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Impressing the editor:  
*Rolling Stone* letter writers and their rhetorical strategies for getting published

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**Abstract**

Authors of letters to the editor face several challenges in their work, among these being published in the first place and trying to persuade editors and others in just a few sentences. Getting past the gatekeeper/editor requires a sophisticated use of language, plus knowledge of the primary audience (editors) and secondary audience (readers). Using rhetorical analysis of 51 letters published in *Rolling Stone* magazine about its sexualized covers, this study considers the “audience addressed” and “audience invoked” (Ede & Lunsford, 1985/1999). Patterns in published letters show that the audience is both real and imagined, from the editor who selects the letter for publication to the larger unknowable audience that will ultimately read it.

Key Words: Magazines, readers, editors, rhetorical analysis

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Readers of print media communicate their own perspectives, ideas, and arguments to journalists, other readers, and opinion leaders through letters to the editor, the primary—though narrow—means for such feedback in newspapers, magazines and other periodicals. One editor or a group of editors may be responsible for reviewing letters, so that all letters are at least scanned and perhaps acknowledged by postcards to the writers, but the most outward mark of success for letter writers is when letters are published. Letter writers must engage in an oddly competitive rhetoric in order to be “heard” by editors scanning the letters and then considered by other readers if letters are published. While the primary audience for print letters, ostensibly, is the cadre of people in charge of deciding which letters get published, another important audience for the letters is the readership of the magazine, who are removed yet another step from letter writers. Letter writers must be passed through this gatekeeping process before their opinions are validated by the act of publishing.

In *Rolling Stone* magazine, letters to the editor are published every two weeks as “Correspondence, Love Letters & Advice.” This project will specifically use print letters from 1996-2001 that comment on *Rolling Stone*’s covers, which half the time depict women—both musicians and non-musicians—dressed in swimsuits, lingerie, or no clothing at all. Covers of this type were chosen because they stand at the intersection of a public debate about the magazine’s past mission and its future. That future, while still the responsibility of long-time publisher and chairman Jann Wenner, was in January 2005 placed in the hands of a former *Playboy* vice president (Granatstein, 2004). Prior to this recent hiring, *Rolling Stone* had in 2002 named as editor a former *FHM* editor, who had used sexualized images every month on its covers and inside to compete against the gonzo lad mag, *Maxim*. Both *FHM* and *Maxim* have attracted a lucrative young male demographic for advertisers, which places economic pressure on other men’s magazines. *Rolling Stone*, though not a men’s lifestyle magazine in direct competition with *Maxim* or *FHM*, shows signs of their competitive pressure by participating in a hiring circuit of former editors of these men’s titles.

This qualitative project addresses *Rolling Stone*’s letter-writers and their responses to the magazine’s sexualized covers through rhetorical analysis, to answer these research questions: How do letter writers construct their dual audiences of editors and other readers? Are there consistent strategies for success (meaning publication of their letters) in their praise or blame of covers, which is a form of epideictic speech?

### **Review of Literature**

#### *Letters to the editor and reader opinion*

Across much of press history in the United States, Americans have expected newspapers and magazines to publish multiple viewpoints as a sort of moral obligation,

even though editors have been free from laws or guidelines mandating them to provide more than one perspective (Rivers, McIntyre & Work, 1988). According to the Committee of Concerned Journalists, “news providers should offer several channels for public interaction—be it letters, e-mail, phone contacts, or public forums—including mechanisms for readers and viewers to make story suggestions or raise criticisms” (“What to expect,” 2005, paragraph 5). Peter Kann, chief executive officer of *The Wall Street Journal*, noted in an annual statement for readers that his paper published “more than a thousand letters from readers often taking issue with *Journal* news or views .... We believe this enhances credibility and reinforces reader trust” (qtd. in Lieberman, 1996). Editors acknowledge that their letters’ sections are not only part of a democratic society, but also essential in building economically healthy publications (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002).

Previous studies of letters to the editor, however, acknowledge the limitation of studying letters as artifacts of public opinion. A review of scholarly studies about typical newspaper letter writers indicates they are older, have written such letters before, are better educated than average, and are predominantly male (Pasternack, 1979; Rivers, McIntyre, & Work, 1988). Hill (1981) calls letter writers “a tiny and atypical group of citizens” in a study of opinion about the Equal Rights Amendment (p. 384), and Thornton (1988) outlined challenges to using letters to the editor for historical research: all viewpoints may not be included, the gatekeeping role of editors may distort opinion, and the total number of letters on a particular topic remains unknown (p. 38).

#### *Rhetorical analysis and audience*

Rhetorical analysis has been used since the time of Aristotle to study messages and the audiences for which they are intended (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990; Leach, 2000). While audiences were seen by Aristotle as external and as properly and effectively reduced to stereotypes to ensure effectiveness (1991 translation), rhetoricians throughout the intervening centuries have questioned his formulaic conceptions and enlarged this sort of audience analysis. While some scholars have claimed that the audience is a fiction that must be invented when a person writes a speech or composition (Long, 1980; Ong, 1974), others claim that writers and speakers must align their work precisely along the needs of a “real” audience (Mitchell & Taylor, 1979; see also technical writing literature). Burke (1950/1990) and Murray (1982) discuss the importance of an internal “audience” for messages. Avoiding the either/or dichotomy of a “fictional” or “real” audience and seeking to show the density of a writer’s rhetorical strategies, Ede and Lunsford (1985/1999) discuss the approach to audience in terms of “audience addressed/audience invoked.” The audience addressed “refers to those actual or real-life people who read a discourse, while the ‘invoked’ audience refers to the audience called up or imagined by the writer” (p. 157). Language used in written discourse establishes the audience; Ede and Lunsford believe that “it is only through the text, through language, that writers embody or give life to their conception of the reader” (p. 167). This conception of “audience invoked” and “audience addressed” as a recursive, embedded process for writers provides a scheme for analysis of letters to the editor, and this conception will be discussed more fully in the methodology section of this project.

A second kind of analysis will be used to study these letters to the editor of *Rolling Stone* magazine, based on classifying them as epideictic (or ceremonial) speech, which is one of three persuasive branches or genres of rhetoric since classical times (Lanham, 1991; Leach, 2000). The other two branches are judicial/forensic, for persuasive discourse concerning the past, and deliberative, for legislative discourse about the future. Epideictic rhetoric is the discourse of praise or blame about the present and seems particularly apt as a frame through which to view the construction of an audience by *Rolling Stone*'s letter writers, since they are vigorously affirming or denouncing the magazine's editorial choices for covers.

In journalism, consideration of audience is broadly discussed in two ways: at the core of serving the needs of a democratic nation and its citizen-readers; or of serving the economic needs of a publication in terms of its demographics and circulation. The first, more idealistic notion of audience neatly combines the two viewpoints: "The theory underlying the modern news industry has been the belief that credibility builds a broad and loyal audience, and that economic success follows in turn. In that regard, the business people in a news organization also must nurture—not exploit—their allegiance to the audience ahead of other considerations" ("A statement," 2005, paragraph 2). The second viewpoint sees newsrooms controlled by commercial rationalization, and therefore more likely to cover easy stories about celebrities and crime than to engage in investigative reporting, in order to reach an upscale audience desired by advertisers (McChesney, 2001). These viewpoints represent part of the tension between readers and editors, as revealed in letters to the editors at *Rolling Stone*. Another problem facing journalists regarding audience members is their general lack of knowledge about them; many scholars have commented on journalists' meager knowledge of the needs and interests of readers and viewers (Gans, 1979; Gaunt, 1990; Schlesinger, 1978; Urban, 1999).

### *Background*

*Rolling Stone* magazine fills a place of mythical power in American popular culture, known for its investigative stories, in-depth features, and star-making abilities. For almost 40 years, the cover has served as a repository of the top names in rock music and has also included the images of celebrities from film, television, and political culture. Because *Rolling Stone*'s covers either depict people who have achieved celebrity power or the covers bestow power upon B-list performers who are struggling for success, not all readers and subscribers are in agreement over who deserves to be pictured there. That is why the magazine's covers have often been a lightning rod for criticism by readers, based on their perceptions of the magazine's purpose. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze content on the magazine's covers, some context will be provided for the debate about cover images, so that information contained in analyzed letters may be clearer. The types of covers also guided the design of a corpus for this study.

In the beginning, *Rolling Stone* saw itself as "sort of a magazine and sort of a newspaper" that would report on "changes in rock & roll and the changes related to rock & roll," according to its founder Jann Wenner in the first issue (1967/1998, p. 2). For the first seven issues, the music news magazine's cover was not devoted to one image, but

sometimes to several photographs and news stories. But before its first year was complete, the single-image magazine cover format became *Rolling Stone's* formula. For a collection of covers produced for the magazine's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Wenner writes that at first he didn't "understand that the cover not only defined a magazine's identity but greatly determined sales and also conferred a very special status to the cover subject" (1998, p. 8).

In the years since its founding, *Rolling Stone* has featured the top names in the rock music industry and beyond, and oftentimes, these portraits involve sexualizing the subject or flouting conventions of other magazines. Whereas a photo of a nude John Lennon and Yoko Ono and a seemingly nude photo of David Cassidy were easily justified by the magazine's hip demeanor in its early years, more recent nude photos of actor Jennifer Aniston and sexualized photos of game-show host Jenny McCarthy were questioned and criticized by readers. It is the trend of these more recent covers that explained *Rolling Stone's* hiring in summer 2002 of a new editor, Ed Needham, called a "pioneer of British 'lad mags'" who has said *Rolling Stone* publishes "long boring features" (Greteman, 2002). After Needham's departure for *Maxim* in 2004 (Carr, 2004), the magazine hired a *Playboy* vice president in early 2005 (Granatstein, 2004).

The belief that "sex sells" seems to carry currency in the current men's magazine market and beyond, resulting in many magazines that use women's bodies on their covers in order to gain subscribers and advertising revenue (Lambiase & Reichert, in press). That sexy cover models sell magazines is taken for granted by some in industry circles (Beam, 1998), just as the "sex sells" mantra is believed to work in advertising (Reichert & Lambiase, 2002). Even *Rolling Stone*, which is not classified as a men's lifestyle magazine, frequently uses this cover strategy. Lisa Bonet appeared on *Rolling Stone's* cover in 1988, standing and clad in a see-through shirt that covered mostly her arms and barely her torso, and that issue was the seventh best-selling cover of all time (Wenner, 1998, p. 176). A decade later, its provocative cover of Britney Spears in 1999 became the magazine's biggest seller of that year, with 233,637 copies sold at the newsstand ("Best and Worst," 1999).

Since 1996, the year before *Maxim* began publication, *Rolling Stone* has featured women on its cover just under half the time, except in 1998, when women appeared on 12 of 21 covers (total covers for all years don't include composites or illustrations). In 1998, one of those women, model Laetitia Casta, appeared nude and another woman, actor Sarah Michelle Gellar, appeared dressed as a dominatrix. In 1996 and 1997, nude covers included three female non-musicians: Tori Spelling, Jennifer Aniston, and Brooke Shields. In one 1996 cover, talk-show host Jenny McCarthy appears in a bikini, holding a hot dog in one hand and shooting mustard on it with the other. While 1999-2001 covers featured fewer nude women, Britney Spears appeared on two covers in both 2000 and 2001 (after her record-breaking cover in 1999). And Pamela Anderson Lee appears nude in a cover with her husband, Tommy Lee, in 2001.

## Data and Method

Chosen for rhetorical analysis were 51 letters to the editor appearing from 1996 through 2001 that commented on *Rolling Stone* covers featuring one woman, whether or not she was involved in the music industry. Design of the corpus of letters, therefore, was guided by the appearance of such covers. Two sets of letters for each year were chosen, so that 12 sets of letters were analyzed, with 6 of those letters about female musicians on covers and 6 about actors, models, or other celebrities. Those appearing on covers included: 1996—game show host Jenny McCarthy and actor Jennifer Aniston; 1997—musician Jewel and actor Sandra Bullock; 1998—model Laetitia Casta and musician Sarah McLachlan; 1999—musician Britney Spears and actor Jennifer Aniston; 2000—musician Mariah Carey and model Gisele; 2001—musician Jennifer Lopez and musician Britney Spears. One set of letters equaled at least 3 or more letters on the same cover image. (During those six years from 1996 through 2001, 58 covers [out of 128 total covers, not including composites or illustrations] included photographs of women.)

Letters were classified along the praise or blame dichotomy of epideictic speech. An example of praise from the data set is “The picture of Jennifer Aniston (RS 729) on the cover of the magazine is easily the best cover photo you have done in the six years that I’ve had a subscription” (Parker, April 18, 1996, p. 16). An example of blame is a letter that begins with “I really have a hard time understanding why an obnoxious blonde deserves to grace the cover of *Rolling Stone*” (Ozegovic, Sept. 5, 1996, p. 16).

After classifying the letters through the frame of epideictic speech, each letter was analyzed for content that constructed an audience. Ede and Lunsford (1985/1999) use several categories for types of “invoked” and “addressed” audiences, and six of these types work for both “invoked” or “addressed” audiences: a.) self, b.) friend, c.) colleague, d.) critic, e.) mass audience, and f.) future audience (p. 167). Two additional categories are included in their analysis for invoked audience, those of past audience and anomalous audience. These categories were adapted for use with this corpus of letters.

Each letter was first considered as constructing an audience as “invoked,” or in other words, as written to an unknown person perceived by each letter writer as a kind of fiction, as a stereotyped “*Rolling Stone* editor.” Ede and Lunsford see this “invoked” audience strategy as trying to imagine or anticipate criticism, as seeing the audience as a “critic” (p. 168). Signs of this construction within the letters were the forms of personal address used by letter writers, such as “you,” “*Rolling Stone*,” and “ladies and gentlemen of editorial distinction.” Of course, letters include references to other types of invoked audiences, as well, and these were classified using Ede and Lunsford’s terms.

Next, letters were analyzed for rhetorical strategies that showed an “audience addressed,” or an audience of so-called “real people.” While this addressed audience was always assumed to be the mass audience of *Rolling Stone*’s readers, it also could be one of the other categories, as well. Overall in the rhetorical analysis, the goal was to find patterns of discourse that showed the letters using strategies to reach both addressed and invoked audiences, to reach both editor (or gatekeeper) and other readers. [Of course, this type of

analysis works well for considering how writers may conjure an audience while writing letters, but it cannot address the question of how actual readers will construct themselves when reading the letters. Other rhetorical theorists (Parks, 1994; Tomlinson, 1990) assert that Ede and Lundford's work cannot account for a reader who resists these categories, possibly constructing himself or herself as an outsider.]

## Findings and Discussion

While the magazine has always featured articles on celebrities beyond the world of rock and roll, some parts of its readership seem to indicate that the pendulum has swung too far away from the publication's original and "purest" mission of rock and roll music and toward crass commercialism and more generalized popular culture. Rhetorical analysis of the epideictic nature of the 51 letters shows that 23 letters were in praise of the covers, while 27 were critical of the covers, with 1 letter coded as neutral. This preliminary analysis was conducted to gauge the distribution of praise and blame letters, as chosen by editors for publication, and also to help determine whether rhetorical patterns of audience appeals were different for praise versus blame.

While each letter was considered to be using the "audience invoked" strategy of imagining a fictionalized "editor critic" as the addressee and gatekeeper, other kinds of invoked audiences were discovered in the analysis, including "colleague" and "mass audience." One example of a synthesis of the colleague and mass audience under the invoked category was from a letter condemning the magazine for running a nude photo of model Laetitia Casta, in which the writer constructs herself as speaking for all female readers and constructs the magazine as losing credibility with these readers, imagining criticism based on her own.

Ex. 1 Your magazine was offensive to all of the women who read your magazine....

It's a shame you have fallen prey to the worn-out theory that you can sell more of anything by catering to men's sexual fantasies. You have debased your female readers and screwed your own credibility in the bargain.  
(Osbon, Oct. 1, 1998, p. 16)

In the letter, the writer speaks for herself and an imagined set of female colleagues/readers, giving this fictionalized set of colleagues the ability to grant or withdraw credibility from the magazine itself. And yet, she addresses the "real" audience of editors by chastising them and making concrete the offense of "your magazine" and additionally referring to the economic benefit to the magazine of using such a cover image.

A similar strategy is found in a letter of praise for a different, but still provocative, cover of Jennifer Aniston.

Ex. 2 I opened my little metal mailbox, expecting bills. Today, though, I retrieved my copy of *Rolling Stone* and was psyched. I then predicted the many letters that I'm sure are forthcoming about having a beautiful female on the

cover who has nothing to do with rock & roll. Regardless of what others say, Jennifer Aniston rocks. Speaking on behalf of all the heterosexual males who read your fine magazine, thank you very much! And I'm sure that the article is great, as well.  
(Davis, April 15, 1999, p. 24)

The writer first converses with himself, as a real audience addressed, about his actions before looking at the magazine. He also addresses the magazine directly, by writing “thank you very much. And I'm sure the article is great, as well.” But in between his internal dialogue with a real self and his external gratitude to the real magazine's editors, the writer discloses a prediction about a future invoked audience, one that he believes will criticize the cover image. He then imagines another invoked audience that will appreciate her photograph and writes that he is “speaking on their behalf.”

This is a common rhetorical strategy in the *Rolling Stone* letters: speaking for other imagined readers who must share the opinion of the letter writer, whether that letter writer is praising or blaming the magazine. Since it is found in this data set as common, then it may also be seen as a successful strategy as well, for in speaking past the editor/critic, the writer is addressing and invoking a mass audience that he or she perceives as having a similar opinion.

- Ex. 3 OK, Gisele makes millions of dollars, she eats what she wants.... And I should care about this? Do us a favor in the future and just stick to the pictures. (Mabry, Oct. 26, 2000, p. 16)
- Ex. 4 Britney has the entire package—thanks for capturing that. I cannot wait to see what she has in store for us next. (Gilles, Nov. 8, 2001, p. 18)
- Ex. 5 Plenty of fans are no doubt eager to see more of Spears' personality in her songwriting. (Farrell, Nov. 8, 2001, p. 18)

In each of examples 1 through 5, the writers in some way project their own opinions onto a fictionalized, invoked audience of readers, by using words such as “us” (examples 3 and 4) and the understood “we” of example 2, or by using less personal words such as “plenty of fans” (example 5) and “female readers” (example 1).

One letter writer in response to Laetitia Casta's nude cover projects two fictionalized audiences of readers, one group that would agree with him and one group that would disagree:

- Ex. 6 Sex need not be tucked away in America's closets. We are all undeniably humans, complete with hormones and primal urges. Those who are ashamed of their own bodies are probably the ones who complain the most about seeing nudity in general. Your cover proclaims freedom—so let freedom ring! (Faage, Oct. 1, 1998, p. 16)

The writer first uses “we” to make “undeniable” assertions about all people and then describes another group of people—fictionalized readers—who will complain about the cover.

A kind of opposite tack is used in two letters about Sandra Bullock, when the writers imagine and invoke a fictional mass audience that holds an opposite opinion to their own.

- Ex. 7 I’m sure you’re going to get loads of letters telling you Sandra Bullock’s boring, talentless, just a box-office face. Well, ladies and gentlemen of editorial distinction, nothing could be further from the truth. At a time when withering blondes are posturing alongside every Hollywood boulevard, it’s great to see a strong, independent and, yes, beautiful woman flourish. Thanks, *Rolling Stone*, for understanding this. (Greer, Aug. 21, 1997, p. 16)
- Ex. 8 Ah, “*Rolling Stone*,” what an elegant cover story on Sandra Bullock. In this flesh-fueled age of *More, more, more, are those real or fake?* it was hugely reassuring to see an honest, well-scrubbed portrait of Bullock grace your front. (Sherk, Aug. 21, 1997, p. 16)
- Ex. 9 I know how all these feminists are going to bash you for putting another half-naked girl on the cover, but I must say thank you. Britney Spears is the greatest cover ever. (Rushin, May 27, 1999, p. 16)

In example 7, the writer imagines readers’ letters of protest by invoking that fictional audience, and in the next sentence, acknowledges the invoked audience of editors with “ladies and gentlemen.” At the letter’s end, however, the writer addresses the “editor/critic” concretely by offering thanks. Example 8’s use of an invoked audience is more subtle, in its fictionalized dialogue of “More, more, more, are those real or fake?” as a way of projecting that mentality on others. Angry “feminists” are created in example 9, as a fictionalized protest group against the magazine.

A fictionalized mass audience is also invoked by letter writers when they refer to “the world.” Two examples are included in the sample of 51 letters:

- Ex. 10 Many female musicians are receiving the credit they deserve (cover story on Sarah McLachlan)...*Rolling Stone* has always provided me with good coverage of musicians, female and male, and it is nice to know the rest of the world is finally following. (Suelflow, June 25, 1998, p. 10)
- Ex. 11 It’s about time the world opened its eyes to what Jewel has to offer. (Winright, June 26, 1997, p. 12)

In both examples 10 and 11, the text equates *Rolling Stone* and its readers to a kind of approving worldwide audience.

Two other strategies are used by letter writers either to address or to invoke real or imagined audiences, and these patterns are just slightly less common than the fictionalized mass audience, friends/colleagues-like-me approach in the aforementioned examples. One of these strategies is the concrete addressing of the journalist as audience, when letter writers praise or blame *Rolling Stone* journalists for writing about those featured on the cover. This is done directly in some examples, and indirectly in others, such as the following:

- Ex. 12 Cheers to writer Fred Schruers, whose story on Sandra Bullock was surprisingly, well, um, terrific....Yes, Schruers should be thanked for putting a little rock & roll into the blue-light special. (McDevitt, Aug. 21, 1997, p. 16)
- Ex. 13 Once again, Jancee Dunn has come through for *Rolling Stone*. She has not only given us a painful and touching look into Jewel's past but also has written a story that anyone would enjoy. (Lee, June 26, 1997, p. 12)
- Ex. 14 In reference to Chris Mundy's Sarah McLachlan article, I must play the role of the swine a la male....Mr. Mundy should have thought about the bands behind the pretty faces selling those Lilith Fair tickets. (Campbell, June 25, 1998, p. 10)

In examples 12 through 14, the writers are addressed in the third person, with the mediator being *Rolling Stone* editors (audience addressed) in the role of real-life boss.

One final pattern for discussion is the practice of letter writers of directly addressing the cover model or musician, in a kind of fictionalized exchange. Again, the synthesis of an actual audience and invoked audience is seen in these letters:

- Ex. 15 Thank you, Jewel, for allowing us to get a little closer to you. (Lee, June 26, 1997, p. 12)
- Ex. 16 Mariah (Carey), sweetie, you don't need to lose a single ounce. Joan Rivers bad-mouths everyone who crosses her path. You should know better than to take her comments seriously, and I think everyone else knows it, too. You're beautiful! (Su, March 30, 2000, p. 12)
- Ex. 17 Hey, Jen (Aniston), you're thirty—big fuckin' deal. (Johnson, April 15, 1999, p. 24)

While these letters are ostensibly addressed to real people, these comments are contained in letters that were first mailed or e-mailed to the magazine, and then published there in a kind of competition. The letter writers had no inkling, when these letters were written, that anyone besides a *Rolling Stone* editor would ever see them, and therefore, these references to actual people are categorized as invoked or imagined audiences.

Two letters are included in the anomalous category of invoked audience, a category that doesn't exist for addressed audience in Ede's and Lunsford's scheme. Using the plural "you," one invokes the audience of *Rolling Stone* editors as a group of pedophiles, while invoking another audience as the Spears' family in Louisiana:

Ex. 18 Here's hoping children's services of Louisiana shows up on the Spears' porch and the vice squad of New York comes knockin' on *Rolling Stone's* door. You both should be ashamed. (Bingaman, May 27, 1999, p. 16)

The other is much more playfully written. In example 19, the letter-writer appeals to the magazine as a thing unto itself:

Ex. 19 Is it possible to be in love with a magazine cover? May I marry issue 793? I promise to be faithful and to renew my subscription in a timely manner. (Huete, Oct. 1, 1998, p. 16)

Both examples 18 and 19 creatively blame and praise the magazine, and these strategies, bound up as they are with the question of audience, helped to ensure that these letters were not only read, but also published.

### Conclusions and Implications

The balance of epideictic speech used in these 51 letters, with a little more than half blaming and a little less than half praising *Rolling Stone* for its selection of cover images and profiles, seems to indicate in this small sample that the magazine is not afraid of printing critical letters about its covers. In fact, the letters about covers are almost always the first to be presented in every issue across these six years, so the magazine recognizes this debate as important to its readership. Regardless of whether the letters condemn or praise the magazine, those chosen for publication display a rhetorical sensibility that may be studied through the writer's evocation of audience within the text of the letters themselves. All writers had to invoke an audience of the editor/critic who would serve as a gatekeeper, but additionally, they had to address a real audience of *Rolling Stone* journalists, editors, and other readers. Instead of being mundane "I hate" or "I like" letters, these messages used a sophisticated oscillation between the invoked and addressed audience, along with a good portion of emotion in order to reach those audiences.

Patterns that emerged from this study show that a writer's sense of audience is important. Letter examples 1 through 11 depict strategies for appealing to or referring to an audience beyond the writers themselves in a fictionalized fashion, while examples 12 through 14 use strategies that meant addressing real journalists by name. Further examples fitting this audience-oriented rhetorical strategy showed writers personally "speaking" to people whose images had appeared on the cover.

Through their attempts to reach an audience, letter writers used a variety of strategies to appeal to editors and to other audiences: humor, directness, personal narrative, and others. The dialogue among real and imagined editors and letter writers—and these writers' extended audiences of other readers and the world beyond—show the

sophistication of discourse used on a page often taken for granted in publications. The audience is both real and imagined, from both the real and imagined editor “critic” who selects the letter for publication to the larger unknowable mass audience that will ultimately read it. Behind all of this effort are the letter writers’ attempts to persuade editors and readers of the rightness in their positions, using a few chosen words and sentences.

While these readers’ letters do not necessarily represent the views of most *Rolling Stone* subscribers, they could serve as an initial gauge for the magazine, which seems at a crossroads in its history based on changing editorial leadership and other signs of stress. A content analysis of letters would provide topics to be used by the magazine for focus groups or surveys of readers in order to improve the magazine and solidify its identity, which is being questioned on these letters pages. Circulation for the magazine, essentially flat for the past three years at around 1.3 million (Fine, 2003; Granatstein, 2004), might respond to changes in *Rolling Stone*’s cover formula, and certainly its single-issue sales would be affected by cover images, which these letters address. A more cynical view of these letters’ purpose, whether they are praising or condemning the magazine’s covers, might be that they focus even more attention on cover images to maintain controversy and interest in *Rolling Stone*.

Critical readers’ voices also might be a kind of “canary in the mine shaft” warning system, since these letters were published in the time prior to the magazine’s dropping advertising page numbers in early 2002 (Granatstein, 2002) and flat circulation figures. Editors and reporters have been shown to rely on letters for direction in their coverage and operations (Hynds, 1991; Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1991), so these letters about covers should not be dismissed by editors as interesting enough for publishing but not important enough for considering beyond their inclusion in the magazine. In terms of best communication practices, these letters represent opinions that should be carefully considered by their first audience, editors, rather than being processed only for their entertainment value to their second audience of other readers.

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