STUDENT SAMPLE 1 - CIRCULATION ANALYSIS

Within the *Precious Lives* podcast episode “Breaking the Cycle of Violence” there is a wealth of information provided regarding Milwaukee’s persistent issues with violent crime. In order to effectively analyze this information, it is important to consider the rhetorical situation in which it is being presented. The exigence was June 11th, 1994, a day which would prove fateful for fifteen year old Garland Hampton. He fatally shot a fellow gang member at a birthday party and is now serving a life sentence because of it. While prior events in his life may have factored into this happening, Hampton being locked up is still the exigence for the podcast. This is because had he not been convicted of murder and locked up, he would not be in the position he is now to reflect on his experiences within the episode. The two rhetors present on this podcast are Garland Hampton and podcast producer Aisha Turner. Hampton is the main rhetor, with Turner’s voice appearing occasionally to help sum up his message or to indicate what the next chunk of the episode will be discussing. Having someone with harrowing firsthand experience as the main rhetor makes the episode more engaging and gives it more credibility.

The purpose of this episode is to spread awareness about the endless cycle of violence in Milwaukee. Hampton also aims to empower those living in situations similar to his growing up to make better choices. He would especially like to see an increase in personal responsibility because unlike systemic issues, personal responsibility is something everyone can work to improve. In order for this episode to complete its purpose, it must be seen by the right audience. *Precious Lives* is listened to by people in the Milwaukee area and students at UWM. Since it focuses on issues people face in the Milwaukee area, this is an effective audience. *Precious Lives* also brands themselves as “the NPR of Milwaukee” which helps them reach the right audience because NPR listeners are likely to be interested in the kind of social issues described in this podcast. This means any NPR listeners who come across this podcast will see it as an opportunity to learn more about the circumstances affecting people right here at home.

Another crucial aspect of the rhetorical situation is the time in which it takes place. This episode was released in December of 2016, 22 years after Garland killed Donell Storks. Since so much time has passed since then, Garland has had a lot of time to reflect on what went wrong and how he could use his experience to help future generations. The large gap in time between the exigence and this episode also sheds light on the fact that whatever we’ve been trying to fix the cycle of violence in Milwaukee isn’t working.

Garland’s story is presented in the form of a podcast, which is an increasingly popular genre of multimodal communication. Genre and medium are very much intertwined, and in this instance the medium is crucial to how the message is received. By being able to listen to Garland Hampton tell his story, the listener is able to connect with him more as a human being. The podcast format also allows for someone to go into way more depth, as opposed to traditional news stations which are largely sound bite oriented. This gives the audience a more complete picture of Garland’s experiences, and a better understanding of how traumatic experiences early on can shape a person’s behavior later in life.

This episode contains a large amount of information from the audio content of the podcast itself. However, in addition to this, the episode contains links to articles and videos with more in depth information on certain aspects of the issue. These are known as embedded media, and by following the links from the primary source as well as doing some citation chasing, you can quickly accumulate a wide range of knowledge about the issue.

The podcast transcript contains a hyperlink to an article titled, “Juvenile Offenders in Legal Limbo Despite Supreme Court Rulings”. The article talks about how even though the Supreme Court banned life sentences for juveniles, it will likely not help the 68 inmates in Wisconsin currently serving life sentences for crimes they committed as juveniles(Jsonline). The Supreme Court won’t review their cases since they are technically eligible for parole, but Wisconsin rarely grants parole to these types of offenders so they are pretty much screwed. I think if we’re going to lock any juveniles up for life we need to stop calling these things “correctional” institutions. Unfortunately, people love to exert power over others while convincing themselves they’ve done no wrong by way of disconnecting themselves from the true nature of what’s going on. It’s the same bs that leads us to make the death penalty seem like a medical procedure , and allows the government to accept roughly 90% civilian casualties on drone strikes. I believe that deep down, these kinds of sentences give both the government and some of the public a way to put themselves above others in their minds. This is why it will be difficult for many offenders like Garland Hampton to ever be released. Despite all this, there is one part of the article that gives me pause when it comes to giving these people second chances. At the top there are 68 stick figures, each representing one of the 68 people serving life sentences in Wisconsin for crimes they committed as juveniles. When you hover over one, it gives you a name and a description of the crime they committed. Many of these crimes are so heinous I can’t honestly say that the individual could ever be rehabilitated to the point of not being a threat to society. However, that doesn’t mean we should give up on them. I believe benchmarks should be put in place for determining if someone is making progress towards being a more considerate and empathetic individual. By no means do I think they should be back on the streets in a few years, but I think there needs to be some realistic chance of them getting to apply the personal progress they’ve made before the end of their life. Otherwise, society is sending them the signal that they have been entirely given up on, and there is truly no merit to the correctional in “correctional institution”. The medium of this article is written words on Journal Sentinel online. This is appropriate because the article is very informative; and having to read the words rather than listen to them forces your brain to focus on them. Audio is appropriate for soliciting emotional appeal in examples like Garland Hampton’s firsthand account, but the purpose of this article is to inform the reader. Therefore, it is an appropriate medium to present this information in.

The podcast also references a PBS documentary called, “Too Many Candles”. This documentary adds multiple types of insight to the information provided in this episode. One way it does this is by adding faces to the names that would otherwise just be part of a statistic. Using the medium of a video allows the viewer to see the faces of the victims and their families, as well as the all-too common memorials around the city. Although the viewer obviously knows that these are people too, seeing and hearing from people affected by violence really makes it hit home that people just like the viewer can be victims of violent crime. Another important function this documentary serves is to dispel the notion that these tragedies can be avoided on a personal level simply by not hanging with the wrong crowd or staying in the safest spots. Fourteen year old Tyreke Akbar was killed while watching the 4th of July fireworks among a crowd by the lakefront. He was apparently caught in the crossfire of a dispute over a girl on Facebook that didn’t even involve him. Five year old Layla Peterson was killed in a drive-by shooting that targeted the wrong house. She was sitting in her Grandfather’s lap reading at the time. Sandy Brown, a family friend of the Akbars, summed up the attitude many people have about violent crime in the video. She said, “I think there’s a big segment of the population that wants to somehow blame the victim when something like this happens. They want to feel safe, they want to think that this would never happen to me or my family, so it must be because Tyreke was a bad kid, it must be because he was black and from the inner city, and it was not at all”(PBS). As they say ignorance is bliss, but it also prevents us from making real progress on important social issues.

Citation chasing is another way to gain more background information on the piece you are analyzing. This is done by examining either the sources used or organizations mentioned within the work. The article says Garland Hampton is being held at a minimum security prison called Oakhill Correctional Institute, so I decided to learn more about this place. As I mentioned before, it’s a joke that we call these things “correctional institutions”. To be fair, most of the inmates here have much lesser sentences, and I’m assuming Hampton has been transferred there from a maximum security facility due to his good recognizance, but it’s still misleading. Someone from another planet would have no idea that Oakhill Correctional Institute is a place where they lock people up. They would probably guess its some kind of mental health clinic. The prison’s website focuses on positives like the programs they have to prepare offenders for release. These include GED courses, anger management, and victim awareness. While I’m sure this is all done genuinely to help the inmates, the site still contains some hardcore sugarcoating that irks me. For example, the stated purpose of the prison’s fence is to ensure that inmates “stay secured”(prisonpro) as if its somehow there for their benefit. I’m not saying there should be no prisons, but if we’re constantly lying to ourselves about what’s going on I think that warrants further examination of current policies. In this instance, I think it makes perfect sense that they feel like sugarcoating. Given that it is a minimum security prison, many of the inmates are there for drug possession. I understand locking up heroin dealers, but those convicted of only possession should only be helped and not locked up. And when it comes to relatively harmless drugs like marijuana, the idea of incarcerating people for possession takes on a whole new level of ridiculousness. Think about this; our government puts people in cages for inhaling smoke from a plant because it makes them happy. That is so unimaginably barbaric and stupid. The medium is a website containing words and pictures from outside the prison. This is appropriate, because pictures and/or videos from inside the prison would make it impossible to maintain the deceivingly flowery vibe of the website.

While reading the previously mentioned article about how a supreme court ruling against mandatory life sentences for juveniles may not help many currently incarcerated, I came across a link to an article called, “How Brain Science is Changing Juvenile Justice Sentencing”. The link was provided in the context of how juvenile brains aren’t fully developed, so I figured learning more about this would be helpful in determining whether or not it is appropriate to give juveniles life sentences. The article states that planning, impulse control, working memory and attention are controlled by the prefrontal cortex of the brain. Shockingly, not only is the prefrontal cortex not fully developed in juveniles, but in fact it is not done developing until a person’s early twenties(childtrends). This means there is still time to try to shape troubled juveniles into upstanding citizens; time that is wasted if we judge them to be, “bad people” and put them in “correctional” institutions. The article also says that adolescent brains are more sensitive to dopamine, and so, “the reward systems associated with drug addictions are in overdrive”(childtrends). It goes on to explain that this leads adolescents to overemphasize the positive aspects of their decisions while downplaying the negative ones. Much like Sandy Brown said in the Too Many Candles documentary, people like to tell themselves that they could never be one of these kids, because they must be “bad”. However, nobody has any way of truly knowing how their life would have turned out were they born in different circumstances. The medium of this article is the website childtrends.org, with only written words being used to get the point across. This is appropriate because the purpose of the article is to inform the reader about juvenile brain chemistry, and later on detail specific court decisions related to how juveniles are treated in the justice system.

While analyzing these multimodal texts, I learned several important things. I discovered that there is virtually no limit to how in-depth you can go to learn about specific aspects of certain issues. This is because articles contain links to sources regarding specific elements of their topic, and those sources contain links to related sources they used and so on. I also learned that the medium and modes chosen to produce content are not necessarily coincidental, they are strategically chosen in order to have the desired effect on the audience. Finally, I believe that when analyzing multimodal texts, it is very important to consider who the rhetor is, what their background is, and what their motivations are. For example, if the rhetor has firsthand experience with the topic or a considerable amount of data to back their claims, they probably have more useful information that an opinion columnist who thinks what they want to think. Finally, it is important to remember that the motivations of the rhetor can drastically affect how the information in the text is portrayed. For example, when reading the Oakhill Correctional website, it is important to consider that it is the official website of the prison, and thus all the wording is tuned to paint them in the most positive light possible. If someone read the content of the site without knowing who wrote it and why it is written that way, they would be very confused about what Oakhill Correctional is. This is why it is important to consider every aspect of the rhetorical situation when analyzing multimodal texts.

Works Cited

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