

Example of analyzing the three presidential debates critical thinking

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The 2012 U. S. Presidential Debates

A month or so before the actual election, a series of presidential debates were established to help people decide on whom to vote between Republican nominee, Governor Mitt Romney, and Democrat nominee, President Barack Obama. With the polls neck-and-neck and many of the registered American voters still undecided, the Republican Party and Mitt Romney brought their A-game to the table and eventually, and without any doubt, won the first debate. The astounding results left many critics and Americans wondering what impact this will have on Election Day.

It was then found out later on that Mitt Romney's plan and strategy gave him slight approval in the polls, wherein his rating increased for how many percent though advantage remains with Barack Obama. With two remaining presidential debates, however, there was great doubt on whether Obama can still cling to that advantage especially if he would continue to do what he did on the first one. Many critics believe that, if Obama could not deliver by the next debate, re-election might be far from his grasp.

One could ask how Mitt Romney exactly did win over and manage to throw off the game of his opponent, President Obama. What did Mitt Romney employ in order to take the win? Furthermore, what was Obama's next move to the win? Last but not the least, how was it that President Obama still won despite this advantage by Romney?

As with any other debate, but maybe with a mix of a little intensity and style, the U. S. Presidential Debate was meant to persuade audiences, more importantly voting Americans, into supporting and eventually voting the candidate they want to be elected as president. This is very evident on the

second debate wherein each candidate tried to answer selected questions from people on different topics. As they answer each, they direct their answers to the person who posed the question and ultimately to the American people who were at the venue and at home watching. Though this was very apparent in all three debates, it was also apparent that their statements had become a target to each other. The act had sometimes deliberately led to them bumping with each other though rather civil. The fact that each candidate was able to address each other oddly with aggression and civility clearly depicted the argumentative nature of debates. Communication operates mainly in a continuous cycle with three elements – sender, message, and receiver. While this is the system with which communication operates by, another element to consider is the presence of sub-texts or connotations on top of the context and denotations that were presented in each argument (Adedimeji, n. d., p. 11-14). Subtexts are taken from inferences by people or the implications set by the speaker. They mainly set the rhetoric nature of each candidate's argument.

In the three presidential debates, very evident is their specific and structured rhetorical form/s which can be seen as progressive and repetitive. Form is “the creation of an appetite and the adequate satisfaction of that appetite” (Ott & Mack, 2009). The debates were progressive in that the most current pressing issues of the country were clearly discussed first, especially with each debate dealing on different parts of the industry namely economy and jobs, and the unfortunate attack of American diplomats in Libya. Secondly, the three debates can become repetitive in nature in that same topics were being discussed and repeated in every debate such as the issue of jobs,

taxes, economic crisis, and war. This may be attributed to candidates trying to present their plans repeatedly so that people had a better chance of remembering them.

Aside from the debate, opinions of each candidate were presented in the opposite way of the progressive form, however, stating the most important usually towards the last. This might again be due to the fact that candidates want to leave a lasting impression on voters. Most notably of the two forms is their repetitive use of both context and subtext trying to let audience clearly grasp their argument. Mitt Romney, for instance, he had referred to statistics and data from the last four years, which was of course the president's first term in office, all the while stating that there were some irregularities with the policies and leadership that took place. President Barack Obama, on his side, continued to make people know the steps that his administration did and what the next steps to his current plans are. In other words, Obama often referred and defended his policies against Romney's arguments.

The nature of debates which involves the most pressing issues may be described as being in the historical genre of rhetorical communication. As opposed to theoretical genres, which provide large-scale and unconscious social phenomena, historical genres are set by media to meet the needs and demands of the consumers or, in this case, the audience (Ott & Mack, 2009). Because of the news about unemployment, economic crisis, and terrorist attacks, it was only logical to include such topics on the debates as they were, and are, the current problems being faced by America today and are likely to be the issues that the elected president must deal with.

While candidates may have a common theme in their arguments, they could not always be expected to just repeat these themes and connect them with each question. Candidates are also asked to defend a view-point or narrate their position on an issue or topic (Adedimeji, n. d., p. 12). This makes debates all the more argumentative, because such opinions are open to contestations by each side. Narratives offer a way of connecting with the audience, as does aesthetics and affect.

The narratives set the mood, which tells the way arguments were laid out during the debate, and the voice, which outlines how the audiences will relate to and understand this mood. As expected, both would employ the persuasive nature of arguments, wherein they speak, if possible, directly to the one who gave the question and if possible addressing by first name. To each other, however, there was the mood of aggression wherein each directly and openly disagreed and disputed stands given by the other candidate. This, as the first questions tried to ask, was the reason Gov. Mitt Romney was deemed to win during the first debate. It was the sense of aggression, knowledge what he will say, and direct-to-the-point tackling of problems of the current administration (i. e. in the face of President Obama), while continuing to be persuasive and having the civility and gentlemanliness required of statesmen and stateswomen. This, however, managed to bring Barack Obama up for the game, wherein in the next succeeding debates he would be seen directly targeting Romney's plans, previous interviews and stands. Obama, maybe as a response to Romney's performance on the first debate, made more comparisons of what Romney said before as oppose to what he was saying on the debate. For example,

Obama noted that Romney “ took great pride on shutting [a coal plant] down” when he, himself, had said that he is “ a big coal guy”.

Because of its persuasive nature, moreover, the three debates mostly employed various persuasion types, which include: (1) appeal to emotion or pathos, (2) appeal to authority or ethos, (3) appeal to culture values or mythos, and (4) appeal to logic or logos. No single argumentative/persuasive article is done without any of this four. Mitt Romney clearly imposed more appeals to emotion than his fellow candidate as he is trying to get more votes. He would normally start answers with sentences stating general empathy and understanding of the topic such as [regarding the Libya attack] “ our hearts go to them” or [regarding tax cuts] “ this is a disappointment. We don’t have to settle for this. We can do better than this.” And finally, “ What kind of America do you want for yourself and your family?” President Obama, on the other hand, employed more of appeals to authority stating past administrations such as Abraham Lincoln’s concept of freedom, Bill Clinton’s tax laws, and many other legislations and legislators who served in the office. However, what probably is the most used of the appeals are appeals to logic or logos, wherein candidates stated their evidences to claims, stands, and plans. Some of the evidences include statistics and studies from different groups about the different topics presented. One example was a study by McKinsey & Co. regarding the impacts of Obamacare.

Debates are healthy discourses that became a part of the tradition of any election so that people will have an idea on who to choose come Election Day. They are, by nature, argumentative and persuasive, in which

candidates try to persuade their audience to vote for and support them, while arguing with competitors on which side is the better one. The 2012 U. S. Presidential Debates showed exactly that nature and structure of conventional debates sitting usually on subtexts and connotations on top of the context and denotations given in each argument. The idea is that the target audience can clearly capture the signs and rhetoric of the each statement in order to influence and persuade their audiences more. While most debates highly feed on facts and evidences, it is not generally that people become much gullible to the extent of believing everything a candidate says. Voters must still remember that candidates are designed to sway and persuade and thus, may have sweet tongues for the election. The responsibility, therefore, must still rest upon the vigilant voter who shall examine whether the facts presented were truthful or not. Being democratic in nature, America is in the hands of each and every Americans and not just a select few, or two people.

Works Cited

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