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MEDIA RHETORIC

Rhetoric is, perhaps, one of the most abused words in the English language. Politicians dismiss one another's statements as "mere rhetoric" or demand that an opponent "get past the rhetoric and discuss real solutions." Such usage portrays rhetoric as empty, pompous speech with little substance behind it, but that is an unfair depiction. Before one can delve into the topic of media rhetoric, one must have a clear understanding of rhetoric itself. This can be perplexing because the phenomenon of rhetoric is often defined in different ways by different disciplines. For example, in sociology and media studies, when one talks about the ways in which a message is framed, the underlying issue is actually a question of how a movement or media outlet engages in rhetorical processes.

Aristotle defines rhetoric as "an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of

persuasion." However, there is more to rhetoric than simply persuasion. Kenneth Burke observes that a key function of rhetoric is to foster identification. People use rhetoric to make sense of the world linguistically and symbolically; through rhetoric, people define themselves and their relationships to others, cast blame or praise on individuals and groups, ascribe motives for actions, and interpret events. In other words, empirically observable phenomena are the province of the sciences, but phenomena that are perceptible only through our symbolic representation of them (such as nation-states, political identity, and religious ideologies) are firmly in the domain of rhetoric.

Rhetorical theory has long been based on traditional oratory, but as media have become an increasingly important part of society, rhetorical scholars have paid closer attention to how the medium shapes the message. This is not a new idea, of course. Marshall McLuhan famously proclaimed that "the medium is the message," meaning that the medium is by no means a neutral conduit, but rather an integral part of how we perceive the message. The 1960 Kennedy-Nixon presidential debates provide an excellent illustration of how rhetors can benefit from or be thwarted by the medium. Many who watched the debates on television thought that Kennedy won, largely because of the nonverbal cues that made Nixon appear sickly, untrustworthy, and sinister. However, many of those who listened to the debates on the radio felt that Nixon had won the debates. In essence, what changed was how one draws on *ethos*, or that credibility that is drawn from the speaker him- or herself, that entices one to believe him or her. However, the means by which one persuades in general had also changed as a result of the shift in the media environment (the Kennedy-Nixon debates were the first presidential debates to be televised). Other scholars, such as Kathleen Hall Jamieson, suggest that Ronald Reagan understood well the power of the visual medium, giving him a rhetorical edge over those who were less gifted at drawing on the resources of that medium.

Gender scholars have examined the difference between sex and gender, suggesting that sex is biologically constructed while gender is socially constructed. Although family plays a considerable role in how norms of gender performance are shaped, the media also play a significant role in shaping and perpetuating these constructions. Some of the

concerns often raised by media effects scholars include body image and eating disorders, adolescent sexual behavior, the influence of the consumption of sexually explicit or violent media, and the creation or reinforcement of potentially damaging gender norms.

Some media effects scholars have argued that the ways in which the media portray the world shape individuals' views of the world. Cultivation theory, put forward by George Gerbner and his colleagues, suggests that heavy consumers of media, specifically television, begin to see the real world as a reflection of the mediated world. They found, for example, that individuals who watched crime dramas and reports of violent crime on the nightly televised news reported feeling that the world was a far more dangerous place than would be warranted by an objective view of crime statistics. What this means is that the media play a significant role in helping individuals make sense of their environment.

As it relates to gender and media, perhaps the area that has received the most interest is how the mass media shape one's perception of beauty and body image. Rhetorical scholar Edwin Black observed that rhetorical discourses ask individuals not only to do something but also to become something. When this concept is applied to the mediated messages that bombard us concerning what constitutes beauty, for example, one is faced with an impossible imperative. One can never look like the models in a fashion magazine or on a billboard, because even the models do not look like that. In an age when digital image manipulation is the norm, people are given a completely unrealistic view of what one should become. However, understanding this manipulation does not negate the imperative to become like these models. Some scholars have therefore argued that unrealistic images of beauty, especially those directed at young women and girls, play a role in the development of eating disorders and pathological self-body images.

Another area in which media plays a considerable role in shaping perceptions is gender roles. Many scholars have noted that gender is performed rather than simply biologically based. Because media is a part of one's socialization, how these gender performances are portrayed in the media has significant implications for how one enacts his or her own gender. Some have argued that television shows that portray women as largely subservient, passive sex objects and men as bumbling idiots held up for ridicule can be damaging for both sexes. Moreover,

some have argued that television shows and movies model family and intimate relationships in ways that may provide unrealistic expectations.

Although it seems that media are something directed at the individual, some individuals take aim at the media as well in order to reach large audiences quickly and simultaneously. For example, social movements have long recognized the importance of gaining media attention and sometimes create protest actions and demonstrations designed specifically to get the attention of the news media. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) is an excellent example of how this strategy can be employed through "die ins," seemingly intentionally provocative advertising campaigns that can become news items in themselves, and spectacles such as the "running of the nudes" in Pamplona Spain prior to the traditional bullfights. By giving the media something interesting to cover, such organizations are then able to use the media to disseminate their messages.

There is also the potential that, with the advent of new media, one's innermost thoughts and actions



PETA members in White Plains, New York, protest the use of fur by the clothing manufacturer Burberry, carrying signs and painted in the trademark Burberry plaid. People use rhetoric to define themselves and others, cast blame or praise on individuals and groups, explain their actions, and interpret events. (Wikimedia)

can be transmitted to an audience that would be impossible to reach previously. It seems that Andy Warhol's prediction that everyone would be famous for 15 minutes is now within reach. A renaissance of interpersonal communication appears to be taking place as media continue to evolve. No longer are the channels directed only one way; now content producers actually pay attention to their audiences, and the mediated environment in new media can seem more like a dialogue than a monologue. This phenomenon has implications for how one behaves rhetorically in such an environment.

With an understanding that rhetoric is the means through which people alter and reinforce their socially constructed world, it becomes clear that media are an integral part of that process. The music to which one listens, the movies and television shows one watches, and the digital content one consumes all contribute to one's understanding of how the world behaves and how it ought to behave. As such, media cannot be relegated simply to the realm of mere entertainment, because they serve a normative function. One must look at media not as something outside the sphere of rhetoric but rather as a part of the system by which we define who we are, what we should value, and how we should behave.

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See also Audiences: Producers of New Media; Audiences: Reception and Injection Models; Beauty and Body Image: Beauty Myths; Beauty and Body Image: Eating Disorders; Blogs and Blogging; Cultivation Theory; Gender and Femininity: Motherhood; Gender and Femininity: Single/Independent Girl; Gender and Masculinity: Black Masculinity; Gender and Masculinity: Fatherhood; Gender and Masculinity: Metrosexual Male; Gender and Masculinity: White Masculinity; Gender Embodiment; Gender Media Monitoring; Gender Schema Theory; Identity; Kilbourne, Jean; McLuhan, Marshall; Media Literacy; Mediation; New Media; Online New Media: GLBTQ Identity; Online New Media: Transgender Identity; Pornification of Everyday Life; Reception Theory; Social Construction of Gender; Social Media

Further Readings

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MEDIATION

For decades, media theorists have extolled Marshall McLuhan's statement that "the medium is the message." Humanistic scholars of media studies interpreted McLuhan to mean that the personal and social consequences of any medium or technology in a culture alter the way members of that culture communicate with their world. Karl Marx defined mediation as the reconciliation of two opposing forces within a given society by a mediating object, which can be cultural or material (such as print materials). Therefore, many media thinkers combine McLuhan and Marx and say that media mediates the message, especially from cultural, economic, political, and sociological perspectives. After considering both Marx and McLuhan, other media thinkers defined mediation as a process of cultural production and gatekeeping by media institutions that intervene in the relationship between people's everyday experience and a "true" view of reality or false consciousness.

Marxist cultural analysis emphasizes that the masses are manipulated and exploited by the ruling class. The Marxist method seeks to explicate the manifest and latent reflections of modes of material production, ideological values, class relations, and structures of social power—racial or gender as well as politicoeconomic or the state of consciousness of people in a historical or socioeconomic situation. The Marxist method provides an analytic tool for studying the political signification in every facet of contemporary culture, including popular entertainment in television and films, music, mass-circulation