Unmasking the Moral of the Story: A Narrative Analysis of the “Stand for Marriage Maine” Campaign

Justin Rudnick
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Mary Hoffman
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Department of Communication and Journalism

Abstract

The marriage equality debate has recently become the subject of political and social commentary across the country. Many states have seen some sort of marriage amendment come to a vote. As with any controversial issue, groups aligned with both sides of the debate have been arguing their perspectives. It is important these messages are analyzed. Stand for Marriage Maine released three television commercials in their 2009 “Yes on One” campaign. In the election, Maimers voted to repeal their marriage equality act. The influence of these messages by this campaign to reverse marriage equality in Maine can be better understood through rhetorical analysis. This project uses a narrative analysis of the Stand for Marriage Maine commercials to explain how the campaign used narrative elements to attempt to persuade viewers to accept a view of the world that was in sync with the group’s agenda.

Background and Method

On May 6, 2009 the Maine legislature passed LD 1020 – an act that legalized same sex marriage in Maine. Shortly after, Stand for Marriage Maine launched their campaign in support of Question 1 – a People’s Veto that aimed to repeal LD 1020. The campaign consisted of numerous blogs, radio and television commercials, and televised debates. The veto narrowly passed in November 2009, and the rhetoric used by the Stand for Marriage Maine campaign provides fascinating insight into discourse that occurred over the debate. Through his work with the narrative paradigm, Walter Fisher asserts that human beings experience and comprehend life through a series of narratives (Griffin, 2008). He argues that all forms of communication appeal to our sense of reason and thus must be fundamentally viewed as stories. In her book, Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice, Sonja Foss (2009) details the elements that comprise a narrative. Using her framework, a narrative analysis was conducted of three commercials released by Stand for Marriage Maine. The analysis consisted of examining the role of setting, characters, narrators, events, temporal relations, causal relations, audience, and theme to uncover the rhetorical strategies used by the campaign.

Analysis

- Narrative analysis revealed that the Stand for Marriage Maine campaign used a strategic combination of character and plot elements to construct a Jeremiadic theme throughout their commercials.
- Jeremiads subtly describe a present failing, the possibility to return to a more virtuous past, and therefore a better future (Wolfe, 2008).
- All three commercials establish a sense of authority for the narrators involved by providing titles and credentials, as seen in the snapshots below:
- These narrators organize the scenes in a way that creates a timeline consisting of past example, present choice, and future consequence if their proposed action isn’t taken.
- The commercials transform the audience into a character in the narrative, and place the burden of action on the audience. The narrators portray dire future consequences and the audience’s responsibility to prevent this. This coerces the audience-as-character to act on the only choice presented to them.

Conclusions

- By transforming the audience into a character, the commercials instill a sense of moral obligation in the audience. In keeping with the Jeremiad, the commercials predict a future of moral and political disruption, and urge the audience to take a stand and act in order to prevent this future from occurring.
- The commercials portray the debate over homosexual marriage as a battle of “good vs. evil”. This theme of “us vs. them” is reinforced by the masking of possible choices and the portrayal of the opposition as deviant and immoral.
- This, in addition to the authority they construct for the narrators, circumvents the central route of persuasion. Viewers of the commercials are thus placed in a position where they make quick judgments and are unable to conduct any nuanced analysis of the actual message.

Implications

While we cannot prove the effectiveness of the campaign, the campaign’s use of public moral messages raises ethical implications:

- Presenting arguments using moral appeals prevents audiences from thinking critically about the issue. By using these appeals, campaigns are able to route the audience to their communicative goals via the audience’s peripheral route of persuasion. This allows the rhetor to take liberties with regard to fact presentation and causal relationships.
- The use of public moral messages creates an artificial sense of urgency for the audience. The call to “act now” invokes a stronger response from the audience.
- Viewers need to be wary of public moral messages and critically analyze the claims made in these messages. Because of the potential for unethical persuasion, public moral messages should not be accepted at face value, but should be analyzed through careful consideration of all arguments.

References


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