

Different Voices or an Audience Distorted Echo?

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Traditionally the exact moral justification behind forbidding incest was trivial as long as it served to keep the hated act banned from American society.¹ However, with important public officials such as Rick Santorum, a high ranking Republican Senator, using incest as corner stone in their arguments against same-sex marriage, it has become a necessity for advocates of same-sex marriage to define incest as legally unacceptable using arguments that do not apply to their cause.² The legal standing on the regulation of incest is the murky issue that William Saletan and Courtney Cahill attempt to wade through in their respective articles, “Incest Repellent?”³ and “Same-Sex Marriage, Slippery Slope Rhetoric, and the Politics of Disgust: A Critical Perspective on Contemporary Family Discourse and the Incest Taboo.”⁴ Although different in their format, these articles share many similarities. They both build credibility with their readers by presenting information from sources that appear trustworthy. They both allow the readers to explore these sources by providing ways to find them. Both the articles contain language that their audience is comfortable with, and they both share similar ideas. Truly, the difference in these articles is their readership, not what they hope to accomplish.

One way to communicate two similar concepts to dissimilar audiences is the method that the authors use to build credibility with their readers. In her article, Cahill refers to several scientific studies that model moral judgment to validate the concept that in “the social intuitionist model...moral judgment is caused by intuitive moral impulses...followed (when needed) by slow, *ex post facto* reasoning’... particularly in response to scenarios, such as incest, that elicit disgust or extreme emotion.”⁵ Clearly, Cahill’s presents her concepts as facts in a neutral tone. In contrast, as seen below,

Saletan uses responses from interviews with The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) communications director David Smith and General Council Kevin Layton to illustrate much the same point:

On Wednesday, I asked Smith that question. “We’re talking about people; they’re talking about specific acts,” he said. “It has nothing to do with these other situations that are largely frowned on by the vast majority of Americans.” Is being frowned upon by the vast majority of Americans an acceptable standard for deciding which practices shouldn’t be constitutionally protected? “It’s not part of the discussion,” Smith replied. I asked whether it was constitutionally OK for states to ban incest. “Yes,” he said. Why? “There’s a compelling interest for the state to ban that practice,” he said. What’s the compelling interest? For that, Smith referred me to HRC General Council Kevin Layton.⁶

Notice how Saletan transforms this interview into a narrative, making his recounting of it appear more realistic. The point of his message is that the two HRC members do not give any justification for why homosexuality is moral and incest is not.⁷ The differing way this concept is shown in Saletan’s and Cahill’s articles simply reflects the varied expectations of the two sets of readers. While Cahill’s scholarly audience puts more faith in the results of abstract studies, Saletan’s layman audience prefers the more down to earth interviews with concrete people to demonstrate this idea.

The authors’ expectations of their readers also guide the way the authors document the supporting materials. Cahill uses a formal documentation with footnotes to show where her article draws its information and ideas.⁸ Doing so allows her scholarly readers, who understand what the references mean, to pursue those references

that interest them. Her precise documentation also clears Cahill of academic plagiarism by allowing her to give credit to her sources. While this kind of documentation makes good sense for a scholarly audience, it is much less useful to a reader unfamiliar with its use and form.

Saletan avoids confusing his readers by making things simple. Saletan takes advantage of the HTML format of his article, making key phrases link to other internet resources.⁹ Creating these links allow his readers to follow his references much in the same way Cahill's readers can follow her footnotes. However, this does not free Saletan of plagiarism. He attributes direct quotes, such as "'He's advocating that a certain segment of American society be disavowed from constitutional protection,' Smith charged,"¹⁰ to their speaker, but the reader does not always know if the ideas expressed in this article belong to Saletan. If he had a more academic readership, this lapse would be inexcusable. However, the layperson audience of Saletan's article is not likely to even consider the matter.

What Saletan's readers are more likely to consider is his article's entertainment value. Saletan uses word choice and tone designed to keep the reader engaged. Rather than just reporting the information, Saletan addresses the reader as a close friend, using the second person: "Can you give [Senator Santorum] a reason?"¹¹ Doing this allows Saletan's reader to connect to the article, as well as prompts them to consider the meaning of what they are reading. The use of sentence fragments and contractions, such as "Let's set aside morality and stick to law,"¹² creates the impression that the article is spoken. This lets the reader grasp a sense of Saletan's voice, making both him and his articles content more real. Saletan use rhetorical questions shades his writing with

a sense of humor as seen in: “If you’re in one of those categories, why should the state prohibit you from marrying your sibling?”¹³ The use of these techniques keeps his article interesting, and promotes effortless understanding. If Saletan had used a neutral authoritative voice, it is unlikely his article would have been widely read by the general public.

Cahill faces the opposite problem. She writes to a much smaller audience that expects extreme professionalism from her writing. While her readers are more likely to stay focused on what she writes, they will only feel what they read to be credible if it is authoritative. Consequently, Cahill maintains a same tense and neutral tone; she often strings obscure words together in her article such as, “the Supreme Court’s substantive due process jurisprudence and was an integral feature of the majority opinion in *Lawrence*.”¹⁴ The use of legal jargon allows Cahill to appear credible to readers who are alike in their use of those same words.

Although the articles of Cahill and Saletan are very different in their design, they share many of the same concepts. Both articles describe incest as judged on emotional rather than rational merits. Saletan writes, “Legally, I don’t see why a sexual right to privacy, if it exists, shouldn’t cover consensual incest. I think Santorum is wrong. But I can’t explain why, and so far neither can the Human Rights Campaign.”¹⁵ This clearly parallels Cahill as she writes this about the justification of incest: “In the social intuitionist model it becomes plausible to say, ‘I don’t know, I can’t explain it, I just know it’s wrong.’”¹⁶ Even though the articles sit on a different level of academic spectrum, they present same intellectual concept.

Although different audiences cause these articles to have fundamental structural dissimilarities, the nature of the content discussed results in similar modes of logic and conclusions that are strikingly alike. Even though authors create their articles to appeal to different sets of readers, the content and conclusions in such articles can often be the same.

Notes

1. Courtney M. Cahill, "Same-Sex Marriage, Slippery Slope Rhetoric, And the Politics of Disgust: A Critical Perspective on Contemporary Family Discourse and the Incest Taboo," *Northwestern University Law Review* 99 (2005) : 1543-1610.

2. William Saletan, "Incest Repellent?" *Ballot Box*, 23 April 2003 [journal online]; available from <http://www.slate.com/id/2081904>; Internet; cited 2 February 2006.

3. Ibid.

4. Cahill.

5. Ibid, 1573.

6. Saletan.

7. Ibid.

8. Cahill.

9. Saletan.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Cahill, 1576.

15. Saletan.

16. Cahill, 1573.