External Organizational Rhetoric

Rhetoric offers practical advice as to how to establish credibility, how to construct logical arguments and how to emotionally connect with an audience. Rhetoric also presents an epistemology which steers away from naïve realism to show how knowledge is generated and socially constructed through communication. This allows the practitioner to understand the complexities at hand when building relationships with an organization’s stakeholders, whereas the critical scholar can use rhetoric to understand how organizations attempt to achieve specific political or economic goals. While scholars of internal organizational rhetoric want to improve the workplace, scholars of external organizational rhetoric often seek to make society a good place to live (Heath, 2006). This entry gives a brief overview of the contributions public relations scholars have made to the study of external organizational rhetoric and also points out some of the challenges which remain.

Contributions

Rhetoric helps organizations focus on the different interpretations and zones of meaning that stakeholders have, and assists in co-defining and co-creating meaning. Rhetoric is simply the essence of an organization’s relationship with its stakeholders and something that strengthens public opinion processes by orchestrating a clash of viewpoints (Heath, 1993). It has thus been argued that external organizational rhetoric is a legitimate activity and positive force. Rhetoric can also be used in manipulative ways, however, something rhetorical criticism attempts to address. Palenchar and Fitzpatrick (2009), for instance, point out that front groups violate the ethical and rhetorical tradition with regards to listening and striving for shared meaning.

External organizational rhetoric has been analyzed using the ancient work of Aristotle, Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian, as well as more modern rhetoricians such as Kenneth Burke, Chaïm Perelman, Stephen Toulmin, and Lloyd Bitzer. Many published studies have an intrinsic character, but there is also a slate of publications which focus on rhetorical concepts such as enthymematic argumentation, ethos, paradoxes, apologia, stasis, metaphors, model and anti-model arguments, ideographs, as well as the notion of rhetorical situations and outlaw discourse (see Heath, et al., 2009; Ihlen, 2010).

One example of ethos analysis can be found in Ihlen (2009), where corporate strategies applied to create the impression of corporations as credible environmental actors are analyzed. Corporations proffer, for example, that they have cleaned up their own house by expanding recycling operations or moving to curb emissions. This rhetoric has been criticized for not engaging with fundamental problems such as the use of fossil fuels.

The best-developed line of research on external organizational rhetoric continues to be that which deals with crisis communication, including the notions of self-defense, or apologia, and dissociation (Hearit, 2006). Typical strategies include separations between opinion and knowledge, individual and group, and act and essence, all of which signify attempts to absolve the organization from guilt. When an organization actually does apologize for an act of wrong-doing, it humilates itself in a form of “secular remediation ritual”
Cheney and Christensen (2001) have criticized the ontological assumption concerning the positive view of a marketplace of ideas where the material has no place. It becomes questionable as to whether the ethics of external organizational rhetoric can be grounded in this idea as long as there is no guarantee that all arguments will be heard, or that better arguments will prevail over self-interested arguments.

The issue of materiality—concerning resources and technology, for instance—and how this affects dialogic ideals is also echoed in a special issue of *Management Communication Quarterly* (2011, 25[3]). The contributors point to challenges current scholarship into external organizational rhetoric faces relating to the discrepancy between theoretical ideals and rhetoric in practice. Public relations are most experienced at helping organizations achieve their own interests—at the expense of others, if necessary. A basic problem relates to the self-interest of organizations, particularly profit-driven corporations. Should self-interest be embraced and corporations should be encouraged to openly communicate this motive—or is society better off with a rhetoric spurred by the tensions which exist between the ideal and real? It could be argued that recognition of economic rationality does not necessarily have to be celebrated, due to the tendency to externalize costs at the expense of others. Ideals can still be posed and encouraged.

Technology—and social media, more specifically—also plays a role in providing opportunities, as well as in imposing constraints on external organizational rhetoric in its intended application, the addressing of stakeholder concerns. One possibility is that social media encourages more dialogic rhetoric, but little research has been conducted on this topic.

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**See also** Rhetoric; Internal organizational rhetoric; Corporate social responsibility

**Further Readings**


