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Care, No Matter What: Planned Parenthood’s Use of Organizational Rhetoric to Expand its Reputation

The Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Inc. (also known as PPFA, but most commonly as Planned Parenthood) faces heated criticism in contemporary American society. Despite performing a myriad of valuable reproductive healthcare services for men and women alike, anti-choice protesters condemn the organization because it offers abortions to those wishing to terminate pregnancies. Although Planned Parenthood is not the only provider of abortions in the United States, its nationwide reputation and accessibility make it a recognizable target for criticism. Individuals against abortion procedures argue that Planned Parenthood commits atrocities by offering these services and asserts that the federal government should revoke funding for the nonprofit. This point of view ignores the fact that the company provides a variety of crucial reproductive health services other than abortion including contraceptive services, general health care, sexually transmitted disease (STD) services, LGBTQ+ services, men’s healthcare, education, and pregnancy care. In addition, Planned Parenthood provides services that are unavailable in many others places. According to a study from The Guttmacher Institute, “Among the 491 counties with Planned Parenthood clinics currently, there are no other centers in 103 of them where low-income patients can get affordable contraceptive services” (Covert). Thus, a lack of federal funding for this nonprofit organization would result in a loss of healthcare for many.

The tension between Planned Parenthood advocates and anti-choice detractors affects the organization’s creation and delivery of messages. Its informational and promotional materials address a widespread audience consisting of critics and supporters as well as prospective and current patients of its facilities. Much of its rhetoric argues that it is more than merely an
abortion provider and that its reputation should reflect this fact. This analysis examines Planned Parenthood’s use of organizational rhetoric in promotional and educational materials on its website (PlannedParenthood.org) to address the widely varying needs and backgrounds of its audiences. The analysis will be based off of the work of Mary F. Hoffman and Debra J. Ford and address the effects of Planned Parenthood’s chosen communication. Planned Parenthood’s use of rhetoric establishes its vital role in contemporary society as a provider of holistic healthcare and asserts that threats to its funding and existence are threats to men and women everywhere. The following sections will provide an overview of the methods used in this analysis and the rhetorical situation surrounding Planned Parenthood.

Methods

In my analysis, I will use concepts of organizational rhetoric to examine the communication on Planned Parenthood’s website and the rhetorical methods at play within it. Mary F. Hoffman and Debra J. Ford define “organizational rhetoric” as “the strategic use of symbols by organizations to influence the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of audiences important to the organization” (7). This subdiscipline achieved prevalence in recent decades, as explained by George Cheney and Jill J. McMillan who note:

> Scholars have only recently begun to discover and examine the pervasiveness of persuasion within every area of organizational life, ranging from activities such as recruiting, motivation, mobilization, and retention on the ‘inside’ of the organization to image making, identity maintenance, and political influence within the wider environment.” (93)
Given Planned Parenthood’s particularly fierce emergence in contemporary political debates, this analytic lens through which to study organizational rhetoric is useful because it refers specifically to the contemporary rhetoric they produce.

I will also feature Aristotelian principles of rhetoric in my analysis with a specific focus on artistic proofs. Within the context of organizational rhetoric, Hoffman and Ford expand upon Aristotle’s definitions of these appeals. The authors explain “ethos” as an organization “building personal credibility” (26). My analysis will uncover the ways in which Planned Parenthood strives to establish a credible reputation among healthcare providers, patients, and politicians. Hoffman and Ford define the second artistic appeal, “pathos,” as organizations’ “appealing to the emotions of the audience” (26). Through analyzing Planned Parenthood’s website as an artifact, I will examine how it executes emotional appeals to promote its importance in contemporary society (in spite of critics who argue otherwise). Lastly, “logos,” defined as organizations “making and supporting reasonable arguments,” will play a large role in my analysis of Planned Parenthood’s rhetoric as I study how the organization appeals to audiences by presenting a logical argument for its continued funding and, by extension, its cruciality in contemporary healthcare.

Finally, my analysis will include some terminology specific to the study of organizational rhetoric. Cheney and McMillan explain the idea of the “corporate person,” stating:

…There is a very real sense in which the organization as a whole can be thought to be a person speaking, a ‘corporate’ rhetor (e.g., ‘IBM announced yesterday new cuts and layoffs’). To be sure, any message is created in some way by one or more individuals, natural persons, but many messages appear to be from wholly impersonal collective sources. (96)
In my study of Planned Parenthood, I will examine its “corporate person” and how it manifests within the context of the specific organization. Additionally, I will focus on how the organization uses “wholly impersonal collective sources” to discuss deeply personal issues like healthcare, reproductive rights, and pregnancy. By including these concepts in my analysis, I will conduct a holistic study of Planned Parenthood’s organizational rhetoric.  

**The Rhetorical Situation**

Discussions about birth control in America began over 100 years ago, when Margaret Sanger first coined the term “birth control.” The Planned Parenthood official website credits Sanger with opening America’s first birth control clinic, noting that she “was then jailed for 30 days for breaking the ‘Comstock Law,’ which forbade the discussion and dissemination of birth control” (Our History). Feminist historian Linda Gordon notes that Planned Parenthood “was the only national birth control organization until the abortion reform movement that began in the late 1960s, and its new name…defined a new concept of birth control that dominated in the United States until then: family planning” (242). Gordon also addresses the positive difference between Planned Parenthood and reproductive healthcare providers from previous eras, noting that “Their nineteenth-century voluntary motherhood predecessors thought sexual control led to family and social stability; Planned Parenthood advocates thought sexual expression led to stability” (245). In other words, the company made the significant assertion that men and women should embrace their sexuality rather than attempting to stifle it. This view of men and women as sexual beings shaped Planned Parenthood’s reputation as respectful and realistic advocates for reproductive freedom.  

The controversial nature of abortions situated this aspect of reproductive care at the center of discussions about Planned Parenthood. Despite the fact that they offer a variety of
essential healthcare services aside from abortion, anti-choice protesters often contend that abortion is the only thing the organization provides. A report from *Scientific American* describes this predicament:

> For some people, Planned Parenthood has come to symbolize abortion, which it has provided since 1970. But in all the rhetoric, facts have sometimes gone missing. For instance, Senator Jon Kyl of Arizona declared last year on the floor of the Senate that abortion accounts for “well over 90 percent” of what Planned Parenthood does. The actual figure is 3 percent. (Planned Parenthood clinics perform one in four abortions in the U.S. but use no federal funds in this practice. (47)

Clearly, abortion is nowhere near the main service offered by Planned Parenthood; however, this widespread myth results in debates about whether or not they should receive federal funding. Anti-choice zealots flock to conservative media outlets to argue against federal funding for Planned Parenthood. One such article lists a variety of grievances: “Planned Parenthood has become a billion-dollar organization on the backs of taxpayers,” “performs one in three abortions in the U.S.,” “emphasizes abortions instead of preventative care,” “accused of financial fraud with taxpayer dollars,” “fights laws that protect women and children,” “accused of jeopardizing the health and safety of women and girls,” and “women can receive wider range of care at other centers” (Attia). The perpetuation of these myths leads to the belief that Planned Parenthood is nonessential and that its services could be supplemented through other means. [SLIDE CHANGE]
Despite these condemnations, Planned Parenthood plays a critical role in the healthcare of many men and women. *Scientific American* examines specific facts about the care they provide:

Stripping Planned Parenthood of federal funding would also sacrifice the 97 percent of its public health work that has nothing to do with abortion, from which many people benefit directly. One in five American women have used the group’s services, and three out of four of its patients are considered to have low incomes. In 2011 it carried out tests and treatment for more than four million individuals with sexually transmitted diseases. It supplied 750,000 exams to prevent breast cancer, the most common cancer among U.S. women. And it performed 770,000 Pap tests to prevent cervical cancer, which was a leading cause of death among women before this screen became widely available. (*Scientific American* 48)

Cutting or revoking federal funding for Planned Parenthood would result in chaos for those currently receiving its services. The company also frequently provides healthcare to underprivileged communities, as cited in one report which notes that 79% of its patients have incomes at or below 150 percent of the federal poverty level (“By the Numbers”). Thus, the company’s employment of organizational rhetoric emerges from this tense situation. Planned Parenthood’s rhetoric strives to convey that they offer significantly more than just abortions and that numerous men and women would suffer if it could no longer offer these services due to a lack of funding.

**Analysis**
Materials analyzed from Planned Parenthood’s website are accessible to anyone with internet access through a cell phone, personal computer, or public computer, and are thus some of the most widely utilized materials sent out by the organization. [SLIDE CHANGE]

During an era of “fake news,” Planned Parenthood’s rhetoric seeks to present an objective view of its services and make bipartisan appeals. The company’s bipartisanship is an example of a logos appeal because supporting it makes sense given its ability and desire to help individuals on both ends of the political spectrum. Such efforts are evident in its informational “Facts and Figures” webpage. The organization’s decision to title the page “Facts and Figures” is significant due to the incontestability of “facts,” unlike opinions and personal beliefs. This move protects Planned Parenthood from critics because they cannot assert that it is convincing audiences of anything: rather, they are simply informing. Further, this establishes its “wholly impersonal” corporate person (as explained by Cheney and McMillan) because it presents objective figures rather than personal viewpoints. The page also features an unofficial mission statement which reads, “Through our health centers across the U.S., inclusive, medically accurate sex education programs, and tireless efforts to defend people’s right to access quality, affordable health care, Planned Parenthood is working to create the healthiest generation ever—both at home in the United States and around the globe” (“Facts and Figures”). Its use of the word “healthiest” appeals to pathos because despite varying stances on abortion, most everyone agrees that good health is a positive thing that upstanding organizations should promote. Thus, Planned Parenthood’s rhetoric asks audiences to trust that threats to its funding are unjust and that a lack of funding would adversely affect more than just women seeking abortions. [SLIDE CHANGE]
The “Reports and Facts Sheets” also linked to this page further strengthens Planned Parenthood’s argument that the organization is a holistic provider of reproductive healthcare. This section of the site encompasses a variety of topics, ranging from “Pregnancy” and “Sex & Sexuality” to “Relationships” and “STDs.” “Abortion” is only one option, and its arrangement among an array of other topics asserts that its other services are equally important, if not more so. In addition, one option on this page—simply entitled “Planned Parenthood”—offers specific figures about what clinics do for patients. The attached report, listed as “Planned Parenthood by the Numbers,” cites figures that contain no direct links to abortion, such as the following:

- Number of years Planned Parenthood has provided men, women, and young people with the education, information, and services needed to make responsible choices about sex and reproduction: **101**
- Number of women, men, and young people worldwide provided with sexual and reproductive health care, education, and outreach by Planned Parenthood in a single year: **5,400,000**

Here, Planned Parenthood employs logos because they publicize the widespread positive effects of its organization. “Reproductive health care, education, and outreach” encompass far more than abortion, ranging from topics like menstruation and developmental care to short- and long-term pregnancy prevention. Given that 5,400,000 patients received these valuable services in one year, Planned Parenthood makes the logical argument that its presence in contemporary culture is vital to the maintenance and protection of health for countless people. Thus, its use of rhetoric here establishes its reputation as an important provider of reproductive healthcare and other essential services for its patients. Within the context of contemporary debates about Planned Parenthood’s funding, its rhetoric suggests that the importance of these services to those who receive them
should end any debates about whether or not the organization merits federal funding. [SLIDE CHANGE]

The “Our Services” page on the Planned Parenthood website also makes for interesting analysis. At first glance, the page immediately evokes Hoffman and Ford’s definition of organizational rhetoric because it employs “the strategic use of symbols…to influence the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of audiences” (7). The primary graphic on the page features a smiling doctor in a clean facility (see Figure 1). Planned Parenthood shapes this situation into a symbol and suggests that comfortable environments and understanding healthcare providers are synonymous with the organization. This differs from the myth that its clinics are dirty, unsafe abortion clinics whose practitioners mount fetal body parts over fireplaces.

In addition, this graphic appeals to pathos because it provides a positive image of care given the frequently intimidating contexts in which some patients come to Planned Parenthood (such as seeking abortions, receiving testing or treatment for STDs, or pregnancy testing). Lastly, the graphic is not associated with any specific procedures and is thus applicable to a wider audience and its varying reasons for choosing Planned Parenthood. The company’s inclusion of the image on this page asserts that they provide more than abortions and that its other services are valuable and worthy of protection.

Additionally, the “Our Services” page includes a lengthy list of services provided by Planned Parenthood facilities and argues in favor of its extensive services and accessibility. Although “Abortion Services” and “Abortion Referral” are the first two items featured, a myriad of non-abortion related services follow, including—but not limited to—“Birth Control,” “General Health Care,” “LGBT Services,” and “Men’s Health Services.” By not including a prominent focus on abortion throughout this educational section of its website, Planned
Parenthood argues that its contributions to reproductive care are multifaceted in nature and that, by extension, its reputation should reflect this. The description at the top of the page also constructs strong ethos appeals, stating, “We offer compassionate care, backed by medical experts and more than 100 years of research in reproductive health.” The company’s deliberate inclusion of phrases like “medical experts” and “100 years of research” builds its credibility because it demonstrates how well-equipped they are to handle patients’ widely-varying needs. Planned Parenthood’s use of rhetoric in this section of its website argues that they are a respectable organization and that its services are diverse, widespread, and vitally important, regardless of anti-choice critics. [SLIDE CHANGE]

Figure 1: “Planned Parenthood ‘Our Services Graphic’”

Planned Parenthood employs rhetoric for similar purposes in its awareness campaigns. In 2015, the company launched the #BirthControlHelpedMe campaign, in which it asked participants to “share their personal stories on social media about how birth control has helped
them.” In conjunction with a report released simultaneously entitled “Birth Control’s Transformative Effects and the Need for Expanded Access,” this campaign strove to assert that “birth control is one of the most important drivers of women’s economic stability and health, making the need to build upon decades of progress all the more urgent” (“Planned Parenthood Launches…”).

Planned Parenthood’s rhetoric in the #BirthControlHelpedMe campaign appeals strongly to pathos. Graphics associated with the campaign describe benefits of using birth control that target audiences’ emotions. In one case, Rebekah from California states, “Because I was able to get birth control from Planned Parenthood, I was able to plan my family. After college graduation, I gave birth to my son. I went on to graduate school at Harvard and a career in Washington DC on Capitol Hill” (“Birth Control Helped…”). Rebekah’s story invokes pathos because it asks audience members to feel proud of her success and understand the important role of birth control in achieving her goals.

Logos appeals are also present in participants’ stories, such as when Dakota from Washington DC explains, “Now that I have an IUD, I can focus on my job and study for the GRE so I can continue my education in graduate school” (“Birth Control Helped…”). Dakota’s account appeals to logos because it argues that in order to focus on her job and study for the GRE, reliable access to birth control through Planned Parenthood was essential. By extension, access to Planned Parenthood must continue through federal funding so that women like Dakota can continue the reproductive health efforts that meet their needs. Planned Parenthood’s rhetoric in the #BirthControlHelpedMe campaign contends that they are a critical resource in the lives of many women and bestows importance upon birth control access, suggesting that abortion is not its primary concern. [SLIDE CHANGE]
Conclusion

In conclusion, Planned Parenthood’s rhetoric argues that they are vital to contemporary reproductive healthcare, consist of more than abortion services, and should receive federal funding and public support. The company’s materials employ a variety of rhetorical methods and promote extensive services which cater to the needs of men and women alike. Current discussions about Planned Parenthood often revolve around the morality of abortion and whether or not federal funding should be given to an organization that even slightly promotes it. Within this context, the company recognizes the importance of expanding its reputation to encompass more than just abortion. By advertising numerous other resources and services available to patients, Planned Parenthood expands the applicability of its organizational rhetoric to a wider audience and asserts that numerous non-abortion seeking patients will be adversely affected if federal funding is seized.
Works Cited


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