

# Message to Debaters:

How to nail arguments about narratives,  
messages and symbols

## Chapters for this workshop

- How to prove message arguments: burdens of proof and how to fulfill them
- When and when not to use message arguments
- How to engage competing message arguments
- How to weigh message arguments in debates that are not exclusively about messages
- Practice #1: proving message arguments
- Practice #2: choosing message arguments

# Burdens of Proof

- 1. Describe the message
- 2. What is the likely interpretation of the message
- 3. What is the delta
- 4. What action are people likely to take (motivation, action, and normative value)

# Describing the Narrative

- Be as detailed as possible given time limits
- Include what is helpful for your case, exclude what isn't
- Guiding questions:
  - What does one see/hear/read?
  - Who is the creator and what are their incentives?
  - What is the setting?
  - What words/mechanisms in the motion help us?

## Analyzing the Likely Interpretation

- Consider the recipients existing pre-conceptions
- Consider how critical the recipient is
- Consider the relationship between the recipient and the deliverer
- Consider other existing messages
- Consider the way discourse around the message will be shaped
- Consider how frequent the message is

# Proving the Delta

- Actively consider what alternative influences exist that could be claimed to already achieve your message
- The easy method: identify the differences between your message and others, try to connect what is unique to your message
- The effective method: prove why a different perception would be created in the counterfactual

# Proving the Impact

- Motivation: why would people care about the message enough to act upon it?
- Plausible actions: what CAN the recipients do and why are they LIKELY to do just that?
- Normative value: why is the impact good/bad?

# Which Burden is Most Important?

- Always the one most contested in the debate
- Rule of Thumb #1: in debates that are explicitly and exclusively about messages, the most contested burden will often be the likely interpretation
- Rule of Thumb #2: in debates that are NOT explicitly and exclusively about messages, the most contested burden will often be the impact
- Rule of Thumb #3: while the extent to which it is contested varies, the delta will almost always be contested



## When to Use Message Arguments

- The obvious: debates about art, media representation, symbols and ceremonies, propaganda
- The not so obvious but always true: arguments about backlash, legitimacy, representation of women and minorities
- Case by case: elections and politics, gender and social justice, education, integration
- In most other cases, avoid them if you can
- In any case, always be aware that you make a message argument if you do

# Competing Message Arguments

- The obvious: prove yours better
- Use the burdens of proof you know to exist to identify missing links on the opponent's argument
  - \*Be wary of mitigatory rebuttals that harm your case symmetrically!
- Be actively comparative in your analysis preemptively
- If the alternative message isn't mutually exclusive to your own – weigh against it.

# Weighing Message Arguments

- It's hard and you should avoid reaching this situation if possible
- Often a message will impact more people than the more direct impacts in the debate
- Often a message will have a harm that is harder to opt out of
- Often a direct impact will be temporary, whereas the message will be contemporary

## Practice: Prove the Argument

- In “THW ban hate speech”, prove the Prop case: “hate speech leads to more discrimination and violence against minorities”
- In “As adoptive parents, THW only tell their children they're adopted after their teenage years”, prove the Opp case: “the child will feel more loved and belonging to the family if we tell them when they are young”

## Practice: Choose an Argument

- In “THW let children choose to take an e-sports (competitive gaming) class, as an alternative to sports class at school”, what message arguments would you run from prop?
- In “In countries with conscription for men exclusively, THBT the feminist movement should advocate for the conscription of women”, what message arguments would you run from opp?