CoR Workshop 5: Media Rhetoric (13 September 2018)

University of East Anglia

Introduction to the Network (Henriette van der Blom and Alan Finlayson)

1. Henriette van der Blom is Senior Lecturer in Ancient History at the University of Birmingham and is the Principal Investigator for the Crisis of Rhetoric network. Van der Blom's research on Cicero led her to think more broadly about political speech, which resulted in the establishment of the Crisis of Rhetoric network. Alan Finlayson is a Professor in Political and Social Theory at the University of East Anglia and is the Co-Principal Investigator for the Crisis of Rhetoric network. His research analyses how people think and communicate about politics, and uses rhetoric to understand what political actors are doing.

2. The Crisis of Rhetoric workshops encourage the audience to participate in the discussions and to help generate lessons. The theme of the fifth workshop (in a series of six) was "media rhetoric", in which participants discussed the format of political debates on television, the rhetorical power of images, and the ways in which the changing landscape of mass communication (especially via social media and YouTube) influences rhetoric and political debate. This workshop built on the findings of the first to fourth workshops. Summaries of these workshops can be found on the network website: www.birmingham.ac.uk/cor

Session 1: Orators in the News (Emily Harmer)

3. Emily Harmer is Lecturer in Media, in the Department of Communication and Media, University of Liverpool. Her research is focused on the changing relationships between gender, media and politics. Her research includes studies of political women's representation mass media, including televised election debates. She has co-convened the UK Political Studies Association's Media and Politics Specialist Group since 2013 and has been the Assistant Editor for the European Journal of Communication since 2015.

4. Emily Harmer presented her research on the mediation of the 2015 UK election leaders' debate on TV in terms of gender and subsequent press reports which repeatedly gendered the politicians' performances, and which tended to focus on 'winners' and 'losers' rather than policies. She found that 30-40% of UK press coverage was concerned with the process of the debate (declaring winners/losers) rather than policy discussion. In general, press coverage tends to focus on personalities rather than policies, and many newspapers in the UK are staunchly party political (most centre-right to right-wing), which can disadvantage progressive candidates on the left. For example, UK Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's 2017 grassroots campaign was politically successful with voters but avoided engaging with the media, which was then allowed to put forward a negative interpretation of the campaign. The focus on personalities is related to a) press deadlines because time-pressured journalists may find it easier/faster to focus on 'winners' rather than policy, and b) politicians' grafting sound bites which also support this tendency.

5. Harmer then focused on the 2010 and 2015 televised election debates in the UK (while acknowledging that social media forms part of the now hybrid media environment) and their reception in traditional mass media (newspapers, TV, radio). She emphasised the novelty of the TV debate format in the UK, as opposed to many other countries, where the three-party debate between the leaders of the Conservatives (David Cameron), Labour (Ed Miliband) and the Liberal Democrats (Nick Clegg) in 2010 introduced the format. The format was much discussed because the political parties were concerned about the implications on their performance in the election, which resulted in a rather stale format which did not promote actual debate.

6. The 2015 TV debate had six party leaders (three female, three male) of which only four were standing for election (SNP leader Sturgeon and Plaid Cymry leader Wood were elected in devolved Scottish and Welsh elections). Harmer's research did not focus on the debate itself, but rather on the ways in which the debate was covered in the national newspapers immediately after the event (qualitative method). The study found that, regardless of gender of politicians, the coverage of the leaders was gendered: 'correct' forms of appearance, behaviour and performance were mainly masculine, while more stereotypically feminine forms were unconsciously presented as less good. The exception was SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon who was seen to perform well, in spite of not being seen to appropriate 'male' forms: generally, what is associated with good oratory is associated with stereotypically male qualities. Secondly, the press was partisan: newspapers promoting the Conservatives would praise Conservative leader David Cameron for masculine appearance/behaviour while avoiding discussion of his performance, and other newspapers would continue an already established presentation of candidates. For example, Labour leader Ed Miliband was presented as emasculated: being indecisive about what clothes to wear and indecisive in his performance. By 'feminising' him, these newspapers indicated that he would not be a good PM.

7. Harmer's concluded that media coverage of a debate performance is generally out of the control of the politician and their team, that the partisanship of the press central to understanding representation of politicians, that 'due impartiality' in broadcasting sometimes minimised the opportunities for staging a real debate, which again give the press the chance to create a 'personality contest'. She finally advised that speechwriters need to take into account the fact that gendered ideas of good orators are central to the reception of a speech.

8. The discussion following Harmer's presentation focused on the frequency and format of the televised debates (in Scandinavia, televised political debates happen regularly, sometimes including eight to ten politicians, while US presidential debates have only two opposing candidates). There are examples of politicians winning the debate but losing in the media coverage afterwards, such as Gerald Ford's Eastern Europe gaffe in the 1976 debate against Jimmy Carter where news coverage afterwards turned the stakes (*The Atlantic* argues this is a myth: https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/08/the-myth-of-gerald-fords-disastrous-soviet-domination-gaffe/493958/). We also talked about the duty of 'dual impartiality' imposed on UK broadcasters, and the fact that party leaders

need to communicate to several audiences at the same time (audience in the room, live TV viewers, subsequent viewers on digital media and readers of print media). The multiple and multi-faceted audiences are a result of modern mass media, but politicians in the ancient Greco-Roman and in 18th century UK parliament also had to operate around multiple media in the attempt to control the reception of their speeches: in Athens/Rome, a politician could circulate written versions of own speeches but could not stop other people from circulating their versions of the same speech, they could not control the gossip afterwards, and although orators were almost always men, gendered stereotypes were still being employed. In the 18th century, British parliamentarians circulated pamphlets of own speeches to control public narrative of their oratory, but could not completely control public perception of speech.

9. The discussion continued on the issue of gender and gendered debates, touching on the 2010 Clegg-mania (Liberal Democrat leader presented as a typical English male suitor a la actors Hugh Grant (in film *Notting Hill*) or Colin Firth (in films *Bridget Jones' Diary* and *Pride and Prejudice*), seeming displaying both stereotypically male and female traits in his performance: in the first TV debate, Clegg engaged with the cameras and with the audience in the room, name-checked the questioners. We also discussed the 'strong female politician', 'the childless woman' and the 'effeminate male politician' stereotypes, and that there seems to be more stereotypes available to male politicians than to female (returning to a point made at CoR workshop 4). One participant related the discussion of perceived aggressiveness in assertive female politicians to the form of media with radio being more adversarial because you are speaking 'to' the audience rather than 'with' it, and mentioned the study of politicians' use of anecdotes to convey their humanity (although this can backfire as in PM Theresa May and husband in The One Show (2016) speaking about 'boys' jobs' and 'girls' jobs'.

10. We concluded by debating the ways in which a politician can create an appropriate ethos for the specific event, across genres and across time, and the extent to which political ethos types seem to be moving from operating within a political context to entering an entertainment context. There seems to be an element of hereto-normativity (male politicians photographed with a female family member to convey potency or ability to act among women, but female politicians are not). More successful self-presentations connect with the political claimed attempted by the politician, e.g. anecdotes about personal reliance on the National Health Service (NHS) within a political debate about the NHS. The following questions remain: do modern media systems help or hinder politicians in conveying an ethos which they themselves want to convey? Does this problem increase with the increasing 'celebrity' culture in political coverage? Can the politician control their own image to make it fit their messages? A final point was that there has been a change since 2010 in what is appealing in a politician, because Corbyn is not a good formal speaker but great in informal conversation. We wondered whether this was partly a result of bad speechwriting or whether Corbyn's image-building was related to this dichotomy in public speaking abilities.

Session 2: Rhetorical Audiences (Jens Kjeldsen)

11. Jens E. Kjeldsen is Professor of Rhetoric and Visual Communication at the Department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen (Norway). He is also Professor of Rhetoric at Södertörn University (Stockholm, Sweden). His research focuses on rhetorical audiences, rhetoric and the media, and visual rhetoric and argumentation. He is preparing a book on speechwriting.

12. Jens Kjeldsen presented some of his research on audience responses to rhetoric: a protocol analysis of party leader debates, including the journalist questions and the politician responses. He argued that later reception of a political orator might be different from the contemporary reception, giving the example of Churchill's public reception during his time as British Prime Minister and afterwards (referencing Richard Toye's research). Kjeldsen argued that we need more studies of audience reactions and of rhetoric beyond the single orator.

13. One example of such studies could be of 'visual oratory', e.g. the rhetorical study of Astronauts' Memorial at the Kennedy Space Centre (Florida, US), or the rhetorical study of the television adds used in the 1988 US election campaign between G. Bush senior and Dukakis. In this latter campaign, the Bush campaign used visual cues to create associations in viewers' minds between Dukakis' stance on the death penalty and giving the criminal Horton weekend passes from jail (which had fatal consequences). The associations were not formal or explicit but formed in the audience's mind, using 'visual oratory'.

14. Kjeldsen then discussed a more recent and geographically closer example, namely the impact of the image of three-year old refugee boy Aylan Kurdi washed up on Turkey's coast. This image effected a complete change from immigration-scepticism to moral responsibility, showing that images can be used rhetorically to convey a certain message. The questions for discussion were then: How do we get to the rhetoric which is not just one single text but something snowballing through media and being changed in the process? How do we think about rhetoric as more than oratory and verbal text? How do we study these non-singular texts? And what impact does 'visual oratory' have on the reporting and recording of speech?

15. The discussion following Kjeldsen's presentation opened with a further set of questions: What kind of rhetoric is this? Who is making the argument (there is no apparent author on the newspaper, who takes responsibility)? Who are they appealing to? Are they inviting a moral rather than a political response? Is this becoming entertainment media moving us emotionally rather making us act in terms of politics? Some of the suggestions following these questions were that the authorship is complex when the narrative is created in the audiences' minds but not explicitly in the videos/pictures: in a way, this is in the epideictic genre ('if you want a good life'), and perhaps not 'entertaining' but clearly 'moral'. Indeed, moral issues are particularly suited for modern media, and much modern rhetoric is in the evaluative phase but not focusing on what we should do. A final observation was that changing people's minds takes a long time, and cannot be

done overnight, but that visuals have a wide reach and can effect some change fast.

16. One aspect of the discussion focused on the methodological issue of measuring the audience reactions to visual rhetoric: how to accumulate enough data to do this kind of analysis? One way would be to move away initially from the amount of material and focus on reception indicators, e.g. online, and check for key factors (new newspapers), mapping out key reactions to identify initial discourse aspects. Another suggestion was to follow individuals (instead of text) and to see how they use rhetoric, because it will show who they are and the issues they care about. Yet another suggestion was to focus on images as nodal points, e.g. a Dane spitting on refugees on Danish highway during the refugee crisis of 2015, which became a metaphor in Danish parliament. A further suggestion was to use concepts from comics: 'braiding' (how an image is woven into a narrative) and 'precedence' (visual characteristics recognised or a stable character recognised in spite of slightly changing elements).

17. At an earlier CoR workshop, a participant suggested that a crisis is necessary for producing good speech. In the 2015-refugee crisis, no one politician (across Europe/EU) stood up to give a memorable speech, but German Chancellor Angela Merkel's comment 'wir schaffen das' ('we can do this' – the full sentence was 'Wir haben so vieles geschafft, wir schaffen das.' ('We have managed so many things, we will also manage this situation.') which underlined her public image for dealing with problems even if not through great oratory.

18. We also discussed the need of seeing the images (visual rhetoric) together with the text provided by the medium reproducing the image, although there was some discussion of whether the image or the text could have stood on their own. The simplicity of the image enabled universality and identification across a wide audience ('identifiable victim effect'), but the different texts in the different media forced a certain interpretation of the image on the audience. It was argued that research shows that both image and text are necessary and that they are overlapping in importance. We discussed the element of emotional appeal (*pathos*) in the image and that the text conveyed a combination of pathos ('what if this was your child?'), ethos ('we must do something') and logos ('this is reality').

19. The discussion then moved on to whether these images work because the audience already thinks the message being conveyed or these images rather provide a premise for an argument, whether images have become a more significant part of what has become political common sense, and the ways in which this relates to identity: do the images reflect on what the general audience thought about who they are, as a nation? Do iconic images make it more difficult to act politically because actions have to follow mundane political rules? And are politicians constrained by such iconic images? It was argued that it is a journalist's decision to take an image for an article, rather than a conscious decision to create a premise, and that the premise and multiple arguments created from it come later. Moreover, the journalist taking the picture of Aylan Kurdi will have taken many images, selected the 'best' and tailored it (cropping, lighting

etc.) to tell the most powerful story, making the image more consistent than many other political messages.

Session 3: Media and Rhetorical Performances (Alan Finlayson)

20. Alan Finlayson is Professor of Political and Social Theory at the University of East Anglia. His research is primarily concerned with political rhetoric and political ideologies and he is Co-Investigator on this AHRC funded research network looking at 'The Crisis of Rhetoric.'

21. Alan Finlayson presented an argument about the ways in which media affect oratorical performances from the angle of the academic discipline of Politics: Rhetoric is a positive because 1) it is one of the things that politics is, namely people formulating arguments to agree on action; 2) rhetoric is not a manipulative tool, but always dialogical between speaker and audience and between speaker and rhetoric of the past; 3) rhetoric is therefore not about one orator, in control. Nevertheless, we need to study speech through one orator or one speech at a time. We can think about this as performance through 'performance theory', thinking of oratory as a performance on a stage, with an audience, and with appropriate gestures/behaviour associated. It is a social role as well as a rhetorical performance. Some scholars argue that modern politics is becoming ever more a performative stage, performing larger societal dramas: myths, tensions and identities performed and re-performed, such as former US President Barack Obama re-performing the history of black people in America in his speech at the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (2016). Performance is fine as long as there is still room for disputation and political debate. This performance becomes a way to communicate identity and societal archetypes and societal agendas. This is the framework for political oratory, but we need to think about how that is being changed by media.

22. Building on Finlayson's current research into political ideology, rhetoric and aesthetics of the 'Alt-Right', we saw short videos of two YouTubers (The Golden One on 'can a short male be an alpha male' and the response of Contra Point) to illustrate the questions: how does a speaker convey ethos to convey a message? How does ethos support the message you want to make? How does the ethos fit with the proof/the argument, and can you perform the ethos rather than simply stating the argument? How does ethos fit with the identity building with the audience? Finlayson argued that there can be tensions between politicians trying to create different kinds of ethos and about between believable performance options for a political leader (e.g. Trump, Corbyn – are they leader-like?). In each case, the electorate is asked to make a choice about whom they think is a trustworthy leader, creating the role of a leader.

23. Finlayson then made the proposition that political regimes construct the stages upon which these political performances are played out, e.g. US constitution demanding the annual oratorical events/addresses (alongside many informal stages), or the UK constitutional tradition stipulating a Prime Minister's Question Time in the House of Commons or the party leader speeches to the annual party conference. If the political leaders do not perform, they are questioned as leaders

(Compare with Shakespeare's Coriolanus in *Coriolanus* rejecting his role as leader and orator, thereby losing legitimacy as leader). These stages provides audiences an opportunity to engage with these performances. Media systems intervene into this process of political performances, creating new stages, and subordinate stages in the political sphere to new media spheres. In setting the stage, the media looks after its own needs (sound, images, space and angles, organisation of bodies and physical elements). Media also dictate genres and styles, e.g. BBC Question Time, where the framework is dictated by the necessities of the medium rather than of political debate.

24. This media situation has consequences: 1) it changes the ways in which these performances are evaluated: is the performance interesting, entertaining, trustworthy, good TV/radio, rather than is this a good political debate? 2) it creates a class of professional critics, whose job it is to interpret the political process and debate for us, the consumers of the media. They stand between the speaker and the audience, and this can spark a wider debate on other media (incl. social media). This is a major change. 3) it creates a third class of political advisers, trainers, spin doctors etc. who help politicians looking good in the media. These are often people with media experience, because they know how to do this. Speechwriters will write speeches knowing how the media might respond. They reframe the rhetorical text itself in light of this expectation. The journalist is often reading a pre-submitted speech just before watching it, creating a less immediate experience of the speech. Does this obviate the delivery of the speech itself? And what happens when the speaker goes off-script? 4) it also gives broadcast media a crucial role in deciding who is a legitimate speaker. For example, then Labour leader Ed Miliband was considered too boring and therefore not a political leader, irrespective of his policies; he just didn't work well on TV. Who has the power to decide who is a legitimate political leader? 5) Audiences are not only marginalised in this way, but also displaced spatially and temporally from the speech. This makes it difficult for the rhetorician to prepare the speech because they don't know the audience(s), and therefore many political speeches become rather bland so as not to offend any potential audiences. 6) The recording of the speech, however, means that a speaker can be taken into account later, being taken out of context. This also leads into the point about remediation – a new rhetorical sequence used by somebody else.

25. This depiction fits the era of broadcasting, the TV world, from the 1960s until today, when it is breaking down. In Jennings, Clarke, Stoker, Moss, 'Popular Understandings of Politics in Britain, 1945-2014' (2015), the authors concluded on the basis of mass observation data from the 1950s that audiences encountered politicians through their speeches and judged them on these speeches. But at the same time, audiences hated modern politicians never addressing them in long form but only being conveyed in bitty fragments. This broadcasting-political system has now broken down and the internet displaces the structures of the older media system. Through internet, the boundaries are broken down and this creates many new stages to articulate own political claims. New stages, new genres, with new participants. We are in the middle of that moment, and there are three characteristics of the moment: 1) nobody know the rules, so we argue about the rule; 2) internet communication is problematic for politics because it has a

tendency for the audiences to abolish themselves because they become participants rather than audiences: and what is a performance without an audience? Everything is a performance and no longer a debate; 3) political actors can eschew mainstream political stages, e.g. Corbyn's live performances. Political practice are able to create new roles and new stages, which challenges the existing political systems. Finlayson ended by challenging us to ask: what is going on with Trump and his performances?

26. The discussion following Finlayson's presentation took up the challenge to discuss Trump. He was argued to be an example of being authentic and performative at the same time, because his performance denies being a performance (he is simply having a conversation with his audience): broadcasting killed the political orator, it will not allow the orator to scream (Hitler) and has made the orator smaller and calmer; it is closeness at a distance, and this takes down the politician from leader to an ordinary person; and that is what makes the argument of performance interesting. Trump can be seen as the death of logos and the triumph of ethos. On the other hand, Trump's 'speeches' are difficult to package for political reports in short form (whether TV, radio or print media), but they fit the ethos that he is speaking to 'his' people. So are we seeing a new form of rhetorical system with Trump and Corbyn?

27. The discussion moved on to consider economic factors for politics and political rhetoric through modern digital media. Indeed, some would argue that the media is the message, even if there are people who think that Twitter and other social media are 'unmediated' opinions even if they aren't. We talked about the roots of the political crisis in the 1970s economic crisis (a systematic failure which damaged legitimacy) as well as a distinct communication crisis, alongside a host of larger factors (nation states, sovereign state and borders): interests are being displaced by identity in political discourse, identity is now more important than direct interests, and this seems to be linked to the digital media impact. This led to the consideration of the interplay between interest and identity, and the clarification that the discussion is not about 'identity politics', but that objective interests exists and politics need to identify these so that communities can identify themselves with these interests and formulate relevant policies: we are talking about group identities, not individual identity, but digital media is now more about individual rather than group identities, which is problematic for society: how do communities exercise a choice over political options? The audience function in politics is powerful, because it keeps politicians to their promises, their policies and their responsibilities to speak to these audiences. Paradoxically, what seems like a participatory medium abolishes the necessity of politicians to address the audience on the policies on which to agree. It seems as if the discourse of participation has been taken over by people arguing that this is democratic, e.g. that people should run their own school/hospital even if they have no expertise in doing so. In the social media context, we see this played out too: social media are designed to induce participation, and appears to be good, but also takes away the audience if everybody is a performer. Who is persuading whom? If there is no audience to be persuaded, what happens to debate?

Closing discussion and next steps

28. The closing discussion focused on the following question: what constitutes the primary text in rhetoric studies: the speech itself, the final version delivered or the mediated/televised version of the speech? What decisions are being made in the mediatising which is outside of the control of the orator/speechwriter (e.g. the cutting of TV reports, what to focus on such as speaker or the audience reacting, and the 'screen' rather than the 'stage'). Indeed, what is the object of rhetoric?

29. The discussion of what constitutes 'the speech' is relevant for modern as well as for ancient speeches, as is the discussion of fragments of speeches becoming symbols of longer speeches and even of the ethos of a speaker: sound bites are known from the ancient world, too.

30. But if there is no primary text, we need to think not about the speech as text but about the function of what is being communicated: is the speaker seeking an emotional reaction, a rational response, or something else? Could social media provide the space for conversations, where we work things through?

31. And what system of coordinated societal decisions are emerging out of this new regime/post-democratic situation? There is an appetite of unmediated translation of popular will into political decisions (e.g. Brexit), and thus the links between political claim → reaction → decision are cut.

32. We considered ways of thinking about formats that are better at conveying political debates. Suggestions included: TV debates, YouTube videos, election debates as actual debates, US-style debates on a specific topic, higher frequency of political debates (rather than format) because it might lower the risk to politicians at each individual event and train them to do it better. Indeed, this is not just a media problem but also a political problem: politicians not wanting to risk themselves.

33. We ended by considering the question of trust. Trump was presented as undermining trust in words because he lies all the time. This situation relates to ethos in rhetorical terms, because it is an attitude in the audience (what do they think about the speaker?). Indeed, ethos is made up of three elements: competence, character and goodwill towards the audience. There seems to have been a movement away from competence towards character and goodwill.

34. The next 'Crisis of Rhetoric' workshop will be in early April 2019 where we invite back political practitioners, speechwriters and journalists – alongside all other participants in the project workshops – to respond to and reflect on the project findings.