

Lisa Wu

Writing 39B, Rhetorical Analysis

Lorene Delany-Ullman

19 November 2008

The Angle on Engel: The Restraining Limits of a Reporter's Memoir

MSNBC's embedded reporter, Richard Engel, tries to beat the typical "liberal, antiwar media" stereotype by claiming, "We're not all manipulative bastards searching for a headline at any cost, despite what you might have heard" (Engel 295). Even though MSNBC listeners probably hold leftist beliefs, they know Engel, MSNBC's Chief Correspondent in the Middle East, as the most acclaimed and awarded broadcaster for giving an accurate story based on his unprecedented access in the Iraq War (SteveK). Another reason why Engel's MSNBC audience probably finds him reliably accountable is because of his journalistic standard of giving an informative-styled report. However, in his most recent book, War Journal: My Five Years in Iraq, despite the extra freedom he is given in his memoir to depict the situation in Iraq from a more subjective standpoint, he still conveys his story mostly from the perspective of a news reporter rather than from a personal account of his survival of the war due to not only the influence of his training as a journalist, but also because he knows that his readers will mostly likely be his MSNBC listeners who are accustomed to his objective style of reporting. More specifically in Chapter 20 of Engel's War Journal while there are a few instances where he reveals some of his frustration and desensitization to death, he mainly attempts to undermine his negative stance that the U.S. has caused more harm to both American soldiers and Iraqi civilians than help in the Iraq civil war that holds no clear enemy by using unloaded language, an informative structure, and

dialogue from interviewees who share his opinions on the war in order to cover up his emotional biases that might damage his ethos with his MSNBC audience.

To begin with, although Engel does convey some of his anger towards Iraq's incompetent government, the brief yet careful description of his emotions minimizes the potential shock the audience feels towards his rare show of personal thoughts. For instance, Engel expresses his "annoy[ance]" towards the Iraqi police when thinking about how he "wanted to grab them by the shoulders and yell, 'It's your goddamn country!...your inept and corrupt government that you were stupid enough to elect...Enough with the whining'" (Engel 282). This is probably the strongest, if not only instance throughout the whole chapter, where Engel openly lashes out with his thoughts. However, even within this moment, Engel does not use an adjective like "enraging" but instead uses the term "annoying" to portray an understating emotion that the audience could typically feel over meager things like traffic on the way to work. In this aspect, Engel's audience can understand his frustration of being gripped by Iraqi's "corrupt government" for years and having no control over it. It may even show patience that he has only "wanted" and not actually taken any physical action to "grab" or "yell" at anyone. The audience can relate to the experience of "want[ing]" to swear and complain about something angering but having the self control to restrain from action. Overall, his audience can understand the uncontrollable thoughts in a tense war environment which are naturally conveyed in a memoir, but in contrast, there are moments where Engel's audience is troubled by his lack in emotion.

When Engel's disposition appears indifferent to all the bloodshed, he rationalizes his judgment as still a reliable reporter to his audience by comparing his mental state with the war's even more drastic impact on Iraqi civilians. For example, when Engel goes to the "Dora Killing Fields", he notes "Shot in the groin, drilled into bodies, hands burned, usual stuff" (Engel 284).

To his audience, labeling such atrocities as the “usual stuff” implies that Engel has become unaffected by the sadistic acts constantly happening in Iraq. This may lead the audience to fear that Engel has lost his sense of humanity and therefore, his creditability to give the proper observation as a reporter, but in comparison to everyone else also witnessing the war, his audience can understand how impossible it is not to be desensitized to the torture methods. As an illustration, Engel quotes “children [who] were playing soccer” in the “Dora Killing Fields” as saying ““He was shot three times...another here that took his eye out...one in his mouth. His hands were so oily!” (Engel 285). The Iraqi children speak so casually about the gruesome details of a dead body and only give an emotional reaction of interest to the “oily” hands as depicted by the exclamation mark. If even the children are so nonchalant to death that they play around in it as a park, the audience realizes that the casualties have become an everyday acceptance for not just Engel, but for everyone in Iraq no matter how young. In essence, Engel juxtaposes his attitudes with children because if the most innocent minds are not shocked by the carnage, than it is perceivable for the MSNBC viewers that the killings have become the “usual stuff” that is furthermore justified by the numerous accounts of worse murder cases he explains afterwards.

In the cruel acts that Engel continues to describe, he uses blunt language that focuses on verb usage instead of adjectives of the actions in order to maintain respectfully objective on the gore that is already unbearable for his readers. Even in the most morbid acts, the depiction of Sunni insurgents who “kidnapped a toddler...killed the boy, sliced him open, stuffed him with rice, baked him in a restaurant oven, and then served him on a platter on his family’s doorstep” is done so on purpose not to seem heartless, but actually to keep a considerate distance from the gruesome image of a boy turned into a “shish kebab” (Engel 284). Engel skillfully acknowledges

that the readers are already cringing at the details without the need of adjectives and figurative language to describe how they “sliced”, “stuffed” or “baked” the little boy. Creating imagery would just be an insult to overdramatize the harsh reality and turn it into a Hollywood movie for the audience. Therefore, throughout his text, Engel chooses not to add subjective commentary of how ruthless and terrible the acts were because the brutal verb-actions speak for themselves. Instead, he lists the actions in short and concise phrases to build a powerful impact that hits his readers at a heightened speed. By condensing the actions into one sentence, he is still able to convince his readers of his point of how viciously inhumane the war tactics are without just directly stating it himself. By focusing on simply the evidence to portray his claims, he strengthens his ethos as a reporter and on a broader scale, even uses factual format to further sustain his reporter reputation.

Even though his MSNBC audience is liberal, the formal, logical structure that Engel uses prevents his adverse views on the war from sounding too farfetched by conveniently concealing his biases. As shown in the beginning of the chapter, Engel chooses the image of a timeline that is normally identified as an informative tool to implicitly incorporate his own perspective on U.S.’s involvement in the Iraq war. Specifically during “2002-2003”, Engel asserts that the US “starts” the war with Iraq and that Saddam has to “accept that the war is coming” (Engel 278). The diction of using “starts” instead of any other verb such as “enters” insinuates that the US was the one causing the fight in Iraq to happen. Furthermore, the word choice of “accept” creates the sense that Saddam had to surrender to the inevitable which is supported by the stance that Saddam already “expects to lose” (Engel 278). Engel tries to disillusion the common image of Saddam being a crazy terrorist who is trying to conquer the U.S. Iraq is described as the one on the receiving end of this conflict and therefore, had no part in “giving” this war. On the other

hand, both words “starts” and “accepts” are not radical enough on the surface to cause Engel’s readers to question his ethos. Also by emphasizing on the order of events in a timeline, he not only strengthens his logos with his audience, but he also achieves his hidden agenda of reinforcing the importance of the U.S. instigating the war in Iraq and not the other way around. Altogether, it is his factual framework that down plays his audience’s detection of his controversial views on U.S. government’s erroneous decision to invade Iraq; similarly within his structure, he articulates the belief that American soldiers are the ones who have to suffer for their government’s mistake to incline the audience to sympathize with them.

To counteract accusations of Engel’s intimacy with the U.S. troops as possibly blurring his judgment, he acknowledges his MSNBC audience’s possible opposition towards the American soldier’s image. Engel takes pride in all the American soldiers who he “bonded immediately with...[while] posing for pictures together and exchanging emails” (Engel 295). After being an embedded reporter for all these years, Engle takes photographs with his comrades much like anyone would with their family and friends. Henceforth, his close ties with them make it difficult for him not to form a positive outlook on the American troops. Unfortunately, on the topic of U.S. soldiers “losing control”, Engel had no choice but to discuss the “abuse of prisoners...smeared with their own excrement and stacked naked in cheerleading formations” (Engel 279). The American Soldiers tried to humiliate the prisoners by covering them with their own feces and arranging them like high school pep squads, but in reality, they only made a mockery of their duties and tarnished the U.S. military’s reputation. Even though this ruins Engel’s portrayal of the brave, honorable comrades that he has come to respect, this “worldwide scandal” could not simply be left out of his story without damaging his ethos in some way because “worldwide” implies that his readers probably already know about the incident (Engel

279). The facts cannot be ignored and Engel realizes that even his American audience, no matter liberal or conservative, is ashamed of these pejorative acts of their own troops; ergo, the audience would not take full notice of that fact that Engel does not give an equal amount of commentary that would hurt their patriotism.

Therefore, Engel gets away with only giving brief and vague reactions of the negative aspects of the U.S. soldiers without stirring too much upset from his audience who want to take pride in their own army. While Engel only briefly mentions the “outraged Muslims” and the American reaction of it being “really bad”, he basically dedicates the rest of the chapter to giving understanding as to why the soldiers, “just a tiny percentage, were snapping” (Engel 279-280). By not giving quotes from the “outraged Muslims”, Engel minimizes the apparent damage and influence the soldier’s had on the foreigners’ trust in the U.S. really being the “good guys”. The reason why Engel chooses the quote “really bad” is because it lacks any real, harsh criticism. Engel intentionally indicates that it was only a “tiny percentage” of soldiers who were not doing their jobs while the majority was just given the bad image. This prevents the audience from being deeply affected by the little reactions described over the contemptible acts of their soldiers. Although Engel is forced to mention the US soldiers’ few but disturbing outbreaks from their morality, he limits the amount of information given on the consequences of their actions. On the other hand, the MSNBC audience readily accepts Engel’s ample dedication for the American soldiers throughout the rest of the chapter because it provides a comforting explanation to the soldier’s actions.

Most effectively, Engel persuades the audience to venerate the U.S. soldiers by implicitly conveying his own notions through primary quotes of a U.S. officer that the audience can rely on to give experienced feedback. Almost immediately after Engel exposes the flaws of his soldiers,

he dives into the justification from a “senior officer” who explains “it’s mainly frustration...now back on their second, third, and even fourth rotations...Iraq is not better off...it’s worse in many cases” (Engel 281). The idea that these soldiers have been called back so many times is amplified by quote’s listing “second, third, and even fourth” one after another demonstrating the countless times these soldiers were robbed of their dream of being finally in peace back home. Engel is also careful to choose a “senior officer” that the audience can infer to have been a part of the military for a long time and therefore, has the legitimate credibility to support his claims. Additionally, Engel’s readers can truly sympathize with the soldier’s frustration and the buildup of bitter resentment for an even worse thought: “their fellow soldiers died for no reason” (Engel 281). When the soldiers sacrifice their own lives and the lives of their comrades for a cause that grows murky over the period of several years of “fighting dangerous enemies for increasingly unclear reasons”, it is conceivable that some soldiers are bound to grow confused and weary (Engel 280). The confusion over an enemy that becomes even vaguer over time greatly hinders their already tiring morale. Engel does not need to explicitly note that this complexity turns into the anger that fuels soldiers to lash out at anyone in reach because he presents the reasons through his interviewees which allows Engel to defend the name of American soldiers to his audience without directly revealing his intentions of justifying them himself.

Despite the fact Engel’s memoir permits him to give his own biases, he still uses his journalistic rhetoric to convey his personal beliefs in more credible methods. This is most likely due to both his innate tendency to write so strategically out of practice of being in the reporting field for so many years and even more so due to the pressures from the expectations of his usual MSNBC audience. Even though the memoir is suppose to serve as a testimony of Engel’s ordeal in Iraq, the majority of the text actually focuses more on proving the legitimacy of his

perspective rather than the intimate expressions of his perspective because his viewers are habituated to basing validity on evidence. Albeit there are a few cases in which Engel does disclose some of his privy thoughts, they are very laconically limited and the diction he uses buries his emotions further beneath the surface. In this aspect, it is his notoriety with his MSNBC viewers and fear of public ridicule and criticism that takes away his flexibility to write about his intense or vulnerable emotional states from the chaos and slaughter of the war. Or is it actually possible that Engel has disciplined himself in his job of reporting to the point where he has lost the ability to verbalize the deeper emotions within himself because the catharsis would be too foreign or perhaps even too painful for him to expose? No matter which way you look at it whether it is from the MSNBC audience or Engel's own perception, his inseparable association of being a "reporter" makes it impossible for him to distinguish between his own subjective experience and the objective support he describes in his text. As an overall outlook on Engel's memoir...it really isn't a memoir. For the most part, it's just another Richard Engel news report on the Iraq war. Even though Engel likes to claim that he is not just another "manipulative bastard" in the news industry, Engel's strategic scheming in even his memoir show that, as a reporter, manipulation is inevitable for audience appeals no matter what you're writing about.

Works Cited

Engel, Richard. Chapter 20. War Journal: My Five Years in Iraq. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008. 277-299.

SteveK, "Engel Upped at NBC, TVNewser." Mediabistro. 18 Apr 2008. 21 Oct. 2008.

<http://www.mediabistro.com/tvnewser/the_revolving_door/engel_upped_at_nbc_82750.asp>

WRITING CONTEST NOMINATION FORM
UCI COMPOSITION PROGRAM
The John Hollowell Lower-Division Writing Contest
2008-2009

Essay Title: The Angle on Engel: The Restraining Limits of a Reporter's Memoir

Student's Name: Lisa Wu

Student's UCI ID#: 93377620

Student's Address: 527 E. Peltason Dr., #114, Irvine, CA 92617

Student's Local Phone: (619) 708-3919 Alternate Phone: (619) 825-8636

Student's Email Address: lwu4@uci.edu

Instructor's Name: Lorene Delany-Ullman

Course: WR 39B Quarter/Year: Fall 2008

Instructor's Email Address: ldelanyu@uci.edu Phone: (949) 786-3169

Brief Nominating Statement:

This is one of the most sophisticated rhetorical analysis essays I've ever had the pleasure to read. Lisa's essay is a beautifully articulated analysis of an excerpt from MSNBC Foreign Correspondent Richard Engel's book War Journal: My Five Years in Iraq. Her essay is not only makes a compelling, highly developed argument, but also accomplishes that task in finely wrought prose.