

The Crisis of Rhetoric: Renewing Political Speech and Speechwriting

Workshop 5: Media and Rhetoric

Notes for Speakers

Goals of the Workshop: The workshop has two main goals. The first is to bring together scholars of rhetoric with people working in other fields, particularly, on this occasion, Media Studies but also Political Theory, Political Science, Linguistics and more. The second goal is to consider how rhetoric (the presentation of potentially persuasive political argument) has been, and is being, affected by visual and aural, electronic and print media, whether or not those effects are a problem for democratic politics and, if so, what we might do about it.

Timing and delivery: The schedule allots 75 minutes for each session. The goal is to stimulate deep collective discussion and we therefore suggest that you prepare to speak for 15-20 minutes so that there is plenty of time for questions, responses and exchanges. There is no need to prepare a full paper – most speakers in the series have spoken from notes (or without notes) and this has stimulated discussion well. If you want to use PowerPoint or a handout to show examples you certainly can – it's up to you. If you wish, you can send the presentation to Alan ahead of time so that it can be loaded up and ready when you arrive.

Content: There are lots of questions on the table and we won't be able to address them all. Below are some themes and linked questions. You certainly aren't expected to address each one – hopefully you will find some that stimulate your thoughts about what we need to know.

Genres and formats: Of particular interest for this workshop is the ways in which the genres and formats of different kinds of media interact with the genres and styles of political rhetoric. What are the stages media creates for rhetorical activity? How do media reshape the presentation of political rhetoric to fit the needs of particular formats? How do speechwriters and political orators adapt rhetoric for news and other kinds of media? Have traditional strategies and styles of rhetorical presentation and performance been undermined by mass media or is there continuity? What is the effect of a very visual culture of communication on what might be thought to be a definitively oral medium? What are the most common or most important ways in which political speech, debate and argument are presented (and are these any good)?

Audiences: What do we know about how audiences encounter, use and respond to media representations of political rhetoric? How can we best study and understand these audiences? Are they active or passive, able to exercise judgment or constrained by one-way communication? How do digital and interactive media change the ways audiences experience and engage with political rhetoric?

Power and Control: All of this is of interest to us because it is about politics – the exercise and distribution of power in a polis and the organization of collective affairs. In what ways are social and economic power reaffirmed or challenged when media re-present political talk? Who (or what) has the power? Should we see politicians and government, or proprietors and presenters as the most powerful actors when rhetoric is mediated? How do political groups seek to shape and influence their presentation? What kinds of new rhetorical actors (celebrity or anonymous) might media empower?

Crisis: A premise of our series is that there is a 'crisis' of rhetoric – that if rhetoric today isn't merely manipulative then it is unedifying and uninteresting, and that the ways in which we exchange political arguments are not good for democratic politics. Is this true? Are media presentations of political rhetoric a cause or a symptom of such a crisis? Can they be a cure? How might we reimagine the presentation of rhetoric in the media in ways that might enhance democratic life?

We invite you to reflect on such questions in a general way, as you see fit, while presenting specific insights into the ways in which you study media, politics or rhetoric and – if you wish – presenting examples from your work and your discipline.