2016: Obama’s America: Narrative Paradigm as a Persuasive Tool

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These past years have seen an increase in the influx of political documentaries into the world of theatre and surprisingly good box office results (Christensen, 2005). Although *Fahrenheit/911* leads the way in terms of ticket sales for any documentary, *2016: Obama’s America,* released in 2012, saw a successful run in theatres and entered the list of top 10 most financially successful political documentaries. It had an estimated $33 million USD in earnings (Austin, 2012). Dinesh D’Souza is behind this political documentary that goes back in time to understand the upbringings of President Barack Obama and his vision for the United States. The documentary is based on D’Souza’s own book *The Root of Obama’s Rage*. Instead of presenting factual evidence, D’Souza aimed to tell a story by introducing interviews and stories from young Barack Obama as he found his source of inspiration. The popularity of this documentary and its subject has led to the reasoning of why this phenomenon should be studied. This is also an important study because of the lack of studies done on documentaries in the communication field.

Walter Fisher created the concept of Narrative Paradigm which concludes that all forms of communication that appeal to our reason are best viewed as stories shaped by history, culture, and character ( Fisher, 1984). Within this concept we find two important categories used to define narrative paradigms: fidelity and coherence. Fidelity refers to the congruence between values embedded in a message and what listeners regard as appropriate, positive, and indicative of a better life (Brinson & Brown, 1997). Narrative Coherence is whether or not a story makes sense, whether characters are believable, and whether the story fits together (Eaves & Savoie, 2005). Narrative paradigm has been previously used to study things such as “news coverage, myths, magazine articles, or anything with a narrative as its source” (Burns, 2009, p. 21). In a political context, it has studied party platforms in the presidential nominating conventions (Smith, 1989). The lack of studies done in terms of specific political figures, have led to the study of narrative paradigm in the documentary *2016: Obama’s America.* This study aims to understand how D’Souza uses narrative coherence and narrative fidelity as a persuasive tool within *2016: Obama’s America*. The study may analyze the strategies the documentary uses to make sure the story “hangs together” (Fisher, 1985). In addition, attempts to create narrative fidelity will be examined in order to understand how the documentary may try to establish relatable to the audience and their own stories and experiences (Hollihan & Riley, 1987).

2016: Obama’s America

2016: Obama’s America is a political documentary written and directed by Dinesh D’Souza (Tamny, 2012). D’Souza, a conservative author and former Reagan policy analyst, is the former president of King’s College (Kaminer, 2012). According to Rosen (2012), the film is based on two of D'Souza's books, *The Roots of Obama's Rage* and *Obama's America -- Unmaking the American Dream*. The film uses D’Souza’s theory of anti-colonialism from his books to analyze Barack Obama and his decisions and motivations as the President of the United States. D’Souza’s books, and ultimately the documentary, stem from D’Souza’s impression that Barack Obama is not known well enough and that his intentions are seemingly difficult to understand.

The film is divided into several main topics or arguments: the comparison of the D’Souza and Obama, Obama’s founding fathers, and anti-colonialism. The documentary begins by outlining D’Souza’s history of traveling to America as a young man to live the American dream, and compares it to Obama’s story. By comparison, they are similar; both were born in the same year, and eventually attended Ivy League schools. Both were also married in the same year, and have family ties to third world countries.

From there the film goes into the history of Obama’s father; his up brining, his marriages, his schooling, and his relationship with Barack junior. D’ Souza also portrays Barack Obama senior as an anti-colonialist, due to the British occupation of Kenya in the early 20th century. Barack Obama’s memoir, titled *Dreams from My Father*, is interpreted to be an explanation of where Obama’s motivations and ideals come from. According to the official site of *2016: Obama’s* America (2012), “the journey moves quickly over the arc of the old colonial empires, into America’s empire of liberty, and we see the unfolding realignment of nations and the shape of the global future.” The connection made between the President and his father’s ideals backs up the argument that Obama’s decisions in office so far stem from his father’s anti-colonialism. D’Souza also goes into other people that he believes have influenced Obama, “including the Rev. Jeremiah Wright; the Chicago educator, activist and former radical Bill Ayers; and Edward Said, a Palestinian scholar and a professor of Mr. Obama's at Columbia (Webster).” With these connections, the documentary aims to strengthen the argument that Barack Obama is motivated by anti-colonialist ideals.

The documentary was released August 24, 2012 (IMDb, 2012) several months before the presidential election. D’Souza released it during this time in order to express these ideas while the topic was fresh and relevant. With the election closing in, and the candidates fighting to gain support, the documentary was released at a time that would maximize its potential to make an impact.

Narrative Paradigm

Walter R. Fisher first proposed narrative paradigm theory in multiple works published in 1984, 1985, 1987, and 1989 (Brinson & Brown, 1997). In one essay, he describes how this theory is a new way to view human communication; humans are storytelling animals (Fisher, 1984). According to Fisher (1984) narration is defined as “a theory of symbolic actions—words and/or deeds—that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them” (p. 2). In addition, paradigm is “a representation designed to formalize the structure of a component of experience and to direct understanding and inquiry into the nature and functions of that experience” (Fisher, 1984, p. 2).

According to Eaves & Savoie (2005), “narrative paradigm posits that humans are storytellers and audiences love to be told stories in all communication processes”. Fisher (1984) argues in this essay:

The narrative paradigm challenges the notions that human communication—if is to be considered rhetorical—must be an argumentative form, that reason is to be attributed only to discourse marked by clearly identifiable modes if inference and/or implication, and that the norms for evaluation of rhetorical communication must be rational standards taken essentially from informal or formal logic. (p. 2)

Narrative paradigm is a different from the rational world paradigm in the way it perceives its audience. The rational world paradigm believes people need to have knowledge of a subject whereas the narrative believes people have the ability to be rational (Hollihan & Riley, 1987). Narrative paradigm also views world in a different way than the rational world paradigm. Fisher states “the world is a set of stories which must be chosen among to live the good life in a process of continual recreation” (Fisher, 1984, p. 8). The narrative paradigm is a theory that’s “mode of human decision-making and communication is ‘good reasons’” (Fisher, 1984, p. 7), which differs from that rational world paradigm as they use “clear-cut inferential structures” (Fisher, 1984, p.4). The rational world’s basis of persuasion comes from prior knowledge, as if people are experts of a subject (Hollihan &Riley, 1987). Narrative uses “good reasons”, which are drawn from history, background, and culture, as the basis of their persuasion (Brinson & Brown, 1997).

According to the theory, “good reasons” is the way that the narrative rationalizes stories and “rationality in essence rests in narrative” (Brinson & Brown, 1997, p. 4). Narrative rationality is “descriptive, as it offers an account, an understanding, of any instance of human choice and action, including science” (Fisher, 1984, p. 9). Rationality can be determined through two things: narrative coherence and narrative fidelity (Fisher, 1984, p. 8). Narrative coherence focuses on whether or not a story “hangs together” (Fisher, 1985). According to Brinson & Brown (1997), “A coherent narrative exhibits three characteristics: (a) internal or argumentative consistency; (b) external consistency, or the extent to which the focal story matches other stories considered accurate; and (c) believable characters” (p. 104). Coherence can be achieved through things such as writing a story through the eyes of a character, using direct quotes or descriptive writing which leads readers to believe the story, and find the information easier to read (Zebra, 2008). As a storyteller, you want the audience to believe that what you are saying is probable even if you’re implying truth. In his examination, Popp (2006) determined coherence can be developed by creating multiple realities of historical truths, thus allowing audience members to discredits improbable events. In their examination of the reality television show, *Big Brother*, Eaves and Savoie (2005) concluded that although parts of this show did not always seem probable, executives were able to create coherence through an uncensored and unedited live webcasts. Coherence is something that can be determined regardless of the context of the information. In the context of politics, Smith (1989) identified the political platforms of the 1984 presidential nominating convention used stories to represent a social reality of each political party. The coherence in this context was achieved through stories of personal prosperity which was consistent with the American dream (Smith, 1989).

Fisher (1985) states in one of his works that “narrative fidelity concerns the ‘truth qualities’ of the story, the degree to which it accords with the logic of good reasons: the soundness of its reasoning and the value of its values” (pp. 349-350). In more basic terms narrative fidelity is whether or not the story “rings true” to its audience (Brinson & Brown, 1997). Good reasons are influenced and shaped by our history, culture, and background (Brinson & Brown, 1997). Narrative fidelity is achieved through using previously accepted stories and experiences, to make sense of the present stories (Hollihan & Riley 1987). In a study of Reiman Magazines, Sheila Webb was able to create fidelity even with a wide age group of the audience. Reiman told personal stories of women in everyday live that’s included everything from stay-at-home moms to the average working mother. These stories created fidelity through these women’s stories of families and their recipes but also giving adaptations to these recipes for women who cannot spend all their time cooking (Webb, 2006). Another study, on the parent relief program *Toughlove*, analyzed fidelity of personal narratives of parenting experiences. It was concluded that narrative fidelity was met in the stories because each parent had felt that they were good people and that they were only failing because they weren’t as hard on their kids as their parents were (Hollihan & Riley, 1987). Each story related to other parents’ experiences with their children and therefore fidelity was achieved (Hollihan & Riley, 1987). Fidelity can be created through telling stories that resonate with the audience. In the 2006 winter Olympics, NBC played small segments of athletes telling their own personal stories of how they got to the games. NBC selected themes and stories that were easily relatable such as overcoming obstacles, working from the bottom, and making sacrifices (Burns, 2009). These themes are commonly associated with the American Dream which is a widely known experience and story theme. Fidelity and coherence, both key parts to rationalization, provide persuasiveness of narratives (Hollihan & Riley, 1987).

The purpose of this study is to examine the strategies used in *2016: Obama’s America* to establish narrative probability and narrative coherence*.* Although researchers have examined the role of narrative paradigm in political platforms (Smith, 1989), to date it has not been applied to an examination of a specific political candidate. More importantly, attempts at narrative probability and narrative coherence have not been examined in documentaries.

RQ: How does *2016: Obama’s America* utilize narrative coherence and narrative fidelity as a persuasive tool?

Method

The artifact being analyzed is the political documentary titled *2016: Obama’s America* directed and narrated by author Dinesh D’Souza. This paper will examine the elements of narrative paradigm in the documentary, specifically narrative coherence and narrative fidelity. This is not only a study of the content of the documentary, but how that content was communicated by D’Souza. Multiple elements of the artifact will be taken into consideration such as visual elements, style of narration, choice of interviews and usage of content produced by Obama (Campaign speeches, audio books, etc.). Style of narration refers to how D’Souza narrated his story, often making connections to his own life. The documentary presents interviews that are used to strengthen D’Souza’s message. D’Souza himself claims that Obama laid out his own vision in books, audio books, campaign speeches, and other forms of communication.

To understand how the themes of narrative coherence and narrative fidelity are being used the paper uses constant comparative analysis. According to Corbin & Strauss (2008), “this type of comparison is essential to analysis because it allows the researcher to differentiate one category/theme from another and to identify properties and dimensions specific to each category/theme” (p. 73). The documentary presented themes that utilize narrative and narrative fidelity.

The process consisted of several steps with the aim to fully understand how the themes were presented in the movie. First the documentary was watched several times, spotting themes all throughout it. Then a list of pertinent themes was created that were present throughout the entire documentary. The research was divided into two distinct categories, narrative coherence and narrative fidelity. Following this, the list of themes was filtered; those that were weak or did not follow the stipulated rules for narrative coherence and narrative fidelity were removed. The purpose of this was to minimize the number of themes per category, in order to isolate the strongest themes that were the most relevant to coherence and fidelity. This process may determine the persuasive tools used in the documentary.

**Findings**

**Narrative Coherence**

Narrative coherence is the whether or not the story “hangs together”. When looking for narrative coherence in stories it is important to look at if the story has two important characteristics: internal consistency and believable characters. Both of these aspects can be used to determine the persuasiveness of a story such as the one told in *2016: Obama’s America.* There are multiple situations in the film that consistently prove these two aspects in a storytelling setting and have been broken down into three different themes: Anti-colonialism/Third World, Obama’s Own Words, and Obama’s Founding Fathers.

**Anti-colonialism**. Throughout the documentary, D’Souza seeks to explain Obama’s decisions he had made so far during his presidency. D’Souza ties these decisions together with anti-colonialism as the driving factor behind the president’s decisions. According to D’Souza (2012), anti-colonialism is the reverse of colonialism, which is “a system of piracy in which the wealth of the colonized countries is systematically stolen by the colonizers.” The anti-colonialism theory presented by D’Souza adds to the coherence of the story by creating connections between Obama’s decisions that had not been previously established.

One example of this is the use of anti-colonialism to tie the relationship of Obama and his father together. He believes that Obama learned many of these anti-colonialist ideas through his father, Barack Obama Sr. D’Souza references the title of Obama’s own memoir, Dreams from My Father. From there, D’Souza explains the connections of Barack Sr. to anti-colonialism Kenya. D’Souza references a socialist article written by Barack Sr. in the East Africa Journal in 1965. Because Barack Sr. was so heavily influenced by socialism and anti-colonialism due to the British rule of Kenya, D’Souza argues, Barack Jr. has been molded to be anti-colonialist because of his respect for his father and his beliefs.

Using the anti-colonialist theme, D’Souza ties all of Obama’s decisions as president together. In the last interview with D’Souza himself, he sums up the whole film by tying together the president’s actions up to that point in time. He specifically lists decisions to halt off shore drilling in the U.S. while funding drilling in South America, the backing of Argentina in the Falkland Islands, and his support of Palestine instead of America’s longtime ally Israel. D’Souza purposely ends the film with restating these actions taken by the president, and how he believes that they are tied to anti-colonialist ideals.

**Obama’s own words.** Through the constant use of Barack Obama produced content, D’Souza aims to sew the story together with the same theme of claiming Obama himself told his story. Regardless of what the content was the fact that it originated from Obama gave the argument of legitimacy that D’Souza could not have achieved otherwise. Although it is in the first section of the documentary that D’Souza presents this claim, he supports it all throughout with constant referencing to Obama’s own words in audiobooks, speeches, and other content.

Early into his documentary D’Souza introduces President Obama’s book, *Dreams of My Father*, a book that goes over who Obama’s father was and what ideology he presented. All through the documentary, D’Souza makes reference to said book as the source of inspiration for Obama while at the same time claiming that Barack Obama never really met his father and thus had no idea what “dreams” he had. This is a constant reference in the books. D’Souza also uses the audiobook version of Obama’s book throughout the file while discussing certain points. This adds to the believability of this character D’Souza is trying to create.

Apart from Obama’s books, D’Souza also brings in evidence to support his claims from Obama’s own political speeches, more specifically from his 2008 campaign and 2004 Keynote Speech at the Democratic National Convention. Sections of said speeches are brought in to bring support to the character of Obama that the director has created throughout the documentary. When D’Souza is explaining specific things about Obama and the presidential elections, he always refers back to taped speeches to show actual footage of Obama. This is proving believability in the character by showing real footage and images of Obama.

**Obama’s founding fathers.** In the documentary, D’Souza tries to explain his points and support his conclusions about Obama’s character by introducing main figures in Obama’s life. These figures are known as the founding fathers of Obama and one in particular is Obama’s own father. These people largely influenced Obama’s life and still influence it today. D’Souza discusses these figures throughout the movie and uses them to tie together key points. This is done to create internal consistency and give believability to Obama’s character.

One specific example of this was the infograph that was shown in the documentary. It was a chart that linked all these people to Obama. D’Souza used a web to show the connections of the people to Obama. First he described each individual and showed their picture, and then gave key facts that related to the decisions Obama has made during his presidency. Then, lines were drawn that connected to Obama’s picture to prove even further that these people influenced Obama. This web creates internally consistency because it ties together all the points that D’Souza had already touched on throughout the documentary. It also proves the believability of Obama’s character because at that point D’Souza discusses important facts about the individuals and then connects those facts to a decision Obama has made or a characteristic of Obama.

The second example of this is done through visuals. He proves the connections to these figures by showing pictures of Obama with two of the founding fathers. When discussing characteristics of Obama, D’Souza discusses how Obama’s father shaped Obama. At that point he also shows several pictures of Obama with his father and shows picture of the father by himself. At another instance, when D’Souza is talking about the founding fathers, he talks about the relationship Obama had with the Reverend Wright and how he shaped Obama’s decisions. He then further proves this by showing pictures of Obama with Wright. These visuals help create believability of the people introduced in the documentary and Obama himself.

**Narrative Fidelity**

Narrative fidelity is whether or not a story “rings true” to its intended audience. Fidelity can be based off of good reasons which are influenced by history, character, and culture. After analyzing *2016: Obama’s America,* it was determined that all of the influences were found throughout the documentary. Three major themes were determined after analyzing the documentary: The American Dream, Crises, and Reality of Interviews.

**The American dream.** The American Dream is an idea that has survived through centuries. It is the idea that anyone from any background can be successful in America. Not only is the American dreams an international symbol of prosperity, it is also a set of values. Every American came from a different background, therefore they should all be able to relate to the American Dream, and the set of values it represents. D’Souza uses the idea of the American Dream to help make several connections throughout the documentary.

The first connection D’Souza makes is that he himself is a product of the American dream. The documentary reveals that D’Souza was raised in a small village in India, and was raised by a traditional Indian family. He then traveled to America to attend school at Dartmouth College, where he earned his Bachelor’s degree in English. Eventually he found his way into the white house working for the Reagan administration. D’Souza presents his story as a successful achievement of the American Dream. He does this to relate his story to the typical American, and to show that the American Dream is still alive.

The second connection made in the documentary is that Barack Obama is also a product of the American Dream. D’Souza outlines Obama’s history, beginning with his childhood in Hawaii and how they moved to Indonesia. He notes that his father was absent for most of his childhood. D’Souza then explains how Obama also attended an Ivy league school, Harvard. D’Souza shows the relationship between himself and the president, and how they are connected through the American Dream. Once establishing these connections to the audience, D’Souza makes a point to say that Obama’s anti-colonialist ideology negatively affects the American Dream, and those who wish to live by the values it represents.

**Crises.** Economic crises are experienced across all societies and have occurred many times throughout history. Fidelity occurs when a story can “ring true” with an audience. D’Souza uses our current crises while telling his story because it is something that that is relatable to any audience. Throughout the documentary, D’Souza visually represents the crises and discusses how they are occurring not only in our nation, but other nations as well.

One example of this is the constant discussion of the debt in the United States what it has done to society. D’Souza uses graphs to show our debt, as well as the debt incurred in past presidencies. This depiction allows for audiences of different ages to relate because it shows past and present debt. Both older and younger audiences can relate to the incidences of debt, especially since it is affecting a large portion of our society today.

Another example of coherence is the visual representations of the crises throughout the documentary. D’Souza uses images of poverty not only in our country, but other countries as well. This allows audiences of different backgrounds and locations to be able to relate to the images. He also shows depictions of occupy Wall Street. This relates to the audience because this movement has shown up all over the country, and not just on Wall Street. These depictions “ring true” to the audience because of their familiarity and significance.

**Reality of interviews.** Throughout the story D’Souza uses interviews to provide proof of information. Each interview is set up as if the interviewees are in their own home and are going about their everyday lives. The purpose of this is to show realism in the interviews. They want to show these sources in their cultural settings and less formal environments in order to be relatable to the audience.

One of the most informative and transparent interviews used by D’Souza was that with George Obama, President Obama’s brother. The environment of the interview is relaxed and considered to be “approachable” by regular audience members, it is set in a sort of park bench with no formal camera crews present or anything similar to that, D’Souza and George Obama are the only ones in the picture. Although the content is important, the framing of this interview is powerful since it does carry unnecessary details or many of the normal factors in a formal interview. The usage of Obama’s brother in the interview also brings in legitimacy and reliability to the story, even though they are not particularly close the fact that they share the same last name gives it power.

D’Souza also interviews a historian and author of books about Obama to comment on many of Obama’s ideologies and his vision. The framing of the interview is not face to face, but over a cell phone bringing in a lot familiarity and informality for the audience. It is obvious that since crews were filming the historian talking on the phone, D’Souza himself could have interviewed him face to face however he opted for a cell phone conversation appearing to be a very approachable man. Being an author that has written books on Obama that also adds legitimacy to his discussion points.

**Discussion**

After the analyzing narrative coherence and narrative paradigm in *2016: Obama’s America*, two specific conclusions have been determined. First, it has been determined that the frequency of narrative coherence and narrative fidelity or equal throughout the film. Second it has been concluded that narrative coherence was a more dominant persuasive tool in the documentary.

The first conclusion is that the frequency of narrative coherence and narrative fidelity was equal throughout the documentary. D’Souza uses both tools throughout the entire film. This was concluded because for both coherence and fidelity there were three major themes for each. It is important that both tools show up equally in the documentary because, as said earlier, narrative paradigm relies on both aspects for a story to be persuasive. This conclusion also differs some from past research in that most studies one of the pieces of narrative paradigm is more frequent than the other or is not used at all.

Although both narrative fidelity and narrative coherence were used in equal ways throughout the documentary we can conclude that coherence is a more powerful tool than fidelity to persuade and influence viewers. Coherence is the skill of tying everything together, all the arguments and points must come together as one. D’Souza introduces strong coherent arguments such as the Anti-Colonialism theme where he continuously connects Obama’s decisions to this ideology throughout the story. Analysis of the documentary reveals that the Anti-Colonialism theme was perhaps the most used one, confirming its importance. This also ties to another theme, Obama’s Founding Fathers where he links the President to what he describes as radical ideologies that influenced him since he lacked a formal paternal figure. In this theme we see yet another link to Anti- Colonialism as some of his “founding fathers” have anti-colonial tendencies. Based on past research, fidelity has been a more dominant theme in presenting stories however this paper also reflects the need to have a balanced approach to both categories; one cannot be more powerful than the next. It gives too much focus to one side of the story ignoring the other one in some cases.

There are two major limitations of this study. The first limitation is that it cannot determine effectiveness of the persuasive tools. Effectiveness of persuasive tools cannot be determined because the analysis is merely on the artifact and not those who have watched the documentary. The second limitation is that people are not unbiased. It is complicated to analyze an artifact that involves such conflictive opinions without having bias.

There are two major implications of this study. The first implication is that this study is one of few done on documentaries. This study is important because there is such little research done on the topic of narratives in documentaries. The second implication is that the topic of the study is an important political figure. Political figures are normally risqué topics and opinions seem to be very strong, one way or another. It is very important to show that the use of narratives can be used to persuade opinions on topics such as political figures.

There are 3 areas of future research areas within this context. First is the need to study how political documentaries such as *2016: Obama’s America* affect audiences, especially on election years which was the case for D’Souza’s documentary. Although the director of this documentary claimed many times that it was not his intent to sway voters on way or another, this documentary was viewed by millions of Americans at key moment in the Presidential election. The next section that needs future research is the study of prominent known figures and how the information the viewer knew about him/her prior to the viewing of the story changed after the viewing. In this case President Barack Obama is perhaps the most widely recognized figure, many different opinions and conclusions are made about the President but said opinions might change after an experience like *2016: Obama’s America*. The last are of future research is how documentaries are presented. With the rise of documentaries to explain issues, documentaries that use narrative paradigm to explain their ideology, must be brought under the lens of future analysis. These are the three areas that need further research, the impact of political documentaries on voters, especially in election years; how perception about a widely recognized figure changes after a mass communicated message such as *2016: Obama’s America*, and how narrative paradigm is used in documentaries.

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