Module 2

Rhetoric and the Logic of Persuasion

Introduction

This module will help you understand the importance of rhetoric in effective communication. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion. It involves the deliberate use of language to effect change in thoughts, feelings, and actions. While you may often encounter the term "rhetoric" in political discourses, rhetorical concepts are applied in various other fields of communication such as media studies, identity politics, power relations, and intercultural communication. The ability to properly argue one's stand on various issues is invaluable to any communicator.

This module presents rhetoric as a framework for engaging social issues. First, it guides you through the process of identifying rhetorical situations using concepts proposed by Lloyd Bitzer. This first section will allow us to understand *what* rhetoric is and *when* rhetorical discourse can take place. In the second section, we will look into political rhetoric, specifically how political communicators can sway audiences through different persuasive strategies. This will situate Bitzer's concepts within the public sphere, allowing us to see how rhetorical discourse can affect public opinion. The last section is on digital rhetoric, focusing on how rhetorical situations are created and influenced by technology.

Through the discussion, you will hopefully become familiar with the process of discovering and approaching situations that invite rhetorical discourse. If you are interested to learn more about rhetoric beyond the introduction presented here, feel free to look up and study the additional readings listed at the end of this module.

In order to maximize your learning, please read and accomplish the activities in the assigned section before you come to class. This will help you ask critical questions and par-

ticipate in class discussions, which will further enrich your understanding of this frame of engagement. Enjoy!

Learning Outcomes

After studying this module, you should be able to:

1. Explain the importance of rhetoric in communication;

2. Discuss the elements of a rhetorical situation; and

3. Examine the use of rhetoric in the discourse around social issues.

1.0   The Rhetorical Situation

(Source: http://canacopegdl.com/images/rhetoric/rhetoric-2.jpg)
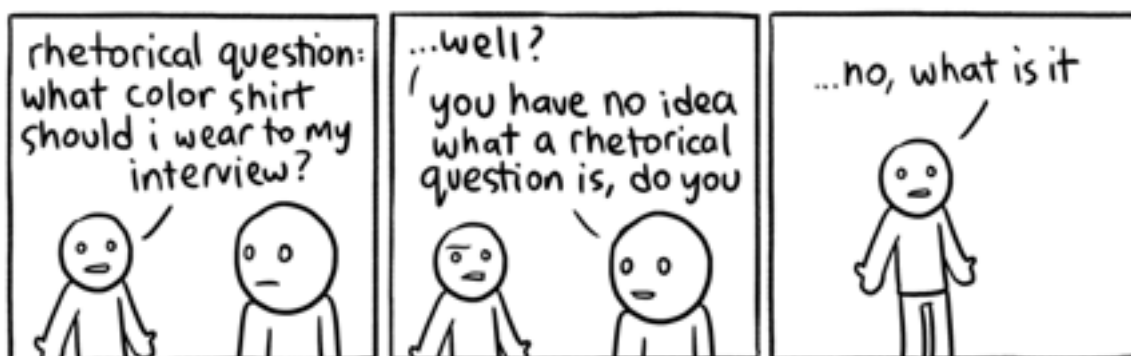
Perhaps your most common encounter with the word "rhetoric" is when someone asks a "rhetorical" question. Despite its label, rhetorical questions need not be answered out loud. Rather, these questions are intended to make audiences think deeper about a certain topic, or they are used by the speaker to prove a point. At its core, a rhetorical question is an attempt to influence the listener's way of thinking. So what does this tell us of the nature of rhetoric?

According to Aristotle, rhetoric is the capacity of discovering in any particular case the available means of persuasion. Notice that this definition can be divided into two chronological parts — the identification of cases, and the discovery of available means of persuasion.

That is, before any attempt at persuasion can be made, a particular case must first be recognized. The case in this instance is a rhetorical situation.

Activity 1

Recognizing a Rhetorical Situation

A. Read Lloyd Bitzer's (1968) essay on "The Rhetorical Situation" and answer the following questions:

1. What is Bitzer's definition of a rhetorical situation?

2. What are the different aspects of a rhetorical situation?

3. Which of the issues you encounter today do you think warrant rhetorical discourse?

B. Watch the following set of videos. Which of these videos do you think contains a rhetorical situation? Identify the similarities and differences between these two situations. Write down your answers and prepare to discuss them in class.

Video 1: Storm Surge Hits Tacloban City (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxmH-Nuky0hU)

Video 2: Film Director Speaks Out in a Rally (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DoByGTN2dqg)

According to Bitzer, it is the situation which calls the rhetorical discourse into existence. In the same way that a question is a prerequisite to an answer, a rhetorical situation is a prerequisite to rhetorical discourse. The responsibility of bringing this discourse into existence rests on the *rhetor*. Ultimately, rhetoric functions to produce change within a situation through the use of discourse.

Can any situation be rhetorical? Bitzer claims that this is not the case. He defines a rhetorical situation as:

a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting as actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about significant modification of the exigence. (Bitzer, 1968, p. 6)

This definition calls attention to the three constituents of a rhetorical situation, namely: exigence, audience, and constraint. Let us discuss these three in detail.

1.1   Exigence

Firstly, since the function of rhetoric is to influence a situation or outcome through discourse, a rhetorical situation must allow for change to happen. If the source of the problem cannot be changed or influenced, then the situation cannot be considered rhetorical. The problem addressed by rhetorical discourse is more specifically referred to as an *exigence* — an imperfection, defect, obstacle, unaccomplished task, or something that is other than it should be (Bitzer, 1968).

While numerous exigences may exist within a given context, not all of these exigences can be considered rhetorical. In the videos that you watched, can you identify the exigences present? Which of these are rhetorical and which ones are not rhetorical? Please write down your answers on a piece of paper and be ready to discuss your answers in class.

1.2   Audience

The second aspect of a rhetorical situation is the audience. Since rhetorical discourse achieves its purpose by influencing the thoughts and behaviors of perceivers who become mediators of change, it follows that rhetoric must always have an audience. Does this mean that any bystander can become a member of a rhetorical audience? Not quite. To further clarify this point, let us again examine Video 2 and ask the following questions:

1. Who heard Lamangan's speech?

2. Are these people capable of being influenced by his speech?

3. Are these people capable of being mediators of change?

4. Can anyone be part of Lamangan's rhetorical audience?

Write down you answers to these questions and prepare to discuss them in class.

1.3   Constraints

The last aspect of every rhetorical situation is the set of constraints present in a given case. These constraints are made up of people, events, objects, and relations that have the power to influence the decisions and actions of the audience in order to modify the exigence (Bitzer, 1968). As you might guess, there are many forces that can act on a given exigence at any point in time. These constraints can generally be classified into two: (1) those originated or managed by the speaker; and (2) other constraints arising out of the situation.

Synthesis

In summary, a discourse is given rhetorical significance by the rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1968). In order for a situation to be considered rhetorical, it must have (1) an exigence which lends itself to modification through discourse; (2) an audience capable of being influenced by the discourse and of being mediators of change; and (3) a set of constraints that limit the decisions and actions of the audience in modifying the exigence. Now that we are aware of the conditions necessary for rhetorical discourse to occur, let us examine how contemporary rhetors use this knowledge to persuade their audiences. This brings us to the second part of Aristotle's definition of rhetoric — identifying the available means of persuasion. For us to discuss these means effectively, let us use communication in politics as our context.

2.0 Political Rhetoric

(Source: http://chainsawsuit.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/20140916-research.png)
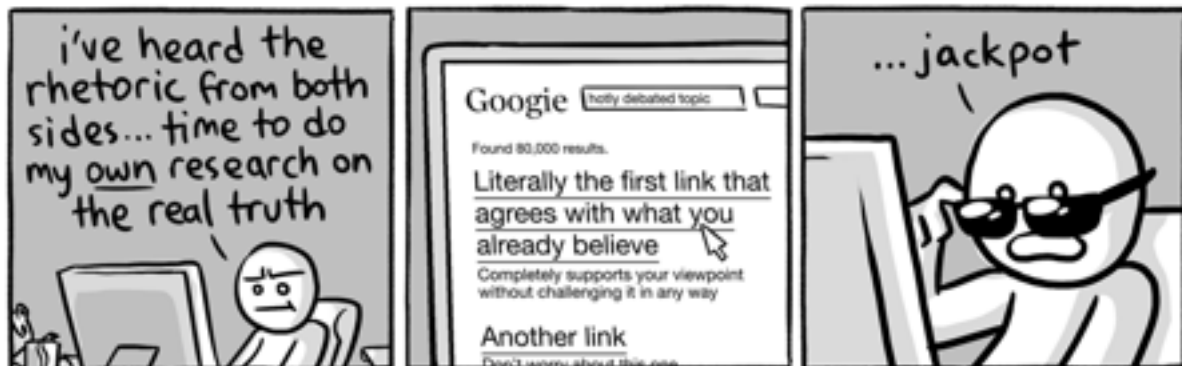
Have you ever exercised your right to vote during a national elections? If so, then you might have listened to a number of debates and speeches during the campaign period. Major television networks in the country waste no time in bringing candidates together for a debate in order for them to pit their ideas against those of their opponents. You are probably familiar with the format of these debates. Each candidate is given time to state his/her plan of action before the other candidates deliver their rebuttals. During these instances, were you conscious of the means by which the candidates attempted to persuade the audience?

According to Condor et al. (2013), political rhetoric is mostly concerned with strategies used in constructing persuasive messages in debates and disputes. This is not surprising because from its earliest stages, rhetoric has been used to expose ineffective policies and advance necessary changes in democratic societies. Back then, political oratory required loud voices and formal gestures in order to be effective. Do you think this still holds true today? We do not have to think too far back to remember the last time we heard a political speech. Every year, student government elections are held in the University of the Philippines. From classroom campaigns to *meetings de avance,* there are plenty of opportunities for you to be exposed to political rhetoric.

Activity 2

Understanding Political Rhetoric

Before we proceed, please read pages 276-282 of Condor et al.'s (2013) chapter on political rhetoric and answer the following questions:

1. What were the different persuasive strategies mentioned in the chapter?
2. Of these strategies, which have you encountered during political campaigns?
3. Were these strategies effective for you? Why or why not?

Aristotle mentioned three means of persuasion, namely, ethos or ethical appeal, pathos or emotional appeal, and logos or logical appeal. Of these, Aristotle noted ethos as the most important. You may notice that Condor et al.'s (2013) examples are derived from this idea of using ethical appeal in persuading an audience. Before we elaborate on what you just read in their chapter, let us briefly discuss Aristotle's concept of the rhetor's ethos.

Aristotle placed great importance on the concept of ethos, which is also defined as the attitude of a perceiver toward a source of information at a given time. To put it simply, it is an audience member's evaluation of the speaker's character. Since ethos is based on the perceiver and not on the source, it can vary in as many ways as there are perceivers. One person in the audience might think that the speaker is somewhat credible, another might agree to a greater extent than some, while the rest may not agree at all. The aim of ethos is to show the sincerity and the trustworthiness of the speaker. What are concrete ways to achieve this? Let us turn to the strategies posed by Condor et al. (2013).

2.1   Taking and Avoiding Sides

Political communicators often deal with audience members who subscribe to a wide range of beliefs. In order to address this problem of diversity, a politician may want to forge advanta-

geous allegiances with certain groups during a speech. According to Condor et al. (2013), it is in the best interest of these politicians to appeal to as many groups as possible without sacrificing loyalty. For example, a group of candidates may want to explicitly distance themselves from political parties known to advance the interests of the elite. By doing this, the candidates can associate themselves with parties catering to the "ordinary people", thus potentially cementing their influence on a broader audience.

2.2   Explicit Appeals to Common In-group Membership

Yet another way by which political communicators may appeal to diverse audiences is by finding or establishing a commonality among them. Condor et al. (2013) referred to this as a "single rhetorical identity" (p. 279) — a group bound by an overarching characteristic. They added that three requirements must be met in order to be an effective political leader. First, diverse communities must be regrouped into a single identity category. Second, the leader's propositions must fulfill the needs of this category. And third, the leader must present him/ herself as a prototypical in-group member. For example, if a candidate appeals to a national identity by claiming to be a "typical" Filipino, then his/her goals, appearance, language, and demeanor must reflect this identification.

2.3   Constructing Aspirational Identities

In attempting to advance changes in the status quo, an aspiring candidate may want audience members to envision a future which is markedly different from the present. By constructing future identities of audience members as more empowered and privileged members of society, the speaker aims to rally the public towards an achievable change. According to Condor et al., this can be done by advocating for a group that is "currently positioned outside, or on the margins of, a particular political community" (p. 280). For example, a candidate may want to inspire members of the LGBT community by telling them of a future wherein people of different genders will be treated with equal respect.

2.4   Implicit Displays of Rhetorical Alignment

There are also indirect means of influencing the thoughts of audience members. Through mere clothing, a speaker may present him/herself as a representative of certain groups. Body posture, paralanguage, and gestures may also contribute to the establishment of a particular identity. Subtle yet effective use of language is also beneficial in this regard. The simple use of inclusive pronouns such as "we", "us", and "our" can serve to endear the speaker to the audience and facilitate a benevolent atmosphere, making it easier to establish and maintain rapport.

Activity 3

Evaluating Rhetorical Strategies

Watch the following video and write down your answers to the questions below. Be ready to share your answers in class.

Video 3: Why Grace Poe is Running for President (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCdCKw0ZFD8)

1. How did the speaker exhibit each of the following?
   a) Taking and avoiding sides
   b) Explicit appeals to common in-group membership
   c) Constructing aspirational identities
   d) Implicit displays of rhetorical alignment
2. Which of these strategies do you think was well employed? Why do you think so?
3. Overall, would you say that the speech was enough to persuade you? Why or why not?

Synthesis

In summary, the political sphere is invariably tied with rhetorical discourse. In attempting to influence public opinion, political communicators apply specific persuasive strategies. By presenting themselves as trustworthy, sincere, and amiable, modern day rhetors may strengthen their bid for leadership positions within the government. However, we must remember that a critical understanding of the context and content of political discourse is needed to effectively implement programs and propose necessary changes. In addition, a public speech is not the only way to exercise political rhetoric and mere knowledge of persuasive devices is not enough to guarantee an advantage. Various other factors may affect the potency of rhetorical messages. One such factor is technology. In the last section, we will discuss its influence on the practice and utility of rhetoric.

3.0   Digital Rhetoric

(Source: http://chainsawsuit.com/comic/2014/04/28/the-speed-of-news/)

How does the digital age affect the way we communicate? This is a question many scholars are trying to answer today. Zappen (2005) provides an overview of studies on how traditional rhetorical strategies work in digital spaces. He points out that traditional rhetorical strategies are *reconfigured* in digital spaces as computers and associated software mediate communication online.

Activity 4

Digital Rhetoric

Read Zappen's (2005) article on digital rhetoric and answer the following questions:

1. How does persuasion work in online communication? How are the rhetorical strategies of persuasion deployed in online spaces?
2. How do computer programs function as persuasive technology?
3. How do the processes of identity and community formation on social media affect rhetorical practice online?

In the article, Zappen (2005) cites Gurak's discussion of the basic characteristics of communication in digital spaces such as speed and reach. Let us consider speed. In social media platforms, it is easy to share ideas and emotions on a whim. Twitter, for example, provides a convenient venue for sharing one's thoughts with an online social circle. However, it imposes a 140-character limit on what one can say. How does a character limit affect the persuasive impact of a post? More interestingly, how is persuasion done using short posts? Another example of how speed can influence the rhetorical message is through repetitive posting or sharing. Think about the last time you shared an article on Facebook. What happens to the credibility (ethos) of the article when it is shared a thousand times? Does it make the article more, or less, persuasive?

The persuasive quality of a piece of information is also affected by *reach*. According to Gurak (2001), the concept of reach is further divided into aspects such as multiplicity and lack of gatekeeping. Multiplicity refers to the number of people who can access the information at any given time. Again, refer back to our discussion of audience in a rhetorical situation. Only people who are capable of being transformed by a rhetorical message can be considered part

of a rhetorical audience. How does digital reach influence this dynamic? Does a wide reach equate to a big rhetorical audience? Consider viral videos as a concrete example. With a viral video, an overwhelming number of people can engage with the rhetorical content within minutes of it being posted online. Is a viral video more persuasive than a video with limited circulation?

Another aspect of reach is lack of gatekeeping. Anyone can post anything online. In fact, the technology also allows for the deliberate exercise of anonymity on the part of online authors, and we are often not entirely sure who the authors of much of the content online really are. How does this impact the credibility of online content? In traditional media, authorship is a key aspect of the persuasive power of text. Does authorship matter in social media? If not, where does the persuasive power of online messages come from? How does ethos as a means of persuasion work — or not — in social media?

Activity 5

Analyzing Online Rhetorical Situations

Look for and analyze a commentary or post on an issue on Facebook or Twitter (if you do not have an account, ask a friend or a relative to help you out). Write down your answers to the following questions and prepare to share them in class:

1. What rhetorical exigence spurred the writing of the commentary?
2. Who is the rhetorical audience? What are the characteristics of this rhetorical audience?
3. What are the constraints to the post's rhetorical effectiveness?
4. Does the number of likes/shares/retweets make the commentary or post more credible? If so, in what way? If not, why do you say so?
5. If the article was published only in offline media (newspapers, magazines etc.), would its persuasive quality change? How and why?

Synthesis

The digital age has changed the practice of rhetoric in a number of ways. For rhetors, digital technologies afford speed of communication and a much wider reach. For the audience, digital technologies afford rapid access to multiple perspectives on any given exigence, as well as the opportunity to participate directly in discourse and contribute to or undermine their rhetorical effectiveness. We are of course at one time or another rhetor or audience and, in online contexts, usually both. We need to develop a critical understanding of how communication in digital spaces works and, ultimately, how such spaces can be utilized for effecting positive change through communication.

Conclusion

In this module, we have taken steps to understand the structure of rhetorical situations. We should now be aware of how the interplay between exigence, audience, and constraints determines the effectiveness of different persuasive devices. We have examined specific examples of rhetorical strategies in political communication and we have also considered issues in rhetorical practice online. Although the field of rhetoric has progressed considerably over the past decades, the concepts elaborated by Aristotle and Bitzer maintain their relevance to this day. As communication students, we have a duty to be sensitive to rhetorical situations and analyze them. Our aim in doing so is not just to become effective communicators ourselves but ultimately to promote use of rhetoric to bring about positive transformations in society.

Required Readings

Bitzer, L. (1968). The Rhetorical Situation. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 1, 1-14.

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Further Reading

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