

RHETORIC IN MASS MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

The mass media's capacity to create reality serves as the stimuli for rhetorical responses. Two categories of rhetorical activity are directly attributable to the influence of mass media: (1) that exacted by defects and problems in reality as it is created and shaped by media and (2) that exacted by sheer awareness on the part of the spokesmen and audiences that reality can be persuasively shaped, maintained, or altered by media. Each category of response poses special problems and dangers important to critics concerned with the functions of rhetoric and media.

Keywords: mass media, rhetoric, exact, sheer, aware

Rhetoric takes a view of media and of public communication generally that we may call functionalist. Rhetoricians tend to think that we use public discourse to do certain things for us with words. Rhetoric is a practical subject, which also implies that it is normative: it will teach us, not only to do certain things with words, but also to do these things well with words. Because rhetoric is about doing things well with words, it is also central to it that we should always be very aware of what we are trying to do, for we can do many different things with words, and they need to be done with different words; in general rhetoric teaches us that the function a message is meant to serve very largely determines all the properties that the message should have, which again implies that messages meant to serve different functions will have very different properties. Rhetoric is not just a subject about how each individual can do his or her own thing with words, sometimes at the expense of others. It also holds that we have language and communication to perform certain vital functions in society. Rhetoric has always been seen by some of its practitioners as the ongoing public discourse that has helped establish human societies and hold them together; society would not have existed without the constant workings of rhetoric. In fact, the way rhetoricians figure that is that they believe that if everyone is enabled and allowed to do their own things with words, then that is the way in which the interest of society is best served. Today, the media are the forum where public discourse is conducted. It follows that we should criticise the media when they fail to perform this

function, and we should try to suggest how they could do it better. By taking this stance toward the media, rhetoric distances itself from a couple of other positions that are strongly represented in today's academic world. In Critical Discourse Analysis and similar orientations there is, as in Rhetoric, an emphasis on the utterance and its specific properties, and on how discourse is always an attempt to further the encoder's interests; but there is also, inspired by Foucault, a constant assumption that public discourse serves to maintain a hegemony, that is, to preserve and extend power structures. The strong suit of Critical Discourse Analysis, as practiced by Fairclough and others, is its meticulous observations of verbal messages revealing how even the smallest linguistic features of public messages may work to impress a view on us – a view which fits the agenda of the ruling powers.

Critical Discourse Analysis, as Fairclough and others define it, is an astute attempt to incorporate linguistic analysis into social science so as to understand the transformations of modern capitalism. So basically, Critical Discourse Analysis is a purely descriptive pursuit. There is no theory of how public communication ought to be in order for it to fulfil a constructive role in society. There seems to be no theory of public communication as a necessary factor in a modern coherent society, no notion of a constructive function for public discourse at all. Rhetoric, in contrast, is based on the premise that public discourse is beneficial and indeed necessary in human societies – but not any kind of discourse. Rhetoric shares with Critical Discourse Analysis the wish to look very closely at utterances in the public sphere and to analyse what they do and how they do it, but Rhetoric believes that there is good discourse and bad discourse, i.e., some properties of public discourse will hinder and some will serve the functions for which public discourse is needed. Hence Rhetoric is informed by the wish to identify these properties and to suggest or demand specific changes in current social discourse practices. There are other voices in the study of public communication which also represent a purely descriptive stance, but with an orientation that is a far cry from the systematic suspicion of the critical discourse analysts. Polemically, one might refer to these other scholars as uncritical analysts in that they seem to have taken it upon themselves to defend the media en bloc against any criticism. The outstanding British-American scholar Pippa Norris, it might be argued, is a representative of this trend. In her recent book, *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies* (2000), she broadly dismisses what she refers to as “media malaise” and demonstrates with a wide battery of empirical data that there is a consistently positive correlation between

attention to the news media and political knowledge, trust and participation. Hence, runs the argument, we should not “blame the messenger” but should look elsewhere to understand and confront the more deep-rooted flaws in current representative democracy. But it is hardly surprising that there is a positive correlation between media use and political engagement; how could it be otherwise? Still this obvious fact does not acquit the media from any criticism of how, and how well, they perform their social functions. As a rhetorician one must find it disappointing that a media scholar like Norris never descends from the bird’s-eye-view to look at specific types or even instances of political journalism. Also it is striking that Norris and other leading media scholars refrain from entering into any normative judgments; she has nothing to say as to which types of political journalism might be better than others in some way, nor as to types of political debate or engagement. Such media studies can of very little help both to society and to the media themselves. In contrast to these two broad orientations, which we may polemically call the paranoid and the obsequious, a rhetorician looks at public communication and the media with a functionalist eye. It recognizes that we need public communication for society to exist at all, and it asks not only: “How well does public communication perform the social functions it is meant to perform?” but also: “How could it perform them better?” A trend in media studies that rhetoric has much in common with is uses-and-gratifications theory. Rhetoric shares with it the notion that utterances are used for different, specific purposes. However, uses-and-gratifications theory assumes, optimistically and individualistically, that each user selects and uses media content for his or her individual purposes. Rhetoric acknowledges that the function of verbal communication is mainly to impress our views and our will on others. However, its view of interpersonal communication has more to it than this. If citizens have the means and the opportunity to make a case for their views in open debate, then that is the best way to build a human society that will endure. What we are talking about here is often called the deliberative function of public communication. Deliberation actually means to weigh something, as on a pair of scales, and what we weigh when we deliberate is decisions. Where decisions are concerned you cannot prove anything, i.e., make a logically “valid” case one way or the other; instead, you have to see if you can increase your audience’s adherence to your proposal. It follows that the best we can do in public debate is to make sure that the best reasons on both sides of a case are heard, understood and given attention. The criteria for public debate just given have several implications. Public communication on politics should give much

attention to the reasons that may be offered for or against a proposed policy. Hence, rhetoricians would, for example, look critically at the ways in which the media present reasons for a decision to go to war. Do the media, in particular, manage to make the available arguments on both sides of the issue accessible and understandable to the public? Also, rhetoric would look carefully at how spokespersons on each side of an issue make their case, and what treatment they in turn are given by the media. For example, it would expect would-be deliberative debaters to acknowledge legitimate arguments on the opposite side. Good reasons should be stated, heard and attended to, also by those who disagree. One important complaint against the way politicians and other decision makers argue is precisely that they tend to suppress, ignore or distort the reasons that the opposite side has to offer – especially the good ones. The media should try to make politicians attend to good reasons offered by the other side, and media critics should watch that the media do so. This is because the necessary function of deliberative debate is to identify, in Aristotle's phrase, "the available means of persuasion" (cf. Rhetoric 1355b) on both sides, thereby helping audiences form their own reasoned standpoints.

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