



Rhetoric in Media Studies
The Voice of Constructive Criticism

Kock, Christian Erik J.

Published in:
N O R D I C O M - Information

Publication date:
2004

Document version
Early version, also known as pre-print

Citation for published version (APA):
Kock, C. E. J. (2004). Rhetoric in Media Studies: The Voice of Constructive Criticism. *N O R D I C O M - Information*, 26(2), 103-110.

Christian Kock

Rhetoric in media studies: the voice of constructive criticism

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 takes the social angle: how can we have communication that will perform these social functions for us? As a result, rhetoricians look closely at specific properties of media content, often with a view to how it could be different, whereas uses-and-gratifications theory, in a much broader approach, describes what each medium, considered as such, is used for.

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.

As an example of how scholars with a rhetorical approach would look at the media and their performance, we might consider the studies that Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella presented, in their book *Spiral of Cynicism* (1997), of how the media reported the political activities around a possible health care reform in the US during the early years of the Clinton presidency. What Jamieson and Cappella found was essentially that the media, instead of focusing on "issues," i.e., the problems facing the American health care system, their possible solutions and what cases could be made for them, they focused overwhelmingly on "strategy," i.e., the moves and manoeuvres of the warring parties and political figures in the legislative process. The view of politics underlying this kind of coverage is that, as a general assumption, politicians are driven by a wish to preserve and extend their personal power, not by ideas about what policies are best for society. Further, Jamieson and Cappella argued that this strategic focus was instrumental in bringing the legislative process to a deadlock so that no reform came about. The book presents a series of studies suggesting that strategic coverage of specific issues tends to infect media users with a general cynicism regarding the *entire* political process; also, that media users do not want or demand strategic coverage of politics to nearly the extent that media people think they do, and that as cynicism grows, so does also public distrust of the media themselves – hence the term “spiral of cynicism.”

Regina Lawrence (2000) did a further study of the dysfunctional workings of political coverage in the media, showing how media, in the phase where a piece of legislation was still in the making, would concentrate on the strategic aspects of the political process; only *after* it was made effective, but only then, would they begin to describe what how it would affect citizens.

There are several other empirical data which suggest that the media and their users do not see eye to eye as to what aspects of politics political journalism ought to focus on. In a 1999

study of the presidential election in 1996, two University of Connecticut researchers found that the way the media covered that election was grossly out of touch with how voters wanted it covered , (Dautrich and Hartley 1999). Consistently throughout the campaign, voters found that the media focused too much on candidates' personalities, on "horse race" and on strategy and tactics, but too little on their standpoints on issues, on the effect if either of them were elected, and on the views of third parties.

For two years I directed a project financed by the Danish Newspapers Association to investigate current and alternative ways of doing political journalism in print media. The project is reported in the book *Forstå verden: Politisk journalistik for fremtiden* (Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur, 2002). In one study, I did a content analysis of all articles in the Danish daily newspapers about the budget negotiations for the year 2000. The articles, it turned out, were mainly about strategic manoeuvring by the various parties involved in, or excluded from, negotiations about the upcoming budget. In addition, there was a good deal of articles about minor, controversial items or proposals many of which never materialised. But there was virtually no coverage of the overall structure of the budget, for example the fact that out of the 400 billion kroner in the Danish state budget, the vast majority is bound by other laws and hence untouchable, whereas less than 10 billion may in fact be shifted about in budget negotiations. But what, then, are the purposes for which we set aside nearly all of our national household money? How big are these programs in relation to each and in relation to corresponding accounts in other countries? Which have grown most, and why? Why does a rich nation not have enough for health, education, and care for the elderly? How much *do* we spend on these accounts, by the way? In short, what are we spending our household money on? These are the questions that traditional budget negotiation coverage in newspapers leaves unanswered. Imagine a family living in similar ignorance of their available income is spent on.

Moreover, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that newspaper readers or even TV audiences actually want the coverage of national budget affairs to be the way it traditionally is.

Media researchers ought to intervene here and point out that this is the way the media treat a subject like this; they might try to work out what users actually feel about it, and what the objective effects of it is; and they might suggest alternatives and do research to find out what users might think of them.

A group of journalism students who had heard of the critical stance our project was taking towards traditional political journalism did a study to see whether a sample of ordinary readers were in agreement with the media's own criteria as to which types of news stories they found most interesting (reported in the book). They constructed a list of 10 made-up news headlines, five reflecting "traditional" criteria of newsworthiness, and five which reflected a focus in broader structural issues. They asked political editors at five national newspapers and 76 ordinary readers to select the five stories that they would be most eager to print, respectively, to read. This brought out a strong discrepancy between editors' and readers' preferences. The most attractive story to the editors was one that stated that the Minister for culture would withdraw from politics in connection with the upcoming birth of her third child. This story was the one that readers were least likely to read. Instead, they gave top priority to a story whose headline asked the question: "Euthanasia - murder or charity. We have the right to live. Should we also be given the right to die?" ...

An interesting wider implication of this study is that some of the stories ranked highest by readers were in fact not about news. Their number 3 favourite was one whose headline said, "A multicultural democracy - Europe is the cradle of democracy, but are we willing to give immigrant citizens full democratic rights?" To this one editor objected that such a headline was "dreadfully abstract," and editors ranked this story eighth.

The interesting general issue here is that the media apparently do *not* necessarily give the audience what they want. There have been many claims that the media nowadays are run by money people, not by news people, and that this is the reason behind much of the current media malaise. But what we see in the case of political journalism is that what the media offer us is to large extent not what the market forces would dictate. The forces that give us cynical, horse-race-oriented, unenlightening political journalism are not the market forces of public demand, but perhaps rather the forces of journalistic myth and orthodoxy.

One article of orthodox journalistic faith is precisely the cynical view of politics - the view of politicians as self-serving individuals whose every action or statement is dictated by a will to preserve or extend their power. This attitude, on the one hand, supplies an explanatory framework that is characteristic of the journalistic profession; it makes the journalist who adopts this attitude look like a seasoned expert, someone with savvy and no illusions who is not easily taken in; however, with this framework to explain anything that goes on in politics, the journalist is not obliged to have any substantive knowledge of any actual policy areas. For example, in

commenting on politicians' moves on health care legislation, the journalist needs no medical expertise or knowledge of health care economics, but may fall back on the same type of catch-all theory as for any other area of political debate: the power struggle framework. Adopting this framework is thus not only gratifying for the journalist, because it gives him a distinctive journalistic angle on politics; it is also cheap: with this one simplistic framework applied to everything any cub reporter can be a professional, because he needs no real knowledge of anything. For this stance I would like to suggest the term "Instant professionalism."

The cynical view that gives political journalists Instant professionalism is only one of several myths that haunt the media. It is a myth in the sense that contrary to what many journalists believe, it is not good for society, and since readers do not particularly want it, it is not good for business either. Another myth that specifically plagues newspaper journalism has to do not with the ideological but with the formal or structural dimension of messages. It is the myth of the "inverted news pyramid." This term refers to the traditional structure of news copy where everything is arranged in a linear sequence, beginning with whatever has most news value and then presenting additional chunks of information in order of descending importance. This often means: irrespective of chronology, logic and clarity.

The inverted pyramid is similar to the set menu at some restaurants, where the chef alone decides what we are having and in what order. Except that when we read it is easier to rebel and either drop out, which is what most readers do most of the time, or skip around, in which case one often has to skip pretty much at random, because it is usually not possible to see in advance what the individual parts of the article contain.

As stated before, it is a key point in a rhetorician's approach to the media that a given medium has several widely differing functions. Consequently, it makes little sense to speak of the function of that medium as such, or to assume that the medium as such imposes specific conditions on whatever content it is used to mediate. The function of a medium is to mediate the functions of the content that it carries. And each medium may carry many types of content, each with its own distinctive function.

It is clear that each medium will be better suited for certain functions than for others. Still, it is a mistake to believe that a given medium, e.g., television, imposes certain specific requirements on all of its content regardless of function. For example, there has been a strong desire in TV programming to inject narrative qualities into material that is not by nature narrative. This

often involves an entire dramaturgy with heroes, villains, build-up, point of no return, etc. However, it is not necessarily the case that such a dramaturgy is functional in dealing with political issues, and while many viewers who watch a TV documentary based on these principles may feel that they are offered a strong narrative experience, they may also feel that somehow not given a fair and useful understanding of the issue involved.

Media scholars might perhaps expect a rhetorician to say to them, "Go ahead, learn all the tricks of the rhetorical trade, and use them. Use metaphors, symbols, tropes and figures, narrative suspense, identification and all the other tools that rhetoricians have identified." But no, what this rhetorician would say above all is, "Learn all these tricks of the trade but also learn to use them for what they are good at, for the functions that they will serve well and not for other functions where they tend to have a confounding effect."

An example of how rhetorical devices tend to confound some functions while pretending to serve others is a study by Michael Milburn and Anne McGrail on "The Dramatic Presentation of News and its Effects on Cognitive Complexity" (1992). What they did was to show authentic, dramatic news stories to two groups, for example an item about election unrest in Chile, where one group saw the original while the other saw a version with the most dramatic scenes cut out. What they found was that "exposure to the dramatic news stories significantly decreased subjects' recall of the information in the stories and reduced the complexity with which individuals thought about the events reported."

More generally, as a rhetorician one would welcome more studies of the use of visuals in news programs on TV, such as what types of visuals are used for particular types of content, what effects they have, for example in terms of recall, learning, etc., and what other types might be used, if indeed visuals are necessary regardless of the type of story that is being presented.

A similar type of studies might be conducted on the use of visuals in newspapers. One aspect of this that deserves closer study is the use or non-use of graphics such as diagrams, maps, tables, etc. What are such devices good for, what are they not good for, where may graphs do a better job than pictures or verbal copy, what types are better than other types, what is current practice, and what suggestions for reform and experimentation might we make?

The use of graphics is one of the important but neglected issues for any medium that wishes to present quantitative information about national or international issues, and even more if one wants to help readers understand correlation, causation etc. Any important political issue involves quantitative dimensions and question of what causes what, for example global warming,

the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and budget balancing. This is one question that cannot be left to the media themselves. For one thing, the use of graphs requires specialized knowledge of statistics and mapping techniques that are generally not part of journalism programs and certainly not of traditional journalistic skills. Also, the proper use of any such communicative device requires empirical studies, qualitative as well as quantitative, for which news organizations have neither the skills nor the means. As part of our political journalism project we did a study of the actual use of graphs in a leading newspaper, and the results clearly suggest that practical journalists grapple in the dark as to what types of graphic presentation of data exist, and what they can do.

Graphics are just one example of a type of rhetorical-communicative devices that is available to the media but is not used at all to serve the functions that it might. There seems to be a prejudice in the profession to the effect that graphics are trite and superficial, and another to the effect that they are nerdy and hence boring. So what some media have done, e.g., the American daily *USA Today*, is to use banal graphics that are pepped up with much colour and cartoon-like artwork. What few people in the profession have realized is that graphics of the type used by *USA Today* are perhaps boring *because* they are banal; no amount of four-colour hysterical artwork will conceal the fact they generally communicate nothing.

Graphics, then, represent one aspect of media rhetoric that media studies might give more attention to. By nature, they are two-dimensional and they may be packed with information and even insight at a ratio that is hard to match with other means. All this suggests that they are particularly suited for print media. And that brings us to the general question: Which rhetorical devices are particularly suited for which media?

In addition to this, we already another equally general question: which rhetorical functions are particularly suited for which media? That is the kind of question that our project asked itself in relation the daily newspaper, especially regarding its coverage of politics. Our answer was one that involved not only the physical makeup of the newspaper, including what we call its enormous, easily navigable user interface, but also the fact that it appears once a day and once only, as well as the fact that most newspapers have a long-established credibility or ethos to draw upon. Moreover, the newspaper is under increasing pressure as to the time readers will have or want to spend on it, given competition from other media and activities. All these particular conditions and constraints go together to suggest that what the newspaper of tomorrow should increasingly focus on as far as political coverage is concerned is well-researched material that tries to illuminate

structures and issues that are currently debated or which will be in the time to come; and they should do this with an increased emphasis on two-dimensional devices, i.e., an array of elements, verbal or visual, that illuminate separate aspects of an issue, and which are easily identifiable as to what they offer. For example, it should be possible to "read" a graphic separately, or an item specifying historical background, or a narrative item representing the human side of the issue, or a analytic piece predicting likely outcomes, or setting out reasons on both sides of the issue. All this means less emphasis on breaking news, less use of the so-called inverted pyramid in reportage, which, as a linear and purely verbal structure, makes little advantage of the newspaper's two-dimensionality and fails to take account of readers' time constraints and reading behaviours. Also it means less opinionated preaching of party lines and correct opinions and more respect for readers who want help to form a considered view for themselves.

An obvious objection to all these claims would be that political journalism which follows these guidelines would not be read because it would be boring.

There are two answers to this. The first is that of course it is a good thing not to be boring, and the media should try to make sure that material about society and its problems is interesting. It might be argued that a piece which actually managed to explain something like the makeup of the national budget would be scary rather than anything else, and what's scary is at least not boring.

The second answer is that interest in this kind of material should come from its capacity to illuminate, i.e., that is to bring insight, not necessarily from its entertainment quality. We all want entertainment, but many of us also want enlightenment, and the two functions, as any rhetorician remembers, are different. Some genres are good at one of these functions; others are good at another.

These have been a few examples of how media experts might look rhetorically at the media. The main emphasis has been on that old-fashioned medium that media studies perhaps tend to neglect: the newspaper. But as we know there are several other media to look at, and several other functions that we would like these media to perform in society, so there are countless opportunities to ask questions of the type, "What functions should this particular medium be used to serve, which ones is it particularly good at, for which does it have constraints that call for special solutions, which rhetorical devices could this medium use to perform this function? What is current practice, and how could it be changed or reformed? What will users think of such a change, and what will its

effect on them be?" These are what I, as a rhetorician speaking to media scholars, would call true rhetorical questions.

References

Cappella, Joseph N., & Kathleen Hall Jamieson. 1997. *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dautrich, Kenneth, & Thomas H. Hartley. 1999. *How the News Media Fail American Voters: Causes, Consequences, and Remedies*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kock, Christian. 2002 (ed.). *Forstå verden: Politisk journalistik for fremtiden*. Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur.

Lawrence, Regina G. 2000. "Game-Framing the Issues: Tracking the Strategy Frame in Public Policy News". *Political Communication* 17, 93-114.

Milburn, M. A., & McGrail, A. B. 1992. "The dramatic presentation of news and its effects on cognitive complexity". *Political Psychology* 13, 613-632.

Norris, Pippa. 2000. *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.