PUBLIC RELATIONS AND ONTOLOGY:
Rhetorical approaches in post-modern times

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Abstract

Rhetorical theory’s contemporary involvement with semiotics is overlooked in much current public relations scholarship. This paper aims to ‘make a difference’ in this respect. There is a need for this change of perspective in view of a call for a new direction in public relations theory. This call came in the final Public Relations Division session at the July, 2003 International Communication Association Convention in San Diego. That panel discussion was titled: ‘What Should be the Focus of Public Relations?’ The session concluded that a turn towards ‘rhetorical theory’ was needed. This paper argues that such a turn would pose interesting theoretical and political challenges for a field which has not fully caught up with post-modern ideas. It points out how involvement with the contemporary ‘rhetorical turn’ paradigm and this paradigm’s link to semiotics, would take public relations studies into interesting conceptual and political regions.

The main intent of this paper is to show the need for far better acknowledgement of the link between semiotics and contemporary notions of rhetoric in public relations studies. This is an acknowledgement which is hindered if there are restrictions on theorising public relations in contemporary intellectual terms. The claim will be made below that there is such a hindrance in operation. The vacuum in this academic region persists despite the link being pointed out earlier by L’Etang (1996) in her chapter ‘Public Relations and Rhetoric’:

Rhetoric has had something of an intellectual renaissance due to the influence of structuralism, post structuralism, semiotics and postmodernist thinking, streams of thought which move away from essentialist conceptions of society and knowledge towards relativist and phenomenological approaches: Society and knowledge are explained as being the result of certain intellectual structures which arise partly from cultural experience and language... Structuralism and semiotics explore the sources and signs of culture and the ways in which our experiences and knowledge are influenced and structured by these. (pp 115-117)
L’Etang is in line with mainstream academic writings on the contemporary understanding of the notion of rhetoric. As O’Sullivan et al. (1989) explain:

Since structuralism began to disclose how much of what we know and experience is structured by the sign systems we inhabit and encounter, there has been a noticeable revival of interest in rhetoric. There are two good reasons for this: first, rhetoric as a branch of learning requires us to attend to the sign system itself (whether verbal or visual) and to concentrate on the devices and strategies which operate in texts themselves – it offers a well established and elaborate set of terms…to see how sense is made…by reference to actual discourse. (p 200)

But the link between semiotics and rhetoric has only been made tenuously in recent studies of public relations. Traditionally notions of ‘rhetoric’ are written into the critique of public relations in an objectivist, common-sense manner. Notions of ‘rhetoric’ and the ‘rhetor’ are usually employed to stand for oral, persuasive communication or the exponents of such. This is the approach in: Elwood, W. (Ed.) (1995); Toth, E. & Heath, R., (Eds.) (1992); and Heath, R., (Ed.) (2001). Eg:

Bernays views Aristotle as a public relations forebear who synthesises rhetoric, public relations and politics…Rhetoric constitutes the core component to public relations…According to Bernays, public relations began with humans’ first utterances to influence other people.’ (Elwood, 1995, pp 5 – 12)

Perhaps one way of defining rhetoric that connects it most clearly to the field of public relations is to use Sproule’s (1988) description of the ‘new managerial rhetoric’. Sproule drew attention in his historical perspective on rhetoric its use, not by individuals but by institutions such as the US government in World War I that prepared pamphlets, leaflets, posters, and other media in collaborative fashion causing rhetors to take on the homogenised persona of spokespersons, purveyors of a settled ideology. (Toth 1992, p 4)

Rhetoric is the voice of community. It is dialogue, statement and counter statement… As rhetoric, public relations enables various entities to become meaningful to, and influential for, one another. (Heath, 2001, p 50)

Of the above three writers Heath most explicitly refers to rhetorically ‘enacted’ public relations as involving ‘ontological choices’ and ‘epistemology’. But he does not make the link to semiotics which might more clearly explicate this ontological perspective. The link between rhetoric and semiotics within public relations studies is best acknowledge in Botan and Soto (1998). Botan and Soto point to an important origin of this modern link in Barthes (1979) in the essay ‘Rhetoric of the Image’. Although Botan and Soto oppose the Saussurean approach of Barthes, Barthes’s footnote makes the relevant point:
Classical rhetoric needs to be rethought in structural terms…It will then perhaps be possible to establish a general rhetoric or linguistics of the signifiers of connotation, valid for articulated sound, image, gesture etc. (p 50)

Botan and Soto are intent on advocating Peircean ‘semiotics’ over Saussurean ‘semiology’ as a method for analysing public relations activity. The nub of their argument is:

It is in semiotic rhetoric that the idea of unlimited semiosis is centered. In Eco's words, "semiosis is unlimited and, through the series of interpretants, explains itself by itself." This cryptic statement means that each explanation exists only within a world of other explanations, so the process goes on ad infinitum, and semiosis can be said to be unlimited. This unlimitedness of semiosis implies that there is not an objective observer who assess a strategic communication campaign from the outside and describes it objectively. Instead any observer is immersed in unlimited semiosis, so that even perception is semiosis. (Botan & Soto, 1998)

This paper will return to the significance of Botan and Soto later. The main point to draw at the moment is the sense that Botan and Soto; and L’Etang are public relations theorists who are in tune with contemporary communication scholarship. They are telling us that there are other, significant intellectual aspects involved in the contemporary notion of ‘rhetoric’ than is the case in much contemporary public relations writing which purports to relate public relations to notions of rhetoric. When Botan and Soto use the phrase: “not an objective observer” and when L’Etang uses the phrase “move away from essentialist conceptions of society” they are referring to the post-objectivist stance of many contemporary communication theorists. This is a stance which is sparse among public relations academics although the late Ron Pearson (1989) wrote:

Post-modern rhetorical theory rejects objectivism…post-modern rhetorical theory argues that language and rhetoric play a fundamental epistemological role, and scientific and moral knowledge is a function of dialogue and intersubjectivity. (p 115)

‘Objectivism’ or ‘essentialism’ is a philosophical stance. This stance involves a particular ‘ontology’ which presumes that things in the world, including people, organisations and what people and organisations do, are obvious, real and directly knowable. Objectivism and essentialism are involved in the character of most people’s everyday, commonsense view of the world. This commonsense ontology permeates much unreflective professional and academic activity. But many contemporary communication, cultural, sociological and critical theorists challenge this stance and advocate post-objectivist or anti essentialist ontology. Post-objectivism and anti-essentialism implies that we can only think what we think because of the ways our culture has equipped us to think. Culture has equipped us to
think by providing us with certain language and other visualisation abilities – abilities which are absent in the purely animalistic state. As culturally constructed humans (or as animals) we can never know the essence of objects. We can only ever perceive of objects (such as people, organisations and their activities) in the terms of the ways our culture has equipped us to think about them. The article by Botan and Soto advocates one anti-essentialist ontological approach – the Peircean one – over another anti-essentialist ontological approach – the Saussurean one. Briefly the followers of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) saw this cultural equipping as very determined and structured by the nature of the language systems which we speak and think in. However Botan and Soto argue that American philosopher Charles S. Peirce (1839-1914) better explained the condition of human perception for the purposes of theorising public relations. Both Peirce’s and Saussure’s systems involve signs. Saussure’s system is called semiology, Peirce’s is called semiotics. In the Peircean system an image, word, speech or some other sign which is picked up by the senses sets up mental images or impressions in our mind. It is these mental images – what is called the interpretant in the Peircean system – which is all we can ever know about the real world. However images in our mind spark off other images in our mind depending on what previous impressions our culture has left there, or is now leaving. So we orient ourselves to what exists and what is happening in the world in a pragmatic manner depending on what the outcomes are of a multitude of impressions, reinterpretations and conclusions. This happens as life experience is communicated to our minds, albeit this is mediated life experience involving many communal, cultural aspects. The notion of “semiotic rhetoric” comes in when coexisting interpretants in the mind cause other interpretants – other mental impressions – to form. To put it another way, how we think is made possible and steered (or directed or persuaded) by a confluence of mental impressions. These mental impressions and their steering are products of what we hear, see, read and so on. But what we hear, see, read and so on and what these things are meant to represent are largely governed by a multitudes of aspects of the culture which we grew up in and which we continue to reside within. Hence we are ‘persuaded’ to see the world in a certain way depending on the way the culture organises and influences the interacting mental impression or ‘interpretants’. The real world exists. But things in the real world are only the third corner of a triangular relationship between, in the second corner the words, symbols, sounds or other thought facilitating discourse which is the cultural representation of the world; and in the last corner the interpretants – the mental images which ARE the thoughts and thus which are our knowledge of the world. Clearly the cultural context¹ – in the Peircean system – is held to steer interpretants and thus how the world is perceived. This notion is in line with Burke (1969):

For rhetoric as such is not rooted in any past condition of human society. It is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic and is continually born anew; the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols. (p 43).

Burke construes rhetoric as the inevitable opinion-directing effect innate to all interpersonal discourse. It is not the opposite of logic or dialectic. It is, as Aristotle

¹ Using culture in the sense of “the institutionally or informally organised social production and reproduction of sense, meaning and consciousness.” O’Sullivan, et al., (1989, p 57).
said, the “counterpart of dialectic” (logical argument) (Burke, 1969, p 54; Aristotle, 1991, p 66). That is, the already persuasive inflection - i.e. the particular orientations and confluence of interpretants - is the condition in which argued ‘facts’ or ‘the world’ must be served up to fit in with the pragmatic effects of all the juxtaposing interpretants which result from that particular cultural location and time. Semiotic analysis along the lines which this paper has tried to explain is fundamental to many divisions of contemporary communication theory: film studies, advertising studies, literary criticism, analysis of news media and so on. The deliberate use of persuasive communication in advertising makes advertising an obvious area for the application of semiotic theory. But Botan and Soto point out that Porter (1992) analyses issues advertising in the Saussurean mode, not the Peircean mode in his contribution to public relations theory in Toth & Heath (1992). Botan and Soto are intent on arguing that mistaken reliance on the limited Saussurean approach has discouraged public relations theorists. They feel that the more fluid – as it were – ‘inter-interpretant’ conception of the Peircean approach would be a more fruitful direction to describe a persuasive process rather than a ‘knee-jerk’ automatic process which is rigidly determined by language structure. But Botan and Soto do not progress much beyond this ambition. They do not point out the interesting political and conceptual consequences which the application of Peirce opens up. Description of the full consequences would involve much more writing than there is room for here. So the conclusion to this paper will merely sketch what is involved in summary: Mayhew (1997) warns:

Distress about the specific impact of the professionalisation of communication management in American public life emerged in the late 1950s. Stanley Kelley’s Professional Public Relations and Public Power (1956) sounded an early warning about the growing use of consultants...In 1956 Kelley could not foresee the extraordinary growth of specialised and variegated forms of political and public relations consulting...Democratic theory presumes that questions of public policy should be resolved by mutual persuasion rather than by force...Such arguments are often murky because of the ambiguous theoretical status of rhetoric as the means by which influence is exercised. (pp 7-8)

But what is the present ‘ambiguous theoretical status of rhetoric’? Well considering the theoretical status of rhetoric in the terms discussed above it is interesting to note that in the section ‘Towards a Social Semiotics of Reception’: Schroder et al., (2003) say: ‘Within the Peircean framework of understanding any meaning is understood as a product of the communicators’ signifying process (p 132).’ This theme is fully developed in the comprehensive work by Jensen (1995). Jensen develops Peirce to argue that the ways people are able to think are facilitated or restricted by the production and availability of the interpretants at large in the societies around them. It is only if culture and society facilitate specific ways of thinking that we can think in those ways. In other words the intensions and the abilities of these in control of the various forms of cultural production are crucial for the sort of understandings with which we conceive the world. Jensen’s notions would seem to resonate with the Habermassian notion of the ‘lifeworld’. Habermas’s lifeworld is the resource of ‘communicative action’. This is the pool of benign and useful community ideas which
are constantly under threat from less benign strategic or instrumental ways of interpreting the world (Habermas, 1989). In contemplating the above discussion it is perhaps not difficult to see why some public relations academics may not want to travel too far down the road of post-modern theory. A full explication of public relations via post-modern theory exposes this pseudo-profession and its associated academia to considerable sociological and political critique. If public relations can be seen as rhetorical production and if rhetorical production can be seen as a process of the semiotic arrangement of interpretants, then the real risks which unregulated public relations poses to democracy become apparent.

The rest of this paper will deal with the apparent shyness of the public relations cognoscenti to employ Peircian or other such revealing ontological approaches. This is a shyness which can also be interpreted as wilful ignorance. My implication is that this shyness or deliberate ignorance may be being maintained in order to avoid the difficult political and thus potentially negative commercial implications discussed by commentators such as Mayhew following Kelley (above). Toth (2000) speculates that:

However, rhetorical studies of public relations may have reached their greatest concentration in the early 1990s. Little followed the book of articles by Toth and Heath published in 1992. It may be that the rhetorical perspective has been too critical of public relations… (p 141)

Toth (2002), subsequently tries to control this criticism by prescribing intellectual limits to the field of study:

I have an affinity for postmodern thought. But, I would be uncomfortable if it did not help the field become more effective. There is a need for practicality in good theory. Another way of saying this is…postmodernism must have “cash value” for modern public relations. (p 243)

Despite Toth’s post-modern reluctance, in their different ways, in their identically named chapters, both Toth (2000) and L’Etang (1996) make the point that the genie of rhetorical theory has been let out of the bottle in the public relations academic arena. ‘Rhetoric’ and ‘rhetorical theory’ may seem like reassuringly familiar, uncontroversial and traditional terms. Surely the rhetorical tradition has existed since ancient Greek times and cannot have much more to say? But on the contrary, contemporary rhetorical theory stands on the very edge of current debates over theories into how society thinks and works. If rhetorical theory is accepted fully as a basis for theorising public relations there can be no coyness or shyness in discussing how public relations people set out to get people to think in certain ways and how they neglect the production of thinking in other ways. There can be no coyness or shyness over who funds and controls public relations projects in western societies which themselves are far from equitable not to mention in a global society where huge numbers die each year through the lack of basic necessities. There can be no coyness or shyness in discussing organisationally produced thinking in a world which seems bent on environmental destruction and the deterioration of the health of even the
wealthy in society. For these reasons the honest and full adoption of all aspects of rhetorical theory will test the commitment of public relations academia to a genuine intellectualism and a genuine professionalism. These virtues will only be achieved through a full and honest commitment to rhetorical theory which grasps the nettle of the effects on societies of the deliberate production and organisation of communication and culture. The implication of Peirce and many of the above authorities is that the strategic planning and the tools of public relations activity which are written as the chapter headings of all public relations textbooks – media relations; employee relations; running exhibitions; crisis management; planning the public relations program – and all the rest, involve the deliberate organisation and construction of signs which form and influence the interpretants which are our knowledge of the world and which thus deliver the possibilities for our acting in the world.

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