

Dr. Sheryl Cunningham  
Wittenberg University

## Creating Enemies in Partisan Political Discourse

### Summary and Rationale for Assignment

COMM 360 (Topics in Rhetoric: Political Communication) is a course targeted toward junior and senior communication majors. In this course we study how contemporary political actors use language (both words and images) to construct a self and an other (often an idealized self and a demonized other) in order to be elected or to gain favor for certain policy positions. We analyze a wide variety of texts, most of which are only available to us through media.

In this rhetoric course I utilize Jasinski's (2001) "conceptually-oriented criticism" (p. 256). Instead of teaching students about various critical methods (cluster analysis, narrative criticism, fantasy-theme criticism, etc.) we begin with theoretical concepts (persona, pathos, vilification, etc.). The investigation of the media content is driven by the text itself, the context in which the text originates, and a theoretical concept.

Political discourse is often polarizing, but becomes increasingly so during elections when citizens are asked to choose between different political candidates. It is almost impossible to avoid political advertising on television and, given the recent *Citizens United* decision, spending on advertising is likely to increase rather than decrease, particularly among PACs who are not directly linked to a candidate's campaign communications. Beyond TV advertising, the online environment also allows for individuals to seek out information that is consistent with political beliefs they already have, via sites like Daily Kos (<http://www.dailykos.com/>) or Townhall (<http://townhall.com/>), exposure to which may increase polarization. Given these circumstances it is crucial for students to understand how political actors create "enemies" through discourse. The theoretical concept "vilification" can help students understand how enemies are created and what motivates this creation. This lesson seeks to help students answer two basic questions: 1) How are enemies created through discourse? 2) Do politicians "need" enemies in order to motivate people to action?

### Materials for this assignment:

- Reading: Vanderford, M.L. (1989). Vilification and social movements: A case study of pro-life and pro-choice rhetoric. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 75, 166-182.
- Negative political television advertisements or other type of overtly partisan discourse

### Process:

- Students read Vanderford piece
- Instructor lectures on vilification, making sure students have a sound understanding of the concept. Vanderford analyzes social movement discourse, so there is a need to compare and contrast social movements with partisan politics. Vilification, in both contexts, is used to create unity and motivation among in-group members which complicates its use as a persuasive form of discourse.
- Students engage in analysis of negative political ads (either in or out of class) attempting to answer several questions: 1) Does the advertising vilify the opponent? 2) In what ways? 3) What is the significance for political discourse or rhetorical theory that politicians or third parties engage in vilification through advertising? 4) How do we engage with vilification in advertising as a form of free speech?
  - Ad attacking Josh Mandel— Ohio senate race: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4h0fCsr0NEw>
  - Ad attacking Sherrod Brown—Ohio Senate race: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JF8DdOf4a28&feature=related>
  - Ad attacking Mitt Romney: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ud3mMj0AZZk>
  - Ad attacking Barack Obama: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4gPvToKtWU>
- Since some political ads do not engage in all types of vilification, instructors may want students to analyze other forms of partisan discourse. I have found it most useful to use opinion pieces / columns from websites with a strong partisan affiliation (talk radio or political commentary on Fox or MSNBC might also be good resources.) Again students attempt to answer several questions: 1) Who or what is being vilified? 2) In what ways? (provide specific textual evidence and explication of that evidence) 3) Is the vilification persuasive? If so, for whom and in what ways? 4) How do we engage vilification within a mediated environment that increasingly utilizes narrowcasting strategies? (Allows media consumers to seek out information that is likely consistent with political beliefs they already have.) One example of a partisan text using vilification is Ann Coulter's "Why Liberals Behave the Way They Do": [http://townhall.com/columnists/anncoulter/2012/08/15/why\\_liberals\\_behave\\_the\\_way\\_they\\_do/page/full/](http://townhall.com/columnists/anncoulter/2012/08/15/why_liberals_behave_the_way_they_do/page/full/)

### Student Reactions:

- Trevor Grandy, senior COMM major: "The concept of vilification has helped me classify the baloney of campaign ads, speeches, and debates. I've always known that these artifacts are full of half-truths or exaggerations, but knowing about vilification allows me to recognize the motivation behind the producers of these artifacts."

- Libby Westlake, senior POLI SCI major: “The concept of vilification has made me more media literate in terms of this election because I am able to recognize when a candidate or ad is actually debating about concrete facts or policies versus when they are constructing the opponent as evil, which often seems to have no relevance to the topic of discussion.”
- Alissa Armstrong, senior COMM major: “I believe vilification is pervasive in partisan political discourse, and that has helped me develop a critical eye when viewing and interpreting the discourse. Knowing that vilification is something that exists and is often used when "preaching to the choir" I am more aware of what message is being communicated and why that discourse is spun in a particular way, regardless of the political party.”

### References

Jasinski, J. (2001). The status of theory and method in rhetorical criticism. *Western Journal of Communication*, 65, 249-270.

Vanderford, M.L. (1989). Vilification and social movements: A case study of pro-life and pro-choice rhetoric. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 75, 166-182.

### Other readings from the class unit on creating enemies

Merskin, D. (2004). The construction of Arabs as enemies: Post September 11 discourse of George W. Bush. *Mass Communication and Society*, 7, 157-175. (concept of focus: enemy construction)

Burke, K. (1941). The rhetoric of Hitler's battle. In *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (pp. 164-189). New York: Vintage. (concepts of focus: scapegoating/ cycle of guilt and redemption)

### **Notes on Contributor**

Sheryl Cunningham is an Assistant Professor of Communication at Wittenberg University. She received her PhD from the University of Washington in 2008. She teaches courses in the areas of rhetoric, media studies, and communication theory. Her most recent publication is a book chapter, “Taking Care of the Children and the Country”: Nancy Pelosi and the Trope of Motherhood in Partisan and Mainstream Media, in *Media Depictions of Brides, Wives, and Mothers* (2012, Lexington Books).