POLITICAL NARRATIVE:
A NEVER ENDING RETHORICAL TOOL

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Abstract

This case study presents two pieces of data taken from the third debate which took place during the presidential election held in the United States of America in 2008 and which had as main opponents the Democratic Senator Barack Obama and the Republican Senator John McCain. The analysis of the data is based on two narratives provided by the candidates during their interventions. The aim of this paper is twofold: on the one hand, to investigate the reasons why these candidates used narratives during their interchange and, on the other hand, to question their narratives' truth-value relative to the images they present. In brief, what impact these narrative may have had on electors and which images the senators wanted to encapsulate in them.

Keywords: political debate, story/narrative, political narrative, truth-value, images.

1. Introduction

« Once upon a time », « in a faraway land » or « once there was a prince », these are only some of the story starters that are often used while narrating a children's story. These are phrases that set the tone, the time, the place, and even the « who » in many fairy tales. Authors have been using these phrases for so long and so frequently, that they have become a cultural institution and sometimes an important aspect of it, since through them we learn much about who we are, where we come from, how ancient cultures developed and why some things are the way they are today. Stories terrify us, they enchant us, they inspire us, but the power which lays in them is not a modern phenomenon. In fact, culturally, we, humans, are predisposed to hearing stories.

People use stories to explain their existence or the here-after. One of the most ancient and well known collection of stories can be found in the Holy Bible. The Holy Bible is a book that has been a keystone for many cultures and civilizations, ancient and modern alike. It is precisely in the Holy Bible that the evangelists - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - retold the narratives which Jesus Christ taught to people:

In all this, Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables[1] indeed, he would never speak to them except in parables. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet:

> I will speak to you in parables
>
> Unfold what has been hidden
>
> Since the foundation of the world
>
> (The New Jerusalem Bible 1990: 1163, Matt. 13: 34).

Parables were successful because they took very abstract and complicated ideas and « put a human face on them » using the context of modern daily life. They took complicated ideas (e.g. Heaven) and made them more understandable (Pearl merchant).

2. Defining Narrative and Political Narrative

Parables, stories or narratives, they all have a point in common - they all narrate events. Hence, the concept of narrative is a difficult one to put a label on. The word narrative comes from the verb 'to narrate' which, according to the Webster Dictionary, means: 'L narratus, past. Part. Of narrare to make known, narrate fr. L gnarus knowing, known; akin to L gnoscere, noscere to know – more at KNOW. vt.: to tell or recite the happenings of (a story) ~ vi.: to act or function as a storyteller' (Webster Dictionary 1986: 1503). As with many words in the English language, the word narrative may acquire multiple meanings. According to the Webster Dictionary (1961: 1503), one of its definitions and the one I will use in this paper as a parameter in the analysis of the data is: « a discourse, or an example of it, designed to represent a connected succession of happenings ». It can be easily noticed that the two definitions: '1. to make know and 2. a connected succession of happenings', combined together can provide a powerful tool by which knowledge is shared and dispersed. The importance of the narratives in the formulation and in the transmission of the traditional knowledge is a potential reason why the study of the narratives has become such a developed research field.

In Shaul Shenhav's article: Political Narratives and Political Reality, the scholar first demonstrated precisely the « prominence of the narrative form in

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[1] Parables are considered to be a kind of ancient narratives which are told with a specific moral or religious purpose.

the formulation of traditional knowledge » (Lyotard 1984: 1) in general, and also in the study of the political discourse, in particular, since « examinations of political discourse show that it relies extensively on narrative patterns ». Moreover, White (1980) argued that « this is partly the result of the human tendency to rely on narrative as a way of understanding the world and endowing it with meaning » (Shenhav 2006b: 244). Furthermore, Shenhav also believed that:

> The dominant role of narratives in political discourse is also based on the centrality of narrative in the formulation and maintenance of world views. The essence of narrative as an effective means of simplifying complex situations into chains of events has also contributed to its popularity (Shenhav 2006b: 246).

In his article, Shenhav does not only motivate the importance of narratives in a political discourse, but he also gives a definition of what he labels as political narrative, as such:

> The need to define certain narratives as «political» raises the same dilemma faced by any scholar trying to identify a particular kind of discourse as political. One approach to this dilemma draws on the formal frameworks within which the discourse takes place. We can thus define a political narrative as one that emerges from a formal political forum, such as a parliament, a cabinet, party meeting or political demonstrations, or as narrative produced by politicians and public officials in the course of their duty (Shenhav 2006b: 247).

Hence, once defined, it is important to mention that one of the features political narratives have is their truth-value. In most of the cases, this characteristic is either taken for granted, or not taken into consideration or sometimes even ignored. With the political narratives this feature seems to be one of particular importance since, as Shenhav mentions: « Political narratives do not just spring into being; they are created in the course of political action, a process that can be followed in both public forums and closed ones » (Shenhav 2006b: 248).

So being created in advance, political narratives' truth-value becomes a feature with much more importance than any other feature, since their truthfulness may tell much about the speaker and his/her speech. Moreover, Shenhav adds that:

The fact that political narratives are constructed and shaped, however, still does not determine how capable they are of representing particular aspects of «political reality». In other words, even if it is clear that narrative cannot capture the whole of «political reality», this does not mean that all narratives are equally true or equally false (Shenhav 2006b: 248).

Concerning the following case study, it is important to underline the fact that its analysis will not take into consideration the whole spectrum of political reality of the United States of America of 2008, instead, its analysis will be confined to the concrete truth-value of two narratives and to the presentation of some proofs in this sense found in the media of that time.

3. Narratives

Two clear examples of political narratives were presented during the last debate of the presidential election which took place in the United States of America in 2008. This debate opposed the Democratic Senator Barack Obama and the Republican Senator John McCain. The analysis proposed by this paper is mainly focused on the candidates' use of political narratives during their third presidential debate which was held at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York, on the 15th of October 2008. This debate was broadcast live in a TV program moderated by the television journalist, Bob Schieffer from CBS News. The debate lasted for almost ninety minutes. The time was divided by the host into segments of nine minutes for each of the thematic questions proposed. Each candidate had a two minute time limit to answer the question he had been asked. Their answers were followed by a more elaborate discussion between the two candidates on the topic proposed. The topics proposed were as such: the presentation of the candidates' respective economical programs, the leadership of their campaigns, the new people the candidates projected to bring into the government once they were elected, their intentions/projects concerning energy and the climate control, their solutions for the improving of the health care system and their nominees for the Supreme Court[2].

The third and last presidential debate of 2008 took place at a crucial moment when the race for the White House was reaching a dramatic climax. The

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[2] These pieces of information come from my transcription of the video recording of this presidential debate. For further information, please, check in the Appendix.

candidates were neck-and-neck in the polls; both were desperate to take any advantage over the other. This was effectively their last opportunity to get ahead. Everything depended on how the candidates presented themselves and their plans. The candidates needed iconic images to convince the American electorate that one or the other was their man. But why did they need images? Because images dominate our lives. Every day of our lives we are bombarded by thousands of different images, images which affect us in countless different ways. They show us how to behave, what to think, how to feel, they define us and they create who we are. But of all these images, there is one particular kind of image whose power is uniquely mesmerizing, because while it terrifies us, somehow it also comforts us or fascinates us although it can manipulate us. It is the image of (our) future. This image is the key image the politicians use to help us make a sense of what their projects resemble. The image of the future has one particularity which makes a huge difference in rapport with other kind of images; it is an image we create ourselves in our minds. It is like a white paper on which each of us imagines whatever s/he wants to have as his/her perspective. Through narratives, and not only, politicians can manipulate us to shape an image of the future according to their own perspectives and expectations. The very success or failure of the candidates' campaigns may hinge on their ability to identify (or « put a human face » on their ideology) with the public through their narratives.

Kings and rulers have used the power of images and narratives to provoke alliance with their subjects. Printing the face of emperors on coins is just one example, or creating grand legends of powerful leaders, such as Alexander the Great is another. Some political leaders, such as Russia's Stalin, had some serious flaws but because the stories told about him were powerful and inspiring, the people remained faithful.

Nowadays, our politicians use the same visual strategies to promote themselves and their parties. One particular tool used during the third presidential debate was precisely a tool which made use of images - the narrative.

The last years have proved that narratives can break or build a political career in a blink of an eye, since they have the power to stigmatize or to bring fame. As a proof, we only have to think of names like Margaret Thatcher, George W. Bush or Bill Clinton. What people kept in mind about them is

probably not what they have accomplished or not, but what they have learnt about the politicians' stories. Each one of these political leaders has tried to convince the electorate that his/her story was the best for their times and contexts. George W. Bush told a story in which he projected himself as the man the American citizen needed to restore dignity to the presidency and therefore to their country after Clinton's deposition. But what about Senators' Barack Obama and John McCain's stories? What are the images they wanted to present to us and how did they succeed during the debate?

3.1. Joe, the plumber, in the spotlight

The answers to these questions will be precisely provided in the analysis of two pieces of information selected from the third presidential debate. Thus, the two pieces of data analyzed hereafter start at 0h06'20" and 1h08'38'.

Moreover, the first piece of data starts when Senator McCain mentions for the first time a certain Joe Wurzelburger. During the debate, the host asked the first question: « Why your plan's better than his?[3] » and each candidate presented his proposed economical project meant to address the economical crisis taking place in the United States of America at that time.

Senator John McCain was allowed to start the debate. On the second turn in responding, Senator Barack Obama followed by giving the four main points of his economical plan. While Senator Barack Obama organized his answer in presenting the four main points of his economical plan, the Senator John McCain presents only one of his short-term projects and adds in his discourse the presence of « a guy who's a plumber – his name is Joe Wurzelburger[4] » , around which he pursues his entire argumentative discourse. In his answer, Senator John McCain referred to « a guy who's a plumber - his name is Joe Wurzelburger » or « Joe the plumber » in a very short narrative. From that moment on, McCain used the plumber's name5 each time he wanted to come back to either his economical plan or to the American citizen – « the plumber »

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[3] Bob Schieffer was asking about the candidates' respective economical plans. According to my transcription of the data, this piece of information can le located at 0h1'55"after the beginning of the debate.

[4] According to the transcription of the debate, this statement is uttered at 1h06'23'.

[5] According to my counting, McCain mentions Joe or makes references to him sixty six times during the entire debate.

creating in this way, a kind of model for the low income American citizen who wants to live what the senator referred to as the « American dream ».

The transcription[6] of the narrative[7] which McCain presents is as such:

0h06'20"- Senator John McCain:

1. (.) NOOU AA I would like TO mentION that a couple of days agO

2. senator Obama was out in OhIO and he had an encounter with a guy (..)

3. who's a plumber (...) hi' name is Joe Wurzelburger (...) [he breaths deeply] AAA

4. JOE (...) wAnts too (...) BUY the businESS that he's been IN (.)

5. for all of these years (..) worked ten (.) twelve hours a day (.)[he breaths loudly]

6. And he want' to buy the BUSSINESS

7. but he looked AT YOOUR TAX PLAN (.) and

8. he SAW that he was gonna pay (.) much higher taxes (.)

9. YOU were gonna put him in a higher tax bracket (.)

10. which was gonna increases taxes (..)

11. which was going TO (..) CAUSE him NOT TO be able to emplOY people (.)

12. WHICH (...) Joe (.) was trying to realize the American dream (.)

13. Now Senator Obama talks about (...) the very very rich (.)

14. JOE (.) I wanna tell yo',

15. I'll not only help THAT and BUY THAT business

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[6] The specific convention rules used for the transcription of the video recording of the debate are: (.) /(..) - indicates a small or longer pause; la,la,la,la – indicates a crosstalk; (XXX) – inaudible;[ ] - informs about non-verbal attitudes;' -some sounds are not pronounced; :))) – a laughter; ------ some parts of the turn of talk are missing; ? - the speaker uses an interrogative tone in his/her voice; waant – the repetition of letters indicates that the speaker underlines the word pronounced without a pitch in the voice; AAA – capital letters are used to indicate the speaker uses a pitch higher in his/her voice. At the top of the transcription the surname and the title of the speaker is mentioned. The lines of the transcriptions are numbered due to practical reasons. For further information, please, check in the Appendix.

[7] The data come from the recorded debate found on Youtube, available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvdfO0lq4rQ.

16. that you worked your whOOle life FOR (.) and be able (...) and

17. I'll keep your taxes LOW and I'll provide AVAILABLE and AFFORDABLE health care

18. for you and your employees (.) And I will not HAVE (...)

19. I will not stand FOR (...) AAa tax increase aa SS on small business income (.)

20. fifty percent (...) of small business income (.)

21. taxe' is rai' TAXES are paid by small businesses (.)

22. that's sixteen millions jobs (.) in America (.) And what YOU wanna DO (.)

23. to Joe the plumber (.) and millions more like 'him (.)

24. is have their TAXES (.) INCREASED and NOT to be able

25. to realize the American dream (XXX) of owning their own business.

The reasons why this specific part of the debate has been chosen are: first of all, because it became prominent in the sphere of political and public discourse once it was broadcast. Secondly, because McCain most likely constructed it to promote a model of the American worker who struggled for years to fulfil the « American dream of owing their own business ». Thirdly, because the character became idiomatic and the story grew as a symbol for the American citizens due to the huge amount of publicity which surrounded this media event. Lastly, because there were so many people who could identify with the main character. Hence, all these are the more reasons to take McCain's side and vote for him.

As a proof, one example of the headlines which circulated at that time was found in the National Post, on 16th of October 2008: Spotlight gets old fast for « Joe the Plumber ».

And one of the comments made by Peter Goodspeed, the editor of this Journal, was:

> Overnight, Joe the Plumber became a national celebrity and a proxy for working people in an election dominated by the financial fears of ordinary Americans. (…) «Joe the Plumber» isn't really a plumber. He's an unlicensed and unregistered employee of a small plumbing and heating company in suburban Toledo, Ohio, who was mentioned

26 times during the 90-minute presidential debate, while the war in Iraq received only six mentions (…).[8]

Moreover, on *The Caucus blog of The Times*, The Politics and Government, Larry Rother and Liz Robbins wrote:

> One week ago, Joe Wurzelbacher was just another working man living in a modest ranch house near Toledo thinking about how to expand his plumbing business. But when he stopped Senator Barack Obama during a visit to his block this weekend to ask about his taxes, he set himself on a path to being the newest media celebrity — and, like other celebrities, found himself under scrutiny. Turns out that «Joe the Plumber», as he became nationally known when Senator John McCain made him a theme at Wednesday night's third and final debate, may run a plumbing business but he is not a licensed plumber. His full name is Samuel J. Wurzelbacher. And he owes a bit in back taxes. (Joe in the Spotlight. The Caucus. Available at: www.timesonline.com. Posted by Larry Rohter and Liz Robbins, on October 16, 2008, 1:30 pm.)

Thus, by choosing to present Joe, McCain cast himself as a powerful image. On the one hand, he shows himself as a future president that cares about ordinary people with which each American citizen could identify himself. On the other hand, as a leader who could help the middle average citizen to have a better life for him/her. Hence, the effect was expected to be electrifying. There was a candidate, a man, strong but carrying - a powerful leader close to his people and ready to be there when needed. Joe, the narrative's character, proves to be, Joe Wurzelbacher, a plumber, who actually lives in Holland, Ohio, together with his thirteen years old son. He is a hard working man who stopped Senator Obama when was campaigning on his street and asked him several questions about his economical plans for the American people since he was concerned about having to pay higher taxes as an owner of a small business.

Thus, it can be stated that the case of Joe the plumber is a primary point that illustrates how political persuasion can be performed through narratives and this is exactly what John McCain did in his argumentative discourse. Joe the plumber turned into being a model of the low income hard working American citizen who was introduced to the American citizens with the help of McCain's narrative.

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[8] Available at: http://www.prospect.org/.

Through the aforementioned narrative, McCain is able to construct a clear and uncomplicated story and a model character within a story that a modestly educated audience can understand. By doing this and by referring to his model so often, the senator is able to connect with the electors and, their expectations. Hence, McCain hopes to move the masses and gain their vote in order to become their next political leader. What McCain does by presenting Jo, is to help Americans project themselves in his story, who would become their story, if they decided to vote for him. A successful political narrative is one that is clear and compelling, one which makes us feel as though we are part of it. This was the case for McCain's narrative, since his narrative proved to be successful and really popular in the United States of America. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that a successful political narrative does not necessarily mean a victory of the election in the presidential campaign of Senator McCain. Hence, this topic may constitute the focus of another paper in which the candidates' respective narratives should be interpreted in relation with the results of the elections.

All in all, what can be stated about this paper's analysis relative to McCain's narrative is that the senator choose to use a narrative focusing on Obama's meeting with Joe Wurzelbacher in order to create a popular model which, although it did not have the expected effect on the electors, at the end of this presidential campaign, it became an institution in and of itself.

3.2. Lilly Ledbetter – « equal pay for equal work »

The second piece of data presents a shorter and simpler narrative brought about by Senator Obama while answering to the last topic proposed during this debate, namely the choice of a nominee for the Supreme Court. The transcription of the narrative which Senator Obama presents is as such:

1h08'38'– Senator Obama:

1. Sooo (...) This is gonna be an important issue AH

2. I will look (.) for (.)THOSE judges who have (...) A an outstanding JUDICIAL record

3. who have the INTELLECT AND who hopefully have a sense of what (.)

4. real- word world folks are going through (...)

5. I'll just give you one quick example

6. Senator McCain and I disagreed RECENTLY (.) when the S'preme Court

7. made it more DIFFICULT (..) foor aA woman named Lilly Ledbetter

8. tooo (..) press HER claim (..) for PAY discrimination

9. FOR YEARS she had been gett'ng paid LESS THAN a man had been paid

10. for doing the EXACT SAME JOB (..) And when SHE brought a ab A SUIT

11. saying (.) equal pay for equal work

12. the judges SAID (..) weell aa you'll you know

13. it's taken you too long to bring this LAWSUIT

14. even though she didn't know about IT (.) until fairly recently

15. WE tried to overturn it (.) in (.) The (.) Senate

16. I supported that effort (.) to provide better guidance to the courts (.)

17. John McCain opposed it (..)

18. I think that it's important for judges to understand that

19. if A WOMAN IS OUT THERE trying to raise a family (..)

20. trying to SSUPPORT HER family (.) and is being TREATED (.) UNFAIRLY (.)

21. then (.) the COURT has to stand UP (.) if nobody ELSE will (..)

22. And that's the kind of judge that I want (..)

The choice of this specific part of the debate was determined by two precise reasons, namely: firstly, because Senator Obama framed his answer by providing a clear example of a short narrative in order to sustain his arguments and, secondly, because this narrative was the only one provided by the senator during this debate. The senator states clearly from the beginning of h intervention that he speaks of a very important issue, i.e. justice. In order to present his point of view, Senator Obama came with a perfect example: a

woman, who has been working for all her life to support her family, has been treated « unfairly ». Obama explains with the help of this narrative that, although this woman, Lilly Ledbetter, has worked as much as a man, she has been paid less than a man. Hence, this was a problem which needed to be solved in Court. This narrative alludes to equal rights between men and women and to the need of restoring justice when there are illegalities committed. Senator Obama not only presents her case, but he goes even further by saying that he, personally, had been helping this woman to represent her lawsuit in the Supreme Court. This fact casts on the audience the image of a senator ready to help hard working people anytime, anywhere. In this way, Obama projects on the electors a positive image about himself - the image of a rescuer, a man ready to fight for the truth and against injustices made to any American citizen. Presenting the case of Lilly Ledbetter, Obama sought to encourage women to obtain « equal pay for equal work » and to make it a priority.

During the debate, Senator Obama reiterates this point making it clear that Senator McCain disagreed with him on this affair. This mention is not without interest since, in this way, Obama puts McCain on the black list of the people who sustain the equality of the rights between men and women. Thus, with a clear brief narrative, Obama put on his side men and women alike; people which fought for many years for equal rights and justice. Hence, these claims proved to be two of the successful keys which helped Senator Obama to become the winner of the presidential elections of the United States of America in 2008.

3.3. Joe vs. Lilly

While comparing the two narratives, we can easily see that both of them represent key images or illustrations of the candidates' programs. These narratives are illustrative images which integrate the senators' view concerning the programs they intend to apply to the nation as potential candidates for presidency.

On the other hand, Joe represents the image Senator McCain choose to promote as a case in point and as a representative figure for the average hard working American citizen who wants to fulfill his « American dream » and who desperately needs to be helped and sustained in his effort by his future president.

On the other hand, there was Lily, the image Senator Obama presented during this debate. In Obama's campaign, Lilly's image may have embodied the urgent need the Americans had at that moment for justice and equality among all people independently of their color, sex or confession.

Furthermore, one significant difference between the two cases presented during this debate is the fact that while Senator Obama's case did not bring much popularity, the case Senator McCain brought to light made out of an ordinary person a star overnight. The days that followed the debate, in the media, Joe became the glorified image of the average American worker if not McCain's spokesperson and a key character in his campaign, while Lilly rested completely ignored. Perhaps the reason behind this is not the question of the effectiveness of narratives, but the story teller's ability to research the demographics and to recite a story with which more people can identify (or in this case, to have the more colorful protagonist).

Although, Joe became the most popular character of the two narratives' characters, he was not the key image which could have helped Senator McCain gain the presidential elections. Apparently, unlike Joe, Lilly's narrative was told at the right moment and convinced the most people. In this sense, *The American Prospect* wrote: « Of all the things Barack Obama has done right this campaign, none may be more important than the fact that he has told a story perfectly keyed to the current moment in history ». The people remembered the story despite its lack of color. They remembered the idea behind it and, after all, that is the main reason for telling a story in the first place.

4. Conclusion

In sum, why do people use stories/narratives? Because narratives, and the images they create (manipulated or real) in our imagination, shape our ideas. They give real dimension to our daily lives.

Why this case study for the communication field? Because narrative is one of the most important forms of communication which gives society the possibility to share views, feelings, emotions, perspectives, values, ideologies and, most importantly – information – in a way people can relate to and remember. Jesus, Alexander the Great, Stalin, and countless other leaders knew this. They (or the people surrounding them) built much of their foundation for

communication on this point. Narratives are a key element for the construction of the individuals and even for the construction of cultures and societies in general. Narratives say who we were, who we are, and who we hope to be. They give truth-value to our lives.

I am writing this last part of the paper as a conclusion at the end of my Specialization Program of the « Analyses des interactions verbales dans les médias » of my Master studies, because I want to put on writing the reasons why I have chosen this specific Program and what pushed me to pick precisely this Specialization amongst many others. The reasons why I have chosen this Specialization?

First of all, I have chosen this Master Program because I was curious to find out how communication works and how information is transmitted in and through the media.

Secondly, I wanted to find out what is behind the images we are faced with each day. I was anxious to put a label on what are the techniques and strategies which make us change our minds, which twist our thinking and perceptions. I wanted to learn how images are born and how narratives are created behind what we actually receive as a final product.

These were more or less the expectations I had while starting this field of my Master studies. What I have found was that with each answer I obtained, I discovered that my curiosity was enhanced. Each course pushed me in different directions which were even more intriguing and appealing.

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Appendix

The data come from the recorded debate found on Youtube, which are available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvdfO0lq4rQ.

After the tape recording was completed, the segments considered of interest were delimited and transcribed with the help of conventions. These conventions are used as « exigences rédactionnelles » in the Specialization Course: « Analyses des interactions verbales dans les Medias » of the Master Program in « Analyse du discours et de la communication publics », from the University of Lausanne, January 2010. They are available on the Moodle Working Platform which is available at: http://moodle.unil.ch/login/index.php.

Contextualization: General remark. All the pieces of information are taken from the third live televised presidential debate between the U.S. Senator Barack Obama and the U.S. Senator John McCain, held at Hofstra University, in Hempstead, in New York and broadcast on the 15th of October 2008, which took 1h30'04".