

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - Controversy Participation As A Function Of Direct Reported Speech In News



1. Introduction

As an object of study, controversy presents a problem for argumentation researchers because on the one hand, it suggests something familiar – a discursive conflict in the manner of a dialectical exchange – yet on the other hand, it suggests something afield – an ill-defined discursive conflict embedded in a variegated institutional, historical, social, and textual environment. Dascal has emphasized the second sense of controversy, its qualities that lie outside of the norms of dialectical exchange, thematizing ‘accidental and “vicious” aspects’, ‘endless “procedural” debates about framing’, and ‘passionate rhetoric’ (Dascal, 1990). Where argumentation research has addressed controversy, it has tended to analyze it through argument reconstructions and/or to evaluate it as a failed or a juvenile dialectical exchange. Viewing controversy this way, as a deviation from the norms of argument and dialectic, encourages a number of presumptions about it as an object of study. One of those presumptions is that, like dialectic, controversies are dyadic exchanges, and, by extension, identifying the participants in a controversy is either not a problem, or not an interesting problem. This paper investigates participation as a problem by asking who counts as a controversy participant.

As part of a constitutive approach to controversy, this paper examines a corpus of newspaper texts that report on the Brooklyn Museum controversy of 1999. A survey by the First Amendment Center narrates the event this way: ‘*Controversy about the show, titled “Sensation”, centered on a painting of the Virgin Mary by British artist Chris Ofili that incorporated elephant dung and cut outs of pornographic images into its design*’ (McGill, 1999).

In this paper, I want to discover who counts as a participant in the eyes of journalists who covered the Brooklyn Museum controversy. By asking the

question about participation in this way, I can deliver an answer that does not rely on analyst presumptions about the number, kind, or prominence of participants. Instead, it examines the attribution and content of direct quotations in the controversy coverage as a measure of participant prominence and, by extension, the impact of participant prominence on reader representations of the controversy. The paper reports the results of this investigation, revealing that while hundreds of individual participants are quoted directly in the coverage of the Brooklyn Museum controversy, New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani is by far the most quoted, and that certain strings of his direct reported speech are routinely repeated across the months and years of coverage, making him a particularly prominent participant. Given that for most readers the coverage is their only experience with the Brooklyn Museum controversy, the journalists representation of this event as one dominated by Mayor Giuliani carries considerable power in inscribing the terms of the controversy for New Yorkers. Beyond the general priority on controversy as an object of study that is wed to its variegated institutional, historical, social, and textual environment, this analysis of the Brooklyn Museum case leads to some conclusions about controversy participation in general: Controversies are not necessarily dialectical encounters. Though many more than two speakers may participate in controversies, as few as one speaker can dominate them. Along with its discoveries about the Brooklyn Museum case, this paper provides an empirical approach to analyzing participation in a controversy, an approach that describes controversy as a kind of event that is named, narrated, and defined for a public audience by media coverage.

Analyses of controversy have tended to adopt three strategies that shape the object of study into a dialectic encounter: Issue-based encampment; participant selection based on entitlement & social primacy; participant selection based on evidence of direct exchange.

While no single study embodies any one of these approaches exclusively, most analyses of controversy use some ratio of them in order to describe and analyze cases. What all of them have in common is that they use the dialectical encounter as a model and often as a framework for evaluation. Many researchers bring a normative framework to bear on their individual cases, evaluating them as failed dialectical encounters, and searching for the argumentative means by which the participants could have resolved the issue.

Many of the events that we call 'controversies', especially in a contemporary

context, are mediated heavily by news reports and other second-hand reports. They are mediated at three significant points: between controversy participants, between the controversy event and the reporter, and between the reporter and his or her readers, listeners, and/or viewers. This final point of mediation is particularly important, as most people learn about controversies exclusively through news or historical documents. In the case of the Brooklyn Museum controversy, for instance, most people experienced first hand none of the events of the controversy – the press conference where the Mayor threatened the museum, the sermon where Cardinal O'Connor spoke out against the museum, the court rooms in which the museum and the city filed suits, the opening of the exhibit, etc. For most people, the representation of the controversy in media coverage is isomorphic with the controversy as an event. It follows, then, that the media will play a significant part in identifying and codifying the cast of participants in a controversy. Unlike other approaches to participant selection – issue-based encampment, participant selection – based on entitlement & social primacy, and participant selection based on evidence of direct exchange – my approach foregrounds media texts rather than abstracting from them.

Although controversy is an object of study that is central to rhetorical analysis and argumentation, researchers typically use the term in a non-technical, ordinary sense. Goodnight (1991) has identified this as a problem and has aimed to develop a more careful technical understanding of controversy (G. T. Goodnight, 1992; G. Thomas Goodnight, 1999; Olson & Goodnight, 1994). Other scholars from rhetoric and argumentation have also addressed the problem (Dascal, 1990; McKeon, 1990; Phillips, 1999). In these cases, scholars have developed technical definitions based on their knowledge of the rhetorical and the philosophical traditions, on publicsphere theory, and on pragmatics. The approach that I take in this paper by examining the discourse behavior of journalists does not conflict with these approaches. Instead, it provides an empirical alternative.

2. Design, method, & results

Direct quotation is a site at which journalists regularly foreground event participants- characters in an ongoing news narrative. Van Dijk emphasizes this function of direct quotation in journalism:

'Introducing participants as speakers conveys both the human and the dramatic dimension of news events. News actors are represented as real actors in that case, playing or replaying their own role' (Dijk, 1988).

In this study, I identify and quantify the attribution of quotations to particular news actors and draw conclusions about the controversy participation based on these results. In order to identify the newspaper coverage of the event, I compiled a corpus of news texts about the event from the top three circulating newspapers in New York City. In order to isolate direct quotations and identify speaker attributions, I searched the corpus electronically for direct quotes, recorded the speaker to whom the quotation was attributed in each case, and tabulated the number of times each speaker was quoted. Finally, I counted and ranked all of the direct quotations and the speakers to whom they are attributed in the newspaper coverage the Brooklyn Museum controversy.

Quoted participants per newspaper

Mayor Giuliani is the most quoted participant in coverage for all three newspapers. His prominence is especially marked in the *Daily News* and the *New York Post*, where he is quoted 51 and 24 more times, respectively, than the next most quoted participant, and his quotations account for about 14% of all of the direct quotations in the coverage of those two newspapers. In the *New York Times*, he is quoted only 6 more times than the second most quoted person, and his quotations account for 9.90% of all of the direct quotations in the controversy coverage of the Times. For the *Daily News* and the *New York Times*, Arnold Lehman, the director of the Brooklyn Museum, is the second most quoted, accounting for 4.73% and 9.39% of direct quotations in each of those newspapers respectively. In the *New York Post*, Lehman is the fourth most quoted, accounting for 3.04% of all direct quotations.

Participants quoted first, second, or third within an article (leading)

Giuliani is the most prominent quoted participant in coverage, overall, which suggests that he is the central participant in the controversy coverage. However, since newspaper readers often read only the first few sentences or paragraphs of an article, quotation order within articles offers another important variable for assessing prominence. For instance, if Giuliani were the most often quoted, but he was never quoted first, second, or third within an article, then any claim to his prominence would be compromised.

With one minor exception, Giuliani is the most quoted speaker in the first, second, and third positions for all three newspapers. The exception is for the second position in the *New York Post*, where scare quotes are the most common, closely followed by Giuliani. Lehman and scare quotes are also prominent in leading

quotations, along with painting vandal Dennis Heiner, in the case of the *New York Post*. In the coverage corpus, the tendency to be quoted often seems correlated with the tendency to be quoted early.

Analysis of leading quotation text by most quoted participants

Stylebooks and news writing textbooks recognize direct quotations as crucial sites of liability and authority for journalists. Beyond the general journalistic criterion of newsworthiness, textbooks encourage journalists to directly quote discourse on the basis of two criteria: level of controvertability and the liveliness of the speaker's expression (Fox, 2001). For instance, Fox emphasizes the importance of direct quotations in the case of controversial statements:

'Direct quotes are especially important in stories that hinge on controversial or inflammatory statements. By providing a full quotation of the statement in question, writers protect themselves from the charge that their leads inaccurately interpret the speaker's words' (Knight, 2003).

Knight explains that ordinary statements do not require direct quotation. He writes, 'There is no reason to make a direct quote from a mundane informational statement – I was born in a hospital in Tacoma, Washington – but if the quotation has some life to it, try to get it verbatim' (Fox, 2001). Many strings of discourse satisfy both criteria. Controversial statements, after all, tend to be lively simply for being controversial. Of course, there are news stories that do not report on controversy. In these stories, the liveliness criterion will dominate. In these cases, Fox recommends quoting discourse that is 'striking or emphatic' (Siegal & Connolly, 1999).

These criteria resonate in the coverage of the Brooklyn Museum controversy. We have seen that Giuliani dominates the direct quotations in the coverage corpus. One likely reason for this is his role as an entitled political speaker and authorized participant, a crucial factor in journalists' source selection (Roshco, 1975). In addition to his social primacy and political entitlement, however, I investigate here his specific language, the language that journalists chose to quote directly, as a way to learn something more about his dominance of quotation in coverage. Since the leading quotation is the one most often seen by readers, who rarely read entire newspaper articles, here I analyze leading quotations by the Mayor. The most conspicuous term in Giuliani's leading quotations is 'sick'. Not only do all three papers quote his use of this term often, it is cited regularly over time. The regular quoting of this term is consonant with the quotation criteria from

journalistic pedagogy and style proscriptions, as Giuliani offers it as a controversial evaluation of the Sensation exhibit and the Ofili painting. A number of his other leading quotations are also controversial and are 'striking and emphatic', as Fox puts it. *The Daily News* quotes Giuliani as he utters words like 'disgusting', 'perverted', and 'ideology' (Haberman & Barrett, 1999). *The New York Post* quotes his inflammatory comment to a caller to his radio show: 'take some Valium!' (Haberman, 1999). The Post also quotes a particularly strong accusation by Giuliani, who claims that the Brooklyn Museum has 'no compunction about putting their hands in the taxpayers' pockets' (Bumiller, 2001; Niebuhr, 1999). *The New York Times* quotes the Mayor's strong and emphatic language in strings like 'Catholic-bashing' and 'disgusting' (Barry, 1999). Although all three papers quote a number of controversial or emphatic words or phrases of Giuliani in the leading position, the *New York Times* also quotes his fully realized assertions in a few cases.

3. Discussion

In news writing, journalists choose sources based on their access and availability and based on their ability to contribute legitimacy and authority to their narratives. By directly quoting sources, journalists ground their narratives in evidentiary testimony, and add variety to their stories. In addition, direct quotations tend to confer authority on quoted speakers and tend to increase reader acceptance of and agreement with discourse represented within direct quotes. For this reason, participants first leverage their political, economic, and social prominence in order to be chosen as a news source and then benefit from the authority and reader acceptance conferred by having their discourse reproduced verbatim in a newspaper account. For these reasons, totaling his or her direct quotations offer one way of measuring the prominence of a participant as he or she is presented in coverage. The results of the study show that Mayor Rudolph Giuliani achieves unique prominence as a participant in the coverage of the Brooklyn Museum controversy. In addition, the study reveals that Giuliani's leading quotations tend to qualify as controversial, striking, and emphatic especially in comparison to those of other speakers.

4. Conclusion

Many studies of controversy begin with the assumption that it is a dialectical encounter. In conceptualizing controversy this way, they bring a dyadic model of participation to bear on their investigation of cases. That is, they discover that

controversy presents an issue with two opposing positions, parties, and/or participants. This is realized through three major strategies that are commonly adopted by controversy analysts: issue-based encampment, participant selection based on entitlement & social primacy, and/or participant selection based on evidence of direct exchange. What all of them have in common is that they use the dialectical encounter as a model and often as a framework for evaluation, and that they background their method of participant selection. This means that analysts must make a number of assumptions about what counts as the issue, or the 'controversy's demand' as Dascal puts it, and who counts as a participant.

Rather than abstract from the media sources from which many analysts find their raw material for analysis, I have foregrounded media texts in order to discover who counts as a participant in the eyes of journalists who covered the Brooklyn Museum controversy. By asking the question about participation in this way, I have aimed to avoid analyst presumptions about the number, kind, or prominence of participants.

Discovering how journalists map the field of participants in a particular case cannot solve the controversy participation problem in any complete way. However, it does offer one way to account for participation empirically, where the alternatives seem to be to ignore the problem or to abstract from received accounts of the event. If researchers remain committed to analyzing controversy as a juvenile or failed dialectical exchange, then participation is unlikely to present itself as a problem. However, if we see controversy as an ill-defined discursive conflict embedded in a variegated institutional, historical, social, and textual environment, participation emerges as an important empirical question.

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