

Newspaper Editorial: Genre of Rhetorical Artifact

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Abstract

Newspaper editorials are considered one of the most underrated and mundane texts. While thousands of newspapers publish editorials exerting worldwide influence, it is unfortunate that they have received least scholarly attention and study. What is, therefore, baffling is that newspaper editorials are generally regarded as taken-for-granted texts and not regarded as worthy of scholarly discussion and study. Equally despairing is the approach of common readers who treat editorial texts with an all-out indifference. Against this scenario, it is vitally important to understand how editorials operate to disseminate their contents. Although newspapers have been studied from different perspectives over the centuries, there still exists a big gap in the existing literature about the study of editorial discourse from rhetorical perspectives. While addressing this gap, the paper also aims at enhancing readers' critical understanding of editorial texts and their rhetorical import. To examine this issue, the present article discusses emerging debates among communication scholars about the rhetorical functions and physical components of newspaper editorial texts. After surveying features that constitute a typical editorial text, this paper explores the approaches and paradigms that define editorials as genre of rhetorical artifacts.

Keywords: editorial, editorial features, editorial functions, rhetoric, rhetorical artifact

Introduction

A wide range of definitions for rhetoric abounds. In the contemporary society, rhetoric is considered an empty talk and is often contrasted with action. Understood this way, rhetoric is just a bundle of linguistic units, ineffectual and incapable of making any social impacts. This definition overlooks the long and honorable academic lineage of rhetoric that stretches as far back as the fifth century BC.

Rhetoric has no auspicious beginning. The first vocal critic of rhetoric is Plato. His main allegation is that rhetoric masks truth and forthrightness, causing falsehood and trickery to reign supreme in the human society. Unlike the narrowly conceived definition as pointed out above, Plato believed that rhetoric is action-oriented. His principal reservation, however, is that rhetoric in the hand of bad rhetors mislead society and in this sense it promotes falsehood and trickery. While Plato's another contemporary

Aristophanes joins him in the denunciation race against rhetoric, Aristotle, Plato's disciple, defends it by creating a systematic and organized body of knowledge about rhetoric. After Aristotle, rhetoric has never been out of business, first with the Roman rhetoricians Quintilian and Cicero enlarging its scope, followed by many others expanding the explanations and application of the term over the centuries. Now far beyond its original definition as the art of persuasion, rhetoric has now taken on new definitions and is currently being used in diverse domains of human disciplines and scholarship, including journalism.

Rhetorical artifacts are the concrete and tangible texts as distinguished from the rhetorical acts which are "fleeting and can never be re-created in its entirety" (Renegar and Malkowski p, 49). Rhetorical acts are ephemeral and elusive, therefore, a critic chooses an artifact, "a tangible evidence of rhetoric" (Renegar and Malkowski p, 49), for rhetorical criticism. For example, a speech is an immediate text of rhetorical act but a transcribed or printed form of that speech becomes a rhetorical artifact. A speech cannot be scrutinized over and over again as can be a rhetorical artifact. There are diverse forms of rhetorical artifacts, which can be both verbal and non-verbal. A few examples are textbooks, newspapers, advertisements, architecture, music and paintings. Rhetorical criticism is a scholarly engagement with any of these texts to understand how communication and rhetoric operate.

Review of Literature

Newspaper editorials are distinctive genre of journalistic writing. They blend fact and opinion to present news and influence public views. The function of newspaper editorials range from "strongly influencing political decision-making" to setting "government agenda" (Kuypers, p. 182). This shows that the impact of newspaper editorials is far-reaching. They usually deal with the topics of current affairs and public controversies.

Newspaper editorials provide perspectives on contemporary issues. Hem Raj Kafle in the article "Rhetorical Aspects in Newspaper Editorials" points out that an editorial text "deals with a familiar issue such as a recent occurrence or news story. It analyses a particular incident, and sometimes gives suggestions about possible courses of actions for the resolutions of certain issues" (p. 325). Editorials are instrumental in that they are the space through which "newspapers speak both for and to their audience, creating a distinctive voice for the newspaper" (Fowler, p. 209). An editorial page contains crucial matters of current events. To Santo, "the most precise barometer of a newspaper's position on political and social questions is assumed to reside on the editorial page – the heart, soul, and conscience of the newspaper" (p. 94). Through its editorials and opinions, newspapers can exert influence in "shaping and articulating public opinion" (Karin Wahl Jorgensen, p. 67). Published on a dedicated page, editorials deal with a wide variety of current issues, and their writers share opinions on a course of actions with their suggestions and recommendations.

Rhetorical study is counted as a distinctly recognized area of study among the seven intellectual traditions of communication theory. Others include semiotics, phenomenology, cybernetics, social psychology, socio-cultural theory and critical theory

(Oberiri Destiny Apuke, p. 20). A rhetorical act primarily involves a communication to influence. So, this function of rhetoric strengthens its prospect of application in journalistic discourse, viz. editorials. Thomas J. Roach encapsulates journalistic practice of rhetoric in three respects. First, journalists write to “produce an effect . . . even when the desired effect is only to inform”. In the second place, they recruit a style “based on the objectivity of scientific investigation” that results in “certain rhetorical processes” that “governs the way they select, gather, and communicate news”. Lastly, journalists “participate in the ancient art of public address” by means of “persuasive messages in the form of editorials, columns or analysis” (p. 304). Thus, the function of an editorial artifact is prominent because it plays a vital role in the construction and change of public views.

Methodology

- **Research Design**

This paper applies qualitative approach of research design, widely prevalent in humanities and English studies. Primarily, the discussion of this article depends on archival sources and published documents. Dictated by this approach, this paper draws on secondary sources for data and information.

- **Sampling**

The orientation of this paper is to trace the discussions that exist in the past and current scholarly matrix about the physical and philosophical dimension of newspaper editorial. As such, the sampling of this paper is restricted to the purposive selection of newspaper editorials only. Depending on the deliberately selected samples of existing literature on editorials, it examines the approaches and paradigms that define editorials as genre of rhetorical artifacts.

- **Data Collection**

The data for the discussion has been gathered from the available archival sources. Existing literature on the rhetorical dimension of newspaper editorial is the principal source of data collection. Data has been interpreted using the theoretical concept of rhetoric and rhetorical artifacts.

- **Data Collection Tools**

Based exclusively on the library research, this paper recruits two basic approaches of collecting data. First, it depends on intensive and thoroughreading of all the existing secondary sources as the primary tool to pool data. As this paper employs purposive technique of sampling, the second approach involves narrowing down of search, specifying only on the materials that discuss the structural and rhetorical dimension of newspaper editorials as genre of rhetorical texts.

- **Data Analysis Process**

This paper applies interpretive critical approach of data analysis, a common research technique of qualitative research design prevalent in English studies. The explanation and interpretation are oriented to show how the editorials maneuver rhetorical strategy to present their perspectives and worldviews. Drawing on the theoretical concept of rhetoric, the article employs the intensive reading, coding and categorizing as the fundamental tools of data analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Most media literature, with its concern for context and audience, are relevant rhetorical artifacts for rhetorical criticism. One example of such application is the study of advertisements because of how they use visual and linguistic devices to influence and persuade consumers (McQuarrie and Mick, p. 436). Another notable trend is the study of photography (photojournalism) as “objects of strong emotional identification or response” (Lucaites and Hariman, p. 37). Yet another trend involves the study of the interactive and Web-based communication prevalent in the newly emerging media environments (Warnick, p. 61). Thus, the practice of rhetorical analysis is being carried out in a variety of media texts.

Newspaper editorials are amenable to rhetorical study for their formal rhetorical features. Editorials, for instance, allow writers to “strive to argue their case well enough – using accurate facts and statistics –to change other people’s minds” (Stein and Paterno, p. 8). Terry Locke states that an editorial artifact functions as a rhetorical text for its purpose of conveying the “carefully weighed viewpoint on a topical issue. Its structure contains “introduction,” “argued points” and conclusion; and it has formal diction and balanced syntax (p.69-70). Editorials are written in a strictly structured format with their focus on evidence and objectivity.

Editorial texts contain two dimensions: content and function. Regarding the content, Janice D. Hamlet defines the newspaper editorial as an article that combines “fact and opinion” and its function serves “to interpret news and public opinion” (“Editorials”). For Rolnicki and Taylor, the principal function of the editorial is “to interpret the significance of an event (the news), to criticize something that has happened, to commend someone or some group for some achievement, or to advocate change and persuade readers that the paper’s viewpoint is worthwhile” (p. 135). Emphasizing the argumentative dimension of the editorial, Verica Rugar contends that “[e]ditorials survived due to an existing need and space for argumentative discourse in the press” (p. 599). Describing the editorial’s role as “idiosyncratic”, Rugar adds that “while news informs, editorials assess; where the news explains what has happened, the editorial tells us why and how it could affect our lives” (p.599). Thus, editorials do not just provide information and data; they discuss the current state of affairs and evaluate them on the basis of evidence and data.

Thus, McQuarrie and Mick, Lucaites and Hariman, Warnick, Stein and Paterno, Rolnicki and Taylor agree that newspaper editorial texts contain distinctive elements that render them a genre of rhetorical artifact. As emphasized by these theorists, newspaper editorials draw on facts, statistics, argumentation and interpretation to pitch their paradigms of what looks like mundane occurrences and platitudes.

Discussion

As the theoretical orientation above reveals, persuasion inheres in all communicative acts. Stein and Paterno are unanimous in their observations about this fundamental characteristic of the editorial. They maintain that in changing people’s minds, advocating change and persuading readers, editorials serve to meet rhetorical functions (p.

8). These postulations support Hamlet’s claim that all editorials are “designed to be persuasive-to sway readers to agree with point of the view expressed” (“Editorials”). This aspect complements Rarahman Farrokhi and Sanaz Nazemi’s suggestion that editorials are “argumentative and persuasive in nature” (p. 155). Primarily, editorial texts exist because of their ability to persuade and influence readers’ opinions or beliefs.

Apart from persuasion, timeliness is another important aspect of an editorial text. This dimension involves the broad aspects of making “acceptable suggestions about timely events,” (Miller, p.103) along with detailing “the importance of the day’s events,” handling “recent events and issues” and developing perspectives “based on objective analysis of happenings and conflicting opinions” (Hamlet, “Editorials”). Locke explains that an editorial text contains rhetorical elements in diverse ways. He sums up that an editorial artifact

uses various means to establish the authority of its argument, for example, by recourse to statistics and views of others. Its structure typically commences with an introduction to the topic . . . proceeds to a number of argued points . . . and concludes with a judgment or call to an action. Its diction is formal but plain. Its syntax is often complex and rhetorically balanced as befits its argumentative purpose. (p. 69-70)

Locke’s this categorization resembles two other models of editorials. The first entails van Dijk’s three-fold rhetorical structure of editorials. According to this model, the three-part structure consists of the definition of a situation or event, the evaluation of the news events that reflects the role of an editorialist as a critic and observer, and conclusion or “recommendations about what specific news actors should do or not do” (p. 244). Likewise, the model of Adrian Bolivar outlines “triadic structure”. This structure consists of Lead, Follow and Valuate. The first of these deals with “aboutness and a posture”. The second concerns with the response to the posture with reference to more relevant examples and the last part is a closing with an “evaluation,” (p. 279-293) that restates the thesis with publisher’s recommendations.

An editorial text is anchored to a rhetorical situation. Rhetorical situations, as Keith Grant-Davie examines, refer to “sets of interacting influence from which rhetoric arises, and which rhetoric in turn influences” (p. 264). Bitzer elaborates more. He contends that “rhetorical discourse comes into existence in response to a situation, in the same sense that an answer comes into existence in response to a question, or a solution in response to a problem” (p. 5). One important component related to the situation is exigency. Bitzer explains that exigency is “an imperfection marked by urgency”, which is “a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (p. 6). Grant-Davie simplifies what Bitzer argues about exigency. He notes, “A rhetorical exigence is some kind of need or problem that can be addressed and solved through rhetorical discourse” (p. 265). Grant-Davie also explains exigence as a response to a future course of action. He reinforces, “Exigence may result not from what has already happened but from something that is about to happen, or from something that might happen if action is not taken—as in the case of many speeches about the environment” (p. 268). Since exigency also concerns some form of anxiety and probabilities, it continues to spark rhetorical responses. As Bitzer notes, exigence is ubiquitous because “the world really invites change – change conceived and effected by

human agents who quite properly address a mediating audience” (p. 13). It follows then that a rhetorical discourse exists simultaneously with “the complex of persons, objects, events, and relations”. This suggests that the rhetorical discourses are “located in reality, are objective and publicly observable historic facts in the world we experience, are therefore available for scrutiny by an observer or critic who attends to them” (Bitzer, p. 11). Bitzer contends that editorials emanate from a context and situation. In other words, they are rejoinders that respond to some compelling situations.

Editorials and exigencies are interrelated. Van Dijk’s observation about the functional aspect of editorial indicates that an editorial text is a response to a situation of “imperfection” or “urgency” or a “need” through “formation and change of public opinion, in setting the political agenda, and in influencing social debate, and decision making and other forms of social and political action” (p. 6). What Hamlet argues about the connections between an editorial text and exigency is similar to van Dijk’s opinion. According to Hamlet, an editorial writer’s investigation into real time and place shows that an editorial text “tackles recent events and issues, and attempts to formulate viewpoints based on objective analysis of happenings and conflicting opinions” (“Editorials”). This shows that editorials are written in response to a context.

Rhetoric’s relationship to exigency is understood in terms of another important component: contemporaneity. For K. Miller, contemporaneity encompasses the broad components of making “acceptable suggestions about timely topics (p. 103). The same holds true for Hamlet. He views that contemporaneity explains “the importance of the day’s events,” tackles “recent events and issues” and offers perspectives “based on objective analysis of happenings and conflicting opinions” (“Editorials”). Another key element to this aspect of contemporaneity is an editor’s knowledge about the immediacy and urgency of the topics.

There has been a trend to study newspapers articles from different rhetorical perspectives. The trend includes the contextual, textual, contrastive and comparative rhetorical approaches. Contextual approaches study the nature of the editorial responses to specific phenomena or events. For example, “Rhetorical Encounters with the Exigency of 9/11: Witnesses Rewrite the Rhetorical Situation,” “The Audience War: The Challenges of Iran’s Nuclear Rhetoric,” and “Rhetorical Analysis of Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19) and Impact of Social Media during Pandemic” illustrate some of the instances of contextual reading of a contemporary situation. Likewise, some research works have employed the qualitative content analysis in large corpuses of editorials, examining such larger socio-political issues as race, ideology, power dynamics and political discourses.

A significant number of rhetorical studies that concentrate on purely textual analysis examine different aspects of linguistics. This type of inquiry entails the analysis of news articles and editorials from the perspectives of content analysis, critical discourse analysis, systemic functional linguistics and argumentation analysis. This approach seeks to study the nuances and intricacies that characterize rhetorical texts. Works utilizing this framework focus on theme choice, verb transitivity and thematic progression in editorial texts. So, studies from textual framework examine intricate and structural aspects, with little attention to contexts or exigencies. These studies contend more with rhetorical maneuverings and strategies than exigencies. They study how newspapers written in

different socio-cultural contexts construct common sense in presenting certain attitudes and perspectives. For example, Verica Rupar’s article “Newspapers’ Production of Common Sense: The ‘Greenie Madness’ or Why Should We Read Editorials?” is a fine example of “how discursive characteristics of one journalistic practice (reporting facts in the ‘news’) influence another journalistic practice (expressing opinion in the ‘editorial’)”. Rupar here discusses how particular components of journalistic discourse, such as headlines, topics and the editorial structure, “contribute to public discussion about important issues in society” (p. 591). Thus, the editorial as a rhetorical artifact is amenable to numerous readings.

Hasan Ansary and Esmat Babii, through contrastive rhetorical framework, seek to find out a common rhetorical structure in the genre of newspaper editorials that goes beyond cultural boundaries. They examine a total of 90 English newspaper editorials from three different socio-cultural contexts, out of which they compare 30 English editorials written by native speakers with 60 English editorials written by non-native speakers. The 90 editorials were culled from three English newspapers published by native speakers of English and non-native speakers. In this contrastive rhetoric, the researchers analyzed the sampled editorial texts. Their findings reveal two universal features in terms of rhetorical elements of editorial structure. These include the four obligatory and two optional generic rhetorical elements. The former includes headline, discussion of an issue, argumentation and showing a stance. Similarly, the latter provides background information, initiation of argumentations, and the closure of argumentation. Their inquiry argues that a universal rhetoric for editorials exist across all cultural settings, in whatever socio-cultural and socio-political context they are written and disseminated (p. 211). Ansary and Babii conclude that editorial writers are consistently guided by strictly maintained structures throughout their coverage.

Conclusion

These journalistic practices suggest that discussions on the rhetorical dimension of the thematic and structural aspects of newspaper editorials abound, showing that such texts should not be regarded as innocuous and mundane. Editorial writers work under strict rhetorical parameters, and thus, organize their artifacts with distinctive rhetorical features, though with some variations. Marshalling facts and statistics, editorialists draw on argumentation to discuss and justify. Functionally, editorial rhetors act as critics and observers, calling to actions and providing evidence-based recommendations. Their perspectives and viewpoints receive objective analysis of otherwise seemingly commonplace events. The purview of editorial artifacts has wider coverage, encompassing such larger socio-political issues as race, ideology, power dynamics and political discourses. While it is laudable that newspaper editorials acquaint and enhance readers with their worldviews about public events, it is also most likely that such readers become subtly swayed by editorials with the latent ideology and propaganda that may underlie editorial texts, and therefore, imperative on the part of readers that they exercise their utmost caution and critical stance while reading the rhetorical contents of such texts.

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