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Discourse and counter discourse in the “sin” industries: The case of the gambling industry in the United States

Shaeda Isani

1. The “sin” industries

- 1 It may be considered that the corollary of Internet-facilitated freedom of expression, the right to know, the demand for transparency and the need for instant information is the right to debate, to argue and to contest. This article proposes to study the increasingly vocal debate taking place via web sites with regard to certain industries perceived as directly or indirectly harmful to society. In an approach based on discourse and semiotic analysis and with the help of conceptual tools borrowed from the field of argumentation theory, this article studies the discourse and counter discourse currently being framed regarding one of the so-called “sin” industries.
- 2 Certain sectors of economic activity are more or less respectable, more or less acceptable than others. This acceptability however is so heavily conditioned by cultural values that it is difficult to single out any one area of economic activity which may be considered a universally consensual object of opprobrium. A recent article in *The Economist* (2007), entitled “World Cup Worries”, illustrates the point at issue with regard to the status of the world’s oldest profession in two countries with cultures which, if perhaps not close cultures, nevertheless share a number of common features, Germany and South Africa, the former and future World Cup host countries: in the former, 400,000 prostitutes are regarded as ordinary, tax-paying citizens entitled to social benefits, whereas in the latter, the profession was declared illegal in the 1950s and has been banned ever since.

- 3 In spite of the “anthropologico-relativistic” nature of the debate (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004: 15) and the resulting absence of consensus, it may nonetheless be agreed that certain “sin industries” generate greater transgenerational and cross-cultural opprobrium than others, in particular the three sectors described by Atherton (2006: 97) as “the unholy trinity of drinking, sex and gambling.”
- 4 Today, the notion of “sin” with regard to this context has lost a great deal of its original moral connotation and has been extended to embrace an increasing number of economic sectors whose activities are perceived humanly, ethically or environmentally harmful in one way or another. As such, industries related to nuclear energy, arms, oil, tobacco and chemicals have become the focus of criticism and the object of different forms of militant action. In a groundswell movement, other less egregiously harmful industries such as the fast-food industries, tourism, pharmaceuticals, insurance, the stock exchange and even banks are also under attack and increasingly branded as “sin” industries. (Isani 2006)
- 5 Several reasons explain this trend which may appear somewhat paradoxical in view of the increasing liberalisation of social mores. One explanation is, of course, the series of highly publicised corporate scandals which marked the end of the last century in the United States – Enron and WorldCom, for example – and the resulting decline in the credibility of corporate leaders today. Another explanation is the heightened awareness of environmental disasters and other abuses generated by unbridled consumerism and in the name of the consumer, leading to a backlash in the form of “consumer power” and a call for a more responsible approach to consumerism. Today, aided by that all-powerful medium of information diffusion, the Internet, organisations of various hues and shapes constitute powerful lobbies which monitor, rank, denounce and sanction, thus obliging companies to toe more ethical lines under the vigilant eyes of self- or officially-appointed watchdog committees and associations. (Isani 2006)
- 6 Even if, in the current ethos of heightened ethical vigilance, the notion of “sin” industries is constantly widening the frontiers of application, in the context of this discussion, the “sin” industry I have chosen to focus on belongs to one of the most traditional: gambling.

2. Gambling

2.1. Definition

- 7 In spite of its occasional use as a system of decision-making (the practice of casting and drawing lots) or its widespread use as a metaphor, the fundamental definition of gambling is an economic one, which the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* online defines as “The betting or staking of something of value, with consciousness of risk and hope of gain, on the outcome of a game, a contest, or an uncertain event whose result may be determined by chance or accident [...]”
- 8 On the basis of this definition, each and every one of us is likely to qualify as a gambling *homo ludens* (Huizanga 1950 [1939]) since it covers activities ranging from roulette and baccarat, horse-racing and the football pools to scratch cards, bingo and the national lottery. As such, gambling cuts across cultures, social classes and age groups:

Gambling has infatuated human beings since the beginnings of time. [...] The desire to seek out risk seems to be a universal human phenomenon, uniting all societies –

ancient and modern, western and oriental. [...] Not just all societies but all levels of society, too: from royalty – the Queen of England is known to like a flutter on the nags and on internet companies; to academics – Isaac Newton lost a bundle in a punt on the South Sea Bubble; politicians – Richard Nixon funded his early political career with his winnings from poker; and writers like Dostoevsky, who was as addicted a gambler as any. The urge to gamble unites the aristocrats, who lost vast estates in the gaming clubs of 18th century England, with the working man whose natural habitat is Jack Lee’s betting shop. (Atherton, 2006: xvii-xviii)

- 9 In a founding study on gambling, French sociologist Roger Caillois (2001 [1958]) distinguishes between two fundamental types of gambling based on the principles of *alea* (dice) and *agôn* (competition), difference summarised by Huizanga as “contest and play” (1950 [1939]: 30). Gambling based on the principle of *alea* involves games of pure chance where the adversary is Fate or Lady Luck – “destiny is the sole artisan of victory” (Caillois 2001 [1958]: 17) – as, for example, is the case with games of dice, roulette, baccarat, lotteries, etc. On the other hand, games with an element of challenge requiring the gambler to “deploy his resources, skill, muscles or intelligence” (Caillois 2001 [1958]: 17) are governed by the principle of *agôn* and typically concern such activities as poker, blackjack, horse-racing and football pools. The frontier between *alea* and *agôn* can, however, overlap as evidenced by the fact that even champion poker players are notoriously superstitious...
- 10 Even though the more innocuous forms of gambling, such as scratch cards and the national lottery, come in for their share of criticism, the scope of this study focuses on the more egregiously controversial aspects of the sector as exemplified by the business and corporate organisation of the activity centred on casino games, both *alea* and *agôn*.

2.2. The gambling industry in the United States: economic stakes

- 11 The gambling industry is an important sector of economic activity in most OECD countries but particularly so in the United States where legalised gambling has always hovered between prohibition and regulation. Today, 450 commercial casinos operate in eleven states,¹ and, according to the statistics available on the American Gaming Association (AGA) website, generated a Gross Gaming Revenue (GGR) for 2005 amounting to \$84.65 billion and paid \$5.2 billion in state and local taxes in 2006. In 2004 they were employing 349,210 people earning a total of \$12.16 billion. Gambling industry statistics are certainly vital with regard to local, regional and state economic stakes.
- 12 Ever since gambling was legalised in the state in 1931, Nevada has undoubtedly become the best-known of the “gambling states”, with its capital Las Vegas, the mythic “Sin City” and so-called casino gambling capital of the world, boasting 210 commercial casinos located on its main avenue, the Strip.
- 13 The largest commercial casino in the United States is Las Vegas-based Harrah’s Entertainment, the self-styled “premier provider of branded casino entertainment”. A company incorporated in 1937, its forty casinos – amongst which the famous Caesars Palace – and 80,000 employees today span three countries and generated a net revenue of \$9.67 billion in 2006. Considered by the AGA to be the casino company with the best communication campaign, Harrah’s Entertainment website becomes an obvious choice to analyse discourse and counter discourse regarding the gambling industry.

3. Argumentation theory

- 14 Argumentation theory is based on the premise that there are two sides to every story as posited by the French argumentation scholar Plantin (1996: 6) according to whom, “*Tout argument peut être renversé, et à tout discours répond un contre-discours, produit d’un autre point de vue et projetant une autre réalité.*” Argument and counter argument – or discourse and counter discourse – constitute mature, codified genres in a number of professional areas. Law definitely presents a variety of examples with such well-known adversarial discursual rituals as examination and cross-examination, closing arguments, oral arguments, refutations and rebuttals, etc. On another plane, journalism may also be considered to possess comparable discursual rituals with the traditional oppositional rhetoric of editorials and op-eds highlighted by surface and textual juxtaposition. And finally, media and politics combine to provide another model based on the discourse/counter discourse paradigm with the now traditional televised debates between runners-up in presidential elections.
- 15 However, argumentation exists beyond the confines of such codified professional genres, as van Eemeren and Grootendorst, two argumentation scholars, point out:
- The practical estate of the study of argumentation covers all the institutionalized and non-institutionalized settings that serve as formal or informal meeting places where the inhabitants can have their exchanges – from official deliberations in law courts and political gatherings to unofficial get-togethers and encounters in offices, pubs, at home or at the proverbial village pump. (2004: 32)
- 16 Before elaborating on the conceptual tools borrowed from the field of argumentation theory for the purpose of this study, a first preliminary *caveat* concerns the nature of our borrowings. Argumentation theory is based on a highly complex system of ritualistic exchanges structured by formally codified discursual rules which regulate the nature of the discourse from the type of exchange to its duration. In the context of this analysis, the approach to argumentation theory is non-comprehensive and limited to borrowing a number of concepts with a view to shaping the discursual framework of the discussion.

3.1. Generic characteristics of discourse/counter discourse argumentation

- 17 Discourse and counter discourse are concepts that are an intrinsic part of argumentation, an interdisciplinary field which interests philosophers, logicians, linguists, legal scholars, speech communication theorists and, in the context of this discussion, researchers interested in the field of specialised discourse and culture. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst provide the following definition of the field:
- Argumentation is a verbal, social, and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by putting forward a constellation of propositions justifying or refuting the proposition expressed in the standpoint. (2004: 1)
- 18 The popular online Wikipedia Encyclopaedia supplies a more detailed definition which helps situate the different generic parameters and possible fields of application:
- Argumentation theory or argumentation embraces the arts and sciences of *civil debate*, *dialogue*, *conversation*, and *persuasion*. It studies rules of inference, logic, and procedural rules in both *artificial and real world settings*. Argumentation is concerned

primarily with reaching conclusions through logical reasoning, that is, claims based on premises. Although including debate and negotiation which are concerned with reaching mutually acceptable conclusions, argumentation theory also encompasses the branch of social debate in which victory over an opponent is the primary goal. This art and science is often the means by which people protect their beliefs or self-interests in rational dialogue, in common parlance, and during the process of arguing. (*My italics*)

- 19 On the basis of these two definitions, argumentation may essentially be defined as an interactive form of communication constructed on the basis of antiphonic and confrontational dialogic exchanges between a proponent who proposes and an opponent who challenges.
- 20 The discursive organisation of argumentative dialogue follows a basic three-phased sequential pattern. The three phases are variously identified by different schools of argumentation but in the context of this non-comprehensive approach to the field, these three phases will be identified as standpoint (also called *assumption*, *root*, or *premise*), initialising discourse (also called *justification* or *argument*) and counter discourse (also called *rejoinder*, *reply*, *rebuttal* or *refutation*).

3.2. Dialogic or triadic discourse?

- 21 Even though this interpretation of the conceptual tools of argumentation is, on the whole, appropriate to the purposes of our analysis, the hypothetical dialogic nature of this form of discourse raises a few questions. At first sight, given that this form of discourse acknowledges only two identified speaking subjects, the proponent and the opponent, the nature of the communication does indeed appear to be clearly dialogic: two protagonists addressing each other. However, when viewed in the light of social pragmatics, discourse and conversation analysis, the notion of addressers and addressees becomes more intricate and questions the dialogic nature of the exchanges. Social pragmatics proposes a more complex reading of the situation of communication by identifying a third locutor, a non-speaking subject, who is in fact the true addressee targeted by both the discourse and counter discourse.
- 22 Identifying the true addressee in such type of communication is often a subtle undertaking. In traditional instances of argumentation, such as debating societies, the true addressee may at first appear to be the audience, non-speaking but very present. However, the fact that winner and loser are determined by judges and not the audience transforms this supposition into a moot point.
- 23 In the case under study, given the commercial nature of one of the speaking subjects identified, one obvious candidate for the status of “true addressee” is the customer, every company’s primary interlocutor. However, owing to the sensitive nature of the commercial activity involved, such corporate communication generally seeks to gain the adhesion of a far wider public, that of all the possible “stakeholders” i.e., all those directly or indirectly impacted by the decisions and activities of the organisation concerned. As such, and to all practical intents and purposes, it may quite well be assumed that the true addressee here is none other than all members of the public concerned, however remotely, as well as those who govern them.
- 24 In such cases, the status of the true addressee – the stakeholders – is implicit since it is not an active speaking subject in the argumentative debate and is moreover, seldom, if at all, overtly acknowledged as an addressee or interlocutor. In spite of its shadow

status, this discreet addressee is increasingly making its voice heard as a differed but nevertheless strong response which considerably influences the substance of the debate. However implicit its role, the true addressee is one of the defining paradigms of this form of discourse and as such, seen in the pragmatic perspective, discourse and counter discourse as a form of corporate communication is a *triadic* and not a dialogic form of interaction. This reality is increasingly being acknowledged in mission statements which now often clearly identify the stakeholder as addressee as confirmed by the NCALG website: “Our mission is to compile information on the adverse personal, social, economic and public health impacts of gambling and disseminate it to *citizens and policy-makers at the local, state and national levels.*” (My italics)

3.3. Defining standpoint and protagonists

- 25 According to van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004: 2), argumentation may be based on a positively or negatively formulated standpoint; in the former the standpoint is upheld by the initialising discourse, while in the latter, it is refuted.
- 26 The ancestral taboos which surround gambling continue to subsist today as reflected in the ambivalence of attitudes it generates, what Atherton (2006: 199), in his book on gambling, refers to as the “schizophrenic” attitude of even the most liberal cultures. Opposition to gambling is immemorial and from early times gambling has been preceded by a reputation for fostering dishonesty, ruin, evil and sin, to which present day opposition has added crime, money-laundering, prostitution and drinking as companion evils.
- 27 In view of ancestral and contemporary opposition to gambling, the standpoint proposed as the foundational premise of the confrontational discourse and counter discourse currently being publicised regarding the subject may be formulated in terms of the age-old perception, “*Gambling is evil*”.²

3.4. Identifying the protagonists

- 28 As insisted earlier on, argumentation as a form of professional discourse and counter discourse is basically a triadic form of interaction. However, having made the point, in the context of this discussion, the focus bears on the traditional dialogic argumentation between two speaking subjects. The two opposing parties here are, on the one hand, the gambling industry and, on the other, the various anti-gambling lobbies such as the National Coalition Against Legalized Gambling (NCALG), The National Council of Churches, the Christian Coalition or Focus on the Family.
- 29 In light of the standpoint “Gambling is evil”, the NCALG becomes the proponent who supports the standpoint and provides the initialising discourse or justification, while Harrah’s becomes the opponent, who refutes the standpoint and provides the counter discourse, the rebuttal.
- 30 Selecting representative locutors for each side of the debate was a relatively easy task since both sides have very vocal and visible protagonists. Concerning the gambling industry, Harrah’s Entertainment, as the largest gambling enterprise and casino operator in the United States was a natural choice. Concerning the anti-gambling lobby, The National Coalition Against Legalized Gambling (the NCALG henceforth), is widely considered to be the most active and visible of anti-gambling lobbies. The choice

of the NCALG is also dictated in part by the fact that Harrah’s website, in a surprising show of fair play, cites the NCALG website and invites the reader to visit it:

We believe that building a sound foundation for public policy on casino gambling requires hearing and evaluating the arguments on all sides of the debate. For a viewpoint on gambling-related issues that’s diametrically opposed to ours, visit the National Coalition Against Legalized Gambling. <<http://www.harrahs.com/harrahs-corporate/index.html>>

4. Discourse and counter discourse: the NCALG vs Harrah’s Entertainment

- 31 The analysis of the discursual strategies deployed by the two antagonists, the NCALG and Harrah’s Entertainment, was based on a study of their respective websites. The discourse and counter discourse strategies used by the gambling opponents and proponents will be analysed in a contrastive approach along the following lines: thematic, semantic, rhetorical and semiotic discourses.³

4.1. Thematic discourse

- 32 Traditional oppositional discourse concerning the evils of gambling has often been religiously orientated, equating gambling with sin. Even in more contemporary times, in the United States and elsewhere, the idea of winning money through chance, as opposed to earning it from the “honest sweat of one’s brow”, goes against the grain of the Protestant work ethic.
- 33 In view of this, it comes as a surprise when thematic analysis of the corpus reveals a complete absence of any explicit reference to religion in the NCALG discourse. Although an implicit, quasi subliminal religious rhetoric may be discerned at the level of visual semiotics (see *infra*), at no point does the anti-gambling discourse overtly express its opposition in terms, or on grounds, of religious or moral propriety.
- 34 This is all the more surprising as Tom Grey, national spokesman of the NCALG and the most prominent anti-gambling crusader in the United States, is in fact the *Reverend* Tom Grey, a pastor of the United Methodist Church which, along with the Presbyterian Church, is considered to be amongst the most conservative of American churches. Not specified anywhere on the NCALG website itself, this information emerges only through extra textual research, as do the facts that the NCALG is affiliated to churches and receives part of its funding from different church organisations.
- 35 One explanation behind this conspicuous absence of religious-based rhetoric is perhaps that sensibilities and attitudes have evolved, giving rise to greater cultural acceptability of gambling in the United States – as elsewhere – thus diminishing the impact of fire and brimstone rhetoric. According to a survey carried out by Scripps Survey Research Centre at Ohio University in 2005, 52 million Americans visited a casino and 58% of American adults gambled in a casino at least once. So much for the stereotypical image of Puritan America!
- 36 In lieu of a religious-based approach, the NCALG communication strategy consists of presenting its opposition to gambling on grounds of economic and social issues. This is clearly indicated in its “Mission Statement” (Resche 2005) – a one-paragraph document – which states that the NCALG is “A 501.c 3 not-for-profit educational organization

dedicated to *protecting the health and economy of our nation*. [...] Our mission is to compile information on *the adverse personal, social, economic and public health impacts of gambling* and disseminate it to citizens and policy-makers at the local, state and national levels.” (My italics)

- 37 The economic and social issues addressed are exposed in two documents, “Who we are” and “Basic Gambling Facts”. These documents collectively present nine anti-gambling arguments which may be classified under three thematic categories, economics, crime and public health, and are briefly summarised as follows:

• **Economics**

- 38 a) Gambling costs non-gamblers. Each compulsive gambler costs the economy between \$14,000 and \$22,000 per year.
- 39 b) Casinos cannibalise jobs and retail businesses.
- 40 c) Gambling doubles bankruptcy. Personal bankruptcy rates are 100% higher in countries with casinos than in countries without.
- 41 d) Poverty increases the risk of pathological gambling by 69%.

• **Crime**

- 42 a) Legalising gambling does not reduce illegal gambling. On the contrary, it cultivates a tolerance for it.
- 43 b) Gambling increases crime because pathological gamblers turn to crime. Fraud and embezzlement become common among formerly hardworking and highly trusted people. Violent crimes also increase, e.g., Nevada is the most dangerous place to live in the United States due to its murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary and motor vehicle theft rate.
- 44 c) Gambling corrupts politics.

• **Public Health**

- 45 a) Gambling brings addiction.
- 46 b) Gambling brings suicides, e.g., Nevada has the highest rate in the nation for suicides.
- 47 These charges, factually and statistically presented by the NCALG, paint an unequivocally dark picture of the industry. The discursive strategy adopted by Harrah’s to combat the demonisation of the industry is to riposte along exactly the same thematic lines, i.e., economic and social issues.
- 48 Harrah’s begins by establishing its economic credentials through facts and figures: the solidity of the enterprise, its status as a Fortune 500 company, its annual turnover, the tax revenues generated at national, state and local levels, its contribution to regional and local economies and finally, its contribution to direct and indirect local employment.
- 49 It establishes its social credentials in its “Code of Commitment” – a variation on the Mission Statement – in which it states its commitment to “our guests”, “our employees” and “our communities”. Hyperlinks provide detailed information about Harrah’s policies in the field of diversity and social promotion in areas of recruitment and procurement, but, perhaps more importantly, in the area of philanthropy, that culture specific American institution of corporate charity giving.
- 50 By its own account, Harrah’s is a generous donor. Its Code of Commitment pledges 1% of its total profits to charity, which, in 2003, amounted to the sum of \$30.5 million. In

addition, the company has its own in-house charity organisation called “H.E.R.O” (Harrah’s employees reaching out) which “encourages” all Harrah’s employees to give of their time and money to support Harrah’s charities, with the commitment that all contributions in this area will be matched by the company.

- 51 In this context, a study of the two sites reveals an unintentional but nevertheless revealing contrast. The NCALG website includes a section devoted to a call for donations – “Click on the PayPal logo to send us a secure payment by credit card or electronic check” – whereas Harrah’s website contains a page entitled “Request a Donation” devoted to how interested citizens and parties may apply to Harrah’s for donations to civic and social causes.
- 52 On the social level, the most important attack formulated against the gambling industry is most certainly what the NCALG refers to as “destroying people’s lives”. Harrah’s is here on slippery ground since it is a traditional, widespread and often substantiated claim that gambling leads to ruin, divorce, domestic and child abuse, and even suicide, facts detailed in an NCALG website document entitled “Basic Gambling Facts”.
- 53 The riposte to this all-important social and public health argument is three-fold. In a first step, the counter discourse sets out to defuse the “charges” by insisting on the fact that the immense majority of their clients are “normal” people who go to casinos for an evening of “fun” in a context of “responsible gaming”. In a second move, the counter discourse acknowledges the existence of a tiny percentage of people who suffer from “problem gambling” which is described as a “pathology”. And, in a third phase, Harrah’s – together with the AGA – describes its investment in a multi-headed campaign for prevention and treatment of the “pathology”. The highlight of this is most certainly a video speech by the CEO in person, exhorting “problem gamblers” to seek help and professional guidance through help lines manned by professionals, set up and financed by Harrah’s. “Responsible gaming” and Harrah’s undertakings in this area are a leitmotiv which runs throughout the counter discourse as illustrated by the following extract recurrently present on the company’s website:

Promoting responsible gaming is part of our culture at Harrah’s. Our long-standing position has been that if a customer plays at a Harrah’s casino for any other reason than the fun, that customer is playing for the wrong reason. Many observers have lauded Harrah’s industry-leading programs and practices in combating problem gambling. <<http://www.harrahs.com/harrahs-corporate/index.html>>

4.2. Semantic discourse: orthophemisms and dysphemisms

- 54 Words are powerful communication tools, particularly in the area of image promotion. In this respect, Allan and Burridge propose a conceptual framework and terminology aimed at analysing and classifying use of words according to their intended function of statement, embellishment and distortion:

Orthophemism (Greet *ortho-* ‘proper, straight, normal’, cf. *orthodox*) is a term we have coined in order to account for direct or neutral expressions that are not sweet-sounding, evasively or overly polite (euphemistic), nor harsh, blunt or offensive (dysphemistic). For convenience, we have also created the collective term *X-phemism* to refer to a union set of euphemisms, orthophemisms and dysphemisms. (2006: 29)

- 55 The notions of *orthophemism*, *euphemism*, *dysphemism* and *X-phemism* are particularly relevant to this discussion. The orthophemism “gambling”, properly used to designate the sector of industry under discussion, is a term which carries definite negative connotations. Consequently, we have here the not uncommon semantic phenomenon of a generic orthophemism which is at the same time a dysphemism, giving rise to a dysphemistic orthophemism.
- 56 This semantic phenomenon is lexical manna for anti-gambling discourse drafters who exploit the dysphemistic orthophemism to the full, as illustrated by the recurrence level of the lexeme – approximately every twelfth word – in this extract from the NCALG document entitled “Basic Gambling Facts”:
- Gambling brings addiction
When gambling appears in a community, it brings a wave of addiction. In a mature gambling market, compulsive gambling typically seizes the lives of 1.5% to 2.5% of the adult population. That amounts to three to five times the number of people suffering from cancer. “Gambling is addictive behavior, make no mistake about it. Gambling has all the properties of a psychoactive substance, and again, the reason is that gambling changes the neurochemistry of the brain.” The American Psychiatric Association says between 1% and 3% of the U.S. population is addicted to gambling, depending on location and demographics. <<http://www.ncalg.org>>
- 57 If the dysphemistic character of the generic orthophemism is a lexical gift from heaven for admonitory discourse, how does approbatory counter discourse solve the dilemma of having to identify the industry by the very term used to discredit it? One obvious solution available to the professional “wordsmiths” paid to craft corporate communication discourse is to resort to classic euphemisation strategies consisting of what Allan and Burridge call “upgrading the denotatum” or “dressing up the goods” (1991: 204-205). In the case of the dysphemistic lexeme “gambling”, this is achieved by resurrecting words belonging to the same semantic field which, having fallen into relative disuse, have preserved a degree of orthophemistic neutrality. Such is the case of the lexemes “wager” or “game”, for example.
- 58 Addressing the threat posed to the image of the industry by the prevalence of a dysphemistic orthophemism is not a matter to be left to random remedial initiatives. Hence, the American Gaming Association presents a document on its official website entitled “Gaming vs Gambling” in which it justifies its preferred choice of terminology in terms worthy of academic argument:

GAMING VS GAMBLING

While some people assume the word gaming was created as a way to “re-invent” the casino industry, history tells a different story. The word “gaming” – defined as the action or habit of playing at games of chance for stakes – actually dates back to 1510, predating use of the word “gambling” by 265 years. The words “gambler,” “gambling” and “gamble” all were considered slang when they came into use in the 18th century, implying that the activity involved unduly high stakes. The word “gamble” was essentially considered a term of reproach, according to The Oxford English Dictionary, and would only be used by those who “condemn playing for money altogether.”

In 1891, even The Anti-Gambling Association referred to the activity as “gaming” in a publication: “Before the third crusade, there was no check upon the gaming vice, and no limit to the stakes. [...] During subsequent reigns gaming, although generally condemned, was vigorously pursued.”

Casinos in Nevada have been referred to as part of the “gaming” industry ever since they were legalized there in 1931. As the industry expanded outside of Nevada, it

continued to carry that name. As opposed to the business term “gaming,” the word “gamble” is now commonly used to refer to the actual activity. A 1987 reference dictionary uses the two terms interchangeably, defining gaming as “the playing of games of chance for stakes; gambling.”

Sources: The Oxford English Dictionary, 1989; Fools of Fortune by James Philip Quinn, Chicago, 1891; Dictionary of Gambling and Gaming, by Thomas L. Clark, 1987 9/99

<http://www.americangaming.org/Industry/factsheets/General_info_detail.cfv>

- 59 In view of this, the dysphemistic lexeme “gamble” of hostile initialising discourse is replaced by the orthophemistic – and euphemistic? – lexemes “game”, “wager” and “play” in approbatory counter discourse, as for example, in “the *gaming* industry” and “a *gaming* company”. Similarly, “a gambler” is transformed into “a casino *player*”, “a *gaming* enthusiast” and “*gaming* patron”. A further euphemising touch consists of enhancing the legitimacy of the “g-word” by a “respectable” adjunct, as in “*gaming* patron”, “*gaming* enthusiast”, “*legal* wagering” and “*responsible* gaming”.
- 60 A final euphemisation strategy consists of occulting the dysphemistic term by introducing positively connoted generic umbrella terms to identify the industry, a strategy which transforms “the gambling industry” of initialising discourse into “the *entertainment* industry”, “the *fun* industry” and “the *hospitality* industry” in counter discourse, terms reminiscent of wholesome family outings.
- 61 To conclude with terminology, a semantic analysis of the two texts underlines the depressing and alarmist atmosphere of the NCALG text, overshadowed by a concentration of such heavily negative lexical items as *crime*, *addiction*, *suicide*, *bankruptcy*, *poverty*, *pathological*, *fraud*, *embezzlement*, *murder*, *rape*, *robbery*, *aggravated assault*, *burglary*, *theft*, etc.
- 62 Counter discourse, on the other hand, deploys a diametrically opposed approach. The first semantic strategy consists of using highly recurrent melioratively connoted words related to fields of political correctness, like *diversity*, *community*, *commitment*, *public affairs*, *careers*, *opportunities*, *benefits*, *responsibility*, *philanthropy*, etc., thus evoking an environment of prosperity and good citizenship. The second semantic approach is the repeated use of words evocative of pleasure, such as *fun*, *leisure*, *games*, “a *night out*” and *entertainment*.
- 63 The subtext generated by these two antonymic semantic fields generates two opposed subliminal atmospheres. Described in Shakespearean terms, the NCALG discourse recalls the dark and brooding atmosphere of *Hamlet* while Harrah’s counter discourse evokes the lightness and brightness of the enchanted forest of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

4.3. Rhetorical discourse

- 64 Promotional discourse relies heavily on the rhetorical strategies of conviction and persuasion, the former designed to appeal to the rational and logical and the latter designed to appeal to the affective and emotional.
- 65 Both initialising discourse and counter discourse make use of the two rhetorical approaches. Concerning the rhetoric of conviction, though both parties seek to wrap their economic arguments around facts and figures, the intertextual approach used by Harrah’s, whereby official documents such as the annual report and quarterly financial

statements are interspersed with image promoting informational documents, certainly contributes to enhancing the rhetoric of conviction.

- 66 If both parties also resort extensively to the rhetoric of emotion, they do so very differently: the one seeks to persuade while the other to dissuade. Harrah’s favours a true rhetoric of persuasion. As already seen, it seeks to appeal through highlighting the positive: the sense of responsibility, economic success, caring and sharing, fun and games, etc. In contrast, the NCALG favours a strong rhetoric of dissuasion: the focus of its apocalyptical discourse shifts from hell below to hell on earth with the threat of such earthly retributions and sufferings as crime, addiction, suicide, bankruptcy and violence – the classic rhetoric of fear and foreboding which seeks to dissuade.
- 67 One classic form of persuasion rhetoric is the use of personal testimonials. Both parties make use of this rhetorical device using both professional and personal testimonials. In the context of this study, it is professional testimonials – not individual customers or victims but employees, suppliers and other partners – which present greater interest.
- 68 The NCALG presents three professional testimonials:
- Casinos know who the pathological gamblers are, and the harm that befalls them.
 - Terry Noffsinger, personal injury attorney
 - What do you get at the end of the day, when gambling is everywhere?
 - Richard C. Leone, National Gambling Impact Study Commission member
 - There is no question, in sites where gambling is introduced, there is an increase in crime.
 - Maryland Attorney General, Joseph Curran
- 69 All three professional testimonials, from law professionals and a public figure, repeat the same bleak message, warning against casinos and of the harm that befalls those that frequent them.
- 70 Harrah’s use of personal testimonials presents a sharp contrast in that it is deployed in its classic function of overt hetero-laudatory discourse. The professional testimonials presented come from Harrah’s suppliers, professional peers – e.g., the NIGA (Native Indian Gaming Association) – and charity associations and convey a positive message underlining the responsibility, generosity, reliability and citizenship of Harrah’s as a professional partner.
- 71 If these testimonials constitute overt hetero-laudatory discourse, those provided by Harrah’s own employees constitute a more implicit self-laudatory discourse. In this context, the following three are of particular interest:
- As a single parent and a student, I initially came to Harrah’s seeking part-time employment to supplement my income. [...] After only six months in a part-time clerical position, I was able to transfer to a better paying position. I am now a full-time employee with a thriving career. My story epitomizes Harrah’s continuing contribution to the community.
 - Renée Dugué (young, Afro-American female)
 - Working for Harrah’s has allowed us to purchase our first home.
 - Robert and Jana Jedinak (picture with baby)
 - Harrah’s has brought a lot of enjoyment to me. This is the only job that I’ve been at for this length of time. Financially, it has helped me to obtain a home and two vehicles. It allows me to provide for my family. It has also made a big impact on my morale. Because of the work I do, I have a lot of people who look up to me and congratulate me for a job well done.
 - Thomas Tyler (young Asian male)

- 72 What is the implicit tenor of these uplifting testimonials? Nothing less than Harrah’s role as The Great Facilitator in the achievement of the American Dream itself and its founding myth of “From Rags to Riches”.

4.4. Visual semiotic discourse

- 73 The visual semiotic discourse of the two websites is contrasted on several planes. In size alone, Harrah’s website presents more volume than that of the NCALG. However, it is in conception and design that the differences become striking. The NCALG website is characterised by its austerity and general lack of eye-appeal and attractiveness: a plain layout, muted blue, grey, white and black colour tones, predominance of text as opposed to images, static pictures of “talking heads”. Such austerity is no doubt partly explained by the relative dearth of funds since the NCALG’s annual budget amounts to only \$100,000.
- 74 The subliminal religious subtext previously mentioned appears at the level of visual semiotic discourse. The logo of the NCALG, “the slot snake” – a childlike drawing of a snake slithering out of the cash drawer of a slot machine – suggests obvious biblical references. Similarly, the few pictures there are represent isolated NCALG orators whose appearance and stance are both highly evocative of the preacher at the pulpit.
- 75 Harrah’s, on the other hand, has a lavish website, appealingly crafted to attract and persuade. The abundance of colour and light is palpable. It is peopled not by isolated preachers at the pulpit but by people in groups, laughing, smiling and interacting together, a visual reinforcement of the “fun” and “happiness” lexical theme of the counter discourse. The images also provide a strong visualisation of the company’s – and the country’s – preoccupation with ethnic diversity and gender equality with clearly identifiable men and women from different ethnic backgrounds, whether customers or employees, all visibly pleased to be at Harrah’s whether for work or leisure. In contrast, the NCALG’s one Afro-American female “orator” suggests the token gesture.
- 76 In terms of visual semiotic discourse, the NCALG is most certainly a victim of its own mission. As an association whose message consists of predicting doom and disaster and preaching “the straight and narrow”, it would be somewhat oxymoronic to conceive of a communication strategy based on colour and light, smiles and laughter. Furthermore, even if the Church affiliation of the NCALG is not part of its overt agenda, it is nevertheless there and undoubtedly partly explains the austerity of the website’s visual semiotics.

Conclusion: winner takes all?

- 77 Argumentation scholars agree that one of the defining objectives of argumentation is to obtain the approval of the standpoint advanced or, inversely phrased, to diminish the acceptability of the opponent’s standpoint with the audience for which it is intended. Argumentation is hence a form of verbal interaction which results in the designation of a winner and loser. In the more traditionally codified genres of professional discourse and counter discourse, winner and loser are determined either on the spot or very shortly after, as for example in the case of legal arguments in court

where the nature of the verdict implicitly designates the victor, or televised debates between presidential runners-up where telephone surveys carried out immediately after determine who fared best. Such immediate feedback in the context of the discourse and counter discourse presented by the opposing lobbies of the gambling industry is not a valid assumption since such argumentation is not conceived of as a single organised event designed to take place over a short and predefined duration but as a sustained action defined over a longer and relatively undetermined duration.

- 78 However, what is observable and assessable is the potential impact of the two divergent discourses proposed. From the above analysis, it is clear that in the framework of the standpoint – Gambling is evil – the refuting counter discourse produced by Harrah’s Entertainment is much louder, more visible, more appealing and more dominant than the supporting discourse proposed by the NCALG.
- 79 The discursual odds are stacked against the NCALG. To begin with, there is the incontestable fact that discourse which encourages “the fantasy of the pot of gold over the rainbow” (Atherton 2006: 12) is pleasanter to the ears than the preaching of doom and disaster. The discourse of “fun and games” is also undoubtedly more relevantly perceived with reference to today’s leisure ethos and the evolution of societal mores and values. Consequently, as Tom Grey, spokesman of the NCALG, has frequently acknowledged himself, it is a David and Goliath contest.
- 80 The above considerations suggest a paradigmatic shift. Since the counter discourse is so overwhelmingly louder and more efficient than the initialising discourse, the question arises as to whether it is not the tiny voice of the NCALG discourse which should be considered as a refutation and therefore as the counter discourse. By reversing the initial standpoint and replacing it with “Gambling is socially acceptable”, the positioning of the protagonists would be reversed: Harrah’s becomes the proponent who justifies the premise and provides the initialising discourse and the NCALG the opponent who refutes the standpoint and proposes the counter discourse.

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NOTES

1. These are in addition to the 184 American Indian groups which have opened a variety of betting parlours in thirty states, a sector generally referred to as “tribal gaming”.
2. Whether the proposed standpoint is positively or negatively formulated is ambiguous since, if at syntactic level, the formulation is positive, at semantic level, “evil” is definitely negative. For the purpose of this study, the syntactic interpretation will be retained and the standpoint considered positive.
3. “Discourse” is used here as “a general term for examples of language use, i.e., language which has been produced as the result of an act of communication.” (Richard, Platt & Platt 1992: 111)

ABSTRACTS

This article proposes to study discourse and counter discourse concerning the gambling industry in the United States in the light of argumentation theory. It begins by providing a brief overview of the “sin” industries, the gambling industry in the United States, and of argumentation theory. It then analyses the discourse and counter discourse produced by Harrah's Entertainment,

America’s largest gaming company, and by the NCALG (National Coalition Against Gambling), one of America’s most active anti-gambling associations.

Cet article propose d’examiner le discours et le contre-discours relatifs aux jeux de hasard et d’argent (JHA) aux États-Unis à la lumière des théories de l’argumentation. L’article commence par une brève présentation de la notion des industries du « péché », de celle des JHA en particulier, et par une introduction aux théories de l’argumentation. Il analyse ensuite le discours et le contre-discours produits par la plus grande société américaine de JHA, Harrah’s Entertainment, et par la NCALG, (National Coalition Against Gambling), l’une des coalitions anti-JHA les plus dynamiques aux États-Unis.

INDEX

Keywords: argumentation theory, discourse analysis, dysphemism, gambling, orthophemism, sin industry, visual semiotics

Mots-clés: analyse du discours, dysphémisme, industrie du péché, jeu de hasard et d’argent, orthophémisme, sémiotique visuelle, théorie de l’argumentation

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