Rhetorical Theory of Public Relations

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Rhetorical theory can help public relations to account for the symbolic aspects of communication, which arguably are the heart of public relations activity. Although some fleeting mentions were made of the term in the early public relations literature, it is often said that the rhetorical approach originated around 1980, when Robert L. Heath proposed rhetoric (Rhetoric; Rhetorical Studies) to be the essence of an organization’s relationship to its environment (i.e., Heath, 1980; Organization-Public Relationships). Heath has since argued consistently that rhetoric affords public relations with the possibility for an ethical and pragmatic practice: “the good organization communicating well” (Heath, 2001, p. 39; Public Relations Ethics). Rhetoric assists organizations to achieve legitimacy as well as specific goals. It helps to focus the different interpretations, the zones of meaning, of stakeholders (Stakeholder Theory) and, ideally, to co-define and co-create these. Concurrence is the aim and the clash of different viewpoints strengthens the public opinion process.

Rhetorical studies related to public relations have been conducted both within the public relations field itself and in organizational communication. Some scholars have seen organizations as symbolic contexts, while others have focused on the relationship between corporate advocacy and society. The latter research has often been tied to issues management, that is, analyses of how corporations engage to anticipate, identify, evaluate, and respond to issues that might affect the organization and/or its publics. A particularly flourishing line of research has involved studies of organizational self-defense and image restoration during or after crisis situations (Crisis Communication; Image Restoration Theory). In general, US scholars have dominated the field, and published several collections of case studies (Hoover 1997; Courtright & Smudde 2007).

Several debates have accompanied the attempt to use rhetoric in public relations. Some have had a problem seeing persuasion as a legitimate activity; others have challenged the epistemological stance of the approach. It has been posited that rhetorical public relations scholars sometimes acknowledge that reality is socially constructed; yet at other times it is assumed that there is really one universal truth, that some “facts” are better than others. The problem is that no hints are given as to how these may be distinguished and why (L’Etang, 1997, p. 39).

It has also been pointed out that the rhetorical approach has ontological weaknesses, since it has expressed faith in a well-functioning “marketplace of ideas” where the resource issue does not play a role (Cheney & Christensen, 2001). Critics have argued that a better metaphor might be the “supermarket of images in which large establishments offer their customers a limited number of brands promoted by a few social leviathans” (Sproule, 1988, p. 484). It is simply not the case that all arguments are guaranteed to be heard, nor that the better ones will prevail against the self-interested ones.

Yet another common charge is that the approach by large has been tied to the instrumental agenda of mainstream public relations research that try to improve the
communication of organizations, rather than questioning their goals or methods from a societal point of view. Still, some studies with a critical perspective have been conducted (for instance, Crable & Vibbert, 1983).

Rhetoric is particularly useful to analyze four major types of organizational strategy: 1) the way that organizations respond to existing rhetorical situations, for instance through crisis communication; 2) the way organizations attempt to anticipate future rhetorical situations, for instance through issues management processes; 3) the way that organizations attempt to shape rhetorical situations, for instance through strategic definitions; and, 4) the way organizations try to shape their own identities (Cheney, Christensen, Conrad, & Lair, 2004). A challenge for future research is to develop a full-fledged rhetoric for these organizational activities. This includes providing ideal models for strategic communication, as well as fulfilling an analytical and critical function.

SEE ALSO: Crisis Communication; Issues Management; Organizational Communication; Public Relations; Rhetorical Situation; Rhetorics, New Rhetorics

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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