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Participants' Reasoning in Controversy Coverage

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ABSTRACT: In their analyses of controversy, many researchers begin with the assumption that it is a juvenile or failed dialectical exchange. In conceptualizing controversy this way, they get caught in an is-ought dilemma, often shaping controversy into a two-sided affair involving an open issue with arguments marshalled but then simultaneously pointing out its shortcomings against these same criteria. As Dascal has pointed out, thinking of controversy as a juvenile dialectical exchange seems to be a therapeutic gesture that may present it as a better-behaved object of study than experience would support. In this paper, I approach controversy first and foremost as a textual object, rather than as a dialectical or argumentative one. While I am ultimately interested in the reasoning of participants, I begin by asking how media texts represent controversies. I start here because media texts are the dominant channel by which we learn about public controversies. Their presentation will have a powerful effect on the ways that the events, arguments, participants, and so on are memorialized. In addition, media texts are part of the variegated institutional, historical, social, and textual environment in which controversies emerge. In this paper, I analyze the reasoning of participants in the Brooklyn Museum controversy as it is presented by in a corpus of media texts reporting on the event. I ask the following question: How much and what kinds of reasoning by controversy participants do media texts present in this case? In discussing my results I reflect on the role of media texts as source material for argument and debate reconstruction.

KEYWORDS: controversy, media, participation, reasoning.

1. INTRODUCTION

In previous work on controversy, I showed that direct quotation along with attribution is a textual strategy that can be used to identify and authorize a roster of controversy participants in coverage (Cramer, 2006). In that work I analyzed the Brooklyn Museum controversy, showing that Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was the most prominent participant in a coverage corpus. Arnold Lehman, director of the Brooklyn Museum, was the second most prominent participant, followed by hundreds of others. In that previous work I offered a preliminary analysis of the direct reported speech of Giuliani and Lehman, focusing exclusively on their leading quotations. In this paper, I extend and deepen that analysis by examining all of the direct reported speech of Giuliani, the most prominent participant. In particular, I ask how much and what kind of reasoning is displayed in Giuliani's speech. In order to answer this question, I analyze Giuliani's statements using the five categories of speech acts of Searle, categories that van Eemeren and Grootendorst have identified as relevant to the analysis of critical dialogue (Eemeren *et al.*, 1996).

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2. DESIGN, METHODS, AND RESULTS

The Brooklyn Museum controversy corpus contains news texts about the event from the top three circulating newspapers in New York City. In order to isolate direct quotations and identify speaker attributions, I searched the corpus electronically for direct quotes, recorded the speaker to whom the quotation was attributed in each case, and tabulated the number of times each speaker was quoted. Finally, I counted and ranked all of the direct quotations and the speakers to whom they are attributed in the coverage.

Since Mayor Rudolph Giuliani is the most commonly quoted speaker in the corpus, his direct reported speech is of particular interest (Cramer, 2006). Not only is Giuliani the most prominent speaker in terms of frequency, he is also the most prominent in terms of prior public visibility and political entitlement. This should be no surprise. Research on media discourse and editorial practice shows that news actors who are celebrities and /or possess political entitlements are much more likely to have their speech quoted directly than others (Bell, 1991; Roshco, 1975). Whether this general state of professional practice squares with principles of fairness and openness in the public sphere, norms of objectivity in journalism, or the ideals of liberal democracy are inquiries for future papers. Given the fact that Giuliani is the most prominent participant, what is important for this investigation is to describe his contributions to the controversy. The study asks about reasoning in his direct reported speech since reasoning is a requirement of many approaches to critical discussion and deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1984; Walton, 1989).

Each quotation was coded as an assertive, commissive, directive, declarative, or expressive in order to discover the amount and kinds of reasoning in Giuliani’s speech. Beyond these categories, I noted the cases where assertives were combined into premiss-conclusion relationships. These are the cases that counted as reasoning. Though many quotations featured full propositions, a number of quotations included only single words. In these cases, I reconstructed the proposition based on context.

Giuliani is quoted 271 times in the corpus, and reasoning is rare in Giuliani’s direct reported speech. The following are the totals for each kind of speech act:

Type of speech act	Count
assertive	207
commissive	3
directive	5
declarative	25
expressive	7
(sub-propositional)	24
Total	271

Most of Giuliani’s statements are assertives. Many of them are statements of value such as the following:

- (1) “It’s sick stuff.”
- (2) “[The exhibit is an] abominable use of public funds.”

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(3) "The judge is totally out of control."

Less common are statements of fact, like these:

(4) "The lease says that this board [of trustees] forfeits its right to run that museum, and the museum reverts to the city."

In either case they remain statements that he presents as being true, a key criterion of an assertion (Fisher, 2004). It is only in the cases where he explicitly limits the attribution of a value to himself that he performs an expressive rather than an assertive:

(5) "It offends me."

Giuliani's political entitlement helps to explain some of the other speech acts that appear in the corpus. For instance, his declaratives illustrate his ability as Mayor to bring states of affairs into being through his speech. For instance, he says

(6) "This board is out of business"

In this statement, he is suspending the Board of Directors of the Brooklyn Museum. It is his political entitlement that gives this declarative its illocutionary force.

While almost all of Giuliani's statements are assertives, ten of them, either in isolation or serial combination, display reasoning. Giuliani's reasoning seems to engage a number of issues concerning the definition of art, the legality of offensive art, and the responsibilities of government to fund offensive art. The following example illustrates his arguments that define art:

(7) "If I can do it, it's not art, because I'm not much of an artist. And I could figure out how to put this together. You know, if you want to throw dung at something, I could figure out how to do that."

Giuliani argues that since he is not an artist, and since he could make the painting in question, the painting must not be art. The argument depends on a conventional understanding of the category "artist", and reflects Walton's "verbal classification" argument scheme (Walton, 1996). This scheme is vulnerable to begging the question. If this were a dialogue, Giuliani would likely be pressed for some additional reasoning to support his classification. A number of 20th Century artists and art movements have de-emphasized craft in favor of concept, and Giuliani's classification seems to restrict artists to those who have mastered a craft.

In his arguments about the responsibility of government to fund offensive art, Giuliani provides reasons for his own actions as Mayor, cutting city funding to the Brooklyn Museum:

(8) “You don’t have a right to government subsidy for desecrating somebody else’s religion, and, therefore, we’ll do everything we can to remove funding for the Brooklyn Museum until the director comes to his senses.”

Here the Mayor argues that he will cut funding for the museum because any entity that desecrates religion will not be subsidized by the government. Implicit in the argument is the premiss that the museum has desecrated religion. This argument reflects Walton’s “established rule” argument scheme, where the arguer appeals to a universal practice that he or she expects the audience to share (Walton, 1996). While the established rule could be a legal one, Giuliani’s statement, in this case, does not ground the rule in law. The argument from established rule is vulnerable to the complaint that the particular rule does not apply to the case. If this were a dialogue, Giuliani would likely be pressed for some additional reasoning that establishes the implicit premiss, that the museum is desecrating religion, along with reasons why the established rule applies to his action to cut funding for the museum. The established rule in this case could point to legal precedents that restrict governments in the US from funding and promoting religious institutions or viewpoints. These precedents could point back to the First Amendment to the Constitution and its prohibitions on government establishment of religion. In another of Giuliani’s statements, he provides reasoning that suggests some of this grounding:

(9) “We can’t support religion. We shouldn’t support vicious attacks on religion, either.”

In this bit of reasoning, the Mayor invokes the prior established rule, one that is a paraphrase of the First Amendment prohibition on the government establishment of religion. This is an a fortiori argument, concluding that by supporting an extreme position on religion, we violate the established rule in extreme. To the extent that this argument might address the case of the museum, the concerns about the applicability of the established rule to the case would remain.

In another instance of reasoning, Giuliani shifts the facts of the case in order to conclude that the desecration that he sees in the controversial painting would be more widely appreciated if its target were not a Catholic one:

(10) “If this were desecration of a symbol in another area,” // “I think there would be more sensitivity about this than a desecration of a symbol that involves Catholics.”

The Mayor argues that in general people are sensitive to the desecration of symbols, but that there is something special about the symbol in this case that has muted this kind of response from the Museum. This reflects Walton’s “argument from bias” argument scheme (Walton, 1996). Following this scheme, Giuliani claims that his opponent, the Brooklyn Museum, harbors a special bias against Catholics. The “argument from bias” scheme is vulnerable to becoming an ad hominem attack. If this were a dialogue, Giuliani would likely be asked for some additional reasoning that could establish a conspiracy against Catholics that was built into the planning of the painting and/or the exhibit, or that was evident in the larger culture. Given that the exhibit was broadly transgressive, insulting a number of sacred cows, a special anti-Catholic bias in the Museum might be hard for the Mayor to establish.

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3. CONCLUSION

The results from this study show that many of Mayor Giuliani's assertives are directly quoted in coverage, but little of his reasoning appears. Those few instances of reasoning that do appear provide curious fragments of his argumentative approach to the Brooklyn Museum and the painting that he finds offensive. Giuliani exploits three argument schemes--"verbal classification," "established rule", and "argument from bias"—in order to define art, to cut museum funding, and to accuse the museum of being anti-Catholic.

While these arguments are interesting artifacts for analysis, their relative rarity raises some questions about how consequential they might be in light of the rest of Giuliani's statements, the statements of the other participants, and the coverage more generally. Consumers of coverage are most likely to encounter his unsupported assertions, statements like "It's sick stuff." This finding could animate a critique of media based on ideals of deliberative democracy, with its premium on argument, or based on the norms of dialectic, where reasoning is a prerequisite. However, there is little evidence to suggest that media discourse in general actually is or even aspires to be a bastion of argumentation, despite the media's charge to be a creator of and contributor to the public sphere. What is surprising about the results of this study is that any of Giuliani's statements contain reasoning.

One of the central problems illustrated by this study concerns its tools of analysis. Is it appropriate to apply methods for dialectical analysis to media texts? Both pragma-dialectics and argument schemes do seem to serve a useful purpose here in helping to understand the kinds of statements and kinds of reasoning attributed to Giuliani. However, this analysis is limited by the fact that the Mayor's statements are fixed in text, bounded by the editorial and genre constraints of journalism, and have no explicit addressee. In order to apply the methods of dialectical analysis to these texts, we must not only reconstruct Giuliani's arguments but also must construct a dialogue between him and other participants.

Dascal has pointed out that controversies diverge from dialectic exchanges in that they slip out of normative bounds (Dascal, 1990). I would build on this notion by suggesting that controversies also slip out of the structural and institutional bounds of dialectic. Participants often stand at some distance to one another, and their contributions to controversy are routinely mediated by journalists. As they are reported for a mass audience, controversies feature proximate monologues rather than a coherent dialogue. Within those monologues, they feature little of the reasoning that is central to a dialectical exchange. Although the tools of dialectical analysis provide powerful methods for describing and critiquing dialogues, they stand at some distance from the data in the case of controversy coverage. While it is possible to apply them to this data, the evident gaps highlight the need for alternative approaches.

[link to commentary](#)

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