Analyzing Audiences

Douglas B. Park

What do we expect analysis of audience to do for writers? What form should analysis of audience take; or, more precisely, what makes certain kinds of analysis more or less appropriate in given situations?

The centrality of audience in the rhetorical tradition and the detail with which current writing texts provide advice on analyzing an audience might suggest that the answers to such questions are well established. But they clearly are not. Side by side with the growing awareness in recent discussions that audience is a rich and complex concept exists a growing dissatisfaction with traditional audience analysis—those familiar questions about an audience’s age, sex, education, and social background that form the core of most proposed heuristics. (See, for instance, Barry Kroll, “Writing for Readers: Three Perspectives on Audience,” CCC, 35 [May, 1984], 172-75; Russell Long, “Writer-Audience Relationships,” CCC, 31 [May, 1980], 221-26; Arthur Walzer, “Articles from the ‘California Divorce Project’: A Case Study of the Concept of Audience,” CCC, 36 [May, 1985], 155-58.)

The general import of the explicit criticism is that traditional audience analysis is too limited a tool: it works only for persuasive discourse; it seems inapplicable to discourse situations with general audiences about whom specific questions cannot be arrived at. But underneath these criticisms lies a greater uncertainty about the whole subject, characterized on the one hand by a sense that traditional analysis somehow fails altogether to provide what we now expect from audience analysis and on the other by the lack of any other widely-shared way of thinking about the subject.

To address this uncertainty, we need to return to first principles and examine just what it is that we do expect audience analysis to accomplish and just how the assumptions behind traditional analysis relate to those expectations. This examination will show why traditional analysis, for all the apparent sanction of tradition, has so little practical rhetorical value for us.

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tant, it will provide a backdrop for a broader and, I hope, more useful view of what can go into analyzing audiences.

In a broad sense, the purpose of audience analysis is obvious enough: to aid the writer or speaker in understanding a social situation. The advice to “know your audience” carries much of the social meaning of “know” as in knowing who another person is or what that person is like. The advice to “consider your audience” suggests a deliberate weighing of the characteristics of the audience with a view to an appropriate shaping of the discourse. If we look at a set of hypothetical discourses chosen to illustrate a range of different audiences, we can describe more precisely these undifferentiated purposes for analysis. Consider

a legal argument on behalf of an accused embezzler;
a local businessman’s letter to City Council protesting a zoning decision;
a grant proposal to develop computer instruction;
a memo from a provost to his university faculty arguing for annual evaluations;
a panel presentation on invention at CCCC;
an article on food in the Pacific Northwest contemplated by a freelance journalist;
an essay on rock and roll contemplated by an English 101 student.

In all but the last two cases, the most obvious specific purpose for analysis will be to understand where a given audience stands in relation to the particular aim and issues at hand. The goal is the immediately strategic one of adapting argument to audience: What are the criteria on which the grant review board makes its decisions? Why are most of the faculty so hostile to annual evaluations? What are the current issues in the discipline’s discussions of invention?

In the last two cases above, however, the writers are not yet ready for this sort of strategic analysis. The freelance writer must first choose an audience—a journal such as Sunset Magazine—in order to be able to think about rhetorical strategy. The student, in a yet more difficult position, must somehow imagine or invent an audience in a situation where no audience naturally exists. Here the primary purpose of audience analysis becomes not the usual one of providing information about an existing audience but rather a means of actually helping students to discover an audience. And this raises the question of just how they are to do that. What must they think about to imagine their papers as having or being capable of having an audience?

The special context of the classroom creates a peculiar purpose for audience analysis, one for which it was never intended. It does, however, usefully focus the essential question of what we mean by “having an audience.” What is an audience, anyway?—as our baffled students often seem to ask. And this is just a generalized form of a need that all writers experience to understand the identity of the audience that they know they have: What does it mean to be in the
situation of addressing a CCCC audience or a grant review board or a City Council? Questions of this sort are, I think, another important part of the meaning of "know your audience." They point to a purpose for analysis which lies underneath the more obvious strategic purpose of determining the audience’s responses to particular issues.

Both these purposes for analysis—the fundamental identifying and defining of an audience and the strategic analysis of particular attitudes—involve describing situations, because audience is an inherently situational concept (Lisa Ede, "On Audience and Composition," CCC, 30 [October, 1979], 294 ff.). The notion of accommodating discourse to an audience is one of participating in a dynamic social relationship. And "audience" itself refers to the idea of a collective entity that can exist only in relation to a discourse; it means a group of people engaged in a rhetorical situation. Therefore if we are to identify an audience and say anything useful about it, we will have to speak in terms of the situation that brings it into being and gives it identity.

From this perspective, it becomes easy to see why traditional audience analysis so often seems unsatisfactory. What it does is to take literally the idea of "knowing" an audience as examining a group already assembled and describing any or all of the characteristics that those assembled may happen to have. In so doing it directly addresses neither the situation that has brought the audience into being as an audience nor the particular states of mind that the audience may possess in relation to the issues at hand. It tries rather to describe general traits from which rhetorically useful inferences may be drawn.

[The elderly] are positive about nothing; in all things they err by an extreme moderation. . . . The rich are insolent and superior. . . . Now the hearer is always receptive when a speech is adapted to his own character and reflects it.


Different habits . . . and different occupations in life . . . make one incline more to one passion, another to another. . . . With men of genius the most successful topic will be fame; with men of industry, riches; with men of fortune, pleasure.


It is . . . to begin by recording certain information about an audience and then, on the basis of experience and research, to infer about the audience such matters as knowledge, temperament, attitudes, habits of thought, language preferences or other matters that will enter into their responses to communication.

Theodore Clevenger, Jr., *Audience Analysis* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), p. 43

Clearly, both Campbell and Aristotle envision the possibility of topoi appropriate for various ages and conditions of men. If an assembled audience in a particular situation can be seen to have a salient trait or quality—what classical rhetoric calls the "character" of the audience—then various lines of
argument will fit that character more or less effectively. Perhaps most of the City Council are like our letter-writer businessman "men of industry," practical men who will respond best to arguments from "riches." As a general idea—which is how audience analysis usually appears in classical rhetoric (e.g. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, III, viii, 38)—the notion seems plausible. Certainly in situations involving small, immediate audiences, most of us have had the experience of sensing the overall personality of an audience, or of dominant members in it, and the need to adjust to those qualities in a general and impressionistic way. But inflated to a social-science method of the sort that the modern description suggests, traditional analysis almost completely loses touch with rhetorical usefulness. Aside from the fact that large generalizations about the psychology of age or sex are suspect in any particular application, the accumulation of demographic facts about an audience has no clear goal or limit (Clevenger, pp. 45 ff.). All it can do is amass information unlikely to add up to any sort of "character." "The characters of men," admits George Campbell, beating a retreat from the subject, "may be infinitely diversified" (243). One of our industrious business executives may also be a man of genius and education who might therefore be motivated by arguments from fame. Another is perhaps rich and therefore "insolent." Two might be in their 30's, one in his 50's, two in their 60's. Two might have high-school educations, and so on ad infinitum, the writer having no clear way to determine the relevance or weight of any of this information to the task at hand.

Of course the general assumption informing traditional audience analysis as we find it in modern speech communication texts is that it aims at the social traits held in common that shape the responses of the audience as a whole. (See, for instance, Paul Holtzman's *The Psychology of Speakers’ Audiences* [Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman, 1970], pp. 73-79.) So we can observe that a CCCC audience will share many social traits: most will have advanced degrees in English; most will be between 25 and 65; probably at least half will be women; most will be politically liberal. Certainly all will have modest incomes. But although such facts might well interest a social scientist, they are merely symptoms of the situation that actually gives the audience its identity. If we were to send a speaker to the podium, shanghaied, blindfolded, armed only with the subject and the results of a demographic analysis, our victim would angrily or plaintively want to know, "But who is my audience?" The answer of course is "conferees attending a CCCC panel," a simple identification that compresses for someone in the know a wealth of necessary knowledge about the identity of the audience as an entity assembled for a collective purpose.

Bizarre as the case of the blindfolded speaker may be, it describes exactly the mistaken way in which traditional analysis is used to help students discover audiences by amassing detailed information about people, real or imaginary. "They [students] must construct in imagination an audience that is as nearly a replica as is possible of those many readers who actually exist in the world of reality and who are reading the writer's words" (Fred R. Pfister and Joanne F. Petrick, "A Heuristic Model for Creating a Writer's Audience,"
Following this principle, discussions commonly suggest as audiences groups with analyzable traits. "Thus a reader might be delineated as being a university administrator, over 40, male, white, etc., or a group of readers might be defined as businessmen in a small [midwestern] community" (Winifred B. Horner, "Speech-Act and Text-Act Theory: 'Theme-ing' in Freshman Composition," CCC, 30 [May, 1979], 168). But obviously the problem that students face is not one of just visualizing hypothetical real people; it is one of grasping a situation in which real readers could constitute an "audience." In what conceivable situations, for instance, could our student writing about rock and roll be addressing a group of midwestern businessmen?

How then do we go about describing the situations that bring audiences into being and give them their identities? Or to put the question in a more basic way, how is it that discourses of any sort can have audiences? If we look at the most concrete possible image of an audience assembled to hear a speech and ask how they come to be there, the immediate answer will be that a particular occasion has brought them together. This, indeed, is the most common way we tend to think about and characterize audiences, as a particular group assembled to hear a particular speech. But a moment's reflection shows that while an audience assembles only for a particular discourse, the discourse alone cannot bring the audience into being. Lawyers do not defend their clients on street corners; passers-by do not wander into Holiday Inns to hear lectures on teaching composition; freelance journalists do not mimeograph their articles and leave them in mailboxes—unless they have become really desperate.

In brief, an audience can assemble on a particular occasion only because a social setting already exists in which a certain kind of discourse performs a recognized function. Note that the ancient classification of judicial, deliberative, and epideictic discourse follows this principle and amounts, as Chaim Perelman points out, to the identification of three basic audiences (The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969], p. 21). To define other audiences we need simply to amplify the principle to its broadest extent, as follows.

An audience can exist when there is 1) an established social institution or social relationship, a judicial system, a legislative process, an institutional hierarchy, a charitable foundation, a social compact of any sort, a club, a nation, even a friendship between two people; 2) and an evolved and understood function that discourse performs within and for that social relationship. Speech-act theory—and sociolinguistics in general—has taught us to see all discourse as representing action performed within and conditioned by a social situation. We can name these actions in very general terms—making statements, contracts, promises, implications, requests. But it is also important to see that all discourse, especially of the more public or formalized kind, functions in and can be described as part of a social transaction that has defined roles for both
writers and readers. If I write a grant proposal, I am making a request, but I am also participating in a highly conventionalized activity evolved to enable the distribution of resources, the manipulation of tax laws, the satisfaction of political and public relations imperatives. I write as the representative of one institution. My audience exists in terms of and reads as representatives of the granting agency.

3) Finally, for an audience to “assemble,” there must be a physical setting. For written discourse, the exact analog to the place of assembly is the means of publication or distribution. Much has been made of the distance between writers and readers as opposed to the closeness of speakers and audience. Walter Ong argues that the readers of written discourse do not form an audience, a “collectivity,” as do the listeners to a speech (“The Writer’s Audience Is Always a Fiction,” PMLA, 90 [January, 1975], 11). In some senses this must of course be true, but because a written discourse always exists within some larger social setting and reaches its dispersed readers through a given physical means of distribution for an accepted social function, readers of prose are very much part of a collectivity. When I read a memo from the Provost in my office mail or a copy of Sunset Magazine in the public mail, I understand that I am participating in a social activity together with others. The major difference between speech and writing in their roles in social settings is that writing has been able to develop a wider range of functions. In the instance of popular journalism, the means of publication has been able to become a social institution in its own right. The reader of a newspaper or a magazine participates in a social relationship that has been largely created by the development of newspapers and magazines themselves.

All these intertwined elements of the social context for discourse define the terms in which the identity of an audience is best understood. This is why when we respond most directly and effectively to the question, “Who is the audience,” we always respond in terms of the social institution and function that the discourse serves—a court, members of City Council, a grant review board, the college faculty, CCCC conferees, readers of Sunset Magazine. Unspoken but always present in any such simple identification of an audience is the whole complex of the social situation that has brought that audience into being. This unspoken presence is so compressed into the identification that it is easy to take for granted. But a writer who understands the identity of the audience grasps a wealth of tacit and explicit knowledge about the form of the discourse and the way the subject can be treated.

This knowledge informs the obvious rhetorical choices about appropriate formats, matters of tone, diction, stance toward the reader, kinds of allowable openings, structure, evidence, and argument. It also includes more subtle, crucial presuppositions about such things as how much the purpose of the discourse or the writer’s own authority can be presumed or needs to be explained and justified. In many cases where the setting is subject specific—e.g., periodical journalism or scholarship—knowledge of the audience’s identity also includes a great deal that the audience can be taken to know about the subject at
hand. Awareness of the audience's identity provides, in short, all the sense of situation that makes it possible for a writer or speaker to proceed with a sense of being engaged in purposeful communication.

The identity of the audience, as I have described it above, constitutes, therefore, the necessary foundation for audience analysis. It constitutes as well the setting that shapes further considerations of strategy about the specific subject. For example, the lawyer pleading the case before the court will be concerned with the attitudes of the jurors toward the client and the issues of the case. But strategies to play on those attitudes will have to acknowledge the decorum of the courtroom and the jurors' own awareness of their special role as jurors. As Chaim Perelman points out, "it is quite common for members of an audience to adopt attitudes connected with the role they play in certain social institutions" (p. 21). In the case of an audience for the CCCC presentation, almost everything that one can say about their attitudes toward the subject at hand will, as Arthur Walzer suggests, have to be defined in terms of that particular "rhetorical or interpretive community" and in terms of the role that academic audiences are expected to play (p. 157).

To summarize the above discussion, I would suggest that what a writer needs to understand about an audience, what we mean by "knowing" an audience, can be adequately described by two interrelated levels of questions:

I. What is the identity of the audience?
   A. What is the institution or social relationship of writer(s) and audience that the discourse serves (or creates)?
   B. How does the discourse function in that relationship?
   C. What is the physical setting or means of distribution that brings the discourse to the audience and what are the conventions and formats associated with it?

II. How does the audience view the specific subject matter and how may it view the intentions of the discourse?
   A. What is known or can be projected about specific attitudes and knowledge in the audience that affect what the discourse will have to do in order to accomplish its purpose?
   B. To what extent are the audience's attitudes toward subject and purpose affected by or describable by reference to its collective identity as audience?

Although this outline has the appearance of a heuristic, I propose it more as a general framework for thinking about what writers may actually do when they attend to audience. How much, and at what points in the process of composing, such attention may profitably take the form of deliberate analysis of the audience are questions that I hope the above framework may help others to explore further. In particular, I think this framework helps to open a more adequate view of how different kinds of writing situations may require very different kinds of attention to audience. The elements of audience that I have
described above seem in different situations to take on different forms, to claim varying degrees of precedence and to interact in different ways.

For instance, our businessman writing to City Council probably knows the members of the Council well and has several social relationships to them—friend, enemy, fellow member of the Chamber of Commerce, and so on—any of which might be involved explicitly or implicitly in the letter. He has, therefore, a number of ways to conceive of and address his audience. But his attention seems most likely to be concentrated on their individual attitudes and predispositions toward the zoning issues. In the case of the grant proposal, by contrast, the writer's conception of the audience will be necessarily defined by their role as agents of the institution and by the conventions of grant proposals. The means of distribution for the discourse maintains distance, even anonymity, between the writer and the audience. Here, everything that can be said about the audience's attitudes will concern the kinds of arguments that this particular granting agency is most responsive to. Yet again, in other kinds of institutional prose, like the provost's memo to the faculty, a piece of discourse may serve more than one function and audience—e.g. the President as well as the faculty. Much of the initial attention to audience will have to fall on actually identifying and defining these multiple audiences and then on juggling issues in recognition of all of them, while perhaps explicitly addressing only one audience. (See C. H. Knoblauch, "Intentionality in the Writing Process: A Case Study," CCC, 31 [May, 1980], 153-59. See also Mathes and Stevenson, Designing Technical Reports [Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs Merrill, 1976] pp. 9-23.)

In spite of the differences in the attention to audience in the above examples, all are alike in that they aim toward the second level of the audience's specific attitudes and knowledge, and the appropriate strategies to accommodate them. This is so because the general function of the writings is transactional, by which I mean that they work to produce specific actions or responses from an audience who, as members of the institution involved, have an active part to play.

The kinds of attention a writer pays to audience seem likely to alter significantly, in ways that we do not understand at all well, when the function of discourse moves away from the transactional, as it does in the typical periodical essay and in much of what we call discourse written for a general audience. The audience for such discourse is not part of an institution—members of a jury, faculty at University X—within which the discourse performs some function. The audience comes rather to the discourse to participate in the social relationship—a sort of one-sided conversation—that is offered there. Here, understanding the identity of the audience means understanding what readers expect, the nature of the "conversation," the conventions which govern that kind of prose. In particular, it usually means understanding the setting of publication, e.g. Sunset Magazine, that ties those conventions to a specific format or to a set of assumed interests and attitudes in readers.

In such discourse, second-level analysis of the audience in relation to the
specific subject and purpose often seems almost irrelevant, or so different from
the analysis in transactional discourse that we need to find other ways of talk-
ing about it. The traditional model sees the writer as assessing and accom-
modating specific attitudes. The discourse is an instrument of negotiation. 
But here the writer is in the position of offering readers a social relationship—
for entertainment, for intellectual stimulation, for general information—
which they may or may not choose to enter.

One familiar way to talk about this very different relationship between dis-
course and audience is to draw on Walter Ong’s idea of the audience as a fic-
tion evoked by the text, a series of roles that the text offers to readers, or a
series of presuppositions it makes about readers that the readers can accept or
not (‘‘The Writer’s Audience Is Always a Fiction,’’ PMLA, 90 [January,
1975], 9-21; see also Douglas Park, ‘‘The Meanings of ‘Audience,’ ’’ College
English, 44 [March, 1982], 247-57). Accordingly, Russell Long suggests that
young writers should not try to analyze their audiences but to ask rather
‘‘Who do I want my audience to be’’ (‘‘Writer-Audience Relationships: Analy-
sis or Invention,’’ CCC, 31 [May, 1980], 225).

Although this idea has force, it has remained too undeveloped. Further, it
seems clear that all discourse must in some fashion attend to the constraints
imposed by the requirements of real audiences. (See Lisa Ede and Andrea
Lunsford, ‘‘Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in
Composition Theory and Pedagogy,’’ CCC, 35 [May, 1984], 155-71.) Write-
ers, that is to say, can set out to engage readers in conversation only by some
appropriate estimate of what they are actually likely to find intelligible, credi-
ble, or interesting. In practice, the setting for publication usually yields such
information. But it seems probable that what writers work with here is not
precise formulations of particular attitudes or states of knowledge but rather
an awareness of a range of possible viewpoints. Robert Roth, for example, de-
scribes successful student revisions that evolve by appealing to a variety of pos-
sible responses from readers, by casting a wider rather than a narrower net
(‘‘The Evolving Audience: Alternatives to Audience Accommodation,’’ forth-
coming in CCC during 1987). The general aim of such attention to audience
might perhaps be described not as fitting discourse to audience but as making
it possible for a variety of readers to become an audience.

This survey is too brief to give more than an idea of the range of consider-
ations that can go into audience analysis. But it will do to indicate how the
framework I have laid out might be used, and to indicate as well some areas
that need more investigation. For teachers of writing, I hope this discussion
demonstrates that analysis of audience cannot profitably be seen as a set of all-
purpose questions to be tacked on to an assignment to help students invent or
identify an audience. To identify an audience means identifying a situation. So
the primary issue that our current concern with audience analysis poses for
teachers of writing is not how we can help students analyze their audiences
but, first, how and to what extent we can help them define situations for their
writing. And to this question there are no simple answers.
The most obvious way to define a situation for writing is to pose hypothetical cases—Imagine you are a resident assistant writing a report for the Dean of Students; write an article for Sports Illustrated—or to use the composition class for "real" writing such as a letter to the hometown paper. In fact the only way to have an audience analyzable in the detail we usually envision when we speak of audience analysis is to have a situation for writing that includes a concrete setting for "publication." For such assignments, I hope this discussion will facilitate more useful analyses of audience than those evoked by traditional advice.

Most teachers, however, will resist turning their composition courses entirely over to the writing of letters for various occasions. They feel, with good reason, that too much emphasis upon specific and often imaginary situations can lead to crude pretense and mechanical emphasis on format that robs student writing of all genuineness. They want students' writing to be in some elusive but important sense real and self-generated. Unfortunately, this ideal is difficult to reconcile with the obvious need many students have for a clearer sense of audience. Well meaning advice like, "Be your own audience," while it seems to get at a truth, can leave many students with no way to understand their writing as being for anyone or any purpose at all.

The student who escapes this limbo—perhaps our hypothetical student writing about rock and roll—will do so partly by using various conventions of written prose to evoke the shadow of a situation, by writing like a freelance journalist or a musicologist, or an encyclopedist, or a columnist, or some creative pastiche of these. The very use of a certain recognizable "register" (M. A. K. Halliday and R. Hasan, Language as Social Semiotic [London: Longmans, 1976], pp. 65-73)—a way of addressing the readers, of opening the subject, of organizing material, and so on—even though it is accompanied by no identifiable setting for publication, will evoke a sense of the paper's possessing an audience. If the student's paper is sufficiently like other discourse that exists in real settings for publication, then it too will be felt to some extent to have an audience. But such a sense of audience will, I would suggest, always be informed by a grasp of the social function of the prose—that is to say how it works as public discourse, what general kind of thing it offers to readers.

If we are to help students who do not have this grasp on audience, we need to learn more about it ourselves. We need, first of all, to give more attention to defining the social functions of various kinds of public discourse. It is easy enough to see that different composition courses and different teachers have preferences—too often barely conscious or impressionistically defined—for different kinds of audiences. Students in one course may be expected to write like popular journalists about their personal knowledge, in another like apprentice philosophers, in another like informal essayists in the grand tradition. The current trend to center composition courses on the varieties of academic discourse seems especially constructive because it is accompanied by an attempt to understand and make more explicit the nature of such discourse (Walzer, p. 157).

Second, we need to learn more about how different kinds of discourse writ-
often for public or "general" audiences actually work rhetorically. Recognizing that the model of audience accommodation which works for transactional prose does not apply well to all discourse situations is a starting point. Doing more to describe the conventions of such prose would also be useful, as for instance in George Dillon's *Constructing Texts* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1981). His description of how students fail to understand some of the basic conventions of expository prose gets at a fundamental part of what we mean by a sense of audience. Although it is difficult to say how far such material should be taught directly, my own experience is that students are more receptive to descriptions and discussions of writing conventions as matters of social form and function than they are to descriptions of absolute criteria for good writing.

Finally, we need to keep in mind that the culture of the classroom can be a pervasive influence on a student's ability to understand an audience. In "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" (*College English*, 46 [November, 1984], 635-52), Kenneth Bruffee provides a fine account of the way that students can learn through social interaction to internalize and then re-externalize the kind of "conversation" that defines "a community of knowledgeable peers" (p. 642). At this point the discussion may appear to have moved far from analysis of audience, but at its most basic the issue of audience in writing instruction is one of social development and maturation—of student writers learning to see themselves as social beings in a social situation. Only in such a context can the art of rhetoric and of audience analysis have any real meaning or force in our teaching of writing.

(Notes to "Convention as Connection," continued from page 477)


12. We realize that this right to break conventions in order to alter the dialogue within an academic community is rarely granted to students. Students of advanced writing might be shown, however, how a professional deliberately breaks conventions so that they might better understand what risks and rewards result. For one example from literature and philosophy, see Helen Vendler's review of Roland Barthes' *œuvre*, "The Medley Is the Message," in *The New York Review of Books*, 8 May 1986, pp. 44-50. Colleagues can often suggest less difficult examples from their fields.

13. See, e.g., Jay L. Robinson, "Literacy in the Department of English," *College English*, 47 (September, 1985), 482-98. According to Robinson, writing teachers view literacy as "something that is achieved when competencies are enabled through exercise of the human capacity to make meaning," whereas English departments view literacy essentially as a knowledge of, and an appropriate attitude toward, special texts. Despite Robinson's claim to the contrary, I suspect that most English faculty hold the first view of literacy, whatever their position on the second.