Elements for a Rhetorical Analysis of Messages

Rhetorical Triangle

Rhetor

Message

Audience

Rhetor

- Who is the message creator?
  - Individual
    - Is the person acting independently of any organization?
    - Does the individual have an association with any sort of organization?
  - Organization
    - What kind of organization?
      - For profit or non-profit
      - Educational
      - Government
      - Political
      - Religious

- Credibility: What credibility does the creator possess?
- Experience/Expertise: Does the creator have any expertise or experience?
- Ownership: Does the creator take ownership of or responsibility for the message?
- Goals/Intents: What do you think the message creator’s overall goal or intent is? (Note: the overall goal might be different from the message goal. A commercial organization may want to sell more product but the specific message in question is simply designed to generate brand awareness such as in the early AFLAC “duck” commercials)
  - To inform
  - To persuade
  - To motivate
  - To entertain or amuse
**Audience**

There can be multiple audiences for any message including primary and secondary audiences. The primary audience is the audience that the message seeks to reach or to target. The secondary audience is either a lesser target or is an accidental audience such as a senior citizen who is exposed to a commercial for an “energy drink”.

- **Primary audience:** Who is the primary audience for the message?
- **Audience characteristics:**
  - Demographical characteristics i.e., age, gender, income levels, etc.
  - Beliefs, values, attitudes
- **Secondary audience:** Who would be secondary audiences?—people or groups not initially targeted but who would be likely to have exposure to the message.
  - Ask the same questions about the secondary audience as of the primary audience.
- **What is the degree of identification with either the source or the message?**
  - Does the audience relate to or connect with any aspects of the message?
    - Cultural connections
    - Social connections
    - Historical connections
    - Emotional connections

**Message**

Messages are often complex compositions that incorporate both verbal and visual components. The five canons of Aristotelian rhetoric identify questions that should be asked regarding the message and its constituent components.

**Invention:** The creation of legitimate arguments, the discovery of resources for persuasion

- Does the message make or suggest an argument?
  - What does the claim or argument look like?
  - What supporting evidence is provided from the message content?
  - Does the audience have to “fill-in” any missing content or make assumptions?

- Is the argument legitimate or does it make use of fallacies?

**Arrangement:** The structure or organization of elements in the message

- Are there aspects of the message composition that impact how the message is interpreted?
  - What is given greater or lesser emphasis?
  - What do you “see” first?
  - What do you “read” first?

- Are the verbal and visual components mutually supporting or in conflict with each other?
• Is any aspect of the message being distorted or changed, i.e., Photoshopping?

**Style:** The way something is spoken, written, or presented

• What is the tone of the message?
  - Serious
  - Somber
  - Humorous
  - Matter of fact
  - Lighthearted

• Does the message contain any emotional content?
  - Does it use strong or vivid language designed to arouse emotions?
  - Does it use strong or vivid images designed to arouse emotions?
    - Types of images
    - Types of colors
    - Types and sizes of fonts

**Memory:** Methods and devices to aid memory or to make something memorable

• How much exposure does the audience have with the message?
  - Length of exposure—how long is the message?
  - Frequency of exposure—how often is the message repeated?
  - Is this message part of a larger series of messages?

**Delivery:** The manner of presentation including control of voice and gestures in delivering a speech. Can also include the different channels or mediums used in delivering the message

• What kind of channel or medium is being used in communicating the message?
  - Face-to Face such as a live performance or interaction
  - Print
  - On-line
  - Broadcast such as radio or TV

• Does the channel allow or encourage the audience to actively participate/interact with the message? With the channel?

**Assessment/Evaluation**

Did the speaker’s message accomplish the goals based upon how the audience responded to the message?

• Did the audience demonstrate uptake of the message?
  - The audience engaged in the desired behaviors, i.e., took some specified or desired action
• The audience responded positively to the message
• The audience expressed or reflected the beliefs in the message

- Nature of the evidence for uptake
  - Antidotal evidence
  - Direct observations
  - Statistics
    - Polls
    - Sales figures
    - Other directly measurable elements