

2024 Elie Wiesel Competition

Special Commendation Senior Essay

Sofia Sanchez, 9th Grade

The Hague School, Becky Boncal

Misinformation to Mayhem: A Rhetorical Analysis

On November 19, 2021, many cars burned in the streets of Rotterdam, Netherlands, when a Facebook group against the distribution of vaccines rioted and streamed it in the process. Ricardo Pronk, a man from the Netherlands, created a violent and unethical Facebook group against vaccines and restrictions regarding COVID-19. The followers of the Facebook group “are more than double” after another rally on the 18th (BBC News). Pronk asserts that vaccines are “poisonous” or part of “a sinister global plot to kill.” This Dutch Facebook group is one of many shared all over social media, geared toward anti-vaxers or concerned citizens who doubt the vaccine’s overall reliability. Members of these anti-vax groups attempt to appeal to logos; they try to persuade their audience by ‘speaking the truth’ while spreading misinformation. Pronk also uses logos in his interview with BBC News, “The violence is needed because something needs to change,” and appeals to pathos to provoke this uncertainty in his followers’ cognitive perspective.

Pronk’s Facebook group significantly impacted future riots, causing them to become more violent. The group’s posts circulated for months until Facebook finally took it down on November 28, 2021, five days after his interview with BBC News. Facebook prides itself on taking down mis/disinformation. Still, people started questioning whether Facebook had taken action regarding a non-English speaking language. If media platforms recognize hate speech or any form of dehumanization and choose not to take action immediately, then the situation could become more violent. Hence, media platforms need to take immediate action against hate speech, as individuals are willing to risk their lives for their beliefs.

As the focus shifts from a Dutch Facebook group to anti-vaxers worldwide, this issue pivots into a comparison between vaccinations and a heart-wrenching event, the Holocaust. In November of 2021, Ben Sale, a journalist who covers anti-semitism, wrote an article about anti-vaxers protesting outside the office of Jeffery Dinowitz, a Jewish politician. But what the protesters wrote shocked many, including Dinowitz: posters depicting the Star of David that read, “No vax.” Along with the star, a protester decided to draw a swastika symbol next to a needle, hinting that vaccines are evil. Not only did this re-surface the agony and pain others endured from the Holocaust, it also promoted anti-semitism. In the memoir *Night*, written by Elie Wiesel, Eliezer did not mention the Star of David but referred to it as the “yellow star.” (Wiesel 11) The Nazis stripped him of his very being by taking away his religion and a meaningful symbol; why provoke those memories once again. Mis/disinformation consumed by the public often comes from unmediated sources, i.e., public speakers, satire websites, etc. To formulate an opinion correctly, a person must use a reliable source.

To counteract the spread of misinformation and combat the dangerous rhetoric propagated by groups like Pronk's, employing a multifaceted approach rooted in sound rhetorical strategies is critical. Firstly, I would explain/research why vaccines are effective/ineffective while using the rhetorical strategy logos. Logos, a frequently used strategy in writing, would logically explain my thought process and logical reasoning of a reliable source. On the other hand, I would not appeal to pathos because when doing so, it provides the audience with personal bias. Bias is dangerous when writing an informational piece of

literature; be weary of bias when reading articles from different sources, for they may lean to one side of the conflict. In a world where misinformation spreads rapidly, fostering critical thinking and responsible information consumption is not just a choice but a necessity for safeguarding the well-being of individuals and society.

Works Cited

Sales, Ben. "With swastikas and yellow star, anti-vaxxers protest New York Jewish politician." *The Times of Israel* 15 November 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/with-swastikas-and-yellow-star-anti-vaxxers-protest-newyork-jewish-politician/>, accessed 7 February 2024.

"How anti-vax Facebook groups fuelled violence in Holland - BBC Newsnight" Youtube, uploaded by BBC News, 23 November 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUx3bJY7nH0>, accessed 7 February 2024