

EDITORIAL ARGUMENTATION IN THE AMERICAN PRESS

A look at the New York Times and Washington Post

A man's opinions are generally of much more value than his arguments.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

The editorial serves to express the opinion of a newspaper regarding current affairs issues. Known to generate discussion and a certain demonstration, this viewpoint is displayed in the form of argumentative discourse. Is this, however, standard procedure? Do newspaper editorials contain that many arguments?

The present study examined the argumentation found in the editorials of two major American newspapers in terms of the number of arguments and of simple opinions expressed. An operational definition and an identification process were established for both argument and opinion. Following a discussion of the methodological aspects involved in this method of identification, a corpus of *New York Times* and *Washington Post* editorials is presented in light of their general considerations and specific characteristics. Finally, subsequent research possibilities are presented.

This research is innovative, as no other exhaustive study has examined editorial argumentation, although some have focused on the topics in editorials (Hynds, 1990), and relevant themes (Rystrom, 1990). Boeyring (1993) used a corpus of editorial argumentations to study the global issue of political coherency. In terms of argumentation research, Van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1997), Kahane (1988) and Sproule (1980) have provided some examples of

arguments taken from editorials, with no argumentation analysis per se. The present research does not represent an exhaustive analysis of editorial argumentation but rather a humble beginning in this direction.

Argumentation: A working definition

Although argumentation studies abound in both French and English, Breton and Gauthier (2000)¹ found a fundamental void separating the two areas of research. Other than the language barrier, the primary reason for this mutual indifference lies undoubtedly in the significant divergence between Chaïm Perelman and Stephen Toulmin, two pioneers in contemporary argumentation studies. Their respective works, *Traité de l'argumentation* (with Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca) and *Uses of Argument* were both published in 1958, marking a renaissance of interest in argumentation research. Coincidental publication date aside, the similarity ends there as the two authors did not at all share the same views. Perelman saw argumentation as being the opposite of Cartesian demonstration, whereas Toulmin believed that argumentation completed and encompassed logic.

When we look at argumentation research, we are amazed at the immense variety of meanings given to the concepts of *argument* and *argumentation*, which are often more or less precise. Under certain aspects, other than Toulmin's model, no other theoretically acceptable or fully working definition has been attributed to the argument; a definition that could not only decipher its essential nature but also help identify its use in its many areas of production such as, obviously, the newspaper editorial.

In many cases, what is defined is not the argument but rather the argumentation. The most general and well-known definition remains that of van Eemeren, Grootendorst and Kruiger (1987), in which argumentation "is a social, intellectual and verbal activity" (7)². Similarly, Willard (1990)

defined argumentation as a “form of interaction” (1). If we view argumentation as a process — “a dialectical process” (45-46), precisely described by Johnson and Blair (1987) — we have no way of identifying the arguments. Arguments are of course the product of a process called argumentation, which is very interesting to attempt to characterize. We may choose to analyze the elements involved in the argumentative process. In that case, we must be able to isolate the arguments armed with an acceptable definition³.

An argument can be precisely identified according to two of the main definitions found in the dictionary⁴. The first rather limited definition signifies a reason offered to support a claim and has been recognized by, among others, Angell (1964), Guttenplan and Tammy (1976) and Légaré and Carrier (1996). In a larger sense, an argument is defined as the union of the reason and its claim. This more complex meaning, such as Toulmin’s argument model (1958), which has been largely supported in recent years by Reike and Sillars (1984) and Toulmin, Rieke and Janik (1984), is the most accurate and also the best known representation. It is this dual conception of the argument that is explored in the present study.

Many have adopted this representation, such as Lepore (2000), Govier (1992), Casullo (1992), Soccio and Barry (1992), Copi and Cohen (1990) and Freeman (1988), and have determined it to be a reasoning with two constituents: the premise and the conclusion. As this logical definition limits arguments to reasonings, it is deemed inadequate by those who want to study other less formal discourses such as editorials. Many disagree with the definition in terms of premises and conclusions (see, among others, Walton, 1996). In our perspective, the problem is that the conclusion necessarily emanates from the premise. Lepore (2000) states that “the conclusion purportedly follows from the premises” (6). There is evidence, however, that this is not always what is observed in editorial arguments.

In reaction to this logical definition of argument, other “dialectic”, “dialogic” and “pragmatic” approaches have emerged that do not limit argumentation to its formal constitution and address its interactional and contextual nature. Johnson (2000), Walton (1998, 1996 and 1995), Woods and Walton (1989 and 1982), Johnson and Blair (1987) and Govier (1987) support informal logic, critical-thinking and problem-solving, and most often view the argument from a normative standpoint. These authors believe in providing an evaluation based on various criteria and conditions of use. It is therefore not surprising that their interest focuses significantly on the fallacies, as demonstrated by Hamblin (1970). On the contrary, examining fallacies brings forth certain rules, the respect of which ensuring an acceptable use of the arguments. This means that each fallacy is defined separately with no global definition to support the argument, simply because such a definition would be of no use within the framework of an analysis in which rules are established for each fallacy.

The perspective in this study was not normative but rather neutral: the objective was to attempt to circumscribe the arguments. A global definition of argument was therefore proposed to address its various instances, reasonings, fallacies and others.

A technical definition of argument was introduced to enable the identification of its use and was described as “the articulated ensemble of a proposition and one or more justifications”. According to this definition, an argument may be represented in the following logical form:

P

—

J

where “P” is the proposition and “J” is the justification. This definition is not particularly original, as it follows the dual concept that an argument is a combination of a reason and a claim. Contrary to the logical definition, it integrates elements other than the premise and the conclusion as possible components of the argument, and contrary to the sporadic definitions of the various fallacies, provides a general description that can therefore be used for all types of arguments. Moreover, by clarifying the elements of the argument, it enables us to examine it from both a structural and operational point of view, rendering it possible to identify arguments.

The proposition is any verbal action led by an element used to introduce a judgment (in the philosophical sense): a thesis, an evaluation, a directive, a suggestion, a recommendation or a prescription. In formulating a proposition, an editorialist takes a stand regarding a current affairs issue. The justification consists of any form of support or assistance given to a proposition: a reason, a mobile, a motivation or a cause.

As stated by the definition, using an argument is to pronounce a judgment that has a basis. An argument is therefore a complex ensemble composed of two basic units that have a specific relationship called legitimation. The justification does not only adjoin the proposition, it is invoked to establish its purpose. Argumentation is a demonstration in the usual sense of the word. Without giving these terms a metaphysical connotation, one could say that an argument confirms a “truth” by means of “proof”.

It is possible to characterize the argument by its two components (proposition and justification), without forgetting its pragmatic nature. Despite having a representational content, the argument is first and foremost the result of an application. It emerges from the performance of an agent who puts forth a judgment that is based on something. In argumentation, the act of arguing comes first, followed by the argument. Despite the fact that arguments are abstract

entities with regard to sentences, they do not exist on their own outside the action of argumenting. In this sense, arguments may in fact be described as a pairing of speech acts, as defined by Searle (1969 and 1979)⁵. This characterization, which essentially remains to be seen⁶, is the ideal way to clarify the goal of persuasion of argumentation within the context of a debate (Freeley and Steinberg, 2000; Ribacki and Ribacki, 2000) and of communication (Kahane, 1988). In this regard, the editorial certainly constitutes a prime subject for investigation.

A definition of opinion

One of the advantages in defining the argument as the articulation of a proposition and a justification is that it helps distinguish between argumentation and a simple stance on a subject. Again, argumenting signifies emitting a judgment that has a foundation, although it is possible to make a judgment that is not founded. In terms of the definition of argument exposed here, there is proposition without justification: a thesis, an evaluation, a directive, a suggestion, a recommendation or a prescription is stated without providing a reason, a mobile or a motivation. Thus, there is a lack of argumentation. Indeed, despite the fact that the proposition is an essential condition, it does not suffice to make an argument.

Contrary to the justification whose existence depends on a proposition (as by definition, a justification exists only when related to a proposition), the latter operates independently of the justification. When a proposition is presented with no justification, there is no argument but rather what I would refer to (by pure stipulation) as an “opinion”. An opinion is therefore an isolated proposition, or in a sense, a truncated argument. My definition of argument consequentially possesses a definition of opinion, namely, that an opinion consists of a proposition without justification.

A logical form of representation of the opinion pertains to the following definition:

P

—

√

in which “√” indicates the absence of justification.

Identifying arguments and opinions

Clear definitions of argument and opinion enable us to locate these two modes of expression within an editorial. An editorialist can either formulate a judgment (thereby expressing an opinion), or base a judgment on some basic idea and therefore develop an argument. Thus, the conditions under which an editorialist argues are greater than one who only gives an opinion. In addition to expressing a proposition, the editorialist must also articulate a justification.

It is my belief that the distinction between argument and opinion is not normative. This does not mean discrediting opinions by showing that they lack demonstration. I am not suggesting that it is better, in principle, to argue an issue than to give an opinion, nor do I claim that the value of any discourse rests on its argumentation. Despite the fact that the argument and the opinion are both acceptable forms of taking a stand, it is nevertheless important to differentiate and not confuse the simple expression of a judgment and its link to a basic premise. Equally important is assessing the argumentative pretension of a speech that, like the editorial, is expressed as being fundamentally argumentative. Definitions of argument and opinion facilitate this assessment.

The definitions are operational, thereby ensuring the identification of arguments and opinions in an editorial. A two-step identification process may be established using the argument/opinion definitions: to identify them, we first locate the propositions in the editorial and

examine each one to determine whether it is supported or not by a justification. Each pair consisting of a proposition and a justification forms an argument and each isolated proposition is labelled an opinion.

This method of identifying arguments and opinions obviously suggests that it is possible to locate propositions and justifications. This is relatively easy to do in a great many cases, as propositions and justifications are usually obvious; identifying them therefore leads to the immediate recognition of arguments and opinions.

To demonstrate how the identification process is applied to locate arguments and opinions, the following examples were extracted from the corpus:

ARG-1

Using the expensive option, and therefore treating fewer patients, is perverse, given the scale of the pandemic. “8,000 Deaths a Day”, *Washington Post*, March 26.

ARG-2

Shutting down the newspaper loyal to the radical Shiite cleric Moktada al-Sadr was a recklessly bad idea that accomplished nothing but to inflame Sadr’s followers. “Obsessing About the Calendar”, *New York Times*, April 6.

ARG-3

The cease-fire was necessary because of the government's own actions (...). "Stalling in Sudan...", *Washington Post*, April 26.

OP-1

That seems like the longest of long shots. "Assessing the Blame for 9/11", *New York Times*, March 25.

OP-2

Mr. Edwards offered an infectious enthusiasm and an admirable willingness to talk about the problem of poverty. "Sizing Up the Primaries", *Washington Post*, March 3.

OP-3

A better approach would be to wean the nation from its profligate use of oil. "False Promises on Gas", *New York Times*, April 5.

In the six examples presented here, the editorialist clearly expresses a judgment and the first three have a basis, a foundation. The arguments and opinions expressed may be logically presented as follows:

ARG-1

P

[Treating fewer patients is perverse]

J

[Given the scale of the pandemic]

ARG-2

P

[Shutting down the newspaper loyal to the radical Shiite cleric
Moktada al-Sadr was a recklessly bad idea]

J

[It accomplished nothing but to inflame Sadr's followers]

ARG-3

P

[The cease-fire was necessary]

J

[Because of the government's own actions]

OP-1

P

[That seems like the longest of long shots]

J

[√]

OP-2

P

[Mr. Edwards offered an infectious enthusiasm
and an admirable willingness to talk about the problem of poverty]

Justification:

[√]

OP-3

P:

[A better approach would be to wean the nation from its profligate use of oil]

Justification:

[√]

Spotting the arguments and opinions results from the process of identifying the propositions and locating eventual justifications. The identification of propositions is ensured by what I have referred to as “the proposition test” (Gauthier, 2004a, 2004b), which consists of assessing whether or not a statement refutes a contrasting statement. If such is the case, we have a proposition. Indeed, by definition, a proposition does not exist unless it relates to at least one other proposition and serves to express a judgment of a controversial issue which may be open to one or more points of view. As stated earlier, this is why the argument and the opinion are deployed in a debate situation. A proposition therefore always emerges from an alternative; it is retained with at least one other proposition or is never more than a counter-proposition. Consequently, a proposition is expressed when the matter is somehow an effective or virtual objection. The opposition test establishes this by leading to the identification of propositions such as those in the three arguments and three opinions cited above. Referring to example ARG-1, applying the opposition test to the sentence “Using the expensive option, and therefore treating fewer patients, is perverse ...” reveals that “is perverse” serves to form an assessment to contrast the opposite analysis which could be expressed as “is socially acceptable” and enables the identification of the proposition that “treating fewer patients is perverse”.

Once the propositions in a text have been identified, it is usually relatively easy to determine whether or not they are corroborated by justifications, which are quickly detected as they are totally dependent on propositions. This ontological subordination therefore makes identification easy. When a proposition is located, it is not difficult to determine if it is based on a justification. In the case of ARG-1, for example, it is evident that “the scale of pandemic” serves as the basic premise for the proposition “treating fewer patients is perverse”. In contrast, the proposition “That seems like the longest of long shots” in OP-1 has no basis.

Methodological problems

Locating the propositions and justifications and identifying the arguments and opinions is not always as obvious as in the examples shown here. Using the opposition test and marking the justifications is very often an arduous task.

The primary challenge when identifying arguments and opinions is that they are expressed by means of sentences, without being limited to these same sentences. Contrary to what some may think (Sproule, 1980; Michalos, 1969), an argument is not a sentence or any other linguistic entity. Ontologically speaking, arguments and opinions are either abstract or logical entities; they are a representational content (similar to Frege's *gedanke* or Popper's third world proposition). However, if unassimilated within a sentence, the argument and the opinion must be verbalised to be effective. If not expressed in sentences, they remain purely formal or virtual and can neither reach nor focus in on their object of persuasion. As mentioned earlier, argumentation is a performance, or more precisely, a linguistic performance. However, the expression of arguments and opinions by means of sentences is uncertain. While sentences adequately and literally express an argument or an opinion, a certain non-literal distance exists between them and the sentences used for their expression. In other words, the expression of arguments and opinions may fluctuate according to variable methods⁷.

Let us examine two well-known modes. Contrary to the logical and natural order presented in the afore-mentioned examples, it is possible that a justification precedes a proposition. And opposite to what is presented in our examples of arguments and opinions, propositions may also be expressed in a grammatical rather than indicative mode. The following are examples of these non-literal arguments:

ARG-4

Given the overwhelming evidence of the partnership between the Taliban and Osama bin Laden, any other decision would have been inconceivably irresponsible. “The Rice Version”, *New York Times*, April 9.

ARG-5

Given the nearly complete absence of information, how is it possible to judge the progress of Iraq’s war crimes tribunal? “Mystery Tribunal”, *Washington Post*, April 5.

This second example in fact combines the two non-literal expressions: the justification precedes the proposition which is stated in the interrogative form. To understand their true meaning, the two arguments must be displayed in the logical form of an argument:

ARG-4

P

[Any other decision would have been inconceivably irresponsible]

J

[Given the overwhelming evidence of the partnership
between the Taliban and Osama bin Laden]

ARG-5

P

[It is impossible to judge the progress of Iraq's war crimes tribunal]

J

[Given the nearly complete absence of information]

As sentences are the only accessible elements to analyze, how can we identify the propositions and justifications? And if sentences are not, in themselves, arguments and opinions, how do we know if they express arguments or opinions? Metaphorically speaking, how can we find our way through the sentence to flush them out? According to the identification process presented here, how can the opposition test be applied to locate the propositions and determine whether a justification has been used to support them?

Herein lies the crucial methodological challenge in argumentation analysis. From a heuristic standpoint, the detection of arguments and opinions is covered by what I have referred to elsewhere as an "interpretability principle" (Gauthier, 2003 and 2002a) in that it is theoretically always possible to determine if sentences contain arguments and opinions or, more specifically, if they are used to express them. Because of the pragmatic nature of argumentation, sentences do not express arguments and opinions; they are, strictly speaking, a vehicle to do so. Obvious demonstrations of the interpretability principle are those in which an argument or an opinion is literally expressed in the presence of an argumentative indicator. The 'because' in ARG-3 and the 'given' in ARG-1, ARG-4 and ARG-5 are such indicators.

The interpretability principle suggests that even in the absence of argumentative indicators, it is still possible to determine whether sentences express an argument or opinion by considering the meaning of the sentences, the enunciation used and the author's intent. Often, we need only to paraphrase the discourse for the interpretability principle to work. By paraphrasing ARG-5, the principle helps to establish it as an argument, even if its expression is not exactly appropriate.

Arguments and opinions in *New York Times* and *Washington Post* editorials

In order to apply the interpretability principle, the identification process was used to detect the arguments and opinions in a corpus of editorials selected from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The corpus consisted of the main editorials published from Monday to Friday during April and March 2004. A total of forty-five editorials were studied. Table 1 presents the arguments and opinions found in the corpus.

 Insert Table 1 here

The data in Table 1 indicate the similarities and differences between the argumentation found in the two newspapers. Their initial commonality was the total number of expressed propositions and a highly comparable number of judgments. It was therefore not surprising that the average number of propositions expressed in the editorials was also similar.

However, the distribution of the propositions found differed in each newspaper. Despite containing an almost identical total number of opinions and average per editorial, the number of

identified arguments differed significantly, as the *New York Times* contained 40 % more arguments than its counterpart, as well as a significantly greater average number of arguments per editorial.

This difference explains the others in Table 1, namely those between the percentages of arguments and opinions and the ratios in the corpus. The evidence shows that what distinguished the *New York Times* from the *Washington Post* was the higher number of arguments and that the difference between the sixty-six propositions in the editorials from the two sources closely approximated the difference between the sixty-two arguments listed.

Prior to assessing the editorial argumentation in the corpus, it was generally compared to that of Quebec daily newspapers from a previous study (Gauthier, 2004b and 2002a) and is shown in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 here

In examining the data in this table, we must also take into account that the size of the Quebec corpus was exactly twice that of the American one. To begin with, compared to their French-language counterparts, the American newspapers registered more than 25 % more propositions. Interestingly, while the average number of propositions per editorial in the Quebec dailies was between 8.6 and 10.6, it was approximately ten for all of the subjects combined. In addition, the total number as well as the average number of arguments found in the combined editorials was very similar, with each newspaper recording approximately four arguments per editorial.

Despite the similarities in terms of arguments, the difference in the propositions expressed in the American and Quebec newspapers depended on the number of formulated opinions. Table 2 logically shows a notable distinction in this regard. In half as many editorials, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* recorded nearly as many opinions as did their Canadian counterparts. Consequently, their average number of opinions per editorial was almost twice as high.

In total, the American and Quebec newspapers presented inverted figures in terms of their percentage of arguments and opinions and their argument/opinion ratio. A general comparison may be presented as follows: the American newspapers expressed a greater number of propositions, mostly in the form of opinions, whereas the Quebec newspapers, recording a lower number of propositions, expressed a greater number of arguments.

Given the exploratory framework of the present study, attempting to dissect the data would be hasty; the information is too fragmentary to infer any consistent theoretical consideration and should be supported by more substantial research. The present study nevertheless raises two interesting questions which may generate certain research hypotheses. Can the relative disproportion of arguments and opinions between the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* be

explained? Why does the *New York Times* use a greater number of justifications to support its judgments of current affairs? Is it a question of editorial policy or the personal considerations of the editorialists involved? In addition, how can we justify seeing more opinions in the American editorials than in those of their French-Canadian counterparts?

Does the American press benefit from a greater interventional role with regard to the public? Perhaps yes, as American current affairs do generate greater public interest. It is interesting to note that the corpus of editorials examined in the present study not only coincided with the post-September 11th period and the American military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq but also covered the months prior to the November 2004 presidential elections.

Conclusion

The arguments in an editorial are not isolated but rather are integrated within well-organized groupings. In other words, there are argument units and there is an argumentation that houses these argument units. When identifying arguments in an editorial, one must also be able to determine its argumentation. The two tasks are not separate from one another, as locating the arguments is a prerequisite to defining the argumentation in an editorial, and generally, in a newspaper.

This characterization is the result of various combinations between arguments that are not only linked in many ways but may also interpenetrate one another. In introducing an argument or an opinion and whether based on a justification, a proposition may quite often take on the role of justification for another proposition on a higher level. To aptly consider the argumentation in an editorial, one must first locate the arguments and opinions within, then establish their various interrelations and retrieve the editorial's argumentative structure. Moreover, the arguments and the

argumentation in an editorial are either valid or non-valid and are only acceptable if they respect a set number of criteria. An argument's justification must most definitely have a basis for its proposition for it to be fully admissible. The primary criteria for the assessment of arguments must therefore be determined in order to fully investigate editorial argumentation.

The findings presented here are limited to isolating arguments and opinions and are a preamble to a more extensive analysis of editorial argumentation. This initial perspective will hopefully be integrated within a macroscopic study to address at least two new concepts, namely, the identification of argumentative structures and the assessment of both arguments and argumentation.

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Table 1

**Arguments and opinions found in 45 *New York Times* and *Washington Post* editorials
during March-April 2004**

	Prop.	Prop.	Arg.	Arg.	Arg.	Op.	Op.	Op.	Ratio
	Nb	Av.		Av.	%		Av.	%	A / O
NYT	491	10,9	211	4,7	43,0	280	6,2	57,0	0,75
WP	425	9,4	149	3,3	35,0	276	6,1	65,0	0,54

Table 2

**Arguments and opinions found in 90 *New York Times* and *Washington Post* editorials
during March-April 2004
and 190 Quebec newspaper editorials during October 2000 and November-December 2003**

	Prop.	Prop.	Arg.	Arg.	Arg.	Op.	Op.	Op.	Ratio
	Nb	Av.		Av.	%		Av.	%	A / O
American									
(90)	916	10,2	360	4,0	39,3	556	6,2	60,7	0,65
Quebec									
(180)	1443	8,0	805	4,5	55,8	638	3,5	44,2	1,26

¹ Thus far the only argumentation research that has examined both languages.

² Along with others, these 2 authors use this definition to propose a “pragma-dialectical” approach to argumentation. See van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992, 1994, 1996 and 2004), van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson and Jacobs (1993) and van Eemeren, Grootendorst and Snoeck Henkemans (2002).

³ Assuredly, the definitions of argumentation and argument are correlative, and in a larger sense, as stated by Johnson (2000), “The theory of argument is component of the theory of argumentation, in much the same way that argument is a component of the practice of argumentation.” (p. 31). This obviously explains why sometimes what is presented as a definition of an argument may in fact relate more to argumentation, as suggested by Gilbert (1997): “An argument is any exchange of information centered on an avowed disagreement.” (104).

⁴ Not counting the one that is a synonym for ‘dispute’ or ‘debate’.

⁵ That is, their exact characterization as speech acts remains to be seen.

⁶ It has been mentioned by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1983) and Grennan (1997).

⁷ One of their primary modes of non-literal expression is indirection. See Gauthier (2004c, 2002b, 2001 and 2000).