# Short practical exercise – a contextual and semantic analysis of online advocacy and political campaigns

**Theoretical introduction – what are contextual and semantic analyses**

A contextual analysis is simply an analysis of a text (in whatever medium, including multi-media) that helps us to assess that text within the context of its historical and cultural setting, but also in terms of its textuality – or the qualities that characterize the text as a text. A contextual analysis combines features of formal analysis with features of "cultural archaeology, " or the systematic study of social, political, economic, philosophical, religious, and aesthetic conditions that were (or can be assumed to have been) in place at the time and place when the text was created. While this may sound complicated, it is in reality deceptively simple: it means "situating" the text within the milieu of its times and assessing the roles of author, readers (intended and actual), and "commentators" (critics, both professional and otherwise) in the reception of the text. A contextual analysis can proceed along many lines, depending upon how complex you wish to make the analysis. But it generally includes several key questions:

1) What does the text reveal about itself as a text?
2) What does the text tell us about its apparent intended audience(s)?
3) What seems to have been the author's intention?
4) What is the occasion for this text?
5) Is the text intended as some sort of call to – or for – action?
6) Is the text intended rather as some sort of call to – or for – reflection or consideration rather than direct action?
7) Can we identify any non-textual circumstances that affected the creation and reception of the text? [1]

For a deeper analysis of the messages from advocacy and political campaigns we can use **semantic analysis**, which is mostly used in linguistics, visuals are also sorts of texts. During semantic analysis we are analysing the structure and meaning of the message and thus revealing relationships between its components – phrases, clauses; graphic elements, transitions, colourisations. The analysis focuses primarily on the text itself, not the particular context.

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[1] http://english.unl.edu/sbehrendt/StudyQuestions/ContextualAnalysis.html.

*Activity – Contextual analysis*

Visit the website http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/ and choose two presidential campaign commercials, ideally of opponents'. Then conduct their contextual analysis and answer following questions:

1) What is the key message?
2) What seems to be the candidates' intention?
3) What is the occasion for the commercial? What does it respond to?
4) Is the commercial intended as some sort of call to – or for – action?
5) Can any non-textual circumstances be identified that affected the creation and reception of the text? Does it relate to some events? Are there any historical/cultural connotations?

You can also conduct a semantic analysis and focus on following aspects:
1)      The links between text and visuals
2)      Does the commercial work with emotions, or is it based on rational arguments?
3)      How are the (key) messages ordered?

*Resources:*

**For further information on advocacy you can follow up these links:**

BECKER, Jo, *Campaigning for Justice Human Rights Advocacy in Practice,* SERIES: STANFORD STUDIES IN HUMAN RIGHTS http://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=20692

Howard, Emma, "How 'clicktivism' has changes the face of political campaigns", in *The Guardian*, 24 September 2014 https://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/sep/24/clicktivism-changed-political-campaigns-38-degrees-change

Sen, Amartya, "Democracy and its Global Roots", in *The New Republic*, 229, No 14, October 6, 2003. Available online at: http://www.columbia.edu/itc/sipa/U6800/readings-sm/sen_democracy.pdf

Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, *Slacktivism*, Accessed the 14th of October 2016. Available online at: https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Slacktivism&oldid=743880818

Obar, Jonathan; et al. (2012). "Advocacy 2.0: An Analysis of How Advocacy Groups in the United States Perceive and Use Social Media as Tools for Facilitating Civic Engagement and Collective Action". *Journal of Information Policy*. Available online at http://poseidon01.ssrn.com/delivery.php?ID=71208508407410510903108102407006700212208100400909509102610308507810012706900900402601802905410105012702302308609311111700707305808204603402809909910109602910801003902109511606812400409112609011611710802912109108010607306501508512702910211202509911 5&EXT=pdf