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The Message, the Medium and the Means of Argumentation: Towards a More Holistic Approach to the Rhetorical Criticism of Television News Reports

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for developing a more holistic approach to the rhetorical analysis to understand the persuasive communicative work being done by television news as rhetors replicating and performing popular culture. The essay argues that studies on the rhetoricality of television news reports tend to either focus on the reports' messages through an analysis of the content or consider the medium on which the reports are aired or the form of these texts. As such, there appears to be a gap in postulating how the content, the medium and the argumentation schemes employed in television news reports come together to engage in persuasive communicative work. Given the status of television news reports as popular culture texts, theories need to be developed to make meaning of their representations of society's most dominant practices and perspectives.

KEYWORDS

television news reports;
rhetorical criticism; means of
argumentation

Introduction

As texts that define, frame and interpret current affairs, news reports are sites of power struggles regarding the meaning and significance we assign to present-day events. This power lies in their role as texts of popular culture that influence what people think about and how they think about things. Furthermore, they are texts with which we do things in the world and persuade others. Through news media, we announce something as novel, confer significance to events, create present-day heroes and villains and challenge powerful institutions and individuals. Therein lies their rhetorical dimension. Barry Brummet intimates that “[t]he theory of rhetoric today is increasingly recognizing the important business that is done through popular culture”, so if we want to understand “how public affairs are nudged in one direction or another, we need to look more at what is happening on television” (Brummett 2017, 102). Vishda D’Souza argues (2019) that as a legacy media platform, television is still an important medium for news professionals, such as anchors, and newsmakers, such as celebrities, to persuasively exercise their authority. Further, Sisanda Nkoala notes that beyond the content aired, “the manner in which a particular broadcaster chooses to cover a particular story, and how they go about deciding which stories to cover, is part of their [persuasive communicative] strategy of

establishing their credibility” (2019, 227–228). This idea of television news reports as rhetors means that consideration is given to how these texts use words and visuals to persuade, how television is used as a medium to deliver this persuasive messaging and how the structure of the reports engages in persuasive communicative work within popular culture. The significance of considering the rhetorical aspects of audiovisual texts, such as televised news reports, is that while much has been studied about verbal and text-based rhetoric since the days of Aristotle and visual rhetoric since the twentieth century, there is a scarcity of frameworks for scholars to draw on when considering the persuasive appeal of audiovisual media holistically. Prevalent approaches tend to either focus on the message, as articulated in the audio and visuals, the medium, or the means of argumentation.

This paper argues for the development of more holistic means of rhetorical analysis to understand the persuasive communicative work undertaken by television news as rhetors that replicate and perform popular culture. Prevailing approaches in rhetorical scholarship appear to primarily examine each of these aspects of the medium discreetly, an approach which limits the extent to which scholars are then able to discuss the persuasive communicative work these texts do in more holistic ways (see Dueck 1995; Nkoala 2019; Setiawan et al. 2020; Cook 2021). The view advanced in this paper is that when undertaking a rhetorical criticism of television news reports, the critic needs to give due consideration to the message, the medium and the means of argumentation to appreciate the type of persuasive communicative work being undertaken. The essay limits itself to television news reports, which, while deemed part of the so-called “legacy media” texts, compared to new media, are still significant in shaping public perceptions. There is scope for future scholarship on how these tools may be applied to new media, such as news reports on Twitter, TikTok and other digital media platforms that audiences increasingly turn to for news content. However, in setting out to propose a more holistic approach to the rhetorical criticism of these texts, the focus is providing rhetorical critics with a framework that will enable them to examine the different dimensions of the persuasive appeal of televised news reports in the traditional sense.

Rhetorical criticism has been used in this essay as a robust way of engaging in this exploration because rhetoric is about “observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (Aristotle 1994, 7). The point of departure is that in these news reports, one can observe how verbal and visual symbols of popular culture have been used to shape attitudes and beliefs (Borchers 2012). This act of persuasion is critical to shaping the prevailing culture of the day and is at the heart of rhetoric culture theory (Strecker and Tyler 2009, 2). In this regard, Ivo Strecker and Stephen Tyler, who have been among the leading thinkers on rhetoric culture theory, observe that “many factors contribute to the shaping of human action ... *rhetoric* ... is the decisive factor in the emergence of cultural diversity past and present” (Strecker and Tyler 2009, 1). They attribute this to the fact that it is our “rhetorical genius that creates the “customs” and “lifestyles” of culture” (Strecker and Tyler 2009, 1), aligning themselves with a view that posits that “cultures are continuously produced, reproduced and revised in dialogues among their members” (Tedlock and Manheim 1995, 2). To this end, rhetoric culture theory posits ways that rhetoric can be used to understand culture and produce, reproduce, and revise it. In Strecker and Tyler’s conceptualization, the theory refers to traditional notions of culture as it is primarily understood from an anthropological perspective.

However, it also applies to popular culture, which Ray Browne defines as “all the experiences in life shared by people in common, generally though not necessarily disseminated by the mass media” (Browne 1973, 6). By turning to the texts that largely influence popular culture, namely mass media, we can use the perspectives provided by rhetoric culture theory to understand the rhetoricality of television news reports and posit around how these texts influence popular perspectives on issues (Milestone and Meyer 2020).

Three kinds of concepts are dealt with in this paper to advance the argument. The first relate to the news reports’ message, where consideration is given to theories dealing with the content and how words and visuals are used to persuade. In this regard, Kenneth Burke’s theory of language as symbolic action, focusing on his ideas around dramatism, identification and terministic screens, is coupled with the notion of audiovisual rhetoric, rooted in film semiotics and Joost, Buchmüller, and Englert’s (2009) framework of Audio Visual Patterns, to consider the impression of reality that is created through the use of audiovisual texts. The second concept considers how television’s characteristics as a medium and the contexts in which it is consumed make it a suitable platform for engaging in persuasive communicative work in popular culture. To discuss the persuasive aspects of television as a medium, David Altheide and Robert Snow’s idea of media logic is used to focus on television as a metonymic text (Altheide and Snow 1979). The third concept relates to how arguments are structured in television news as a genre, focusing on how a persuasive information argumentation scheme is often employed in news media reports, as advanced by Walton (2007). While these respective concepts have been the subject of individual scholarly consideration over time, the essay leans heavily on their original conceptualization by the theorists who developed them because it aims to propose the holistic approach to the rhetorical critique of television news reports as texts based on their foundational ideas.

The message

The orientation of this paper is to view language and media as social phenomena “that simply, routinely and ordinarily work” (Scannel 1998, 257), where consideration is given to the kind of work being done through the use of language and media, and how that work is being done. As such, Burke’s notion of language as symbolic action finds great relevance. In his conceptualization, Burke sees language as a mechanism for exchanging ideas and as an instrument to do things in the world. He states, “[l]anguage is a species of action, symbolic action—and its nature is such that it can be used as a tool” (Burke 1966, 15). This stems from his view of a human being as a “symbol-using animal” (Burke 1966, 15). He expounds on this idea on two levels. First, he notes that to make things function in society, such as a factory, one relies on various nomenclatures, such as accounting, technological specialities and education (Burke 1966). In this sense, these symbols enable the factory to do what it does. By extrapolation, it is language that steers how systems and organizations function in society. The second level relates to the intuitive ability of human beings to use language as a tool that helps them examine how they use language, as is the case in definitions listed in a dictionary (Burke 1969, 43).

Stemming from this perspective of language as symbolic action, Burke defines rhetoric as “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by

nature respond to symbols” (Burke 1966, 14). In this statement, he advances the view that all language is persuasive because symbolic acts do something. Burke differs from the traditional view of rhetoric in how he posits persuasion is achieved in a rhetorical exchange. For Aristotle, this was through the artistic proofs of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* (Aristotle 1994, 7). For Burke, persuasion occurs through “the use of words [symbols] by human agents to form attitudes or induce actions in other human agents” (Burke 1969, 46). Thus, for Burke, rhetoric and rhetorical criticism concern understanding what motivates people and how language, as a symbolic system, can influence and expose those motives.

Burke’s conceptualization of language as symbolic action is key to the argument advanced in this paper because it directs the analysis to how those who craft televised news media texts use words and visuals to “identify symbolically their perspectives as they attempt to define situations, create orientations or attitudes and shape an individual’s view of reality” (Foss 2017, 74). While he does not explicitly define this notion of language as symbolic action, he argues that all language is persuasive because it is a tool used to say things and a tool used to do things. He argues that words “shape our relations with our fellows. They prepare us for some functions and against others, for or against the persons representing these functions. [They] go further, they suggest how you shall be for or against” (Burke 1984, 4). Thus, by choosing to report on issues in a certain way, news reports direct the audience to interpret them from a particular point of view, which usually aligns with the perspective of the journalists who crafted the story (Burke 1969).

This theory of language as symbolic action led Burke to branch out and introduce the concept of dramatism, which he used to explore human motivations. Dramatism is “a technique of analysis of language and thought as basically modes of action rather than a means of conveying information” (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary 1968, 685), and it is rooted in Burke’s view that language is dramatistic because it is “primarily as a mode of *action* rather than as a mode of *knowledge*, though the two emphases are by no means mutually exclusive” (Burke 1978). Burke argues that life is not *like* a drama; it *is* a drama, where humans are the actors who use language in their acting. Through dramatism, one can consider “What is involved, when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?” (Burke 1969, p. xv). Sonia Foss explains this idea by stating that in Burke’s conceptualization:

We use rhetoric to constitute and present a particular view of our situation, just as a play creates and presents a certain world or situation inhabited by the characters in the play. Through rhetoric, we size up a situation and name its structure and outstanding ingredients ... Once we know how rhetors have described situations, you are able to discover their motives for action in the situation. (Foss 2017, 36)

Thus, Burke’s idea of dramatism allows us to consider how the words used in the news reports unmask the motives behind why the crafters of these news items construct them in the way they do. Attention is drawn to how particular “realities” come into being in the use of words and images in television news reports and how the constructors of these news items “motivate or block particular understandings, attitudes, and pre-dispositions” on the issues they report on (Livesey 2002, 121–122).

Burke introduces another notion to support his theory of language as symbolic action: the idea of identification. Through this concept, he advances the view that a speaker only

persuades an audience if the speaker somehow evokes viewpoints shared in common with the audience. He states, “[y]ou persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your way with his” (Burke 1969, 55). For Burke, one of the main reasons people engage in communication is that even though they are separate beings, they long to bridge that divide by finding people to identify with. Words are the primary way that identification is facilitated. According to Burke, identification is an essential rhetorical tool because only once an audience feels they have identified with a speaker can they be persuaded by what the speaker is arguing. He states, “We might well keep it in mind that a speaker persuades an audience by the use of stylistic identifications; his act of persuasion may be to cause the audience to identify itself with the speaker’s interests” (Burke 1969, 46).

When applying this idea to television news reports, consideration is given to how people and phenomena are named to ensure that the audience identifies with the argument advanced in the news report. For example, descriptors such as “tragedy” and “heinous” are sometimes used for particular incidents and identification assists in the critique of which crimes are described as such and how such descriptions are the journalist’s attempt at employing identification to ensure the viewer agrees with their perspective. Second, in the process of association, the news reports emphasize certain aspects and conceal others to advance a particular view and prompt a specific kind of meaning to be read from it. There is a difference in which issues receive focused coverage in any specific year. Using news reports on crime as an example, in one year, cases of gender-based violence may be amplified while corruption-related crimes are ignored. In another year, corruption may take centre stage while reports on interpersonal crimes receive less coverage. This is not necessarily based on the statistical prevalence of the crimes but rather on efforts, on the part of the journalists, at identification based on what they assume is uppermost in the public’s minds. The third process occurs as the audience finds that “shared substances” advanced in the report and, in so doing, is persuaded by the message it advances, which brings the other two processes together to consider their overall rhetorical effect.

The description of these three processes as discrete activities is purely academic because, in reality, they co-occur. Although Burke focuses on the relationship between public speakers and their audiences, identification is also how an audience member can perceive a communicator as similar or having the same interests. When it comes to news reports, focusing on newsworthy incidents is one way in which journalists attempt to identify with their audiences by sourcing stories they believe will be deemed relevant by those watching, reading or listening to their news reports. Consideration is given to factors such as the story’s proximity, timing, how many people it is assumed to impact and whether a report confirms publicly held views about an issue or contradicts those (Jordan 2017; Gruenewald, Pizarro, and Chermak 2009).

The final Burkean concept that is important in this essay is the notion of terministic screens. Burke introduces the idea of terministic screens, which he describes as how we use language as filters, or screens, through which we view reality (Burke 1966). Our interpretation of what particular developments mean is informed by how they have been described because “terms direct the attention to one field rather than to another” (Burke 1966, 46). Burke posits that there is no way of avoiding terministic screens “since we can’t say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they

necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another" (Burke 1966, 50). While Burke uses language in the discursive sense, because the perspective undergirds the concept of terministic screens as symbols for communication, it can be applied to audiovisual communication. In fact, in expounding on how he came to the idea of terministic screens, Burke states that it was inspired when he came across "different photographs of the same objects, the difference being that they were made with different colour filters" (Burke 1966, 45). Adoni, Cohen and Mane argue that when it comes to television, persuasion occurs when the "symbolic representation of reality is based on selection and editing of material derived from reality, and thus depicts only a certain part of reality and portrays it from a specific point of view" (Adoni, Cohen, and Mane 1984, 34). This "certain part of reality" and the "specific point of view" articulated by the reports are what the critic will be most interested in because it may point to the perspectives advanced by the coverage. Moreover, because of the audiovisual character of television, the criticism ought to focus on crafting television news reports as visually and discursively persuasive texts because this medium uses these strengths as a platform for socialization (O'Guinn and Shrum 1997).

Each of these Burkean concepts allows us to consider how television news achieves its rhetorical purpose at the level of the words used. First, the dramatic pentad focuses on these texts' structure and will enable the critic to unpack how the language reveals the motives behind the texts' construction. Second, the idea of identification steers the analysis to focus on the more abstract ways language relates the news reports to the audience. Finally, terministic screens also focus on the more abstract ways language is used to prompt viewers to read the reports through a particular filter and arrive at particular perspectives. Each of these concepts provides a rich enough analysis by itself. However, to understand the rhetorical effectiveness of news reports better, the rhetorical critic must consider what motivated the creators of these texts, simultaneously with how these texts try to produce identification in the audience, simultaneously with how they prompt the audience towards a particular perspective using discursive and non-discursive filters and ultimately how they function as symbolic action. Dueck (1995, p. iii) takes this further and argues that when it comes to television news, even when newscasts are based on the same developments, "in their construal of semantic field, positioning of speaker and hearer and mode of development", broadcasters can produce differing rhetorical effects because it is not just about what is said, but the context in which it is said. Further, because they are audiovisual, it is important to consider the use of words and images to appreciate the persuasive message of television news reports fully. To discuss the visual aspects of these texts, the essay draws on the concept of audiovisual rhetoric, which is based on a perspective of audiovisual texts, like television and film, being viewed as possessing a language that uses specific signs and symbols to persuade (Joost, Buchmüller, and Englert 2009). Film scholar Christian Metz makes the case that what makes the viewers' impression of reality so strong when they watch audiovisual texts is the fact that by using moving images, these texts "speak to us with the accents of true evidence, using the argument that 'it is so'" (Metz 1991, 4).

In considering the audiovisual aspects of the news, one must also think about visual persuasion and what makes these images persuasive. Paul Messaris (1997) identifies three characteristics in this regard: their ability to simulate reality, their ability to

advance arguments in how they “show us the unspoken”, and their role as evidence or proof of something. This goes beyond the image we see to how the image is represented through production techniques, such as framing, and post-production choices, such as editing. Joost, Buchmüller, and Englert’s (2009) Audio Visual Patterns (AVPs) framework provides a valuable structure for how one can “read” video footage and observe the patterns employed in aspects such as the types of shots used, how the story is sequenced, and how audio is used concerning the visuals to posit on how these texts persuade.

Two aspects of the televised news reports provide a good example of how this can be done: the shots employed and the sequence they followed. According to Sergei Eisenstein and Daniel Gerould (1974), the shot is the basic unit of audiovisual media. However, it is not the same basic unit as, for example, a word in semiotic analysis involving language. Here Metz (1991, 67) says, “through its semantic content, ... its ‘substance’ is closer, all things considered, to a sentence than to a word”. Thus, in its consideration of the shots used, one can examine aspects such as the type of shot used at critical junctures of the news report, for instance, the opening and closing shots. These are akin to analysing a narrative’s opening and closing sentences, which are always significant in stories. Consideration can be further given to the image featured and how it is framed in the shot. In terms of the sequences employed in these reports, namely how they start and end and how these shots follow each other, Metz describes an audiovisual sequence as “a complex segment of discourse” (1991, 65). Sol Worth argues that in the context of audiovisual media, like televised news reports, a “sequence is a deliberately employed series used for the purpose of giving meaning rather than order” (1969, 34). Thus, ordering visuals in television is done purposively to articulate and confer meaning. When analysing televised news reports and the patterns employed for persuasive appeal, one could consider the beginning and the end of the stories and the junctures at which visuals of characters such as victims and perpetrators of crime-related developments are used.

One shortcoming of the interpretivist approaches discussed above is their one-way reading of television as a text and downplaying the role that format plays in how television is read. Metz’s work is on “cinematographic language” generally and does not distinguish between how that language is read differently when presented in a domestic context, as is the case with television. Meanwhile, Burke’s work is wholly opposed to the idea that the medium through which a message is presented has a bearing on its meaning. In his book *Language as symbolic action: Essays on life, literature, and method*, he has a specific chapter entitled “Medium as ‘Message’”, where he provides a detailed critique of his contemporary McLuhan’s notion that the medium is the message.

McLuhan’s view posits that technology is an extension of man, and as such, media is an integral part of the language we use to shape perceptions of reality. He states:

the medium is the “message” because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action. The content or uses of such media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association. Indeed, it is only too typical that the “content” of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium. (McLuhan and Fiore 1967, 203)

Burke takes issue with this, as his view is that media are but “instruments” and favour a particular kind of content, and as such, the content remains the focus. He argues, “If the medium is the message, obviously the important thing is not what somebody says

in a given medium, but what medium he uses, regardless of what he says ... The medium is the message. Hence, down with content analysis" (Burke 1966, 413). In his strong criticism of McLuhan, Burke does not offer a perspective on how, if at all, technology influences language as symbolic action. A reason for this could be that in his conceptualization of his ideas, his sole references were to written texts that "carry" language very differently from the audiovisual texts that have come to proliferate in society, such as television. Thus, while this essay does not adopt McLuhan's overzealous media-deterministic posture on the role of the media in shaping reality, it recognizes that an approach to rhetorical criticism of television news reports that focuses only on the words and visuals used, at the expense of the medium, is inadequate for a critic who wants to posit on the persuasive appeal of these texts holistically. As such, it draws on the notion of media logic to supplement the interpretivist view that understanding language and visual use alone will aid in understanding communication. It does this by drawing on the idea of media logic because, in the twenty-first century, "much of popular culture comes to us through the 'tube'" (Brummett 2017, 271).

The medium

Media logic is:

the way organizational and technological media formats (how the material is organized, the style in which it is presented, the focus or emphasis on particular characteristics of behaviour, the grammar of communication) structure both content and audience expectations. (Brants and van Praag 2017, 398)

It is a perspective that views media as an institution with its own logic regarding communication (Altheide and Snow 1979). It assumes that "as people become accustomed to a technology and to the social uses to which it is put, they internalise certain ways of thinking and perceiving" (Brummett 2017, 272). When drawing on this idea of media logic, consideration is given to in how content is packaged and delivered to audiences, it "cultivates a sense of its own reality in viewers" (Brummett 2017, 275). Media logic has similarities to a notion advanced by Neil Postman that each medium has its own epistemology and that, in turn, privileges certain types of intellect in a culture (Postman 2005).

Indeed, it has not always been the case that audiences instinctively know to distinguish fiction from fact in media programmes. For example, the historic radio broadcast of the radio drama "The War of the Worlds" in 1938 caused public panic as audiences did not realize it was fiction and thought aliens were invading the earth based on what they were hearing (Heyer 2003). This is evidence that media logic develops with time as audiences learn to read the different media platforms and genres.

One also considers the context in which the medium is usually used by considering whether one is likely to consume the medium alone or with a group of people; one is expected to consume the medium in public or private spaces (Brummett 2017). The medium discussed in this essay is television. As such, consideration is given to its realism as an audiovisual medium; its intimacy as a medium orientated towards making "small, intimate concerned paramount" (Brummett 2017, 276), given that people view it in intimate contexts, such as homes. Finally, given its status as a mouthpiece of popular culture (Brummett 2017), consideration is given to television as a text

that articulates the rhetoric of popular culture. This idea is relevant because audiovisual media, such as television, changes an audience's sense of time and space (Meyrowitz 1986; Larsen 2002). The fact that we can be transported to a crime scene while seated in our homes or watch a judge deliver a sentence at 8 p.m. while eating supper shapes our attitudes and beliefs around the developments we observe. Altheide and Snow argue that:

when media logic is employed to present and interpret institutional phenomena, the form and content of those institutions are altered. The changes may be minor, as in the case of how political candidates dress and groom themselves; or they may be major, such as the entire process of present-day political campaigning in which political rhetoric says very little but shows much concerns. (Altheide and Snow 1979, 11)

Altheide and Snow's work on television news logic is the basis of this essay's argument for the necessity of rhetorical critics to consider the characteristics of television as a medium and news reports as a genre when analysing the persuasive appeal of these texts. First, one of the perspectives they say informs television news logic is the notion of television news as entertainment, which leads to certain types of events being deemed more newsworthy than others for this medium specifically. Second, they argue that television news is a distinct format with specific features in terms of duration, time of day when it is aired, and the content it focuses on. With the introduction of 24-hour news channels, some of their ideas around this are dated, but their overall proposition of television news as a distinct format still holds. Third, media logic informs who and what is deemed a credible news source, and in so doing, it determines what kind of content gets reported on. Next, there is an approach in television news that within a bulletin, there should be a variety of stories so that even if there happen to be a lot of relevant developments related to crime on a particular day, not all of them will be reported on so that political, economic, human interest and sports stories can also be included to ensure variety in the bulletin. Lastly, they highlight the audiovisual nature of TV news, which compels this format to rely on stories with action and where visuals can be obtained to show, not merely tell, a particular development.

Considering just the words and visuals in these news reports limits the rhetorical critic from adequately analysing these texts' features based on television logic, which this essay has argued is an essential aspect of how one reads meaning into televised news content. Another aspect of news reports that cannot be examined by only considering the words and visuals used are the argumentation schemes in these texts. Argumentation is a more specific form of persuasion that compares "claims in support of and in opposition to a proposition" (Borchers 2012, 21). The study of argumentation is relevant as it helps one understand how people reason in different contexts. Furthermore, considering communication exchanges from an argumentation perspective means that consideration is given to how people use language to explain a particular view to get others to agree with them. To this end, Joseph Wenzel advances three perspectives on argumentation, which outline the differences between rhetoric, dialectic and logical argumentation (Wenzel 1990). He views rhetoric argumentation as the natural process of persuasive communication; dialectic focuses on engagement procedures in persuasive communication, and logic as the product of persuasive communication (Wenzel 1990; Lewiński and Mohammed 2016). The section that follows considers persuasive information-seeking to understand how

argumentation in television news reports functions and posits that a particular type of argumentation scheme, namely persuasive information-seeking, is best suited for understanding television news reports.

The means of argumentation

In discussing how television news reports persuade, this essay argues for consideration of news media argumentation as one of the strategies used in these texts. The view advanced is that news media has its unique approaches to argumentation because of its particular characteristics as a text. As such, when a rhetorical critic examines the persuasive performance of television news reports, they should not just consider their content or the logic that informs how the medium should be read; one must consider the argumentation schemes that inform these televised news reports. As Walton argues, a paucity of scholarship has sought to understand the “central mechanisms of media argumentation” (Walton 2007, 5). As a result, there is somewhat of a gap in the scholarship on the argumentation schema used in mass media.

Because it aims to analyse the persuasive communicative work of television news reports, this essay focuses on rhetoric and dialogue argumentation. As argued above, while some general features of media argumentation apply to news media texts broadly, different media draw on their specific logic and have particular ways of making persuasive arguments. Peter White, for example, provides a framework through which one can analyse the rhetoric of newspapers and explores how the “recurrent, characteristic patterns of text organisation and lexical choice may influence readers, how they may position readers to accept a text’s propositions, to accede to its presuppositions or to endorse the particular view of the social order upon which it relies” as a means towards this (White 1998). This essay draws on Walton’s (2007) work on media argumentation to do something similar to what White has done for newspaper reports concerning television news reports.

Walton outlines three elements of persuasive dialogue:

the argument put forward by the proponent is deductively valid or is otherwise structurally correct ... The second element is the commitment of the respondent to the premises of the argument ... The third notion is that of the unique proposition designated as the conclusion of the argument. (Walton 2007, 54)

News reports put forward a perspective on something that is “amiss” or newsworthy in the world (Parks 2019). The news report intends to get the viewer to deem the account of a development as credible and plausible, even if the viewer disagrees with the perspective advanced by a particular newscast (Nkoala 2019). The information-seeking element comes in because each of these elements uses the information-seeking disposition of viewers to advance the argument. News reports rely on being relevant such that audiences turn to them out of a need to know about local, national and international significant developments outside of their immediate context (Schröder 2019, 5). The reports rely on features such as information from experts and officials, and in the case of television news, visuals of the developments to position the argument they advance as deductively valid (Bednarek and Caple 2012). Walton (2007, 87) outlines this argumentation scheme as follows:

MAJOR PREMISE: Source “E” is an expert in subject domain “D” containing proposition “A”.

MINOR PREMISE: “E” asserts that proposition “A” (in domain “D”) is true (false).

CONCLUSION: “A” may plausibly be taken to be true (false).

Walton outlines the importance of the appeal to expert opinion as one of the key traits of this argumentation scheme based on the assumption that the most useful information will come from the expert. Therefore, it is essential for a rhetorical critic to ascertain who these news reports position as subject matter experts, over and above what they say. For this reason, the types of people featured in this expert role and what that says about the kind of information these news reports deem to be persuasive are important in the proposed holistic consideration of the persuasive communicative work of these texts. The idea of persuasive information-seeking, where one considers how the reports employ persuasive argumentation and an information-seeking scheme, allows the critic to consider these reports’ compositional aspects in greater depth. This persuasive information-seeking scheme is linked to framing because while the information sought and referenced in a story may, in and of itself, be neutral, the way that information is framed will “construct a particular point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be viewed in a particular manner, with some facts made more or less noticeable (even ignored) than others” (Kuypers 2009, 182). In much of the literature where rhetorical critics examine the persuasive appeal of television news reports, they appear to employ an approach that does not take the particular argumentation schemes used in these texts and instead either considers the words and visuals or analyses the media logic apart from considering how information-seeking schemes are employed (see Dueck 1995; Nkoala 2019; Davisson and Donovan 2019). Accordingly, we see that understanding the persuasive appeal of television news reports does not lie solely at the level of understanding the textual elements, such as how language and visuals are used, neither is it only at the level of understanding how the medium’s features are used to make the reports persuasive, as posited in the notion of media logic. It also lies in understanding the structure and organization of the news reports, the type of stories that are more likely to be covered and the kind of people more likely to be featured.

Conclusion

This paper has argued for a more holistic approach to the rhetorical criticism of television news reports. The emphasis is on the text’s message produced by these news reports as rhetors, and the argument considers how the messages within these television news reports function. The argument advanced is that to understand the persuasive work being done holistically, one must consider the message, the medium and the means of argumentation of these texts. Using Burke’s notion of language as symbolic action, the essay has highlighted three concepts to consider the rhetoricality of the message of television news reports. The first is dramatism, which allows one to analyse the television news reports to understand what may have motivated the reports’ messages. The second is identification, which explores how words and visuals are used to identify with the viewers. The third is terministic screens that explain that news reports, as rhetors, use words and images to cause the audience to filter messages from specific points of view. Finally, the paper also discussed film semiotics and how the reports’

audiovisual aspects are analysed using Metz's notions of how moving visuals persuade about reality.

Regarding the medium, the essay argued for the applicability of media logic to explain why television is read in a particular way and why this influences how it persuades as a medium. Finally, the essay dealt with Walton's idea of media argumentation. It explained why a persuasive information-seeking argumentation scheme is employed to understand how persuasion occurs based on how these news reports are organized. The essay has endeavoured to make the overarching argument that previous perspectives that have considered the persuasive features of television news reports either at the level of the message or the medium or the means of argumentation, as discussed above, are inadequate to explain these texts' persuasive features because they consider each of these elements discretely. An approach has been advanced that would employ the techniques outlined in the paper for a more holistic rhetorical criticism of television news reports. As an argumentative paper, this essay has stopped short of undertaking such a critique as that would warrant an empirical approach based on data collected; however, it has provided some examples of what this could look like. It has aimed to provide a framework for how scholars can move beyond the disjointed approaches that characterize the rhetorical analysis of television news reports as rhetors.

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