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Corporate Rhetoric as Organizational Discourse

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THE NATURE OF RHETORIC IN AN ORGANIZATIONAL WORLD

Definition of rhetoric and its relevance to organizations

Rhetoric *is the humanistic tradition for the study of persuasion. Identified most closely with the ancient Greeks and Romans, rhetoric's classical emphasis is best captured by Aristotle's famous definition* 'the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion' (1954. p. 8). This means analysing the art of using symbols to *persuade* others to change their attitudes, beliefs, values or actions. In contrast to persuasion are processes through which auditors are *coerced* to act in particular ways through the use of inartistic strategies such as threats, torture or contracts. The 'rhetorical situation' envisioned by Aristotle and Cicero (1942) was comparatively simple by today's standards because it involved an educated, propertied, male speaker addressing a homogeneous audience about an issue of the day for which the speaker and the audience had a shared interest. Aristotle understood keenly how inductive and deductive structures of argument work in the persuasive process: thus, he spoke of the power of 'the example' (or narrative) and the *enthymeme* (an interactive syllogism) in the enterprise of convincing others. Moreover, Aristotle understood the interplay of three dynamics in the use of discourse to influence others: the speaker or source dynamic, *ethos*; the message or logical dynamic, *logos*; and the audience's emotional and value-oriented dynamic, *pathos. Therefore, from its inception, rhetoric was concerned about the way discourse is intertwined with human relations.*

Rhetoric held a vaulted place among the disciplines in the ancient and the early medieval worlds since it was part of the *trivium*, along with grammar and logic. During the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, however, rhetoric lost its

status as its domain of concern was narrowly circumscribed. Rhetoric was therefore distanced from truth-seeking and relegated to the world of speculation, to conditions of uncertainty, and to the ornamentation of language. This devaluation of rhetoric and its reduction to technical matters of elocution have contributed to the pejorative use of this term. In the mid-twentieth century, rhetoric's scope was expanded and its broad societal functions rediscovered, as evident, explicitly or implicitly, in the works of such scholars as Austin (1970), Burke (1969), Searle (1970) and Wittgenstein (1953). Today there are 'rhetorics' of fields as diverse as sociology (Brown, 1977), economics (McCloskey, 1994) and physics (Pera, 1994). In each case, the central symbols of those disciplines (including models, metaphors and images) come under examination for their persuasive capacities (Simons, 1990). Moreover, rhetorical scholars have widened their focus beyond the impact of individual orators to encompass a wide range of symbolic action, including social movements, architecture and broader discourses of society. In this way, rhetorical theorists have re-conceptualized persuasion to focus on the dialectical processes that link social actors, texts and communicative situations (Burke, 1969; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). For example, Burke's 'Dramatism' includes non-deliberate influences (e.g., when a subordinate anticipates what a 'boss' might want to have done; see Sennett, 1980), self-persuasion (e.g., when public presentations by an organization's representative serves as internal communication; see Bullis & Tompkins, 1989), and numerous linkages between discourse and other types of symbol (e.g., when a manager conflates the power of a formal position with his/her own power; see Kanter, 1977).

In addition, influences from social theory, including the Frankfurt school, post-structuralism, deconstruction, feminisms, postmodernism, and post-colonialism, have interacted with rhetorical theory and criticism (see Foss et al., 1991). The overall effect is to orient rhetoric towards societal roles (Foucault, 1984) and to bring it into direct concern with social and institutional power (e.g., Habermas, 1979). In both respects, the study of rhetoric now addresses the roles that organizations and institutions play in the modern world.

Relationship of rhetoric to other perspectives on discourse

In a multidisciplinary volume such as this *Handbook*, it is important to position rhetoric in relation to other discourse-based approaches in the study of organizations. The comprehensive scheme developed by Putnam and Fairhurst (2001) describes eight different forms of 'organizational discourse' that relate in various ways to rhetoric, including logic and formal argument, pragmatics, interaction and conversational analysis, semiotics, narrative theory, and critical discourse analysis. Limited chapter lengths for this volume prohibit an extensive treatment of each relationship; hence, we offer only a few general comments.

First, we view disciplines, theories and scholarly perspectives as networks of researchers. Thus, when we speak of 'the rhetorical tradition', we refer to certain families of scholarship and ways of understanding society. We are also talking

about a specific intellectual history, a lineage of ideas and a core set of concepts in a 'membership' group characterized by paradigmatic ways of seeing language, symbols and society (Brown, 1987). In the area of logic and formal argument, rhetoric shares with pragmatics a concern for the actual or potential effects of messages, especially those that are not abstracted from their social contexts. In contrast to conversation or interaction analyses, rhetoric attends to the social situations beyond the micro-interpersonal or group episode. And, rhetoric's mode of explanation is usually less concerned with rules or norms of interpersonal interaction than are other approaches to the study of 'talk'. Rhetoric shares with semiotics a sensitivity to the ways that symbols are interrelated, but rhetoric is less structural in its approach to analysis than is semiotics. Narrative theory has influenced rhetoric by elevating storytelling and inductive reasoning to positions alongside deductive forms of communication. In contrast to ethnography of speaking, organizational rhetoric is oriented to formal, *public* messages and discourses (e.g., CEO speeches, mission statements, public relations campaigns and discourses regarding organizational efficiency and change). Finally, while rhetoric centres on persuasion and identification, critical discourse analysis (CDA) orients its work to the concept of power (Fairclough, 1989). In this way, the two methodological and philosophical traditions of rhetorical criticism and CDA offer complementary and overlapping schemes for analysing language in organizations (see Cheney et al., 1999).

Characteristic concerns of organizational rhetoric

The defining concerns of rhetoric include:

- Situations of uncertainty and possibility (for instance, when a corporation seeks subsidies or tax breaks from a governmental unit but cannot guarantee economic advantages to the community commensurate with the magnitude of the request).
- Situations in which the 'intent' of a message is ambiguous for the speaker and/or audience (as when managers of a hospital argue that fundamental organizational changes are being imposed on them by market forces, without admitting or recognizing that the anticipated changes will transform the underlying values of the institution from an ethic of care to an efficiency model).
- Situations in which the credibility or the *ethos* of the source is problematic (as when energy companies argue that self-regulation is sufficient for environmental protection).
- Situations in which the nature of the audience(s) for a message is unclear or complex (for instance, when the World Health Organization must simultaneously speak to and coordinate with governments and health-care institutions at all levels).
- Situations in which the likelihood of persuasion as the message effect is context-dependent (e.g., the persuasiveness of a corporate ad *campaign* on 'diversity' as opposed to the success of an individual advertisement).

These defining concerns differ from a classical approach which positions rhetoric in tension with logic, particularly formal models, such as the syllogism. A syllogism can be 'true' or made true through its adherence to certain abstract principles. The most famous of all syllogisms is: 'All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal.' This categorical syllogism is true by virtue of its form and the scientific accuracy of its premises. Both the form and the definition of truth are a priori and independent of tests in interaction. In contrast, a rhetorical syllogism employs probability statements whose 'truth' depends on conformity to the audience's beliefs and the functions of the syllogism in everyday talk.

Thus, *organizational rhetoric is embedded in or implied in interaction* that deals with contingencies, uncertainties and ambiguities. While classical rhetoric emphasized the intentionality of the speaker, contemporary rhetoric examines a range of communication situations, including organizational socialization (Allen, in press; Clair, 1996), in which intentions are not tied to one person or decision-maker.

Credibility or ethos can be linked with authority and rationality. In an important essay, Tompkins (1987), compares Weber's (1978) ideal types of rationality and authority (charismatic, traditional and legal-rational) with Aristotle's (1954) 'artistic proofs' of persuasion – *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos.* That is, Weber's three main types of rationality (or four, it you add a values-based, see Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Satow, 1975) represent logics of human relations, ones that have their counterparts in discourses about work, decision-making and organizational life. This parallel suggests that rhetoric serves a constitutive function in organizations. The rhetoric of bureaucracy, for instance, surfaces as a broad discourse that privileges value neutrality, universality, standardization, roles and fairness (Cheney et al., 2004).

The audience becomes considerably more complex in moving from the classical 'rhetorical situation', with a clearly defined orator and audience, to contemporary organizational rhetoric in which messages are removed from their sources and audience boundaries are unclear and shifting. For example, in today's organizational society, the line between 'internal' and 'external' corporate communications is not distinct (Cheney & Christensen, 2001). Advertising to outside audiences may simultaneously affect employees, just as messages to employees may affect consumers.

Functions of rhetoric in organizations

The application of rhetoric in organizational contexts can be categorized along three dimensions: the specific form of rhetoric, its general direction and the role of strategy. These three dimensions array in the following dialectical pairs:

- 'Texts/Artifacts' versus 'Discourse/Fragments'
- 'Internal' versus 'External' Forms
- Strategic versus Non-strategic Understandings

For the first dimension, the contemporary field of rhetoric differs as to what constitutes the specific form or an appropriate object for rhetorical analysis. Leff (1987) advocates a traditional focus on bounded, discrete 'texts'. Traditionally, these texts consist of speeches presented orally, but the analysis of discrete texts also includes other messages such as CEO letters (Hyland, 1998), mission statements (Swales & Rogers, 1995), marketing campaigns (Christensen, 2001b), or corporate architecture (Berg & Kreiner, 1990). By contrast, McGee (1990) argues that bounded 'texts' are illusions and that rhetoric consists of discursive 'fragments' or scraps of messages that loosely cohere and never come together into a finished product, but they are packaged for the critic. However, even if they are not complete, some texts *appear* as 'apparently finished texts' (McGee, 1990).

The tension, then, lies between focusing on the persuasive effect of distinct messages or the critique of a broader set of discursive patterns in society. This situation is analogous to the tension in mass communication between tracing the persuasive impact of a particular violent television show to tracking the 'cultivation' effects of violence on television in general. While the former approach examines instances of aggression spawned by television viewing, the latter one focuses on the broader cultural implications of viewers' perceptions of a violent world (Gerbner, 1994). Organizational rhetoric operates at both levels. On the one hand, organizations employ 'finished' messages in their efforts to persuade, as for example, issue advertisements (e.g., Crable & Vibbert, 1983; Heath, 1980) or corporate *apologia* in response to a specific crisis (Benoit, 1995). On the other hand, the same organizations create broad programmes of messages to socialize their members (Cheney, 1983a, 1983b; Clair, 1996) or to frame discussions of public policy issues (Conrad & McIntush, 2003).

The second dimension focuses on the intended direction of persuasive efforts. Even though the boundaries between the inside and outside of the organizational 'box' are not clear, an *internal* audience of organizational members and an *external* audience of stakeholder groups clearly exist. There are important practical ways in which employees are 'inside' an organization; for example, they receive a salary from the organization and can get fired. As a consequence, their motivations are likely to differ from those of consumers, investors, the general public and other groups. Organizations may direct their rhetorical efforts internally by attempting to persuade members to identify with organizational goals and to adopt organizationally desired decision premises (Bullis, 1993; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985), or they may focus on external audiences, in an effort to restore tattered organizational images (Cheney, 1992) or to influence the grounds on which an upcoming policy initiative will be decided (Vibbert & Bostdorff, 1993). Nevertheless, internally- and externally-focused messages are not mutually exclusive; that is, organizations are engaged in multiple rhetorical efforts simultaneously. The same persuasive efforts can be aimed at both internal *and* external audiences, not only because organizational employees simultaneously are members of various external stakeholder groups but also because they typically ascribe more significance to messages posted in high-status media like advertising. For example, when an organization sells itself in an advertisement as

composed of 'dedicated employees who never sleep', it aims to advance a positive image while reinforcing the value of hard work to its members (Christensen, 1995, 1997).

The third dimension relates to the strategic function of organizational messages. When organizations act rhetorically, they make strategic decisions regarding the types and audiences of their messages. 'Strategy' is a cornerstone of traditional rhetorical practice in that persuasion relies on targeted assessments of purpose, audience and message. *Rhetoric, thus, seeks to have an impact beyond a self-contained effect*, such as aesthetic appreciation (in poetics). It is the conscious, deliberate and efficient use of persuasion to bring about attitudinal or behavioural change. In this way rhetoric can be seen as a capacity, an instrument and a dimension of human communication and social relations, highlighting and exploiting opportunities for influence. Perhaps one of the best encapsulations of the strategic function of rhetoric comes from the notion of adjusting 'ideas to people and people to ideas' (Bryant, 1953), an aim that extends to external discourses of public relations and issues management in the goal of 'adjusting organizations to environments and environments to organizations' (Crable & Vibbert, 1986).

The links between rhetorical and organizational studies seems natural because considerable persuasion in contemporary society *is organized and is organizational* (Cheney & McMillan, 1990; Conrad, 1993; Crable, 1990; Tompkins, 1987). This is not to say that the individual *rhetor* is completely eclipsed by the institutional one, but that much of public persuasion today is embedded in institutional arrangements and processes. Contemporary everyday rhetoric is also diffused, just as, for example, the impact of violence on television may be seen in terms of the larger 'text' in addition to the effects of specific programmes or scenes. This idea applies to the realms of sales, marketing and advertising, as well as to the formal and informal ways identities and issues are managed by and in organizations. In this respect, examining the effects of 'corporate advocacy' and 'corporate issues management' broadly (e.g., Heath, 1980; Crable & Vibbert, 1983) makes sense. This perspective recognizes not only the *announced* persuasive strategies of organizations, such as Exxon's PR campaign in the wake of the Exxon-Valdez oil spill of 1989 (Leeper, 1996), but also the complex of messages that come to define an organization's image, identity and culture. 'Strategy' then covers both explicit persuasive campaigns and the wider arena in which influence is exercised – including *un*intended consequences (Cheney & Vibbert, 1987; Perrow, 2002). The question of strategy in broad institutional arrangements is thus linked to reformulations of intention and agency in the move from the individual to the collective unit of analysis.

In contrast to other forms of discourse analysis, a *rhetorical* approach is concerned primarily with the *strategic dimensions* of discourse. This focus does not imply that *strategizing* is a strictly rational endeavour, or that the impact of a particular strategy is within the control of an organization. Research in psychology and philosophy, especially in the areas of discourse processing and practical reasoning, has challenged the rational perspective on strategy (see, for example, Cascio, 1993;

Dooley & Fryxell, 1999; Levinthal & March, 1993; Simon, 1947; Weick, 1979). Indeed, organizational theorist Petro Georgiou (1981) asserts that no organization has any other primary goal than its own continuance and aggrandizement. Consistent with *auto-poesis* or theories of self-creation, organizations as living systems interact with their surroundings to create and recreate themselves (Krippendorff, 1984; Luhmann, 1990; Maturana & Varela, 1980). Through the related notion of 'auto-communication' (Lotman, 1990), scholars have demonstrated that corporate speeches, mission statements, advertising campaigns, marketing strategies and market analyses are *meta*-messages that help organizations *confirm themselves* to internal as well as external audiences (Broms & Gahmberg, 1983; Christensen, 1997). The self-generative, self-identifying and self-protective modes of organizational performance may ultimately overwhelm other functions and provide an interesting twist on the neo-Weberian model of bureaucratic organizations as rational(ized) systems.

Finally, not only are organizations often unsuccessful in their attempts to persuade, they may also be unaware of the ultimate effects of their rhetoric. For example, Heath (1990) demonstrates how the asbestos industry, in its efforts to convince the public of the safety of its product, ultimately convinced *itself* that asbestos was safe, leaving it incapable of adequately responding to the chaotic environment faced by the industry once the harmful effects of asbestos were widely recognized. Marketers often employ strategy precisely when the benefits of their activities are least clear or are most difficult to measure. When asked about *the effects* of an image campaign, organizations may respond that it is part of a long-term strategy and thus beyond simple measurement. Thus, strategy and rationality emerge discursively, *qua* argument, especially when the exhortation 'Be rational!' is used both to win and to terminate a dispute. A rhetorical view of organizational discourse, then, focuses on the *strategic possibilities of discourse in action*. Thus, strategy as a rhetorical concept is considerably more complicated that the persuasive intent of organizations alone.

CENTRAL ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF ORGANIZATIONAL RHETORIC

Key terms from classical and contemporary

Basic concepts from classical or contemporary rhetorical theory appear in Table 3.1 (reprinted from Cheney, in press). These concepts include such issues as intention and effect, categories of classical rhetoric, the dynamics of the rhetorical situation, the dialectic between inductive and deductive forms, and the shift from persuasion (Aristotle, 1954) to identification (Burke, 1969). The remainder of this essay references and highlights terms from Table 3.1.

Major strategies of organizational rhetoric

Concepts of rhetoric apply specifically and broadly to diverse situations and forms of organizational communication. Discourse is used to perform the essential

Table 3.1 *Some core concepts from the rhetorical tradition as applied to organizations*

1. **Locus** of Study: Messages and their *actual or potential effects* (Wichelns, 1925); compares with pragmatics

2. **Function** in Society: 'Adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas' (Bryant, 1953); similar to modern PR (see Crable & Vibbert, 1986)

3. '**Faculty** of observing in a given case the available means of persuasion' (Aristotle, 1954, p. 3); parallels social-psychological persuasion research

4. Principal **dynamics** of rhetoric (compare Aristotle, 1954; Booth, 1988; Weber, 1978; Tompkins, 1987):
   (a) Speaker or source (Ethos or character)/'Entertainer's stance'/Charismatic authority
   (b) Message (Logos or logic)/'Pedant's stance'/Rational-legal authority
   (c) Audience or listeners (Pathos or emotional appeal)/'Advertiser's stance'/Traditional authority

5. The **Canons** or key principles of rhetoric (Greco-Roman traditions)
   (a) **Invention**, or the sources of ideas
   (b) **Arrangement**, or the organization/structure of ideas
   (c) **Style**, or the use of language and other symbols
   (d) **Delivery**, or the nature of the presentation of the message itself
   (e) **Memory**, 'the forgotten canon' (central to the oral tradition, with its analogues in written and electronic forms of literacy)

6. **Types** or Classes of Rhetoric (Aristotle, 1954; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969)
   (a) **Deliberative** – arriving at a decision – chiefly future-orienteded
   (b) **Forensic** – passing judgement – chiefly past-orienteded
   (c) **Epideictic** – issuing praise or blame, celebrating values, self-promotion – chiefly present-oriented (compare Cheney & Vibbert, 1987; Crable & Vibbert, 1983; Cheney & McMillan, 1990)

7. **Topoi**, topics, 'commonplaces', or areas used as resources for ideas and claims; also, points of reference or 'pools' of meaning (Aristotle, 1954; Karpik, 1978)

8. **Stasis**, or the status of an issue: When is an issue active, latent or dead? Through what processes does the status of an issue change? (Aristotle, 1954; Crable & Vibbert, 1986)

9. **Central Terms:**
   (a) Of ancient rhetoric: *persuasion* (Aristotle) *or inspiration – movere* (Cicero, 1942)
   (b) Of contemporary (post-Aristotelian, post-Marxist, post-Freudian) rhetoric: *identification* (Burke, 1969)

10. **Kernel Elements** (Aristotle, 1954)
    (a) The *Example*: the building block of inductive rhetorical form (compare Fisher's (1987) narrative _____ form)
    (b) The *Enthymeme*: the building block of the deductive rhetorical form – drawing upon premises of fact or
    value already held by the audience to lead them towards a particular conclusion (compare Sproule's (1988) non-enthymemic 'managerial' rhetoric and Tompkins & Cheney's (1985) 'enthymeme 2' in corporate discourse)

11. **The Rhetorical Situation:**
    (a) For Aristotle: identifiable single speaker addressing a homogeneous audience in a largely one-way manner with a discrete message
    (b) For Bitzer (1968): exigencies (Needs), Audience, and Constraints (Parameters)
    (c) For Burke (1973): 'congregation' and 'segregation' (in the universal human condition)
    (d) In the organizational context: 'corporate' or organized bodies addressing multiple audiences, including one another, through multiple means, and in an elusive search for stable identities, in an exploding/imploding universe of communication (Cheney & Christensen, 2001)

persuasive functions of the modern organization as well as to achieve specific organizational goals. Organizational rhetors typically employ several broad strategies (or categories of strategies), often by a variety of professions, media and messages. (The appendix to this chapter presents additional specific discursive/ rhetorical strategies). These typical categories of strategy are:

- Responding to existing rhetorical situations
- Anticipating future rhetorical situations
- Shaping or framing projected rhetorical situations
- Shaping organizational images and identities

Responding to existing rhetorical situations

Bitzer's (1968, 1980) famous re-conceptualization of the rhetorical situation has played a highly influential role in thinking about rhetorical strategies. He purports that a speaker responds to a particular *exigence*, which can be remedied through discourse to influence an *audience* within given *constraints*. *This view of rhetoric's role as reactive and targeted certainly describes what organizations seek to accomplish when they attempt to persuade*. Thus, when faced with crises such as an oil spill, as was Exxon in 1989 (Leeper, 1996), accused of operating sweat-shops, as was Nike in 1998 (Stabile, 2000), or simply confronted with a record of poor performance, as was Chrysler in the mid-1980s (Seeger, 1986), organi-zations aim to persuade the public that the crisis is either not their fault or that the organization can resolve the urgent situation. Public relations was actually born out of responses to such crises when oil companies, railroads and other monopolies came under public attack in the last two decades of the nineteenth century (Cheney & Vibbert, 1987). Often, such *responsive* persuasive efforts take the form of an *apologia*, or attempts to restore lost credibility (see Benoit, 1995). However, focusing solely on reactive rhetoric would limit the range of persuasive efforts that an organization can adopt. Organizations also anticipate and plan for the development of rhetorical situations and employ discourse strategically to influence the situations they face, as did the US airlines when they anticipated the economic effects of the 2003 invasion of Iraq and sought additional governmental aid.

Anticipating future rhetorical situations

Another way in which organizations anticipate future rhetorical situations is to act rhetorically to prevent a crisis from occurring in the first place. In fact, one of the primary purposes of issues management is to anticipate and adapt to changes before they occur (Kuhn, 1997). As a corporate communications strategy, issues management surfaced in the mid-1970s when US petroleum companies began an aggressive campaign to speak about values, issues and identities and to shift attention away from their products, services and policies. *At a first-order level of*

strategy, issues management contributes to strategic planning by allowing organizations to anticipate and adapt to changes before they occur – through what is called 'environmental scanning' (Forbes, 1992). Anticipating changes in environmental pressures offers several advantages. The information-gathering process necessary for any issues management campaign yields information that then can be used to set the stage for future policies and message campaigns (Heath, 1990). For example, Heath argues that proactive issues management enables an organization to identify shifting societal ethical standards and to align company policy and corporate image management accordingly. Extending this view, Mobil Oil executive Schmertz (1986) contends that issues management allows businesses to represent their side of a story before their opposition presents it for them. Finally, Littlejohn reaffirms that PR's importance lies in 'being harnessed to assist directly in the pursuit of strategic goals' (1986, p. 109). While traditional managerial practice separates the act of strategizing from communicating about it, more recent commentaries treat planning and communication functions as being inextricably intertwined. And, to the extent that PR is less defensive and more proactive, these links to strategic planning and management seems natural.

Shaping rhetorical situations

Organizations also act rhetorically at a *second-order level of strategy* by attempting to shape, rather than simply anticipate, the rhetorical situations they might face. They do so by influencing popular attitudes and public policies. Rather than simply designing or prescribing measures that adapt to changes in 'what's out there', PR, marketing and related disciplines recognize that organizations need to set changes in motion that they hope will become true tomorrow (e.g., Berg, 1989; Brown & Eisenhardt, 1998; Hamel & Prahalad, 1994). This idea is built into the logic of contemporary marketing, though it exists somewhat in tension with the democratic ethos of marketing: 'give 'em what they want' (Christensen, 1997). For example, organizations that market lifestyle products increasingly employ 'cool hunters', postmodernist market researchers who do not simply chase what's cool, but who also participate actively in the construction of 'coolness' (Gladwell, 1997).

The same proactive and comprehensive orientation towards corporate communications is also applied to documents and web-based material such as vision, mission and ethics statements. Although little empirical evidence exists to confirm that employees and consumers care about these documents or that they contribute to organizational success (Bart, 1998), corporations and consultants make powerful claims for their persuasiveness and for the value of having an overall strategic communication plan (Begley & Boyd, 2000; Stone, 1996). And, Duncan (1995) insists that marketing 'a cause' – such as the core values of a company – allows an organization to invest in a single symbol (or set of symbols) as the repository of the organization's values, identities and culture, with long-range implications beyond the immediate campaign. This wide-ranging, proactive perspective is analogous to Crable and Vibbert's (1986) *catalytic* issues management strategy

and is *the essence of 'strategizing' on the second-order level – the calculated attempt to shape the very conditions of strategy making*. Thus, organizations not only react to issues in their surroundings but also initiate and stimulate the advent of certain trends and developments. Such persuasive efforts lay the groundwork for future rhetorical endeavours, but the power of an organization's own mechanisms may be masked in the process.

One function of organizational rhetoric is to try to influence *topoi* or beliefs and general assumptions held by the public. For many contemporary organizational rhetors, at least in the private sector, the most valuable *topos* is the myth of the free market or what Soros (1998) calls 'free market fundamentalism': that is, the presumption that free market capitalism is superior to any other economic system and that government 'interference' in that system is inevitably futile and perverse (Aune, 1994, 2001). The myth of the free market became increasingly dominant during the last two decades of Western neo-liberal ascendancy, through the concerted, strategic efforts of organizational rhetors (Krugman, 1994; Kuttner, 1997). Because it is inherently unstable, the ideological edifice of 'free market capitalism' requires strong persuasive buttresses. What seems 'natural' and 'inevitable' in fact relies on constant messaging (Aune, 2001; Lindblom, 1977; Madrick, 2002). But, if the major premise of 'free market' superiority is sufficiently reinforced, the myth is available to rhetors in almost any organization and any industry to legitimize almost any organizational policy or practice.

Consider several examples. First, in a number of Western capitalist democracies, 'privatization' has become a god-term as well as a broad practical trend. The term articulates an unquestioned premise that carries notions of individual incentive, economic efficiency, smooth management and organizational effectiveness. During the 1980s and 1990s, even comparatively egalitarian nations such as New Zealand rushed to see how quickly and how completely they could dismantle the welfare state and convert formerly public domains to private organizations (Gray, 1998). Due to the persuasive power of the free market ideology, this revolution took place without a systematic comparative analysis of the performance of different organizations in the private and public sectors (Kuttner, 1997). Even in nations that have questioned privatization more vigorously, as in Scandinavia, a growing suspicion associated with public sector jobs and activities is found (see, for example, Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994). As a result, most public service organizations in Sweden, Norway and Denmark must demonstrate their worth by embracing management principles developed and celebrated in private business (for a critical analysis, see Stokes & Clegg, 2002).

Even industries whose practices seem indefensible exploit the broad premises of market fundamentalism. In the 1990s, rhetors in the tobacco industry found that standard *topoi* failed to mollify hostility to the industry – both in the US Senate and with the US public. However, corporate rhetors reframed the debate from the issue of industry behaviour to a question of government interference in the free market. The corporations did this by attacking a proposed tax on tobacco, which would have compromised the positions of working- and middle-class consumers. Thus, the tobacco companies portrayed themselves as champions of

working people and as defenders of a market free, thereby sidestepping the issues of how they promote tobacco addiction in the USA and the rest of the world.

In sum, organizations have a broad forum for the promulgation of their issues and corporate images. They have the resources, access and expertise to engage widely in the management of public issues, and the gradual expansion of 'corporate free speech' in recent decades extends this influence. Corporate rhetoric serves two primary functions: it draws on existing cultural assumptions to support/condemn and/or legitimize/ de-legitimize particular policies, and, more importantly, it reproduces and reinforces the cultural assumptions on which it is based.

However, in addition to moulding popular attitudes and images, organizational rhetors can manage the regulatory and political environments they face through strategically manipulating political structures and practices (Austin, 2002; Ryan et al., 1987). The most important strategy is also the simplest one, doing public business in private (Baumgartner & Leech, 1998). The post-September 11 bailout of the US airline industry, for example, was developed during private meetings among corporate lobbyists, a handful of members of the US Congress and the George W. Bush administration. Even ranking members of US Congressional committees and executive departments were excluded from these deliberations (Wayne, 2002). *In these cases, public discourse became relevant only after the policies had been made in private, and thus the discourse was focused on justifying the decisions or the process itself.* Invariably those justifications assert that the policy would benefit all citizens, not just a privileged few (Stone, 1988).

Even when policy debates 'go public', organizational rhetors have a number of structural advantages. Pro-business rhetors and those who represent economic elites are more tightly organized than groups that represent other interests. At least, they typically have greater resources and prestige, are better able to utilize the decision processes of legislative bodies, are better equipped to obtain and use private information provided by politicians, and are able to inflate their political power in the minds of policy-makers (Schattschneider, 1935; Stone, 1988; Wilson, 1973). Through multiplex and private networks, organizational rhetors can (1) influence the way in which 'problems' are defined and policy questions are framed, (2) mould public opinion on issues, and (3) define the terms of an upcoming public policy debate (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993).

In the rare cases in which definitional strategies fail and an undesirable proposal reaches the policy agenda, organizational rhetors often employ blocking strategies to 'contain' an issue or to limit its popular appeal. In this way, rhetorical strategies come full circle to become reactive and responsive. Some strategies involve little or no risk to the organization and its image. These practices include refusing to acknowledge that a problem exists, denying knowledge of the problem, not recognizing the legitimacy of groups that are pushing for policy change, and 'anti-patterning' or arguing that a problem is an isolated incident not worthy of systematic attention (Ibarra & Kitsuse, 1993). More risky but potentially more effective strategies include launching *ad hominem* attacks on advocates of change or resorting to 'symbolic placation', including efforts to define a

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problem as a 'private sector' or 'law enforcement' concern rather than a matter for public policy. Hall and Jones (1997) show that this strategy is especially effective in blunting calls for increased regulation following periods of business malpractice; Conrad (2003) offers a parallel analysis of its role in blunting reform after the Enron scandal.

Shaping their own identities

Organizations act rhetorically also by *attempting to shape their very image as rhetors*. Image and identity management, which became popular in consulting venues during the 1980s (Olins, 1989), are revisited in the efforts of 'integrated marketing communications' to unify communication practices (i.e., from employee communications to identity management to branding) and to develop a grand strategy under a highly appealing name. Even though marketing has always regarded itself as an integrative practice of coordinating the promotion mix (advertising, sales promotions, packaging, etc.), scholars of integrated marketing communications envision 'integration' as far more comprehensive. Recognizing that contemporary organizations communicate with their stakeholders on dimensions typically ignored by marketers (e.g., employee behaviours, investment policies, retirement benefits and waste disposal), they aim for the organization to speak with 'one voice' through coordinating all relevant 'contact points' between the organization and its surroundings (e.g., Caywood, 1997; Schultz et al., 1994; Yeshin, 1998).

Rhetorically speaking, then, integrated marketing communications takes seemingly disparate messages, melds them into one, gives them a voice and provides them with a strategically designed persona. The resulting label radiates technical competence as well as confidence. Ironically, this 'new' strategy harks back to early twentieth-century efforts by major corporations to 'give a folksy persona' to an organization, so that it would not be seen as a massive, cold and distant institution (see Marchand, 1998). At the same time, these comprehensive rhetorical strategies often fail to appreciate the ambiguities inherent in corporate logos and symbols, the sub-cultures that exist within the organizations, and the fact that many audiences are relatively disinterested in the identities in which organizations invest so much time, energy and resources to construct (Christensen & Cheney, 2000).

PREDICAMENTS AND CHALLENGES FOR ORGANIZATIONAL RHETORS

As organizations exercise specific and broader influences, they face several important challenges. To some extent, these difficulties are associated with a postmodern communication environment. Three challenges are especially important:

- The communication implosion as well as explosion
- The management of 'univocality' versus 'multivocality'
- Maintaining credibility and legitimacy across circumstances and over time

The communication explosion as an implosion

James March remarked that 'the most conventional story of contemporary futuro-
logy is a story that observes and predicts dramatic changes in the environments
of organizations' – changes spurred by increased competition, globalization and
new information technologies (1995, p. 428). Increasingly, this story is phrased
in terms of corporate communications and organizational rhetoric. Thus, organi-
zations continuously reaffirm that the communication environment in which they
operate is turbulent and volatile and shaped by a virtual explosion in the number
of messages and images that shout to be heard and taken seriously (Blythe, 2000;
Ries & Trout, 1981; Schultz et al., 1994). Contributing to the generally negative
portrayals of the communication environment are depictions of audiences as apa-
thetic, critical and sometimes cynical (see also Baudrillard, 1988; Ewen, 1988).
Taken together, these assumptions reduce conventional communication cam-
paigns to dubious undertakings (Bond & Kirshenbaum, 1998; Morgan, 1999).
With the additional realization that mass media are 'fragmented', contemporary
organizations feel hard-pressed to adopt new ways of reaching their audiences
(Belch & Belch, 1998; Fill, 1999). *Indeed, even though communication often pro-
duces the very problems it claims to solve, the pressure to seek distinctiveness
through rhetorical means is more pronounced than ever.*

Ironically, one primary rhetorical method that organizations use to distinguish
themselves is recycling *pre-existing* messages. In an influential series of articles
for *Advertising Age*, later published as the book *Positioning: The Battle for Your
Mind*, Al Ries and Jack Trout (1981) argue that the problem of *over*-communication
can be attributed, in part, to the limited mental capacities of audiences. Put
simply, the human mind can only recall a limited number of brands and brand
names, forcing marketers to work from what the consumer already knows or
believes about the market, that is, to adopt enthymematic arguments. Thus, some
companies 'position' themselves by trading off images of major competitors, for
example, Avis's 'We Try Harder' campaign of the 1970s and 1980s played on its
second-place market position behind Hertz; 7-Up famously marketed itself as the
'Un-Cola'; and Apple urged consumers to 'Think Different' in response to IBM's
widely recognized slogan 'Think'. Such strategies increasingly go beyond prod-
uct categories to employ sophisticated forms of 'intertextuality' (e.g., Allen,
2000) as, for example, when Sisley Underwear – in a witty reference to the
famous motto of Nike – suggests: 'Just *Un*do It'. And Sprite intentionally plays
on advertising strategies such as Gatorade's 'Be Like Mike' slogan, using
celebrity athletes to endorse and confirm what consumers already know, that is,
drinking their product will not make the consumer any more like that athlete.
Some organizations, such as Absolut Vodka and Silk Cut cigarettes, engage in
self-referential advertising, acting with 'autonomized' images without reference

to anything but themselves or what Perniola (1980) and Baudrillard (1994) call *simulacra*. These various responses, in turn, become messages that *other* organizations inevitably play on to position *themselves* in the crowded communication climate. Thus, the communication environment creates its own dynamics and turbulence, one in which even established positions are exposed and vulnerable (Christensen, 2001a, 2001b). The crowded communication climate, in effect, functions as a pool of messages on which organizations inevitably draw, reflecting their traditional rhetorical concerns for *topoi*, the argumentative resources on which a rhetor may draw.

Managing 'Univocality/Multivocality'

At the same time that organizations draw from a common pool of *topoi*, they must simultaneously manage the tension between casting themselves as either univocal or multivocal rhetors. As discussed earlier, organizational messages are received and interpreted by multiple audiences. Organizational mission statements, for example, not only foster member identification with corporate value systems but also *announce* those value systems to external audiences such as consumers (Swales & Rogers, 1995). Simultaneously, the *organizations themselves* are audiences of their own mission statements and can become so infatuated with the view of the corporation portrayed in them that they believe it *is* the organization (Langelar, 1992). In this way, organizations are susceptible to their own persuasive efforts, an outcome that underscores the challenges organizational rhetors face as they try to manage multiple audiences. These challenges are heightened as organizations attempt to navigate an increasingly global environment and are held accountable to a broadened array of stakeholders, many of whom are likely to be antagonistic to them (e.g., Argenti, 1998; Fombrun & Rindova, 2000; van Riel, 2000).

As organizations manage the way they communicate with a wide range of audiences, they must inevitably negotiate the tension between presenting a message in an integrated, univocal manner or tailoring it in a multivocal fashion to the needs of various audiences (see Balmer, 2001). Within the broad field of marketing and advertising, an ongoing debate exists on the possibility and desirability of standardizing corporate messages *across* different audiences and different markets. On the one hand, marketing and rhetoric share an ethos of tailoring messages to the audiences they are intended for and anecdotes in books such as *Big Business Blunders* (Ricks, 1983) remind organizations of the failures that loom by ignoring cultural differences. On the other hand, Theodore Levitt (1983) has argued, with much influence, that to survive in a competitive market, corporations must operate as if the world is one large market, ignoring 'superficial regional and national differences', a need which the Internet's pressures towards global convergence and homogenization continues to magnify (Hennessey, 1999).

In response, some marketing scholars claim that Levitt's analysis is impervious to cultural differences and therefore contend that corporations will receive

greater returns by adapting their products and marketing strategies to the specifics of individual markets (e.g., Kotler, 1985). Other scholars claim that the convergence thesis is unsubstantiated and blind to the fact that numerous companies adapt their product lines to idiosyncratic country preferences (Douglas & Wind, 1987). In the midst of this controversy, the larger question of corporate globalization is left unchallenged.

To address this question, many organizations devote their persuasive efforts to advancing a particular image of the *organization itself*. Here, organizational rhetoric is aimed at a level 'above' products and services, namely, what an organization *does*, *what* its identity or image is, and what the organization itself *is*. Promoting a vision of a 'one-voice company' in which all communication is co-ordinated into a consistent, coherent and seamless expression, integrated marketing communications and corporate branding aim to help organizations create a synergy of persuasive voices (Thorson & Moore, 1996). Rather than branding individual products and consequently sending off different kinds of message in different directions, the logic of integration and corporate branding is to create a platform of symbols, a master brand that can inform and shape all forms of market-related communications. Thus, for example, the LEGO Corporation has for many years taken the position that *LEGO is a global product* and that, accordingly, it should focus on similarities across global markets, making its products available in a similar form (Cheney & Christensen, 2001).

Whether the ideal of adapting messages to the interests and concerns of local audiences was ever implemented, that ideology shaped almost everything organizations said or did in the past. But now, the literature on corporate communication speaks *against* such an adaptive approach and promotes the ideal of 'one corporate voice' (Balmer, 2001). The irony of corporations insisting on univocality while simultaneously claiming to listen and adapt to their customers cannot go unnoticed; yet very few organizations acknowledge this contradiction in their practices. The co-existence of these trends means that the corporate sector is successful at talking about dialogue and adaptation while doing all it can to control the communication agenda. After all, to bend significantly in the direction of audience adaptation really is to surrender to uncertainty (e.g., Chase & Tansik, 1983).

Maintaining credibility

The pressure to maintain univocality in the face of divergent stakeholders also reflects the rhetorical concern for *ethos*, as corporations strive to create and maintain credibility and legitimacy. The disciplines of marketing and corporate communication argue that consistency and univocality in corporate communication not only facilitates the creation of a distinct identity but also help an organization build credibility among its various audiences (e.g., Backer, 2001; Christensen, 2002; Ind, 1997; Kunde, 2000). Once established, this credibility becomes a resource for additional communication campaigns. Within the context of integrated communications, global consistency and univocality refer to securing maximum impact in a crowded marketplace, a goal that is broader than just the

alignment of messages. It also implies an ongoing effort to ensure concordance between organizational words and action. Thus organizations tell themselves to 'walk their talk'. While this ideal formerly meant that managers should practise what they preach, it now extends to organizational behaviour *in toto*. Having publicized vision statements, values and corporate stories that highlight ideal futures and business practices, organizations expect to be held to their words. Or, put another way, company and consumer jointly expect that today's corporate 'messages' will sound something like yesterday's rhetoric. By subscribing to this ideal, corporations open themselves to a new type of critique that crosses formal organizational boundaries and confirms the observation that internal and external communications are no longer distinct practices (Cheney & Christensen, 2001).

What does this change suggest to organizations about their discourses and strategies? Although some stakeholders (e.g., journalists, interest organizations and investors) occasionally question the values and visions of organizational practices, *it is probably too early to tell how the call for consistency and integration will affect responses to corporate strategic communication*. Weick (1995) has speculated that the practice of walking the talk, while reducing hypocrisy, also stifles innovation and risk-taking; that is, 'People act in order to think. … When told to walk their talk, the vehicle for discovery, that walking, is redirected. It has been pressed into service as a testimonial that a handful of earlier words are the right words' (Weick, 1995, p. 183). Still, few organizations can ignore the call to let their actions follow their words. To the extent that organizations educate their audiences to demand new practices, stakeholders and consumers are likely to hold organizations responsible for their communication. Whether such attempts will give rise to a more sophisticated critique of corporate rhetoric, only time will tell. Certainly this trend will give rise to new discursive strategies; and the new ones will likely make reference to the old ones.

EPILOGUE

In this essay we have argued that viewing organizational discourse as a rhetorical process has great theoretical and practical potential. In this process, we have ignored a number of important issues. For example, we have elided our treatment of organizational agency, legitimacy and ethics. Of course, we recognize that the question of *agency* is central to an understanding of organizational rhetoric, just as it is pivotal to problems in social theory, political theory and law. It is also difficult to decipher the roles of organizational actors in society, especially at a time when many of them take the form of networks and when their messages are distanced from policy-makers, individuals and groups. We also realize that *legitimacy* strikes to the heart of society's rationalizations of itself and of organizations' claim on societal resources. Also, a full understanding of legitimation entails a broad-ranging consideration of power relations between sectors – public, private and 'independent' – and the reception of it by citizen-consumers. *Ethics* are bound up in the practice and study of organizational rhetoric, both in the inherently *suasory*

nature of language and in organizational campaigns based on values. For corporate rhetoric and organizational discourse, these three issues demand urgent attention.

APPENDIX: RHETORICAL AND DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES COMMON IN ORGANIZATIONAL/ INSTITUTIONAL MESSAGES

(adapted slightly from Cheney et al., 2004)

- Identification: for example, linking one issue with another
  Think how often 'sex and violence on television' is expressed as an indivisible unit.

- Differentiation: that is, declaring an issue to be unrelated to another or separating the organization from responsibility
  e.g., 'Guns don't kill people; people kill people.'

- Juxtapositioning: simply putting one thing next to another, regardless of connection
  This is especially common in the verbal and visual elements of advertising, for example, placing a beautiful body on top of a sleek new car.'

- Strategic ambiguity
  e.g., 'We cannot say for certain that smoking causes cancer.'

- Denial: that is, asserting that the issue is not relevant or is not even an issue
  e.g., 'The loss of that part of the work force will have no effect on quality.'

- Containment: that is, minimizing an issue
  e.g., 'Don't mind his flirting and talking about sex at work. He's harmless.'

- Reification: treating something as solid and unchangeable
  e.g., 'You can't even suggest changing the policy. That's the way it is.'

- Enhancement: that is, stressing the importance of an issue
  e.g., 'We are in a crisis; that much is certain.'

- Substitution or diversion: that is, trying to move the discussion to another issue
  e.g., 'The problem with energy resources is not over-consumption but under-exploration.'

- Bolstering or self-promotion: for example, through the build-up of the status or credibility of the organization
  e.g., 'In the union's generous proposal to management yesterday, we offered. …'

- Dismissal: denigrating an opposing viewpoint or opposing source
  e.g., 'Only narrow-minded resistors of change would reject this proposal.'

- Partial reporting: for example, taking a statistic or a result out of a larger context
  'The unemployment rate is at an all-time low.'

- Totalizing: declaring a concern to be overriding, of superordinate importance, or overshadowing all other issues
  e.g., 'Global warming is unquestionably the most important issue of our time.'

- Apology: using excuses or justifications for past actions admitted to be harmful
  e.g., 'We admit we made a few mistakes, but have taken action to correct them.'

- Misrepresentation: that is, offering highly questionable assertions or conclusions from data
  e.g., 'The proposed tax cut will benefit all *citizens.'*

- Concealment of identity: that is, hiding or renaming the source of a message
  Think of ads that barely mention the source, give it a misleading name, or don't even list it.

- Self-expansion: suggesting that an organization or a consensus is really larger than it is
  e.g., 'Our employees overwhelmingly support the new performance appraisal system.'

- Reframing and reversal: using an ironic or surprising shift to create a new idea
  Consider recent attempts to make the term 'corporate welfare' stick.

- Non-response: that is, ignoring an issue that has been raised by a person or group
  Consider cases in meetings where a passionate speech on the part of an individual is ignored by the group.

- Propaganda: that is, suggesting that only one view is reasonable or possible
  In advertising, this is often manifested through the illusion of two alternatives; for example, 'You must choose Coke over Pepsi' or 'If you don't buy this facial cream, you'll. …' At work: 'In this organization, there are achievers and there are slackers.'
  And in politics: 'If you do not support this bill, you are part of the problem.'

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