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Jennifer Dettmann

Minnesota State University, Mankato

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A Rhetorical Analysis of the Rethinking AIDS Website

Student(s): Jennifer Dettmann

Mentor: Daniel Cronn-Mills, Faculty Mentor

Department: Speech Communication

Abstract

A group of scientists known as the Group for Scientific Reappraisal of the HIV-AIDS hypothesis created a web site title, Rethinking AIDS. The group behind the web site argues that AIDS is not a sexually transmitted disease. They even question the existence of the virus entity.

My analysis is driven by the critical question: Does the web site construct a reality that affectively alters our perception of HIV-AIDS? In order to answer this question, Goodnight and Poulakos 1981 article, Conspiracy rhetoric: from pragmatism to fantasy to public discourse (*Western Journal of Speech*), will be utilized.

Chairperson, Participants at the 13th International AIDS Conference; Comrades, Ladies, and Gentlemen: On behalf of our government and the people of South Africa, I am happy to welcome you to Durban and to our country, stated South African President, Thabo Mbeki on July 9, 2000. Sounds like the start of a normal speech until, Mbeki defended his decision to open the AIDS debate to a dissident group questioning the origins of the disease. Mbeki along with a growing group of biomedical scientists claim the cause of AIDS is still unknown. The dissident group believes AIDS is not a sexually transmitted disease. They believe the disease has toxic causes, and people are dying because they are poisoned to death by anti-viral drugs. The AIDS dissidents even question the existence of a virus entity. These skeptics say the AIDS virus has never been isolated, and the AIDS tests are worthless.

What has resulted is a loosely affiliated worldwide network of scientists called the group for scientific reappraisal of the HIV-AIDS hypothesis. They have created a website called Rethinking AIDS found at www.virusmyth.com. The dissidents and their website have the

potential to transform the way many people look at the topic of AIDS and constitutes the artifact for my analysis.

The analysis is driven by the critical question: does the Virusmyth website construct a reality, which may effectively alter our perceptions of the HIV-AIDS hypothesis?

So in order for us to better analyze the Rethinking AIDS website we will utilize Thomas Goodnight and John Poulakos, *Conspiracy Rhetoric: From Pragmatism to Fantasy in Public Discourse* as published in the Fall 1981 edition of the *Western Journal of Communication*.

Goodnight and Poulakos method focuses on how a group can construct a conspiracy that works to change fantasy to reality. This model is justified because it examines how claims that are outside the norm of society attempt to become the norm. Which is exactly what the dissidents are trying to do with their Virusmyth Website.

For us to best understand the import of their message, we will first, consider Goodnight and Poulakos method, next use the method to analyze the Rethinking AIDS website, and finally draw some critical implications.

First, according to Goodnight and Poulakos, a groups reality, no matter how logical can be altered by the disclosure of opinion leaders. Conspiracy rhetoric begins by exploring two different grounds for rhetorical discourse: the pragmatic and the fantasy.

Goodnight and Poulakos describe the pragmatic frame to be True Ideas that we understand to be conventional wisdom, or in other words, the way most of us view reality. For example, most people believe you have to work for a living. The fantasy perspective, on the other hands, is the

nonconformist belief, or an idea most of us don't accept to be a True Idea. Fantasy viewers think they will win the lottery and thus don't have to work. Goodnight and Poulakos state, Those upholding an unpopular or presumably lunatic point of view may be trying to restructure the way people think. The fantasy perspective is attempting to change the mindset of those with the pragmatic view.

After examining Goodnight and Poulakos method, we can now apply it to the Rethinking AIDS website.

Now every link on the website argues against our reality, or the pragmatic view we hold. The website is trying to convert our fantasy, their reality, into our reality.

The fantasy views of the Rethinking AIDS website challenges the reality of 99 percent of Americans. The reconstruction of reality may be effective, according to Goodnight and Poulakos, by introducing evidence, which conflicts with our current beliefs. The dissident group is constructing viable alternatives to our reality through three rhetorical means: first, through the logos of expert testimony, second, through the ethos of professional journal articles, and finally through the pathos of challenging current medical tests.

First, expert testimony is given to show significance. Kary Mullins, a biochemist and 1993 Nobel Prize winner in chemistry states, If there is evidence that HIV causes AIDS, there should be a scientific document which either signally or collectively demonstrates the fact, at least with high probability. Peter Duesburg, Ph.D. of molecular and cell biology at the University of California, Berkeley claims, There is no evidence to support the HIV AIDS hypothesis. Instead, the virus is biochemically inactive and harmless, and AIDS is not behaving as a contagious disease.

Second, the credibility of academia mainstream popularity is being used to advance the claims. The website lists articles being published in highly regarded, peer reviewed scientific journals. Like Peter Langs article found in the *Journal of American Medical Association* or Dr. Feimmings 1995 article found in the *Journal of Acquired Immuno Deficiency*.

The Virusmyth website extends its credibility by noting HIV dissidents are appearing in the mainstream. According to the website, On January 14, 2000, multi-platinum rock band, the FOO FIGHTERS, staged a Los Angeles benefit concert for the AIDS reappraisal group, raising over \$20,000.00. LAs number one radio station KROQ aired a segment with the FOO FIGHTERS stating, on air, the Alive and Well Message that HIV DOES NOT CAUSE AIDS. This is the first time internationally known celebrities have openly supported the AIDS dissidents.

Finally, the Virusmyth website works emotional declarations into their construction. The site declares being tested for AIDS is worthless. In fact, the site gives 10 reasons NOT to be tested Including, The doctor will just pressure you to take strong drugs immediately, and even if you test positive you may never become sick.

After examining Goodnight and Poulakos method, and applying it to the website, we can now draw some critical implications.

Three implications can be drawn about the artifact. First, the use of expert testimony, a standard in conventional wisdom is being used to advance the counterclaims. The dissidents cite Nobel prize winners and scientific journals, not new age spirituals or other sources we can easily discredit. Goodnight and Poulakos state, Typically, the more highly regarded the source, the more credible the message, and the greater the likelihood of persuasion. therefore, the trust in the

dominant view gradually starts to erode, the ideas of the conspirators become more powerful and appealing, and people start to believe the unusual ideals. Thus, the effect, according to Goodnight and Poulakos, is people start to distrust the doctors who say HIV DOES cause AIDS. They start to believe they don't need to seek medical help and they don't need to be tested for AIDS.

Second, is the issue of the effectiveness of the campaign. We cannot accurately determine how many people have been have had their perceptions of reality altered by the Virusmyth website. We do know, however, their effective use of aligning their evidence within classical Aristotelian concepts logos, ethos, and pathos increases the potential impact of the rhetoric. The belief HIV causes AIDS may now be seen as less convincing than once thought, perhaps even false. The Virusmyth evidence is effective, because as Goodnight and Poulakos state, inconsistencies of the old evidence occurs and suspicions start to grow.

Finally, we must consider the impact the Virusmyth website may have on individuals who are swayed by the discourse. We must note their rhetoric only confronts and challenges the current HIV-AIDS reality. The dissidents through their website do not provide a course of action for the current health crisis. Scientists may not know everything about HIV-AIDS, and some of the current perspectives may not be correct but what we do know is compelling: Something has infected millions of people, Something has killed tens of thousands and will kill thousands more, unless continued action is taken.

Today, we have examined Goodnight and Poulakos method, applied it to the Rethinking AIDS website, and finally drawn some critical implications.

Mbeki closed with, On behalf of our government and the people, I wish the 13th International AIDS Conference success. I am confident you have come to these African shores as messengers of hope and because you care. Mbeki's view along with others is attempting to change the way society views AIDS. Many argue against the effectiveness of these claims. However, others believe the only way to advance is to question. Professor Walter Gilbert stated, The community as a whole does not listen patiently to critics who adopt alternative viewpoints. Although the great lessons of history is that knowledge develops through the conflict of view points. The truth is, many are accepting the claims, only time will tell if this fantasy becomes a reality.

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