration is not causal explanation*; the passage of time is a poor explanatory variable.”²⁹ Still, correlation is one of the most common explanatory

28 Edward R. Tufte, *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* (Cheshire: Graphics Press, 2001), 37.
29 Edward R. Tufte, *Visual Explanations: Images and Quantities, Evidence and Narrative* (Cheshire: Graphics Press, 1997), 29.

Figure 11

Split-screen with unemployment rate and forecasts (SOTU 2015).

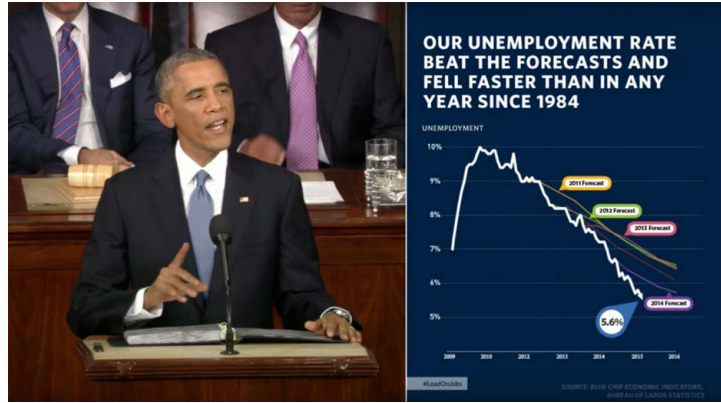


Figure 12

The Republican version of the Enhanced SOTU 2015. Split screen with slide of unemployment rate replaced with slide stating that 8.7 million Americans remain unemployed.



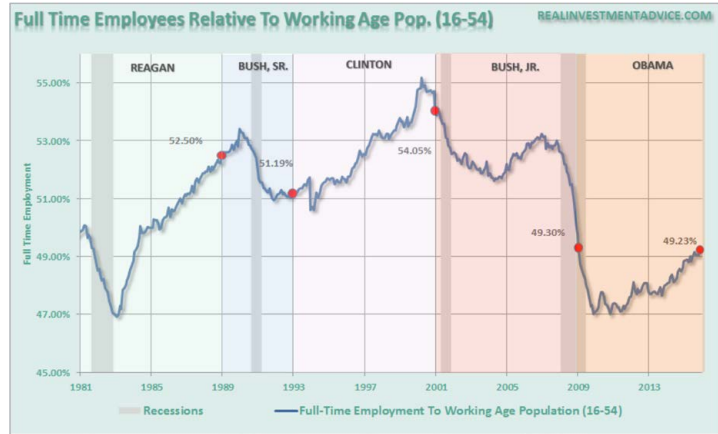
and rhetorical variables used in politics. The importance of the picture and graph slides is signified by the effort that the Obama Administration put into them. Furthermore, their importance is signified by the Republicans' efforts to make their own counterpoint version of the presentation, where the Enhanced SOTU slides are covered up or changed into other statistics displaying a different development.

When the 2015 Enhanced SOTU showed the slide representing job growth (Figure 6), the Republicans' version of the presentation simply removed it. When President Obama stated that the unemployment rate beat the forecast and fell faster than in any year since 1984 and provided a graph to support his claim (see Figure 11), the Republican version removed the graph and argued back by putting in a slide simply stating that 8.7 million people in the United States remain unemployed (see Figure 12). Even though the Enhanced SOTU presentations aim to persuade using rhetorical strategies of reification, reality, and naturalizing, opponents still argue back.

Online viewers also were active in debates about the statistics and the numbers. Some simply denied the numbers and called President Obama a socialist; others engaged with the graphs and numbers and pointed to alternative statistics, thus using visuals and data to support their own arguments. For example, the day

Figure 13

Graph from editor and economist Lance Robert, depicting the full-time employment in relation to working age population. Originally published at <http://realinvestmentadvice.com/the-2016-state-of-the-union/>.



before President Obama delivered his 2016 SOTU, editor and investment advisor Lance Roberts questioned the success of job growth that the Enhanced SOTU proposed (Figures 5, 6, 7, and 11). Publishing a post on his website, realinvestmentadvice.com, Roberts argued against the numbers and figures that President Obama had used.³⁰ Although he accepted that the unemployment rate was at 5.0 percent, Roberts claimed that the number is “obfuscated by the more than 93 million workers that are currently not counted as part of the labor force.”³¹ In addition, he argued that even though 49.2% of the population was employed full time, this rate was actually lower than when President Obama entered office: “[T]he employment ratios are deceiving when you realize that the population has grown faster than employment, leaving a rising number of individuals no longer counted as part of the labor force,” he stated.

The job creation slides used in the Enhanced SOTU do show an impressive increase in job creation (Figure 5, 6, 7, and 11), but this increase is depicted for a selected period covering the time that President Obama had been in office. Meanwhile, Roberts presented a graph with a time perspective that runs from 1981 to the then-present day (see Figure 13). This graph does not change the data in the SOTU slides. The numbers from 2009 onward are the same. This part of the graph shows the rise that also is shown in the bar graphs of the SOTU slides. However, Roberts’s graph changes the perspective because it shows the employment changes across a longer timeframe. The broader perspective reveals three things: 1) the level of employment in 2015 is still lower than when President Obama took office; 2) the overall employment levels were higher under the four previous presidents; and 3) employment seems to be affected by cyclical fluctuations that appear independent of presidential policies.

The point of the comparison is not whether President Obama or Roberts is “right”; they both, in fact, present accurate data. The point is that numbers, statistics, and graphs are forms of rhetoric that can be used for the purposes of the user; they might

30 Lance Roberts, “The 2016 State of The Union,” *Real Investment Advice* (website), last modified January 11, 2016: <http://realinvestmentadvice.com/the-2016-state-of-the-union/> (accessed December 28, 2020).

31 Ibid.

enlighten and they might also misrepresent or deceive.³² Audiences should approach such rhetoric as politics, when it is used in political communication.

The rhetoric of reification and reality through the use of pictures and visuals seeks to prove a case, without a doubt. Political sympathizers tend to consider such numbers as proof, while political opponents tend to reject this visual “proof.”³³ In political contexts, science and scientific visualizations necessarily are politicized. Even though a president presents figures and statistics as plain facts or reality itself, political opponents can be expected to dispute them.

Conclusion

On the one hand, the online Enhanced SOTU points to some fundamental changes of a political genre through the introduction of new forms of visualization and through changed forms of mediation and distribution. On the other hand, the Enhanced SOTU reveals that, despite changes in the forms of presentation for political speeches and communication made possible by media and technology developments, some of the fundamental appeals remain the same. The most important and prevalent rhetorical topoi in the SOTU speeches were still traditional political topoi, such as contrast and consequence.

One last lesson should be taken from this study of the Enhanced SOTU: The traditional political speech, as a discrete and easily demarcated object, may have become impossible to locate. What exactly is the SOTU? Is it in the speech heard in the House? Is it the distributed manuscript? Is it the speech seen on television? Or is it rather the enhanced speech that people experienced online in various forms? Even though reception-oriented rhetorical analysis has not been the focus of this article, it does point to the need to move the focus from the speech as a discrete text in a specific situation to the rhetorical formations that different audiences experience in different situations.³⁴

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32 See Darrell Huff, *How to Lie with Statistics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993).

33 For an example of how audiences argue and reject pictures using other pictures, see Jens E. Kjeldsen, “The Rhetorical and Argumentative Dimensions of Press Photography” in *Multimodal Argumentation and Rhetoric in Media Genres*, eds. Assimakis Tseronis and Charles Forceville (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2017), 52–80.

34 Jens E. Kjeldsen, ed., *Rhetorical Audiences and the Reception of Rhetoric. Exploring Audiences Empirically* (Rhetoric, Politics, and Society) (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).