On Barnyard Scrambles: Toward a Rhetoric of Public Relations

Øyvind Ihlen

Abstract
How can we gain a better understanding of public relations rhetoric? This essay takes stock of the analytical building blocks that can be found in the public relations research and addresses the question raised in the introduction to this special issue: Can external organizational rhetoric help make society a good place to live? It is argued that whereas the literature on crisis communication and the concept of apologia—speech of self-defense—is fairly extensive, analysis of other subfields and types of public relations discourse is needed. Following the modification of its original epistemological basis, the concept of the rhetorical situation helps guide this endeavor. Such analysis can form a basis for a critical discussion of whether organizational rhetoric helps improve society.

Keywords
public relations, rhetoric, rhetorical situation

Since public relations wields great influence on society, scholars have a responsibility to study this phenomenon critically (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2009). Such research can shed light on how public relations helps or hinders...
movement toward “a more fully functioning society” (Heath, 2006a, p. 96). Rhetorical theory facilitates these efforts as it furthers our understanding of the symbolic activity of public relations practices and the consequences that these practices have for society.

This essay discusses contributions from rhetorical studies of public relations and analytical building blocks found therein that can help us move toward a rhetoric of external communication of organizations. A case is made for further analysis of the archetypal rhetorical strategies that organizations through public relations practitioners use in certain rhetorical situations (Bitzer, 1968). The concept of the rhetorical situation holds that the rhetorical act is explained by the situation in which the rhetor finds him- or herself. As will be demonstrated, however, there is a need to move beyond the original epistemology implied in the concept to grasp how rhetorical utterances are formed. Modern rhetoricians including Bitzer argue for the revamping of the rhetorical theory of the ancients. Such an overhaul is needed now more than ever as organizations struggle to relate to an increasingly complex world.

The essay begins with a short literature review of rhetoric in public relations. Then, the notion of the rhetorical situation is introduced, and its problematic aspects are discussed. This is followed by a short case examination that illustrates how broad rhetorical strategies are used in a particular rhetorical situation that presents rhetors with both constraints and opportunities. Finally, that analysis is used to formulate ideas about how scholars can develop a rhetoric of public relations.

**Rhetoric and Public Relations**

Rhetorical theory of public relations focuses on the symbolic and relationship-building aspects that organizations engage in to achieve specific political or economic goals. Heath (1992) postulates that rhetoric is the essence of an organization’s relationship to its environment. Based on Quintilian’s notion (1920/1996) of the ideal rhetor, Heath (2001) argues that rhetoric gives public relations the ethical and pragmatic ideal of being “the good organization communicating well” (p. 39). In addition to Quintilian, public relations scholars look to other ancients including Aristotle, Cicero, and Isocrates (Heath, 2009; Ihlen, 2002; Marsh, 2003; Porter, 2010) and new rhetoricians such as Burke, Perelman, and Toulmin (Heath, 2009; Ihlen, 2002; Mickey, 1995; Skerlep, 2001) to analyze public relations rhetoric.

Much research has centered on organizational self-defense and image restoration during or after crisis situations (e.g., Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1999, 2009; Hearit, 2006; Millar & Heath, 2003). Scholars have discussed such
notions as enthymemic argumentation (Edwards, 2007), ethos (Bostdorff, 1992; Ihlen, 2009a), paradoxes (German, 2007; Heath & Waymer, 2009), apologia (Hearit, 2001; Jerome, 2008), stasis theory (Marsh, 2006), metaphors (Zhang, 2007), and model and antimodel arguments (Brand, 2007).

Efforts to use rhetoric in public relations have been accompanied by debates concerning, among other issues, ontology, ethics, and orientation (Ihlen, 2008, 2010). This criticism has largely been directed toward Heath’s body of work, which over 30 years (e.g., Heath, 1980, 1992, 1993, 1997, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2006b, 2009) has come to exemplify the rhetorical approach to public relations.

Heath (2001) has written that rhetoric is built on “dialogue to define and advance . . . interests within the limits of others’ opinions about these matters” (p. 32) and argues that “no entity can manipulate others forever, if at all” as arguments are tested in the marketplace of ideas (Heath, 1993, p. 143). Cheney and Christensen (2001) criticize this ontological assumption for not taking into account the issue of resources. Although resources are no guarantee that rhetoric will be successful, neither is it guaranteed that all arguments will be heard nor is it guaranteed that better arguments will prevail over self-interested ones (Ihlen, 2002). Indeed, commentators on rhetoric and management contend, “Rhetoric is a strategy of the powerful, a form of control” (Hartelius & Browning, 2008, p. 33).

Advocates of using rhetoric in public relations have vigorously defended rhetorical practices, including advocacy and persuasion, against the charge of being unethical. It is pointed out that these are not necessarily manipulative per se. Rather, open and responsible dialogue is suggested as the ethical ideal (Edgett, 2002; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Pfau & Wan, 2006; Porter, 2010). According to Heath (2001), public relations is the “management function that rhetorically adapts organizations to people’s interests and people’s interests to organizations by co-creating meaning and co-managing culture to achieve mutually beneficial relationships” (Heath, 2001, p. 36). Here, however, it is argued that although rhetoric and public relations may certainly take ideal forms, unethical practice thrives, as the mass media demonstrates on a regular basis. It is argued, therefore, that public relations should be studied, like any other social activity (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2009), with awareness that it can play a constructive as well as a destructive role in society (Heath, 2006a).

Although much public relations research has been devoted to instrumental purposes, especially to help organizations in crisis (e.g., Coombs, 2009), studies have also illustrated how public relations rhetoric works to promote particular ideologies (e.g., Crable & Vibbert, 1995; Holloway, 1995). It seems that scholars straddling the boundary between public relations and
organizational communication in particular lean toward critical approaches (e.g., Bostdorff, 1992; Hansen-Horn & Vasquez, 1997).

In this rapidly changing, increasingly fragmented world, the particulars of each situation that an organization encounters can vary to such an extent that planning becomes very difficult. Regarding crisis communication, some authors advocate complexity-based approaches that emphasize organizational learning so that organizations can adapt quickly to the changing circumstances (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008). At the same time, however, it is argued that organizations, broadly speaking, find themselves in a limited number of situations with a limited number of ways to respond rhetorically (Black, 1965/1978). These assumptions have led to research into rhetorical genres and rhetorical patterns across recurring situations (Foss, 2008; Harrell & Linkugel, 1978; Miller, 1998).

Several authors suggest various typologies of public relations strategies, especially in crisis situations (Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 2009; Hearit, 2001; Millar & Heath, 2003). It has been found that organizations in crisis typically rely on different archetypal strategies ranging from the aggressive to the accommodative (Coombs, 2007, 2009). The rhetorical genre of *apologia*—a speech of self-defense—has been explored at length (e.g., Courtright & Hearit, 2002; Hearit, 1994, 1995, 2001, 2006), inspired by the writings of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969/1971) and the notion of disassociation—the separation of, for instance, the individual from the group.

Scholars also discuss typologies related to issues management (Kuhn, 1997), identification strategies (Cheney, 1983), employee recruitment strategies (Russell-Loretz, 2007), and environmental communication (Ihlen, 2009a), as well as strategies for specific types of organizations, including those in high-technology industries (Baker, Conrad, Cudahy, & Willyard, 2009) and sports (Boyd & Stahley, 2008). These latter strands of research, however, have not spurred additional development as have the typologies of crisis communication and apologia. Thus, it is argued herein that the concept of the rhetorical situation may be usefully employed to identify and explore more fully situations other than crises. This notion is largely inspired by Cheney, Christensen, Conrad, and Lair (2004), who propose that organizations attempt to shape their own identities with the help of rhetoric but that they also *respond to*, *anticipate*, and *shape* rhetorical situations. That is, organizations engage in crisis communication, issues management, and/or use strategic definitions or attempt to influence popular beliefs. As examples of the latter, Cheney et al. (2004) show that when the tobacco industry
opposed taxation of tobacco products, it framed the debate as government interference in the free market rather than public health.

Without exploring rhetorical situations in detail, Cheney et al. (2004) usefully point to how certain situations demand organizational answers and that organizational rhetors are active and creative in that engagement. Pressing for more depth on the topic, this essay will revisit the concept of the rhetorical situation and discuss its strengths and limitations before employing the concept in a short case examination.

**Rhetorical Situation**

Bitzer (1968) popularized the notion of the rhetorical situation, which in a now classic article, he defines as follows:

Rhetorical situation may be defined as a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence. (p. 6)

According to Bitzer, rhetorical situations comprise three constitutive elements. The first element is a pressing problem ("exigence") or an imperfection that "demands" a rhetorical response and that has to be solved (wholly or partially) with the help of rhetoric. The problem may be latent, and there is no guarantee that it will be solved once and for all. The pressing problem is nonetheless the organizing principle for a situation and what specifies the public and the change that is desired. For example, a rhetor may argue for stricter legislation and regulation to modify or reduce air pollution. The challenge facing the rhetor is to persuade legislators about the need for stricter legislation.

In a later article, Bitzer (1980) emphasizes how such problems are always tied to interests. The fact that a factory spews emissions may be undisputed, but whether this should be perceived as a problem is open to discussion. Some may believe that a little pollution is tolerable, whereas others may call for a tax on pollution, and yet others may wish to eradicate pollution altogether.

The second element of a rhetorical situation is the audience, whose thoughts, decisions, or actions the rhetor aims to change. Bitzer (1968) reserves the role of rhetoric for a particular type of discourse and emphasizes that the rhetorical audience has to be capable of being influenced and affecting
some change in relation to the pressing problem that the rhetor is addressing. The audience must agree that something is a problem, namely, that there is a certain imperfection that needs to be addressed. Politicians are an obvious audience in the above example, but the general public may also put pressure on them to change environmental legislation. The relationship between audience and rhetor is characterized by similar or dissimilar views of “facts” and/or interests.

The third element of a rhetorical situation is constraints, which are understood as those things that represent obstacles that the rhetor must overcome to solve a problem successfully. Constraints can be rhetorical, physical, or cultural. One common example is disagreement among scientists, which constrains those who want to rally science for their cause (Jasinski, 2001). Constraints in a rhetorical situation limit what the rhetor can say and do.

Together, these three elements constitute the rhetorical situation, which, Bitzer (1968) argues, prescribes certain fitting responses. The rhetor must define and translate the problem into words, identify an audience that can help solve the problem, and understand the constraints in the situation and hence what is required of his or her rhetoric. In summary, Bitzer’s theory holds that a situation has specific elements that the rhetorical response has to reflect. This is probably the main strength of the concept.

The Debate About the Rhetorical Situation

The concept of the rhetorical situation, arguably one of the most important ones introduced in the new rhetoric, has spawned serious debate. Some protest that Bitzer appears to recognize only rhetoric that is successful, that is, rhetoric that helps to solve the problem that is described. This would be an unnecessary limitation of the domain of rhetoric (Larson, 1970). What has caused the greatest debate, however, is the epistemological basis of the theory, for Bitzer talks about a pressing problem and how the rhetorical situation determines the rhetorical response (Jasinski, 2001; Kjeldsen, 1997; Lucaites, Condit, & Caudill, 1999; Young, 2001). Vatz (1973), perhaps the strongest critics of such a notion, argues that Bitzer’s perspective has its roots in realism and the notion of an objective reality. He contends that the rhetorical response is not a product of objective events but rather a result of how a rhetor and an audience interpret a situation or a problem. The rhetor must be seen as creative and active, something that Bitzer’s defenders argue is implicit in the theory (Young, 2001). The most important point here, however, is that theoreticians appear to agree that it is not a question of either/or; rather, rhetoric is both a response to situations and something that create and shapes situations (Jasinski, 2001).
Benoit (1994, 2000) argues that it would be better to use Burke’s pentad to grasp the genesis of rhetorical action. Pentadic analysis involves two steps. In the first, the analyst will attempt to answer five questions with respect to the rhetor’s perspective: What “was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he [sic] did it (agency), and why (purpose)” (Burke, 1945/1969, p. xv). In the second, the analyst must focus on which of the pentadic elements has the most influence on the others, conducting an analysis of the ratios—the relationships between the elements. Benoit (1994, 2000) contends that the rhetorical act is best understood after examining the influence of the purpose, scene, rhetor, and means or agencies. The ratios may take on different importance in different situations. Nevertheless, based on Brockriede’s notion of perspectivism, Benoit maintains that the ratios make up an “inviolable whole” (Brockriede, 1985 in Benoit, 2000, p. 180). In contrast, Young (2001) and others favor a reconstructed theory of the rhetorical situation, arguing that the dynamism of Bitzer’s notions has not been truly appreciated.

The emphasis on the rhetor’s creativity has led some authors to argue that the rhetorical situation represents not only constraints but also opportunities to be grasped. The rhetorical situation can be tied into the notion of kairos (Andersen, 1997; Kjeldsen, 2004). It is difficult to find a clear definition of this concept, but three understandings dominate: Kairos is what demands action, refers to the right moment for an utterance, or expresses what is fitting for the situation (Andersen, 1997; Kjeldsen, 2004). As such, kairos seems to overlap with the rhetorical situation; however, traditionally, in the former, the focus is on, for example, aesthetics, whereas in the latter, the rhetor will grasp an opportunity to demonstrate his or her skills. It has been posited that kairos is something more than a rhetorical situation but that all rhetorical situations are tied to kairos (Andersen, 1997).

Another objection to Bitzer’s concept of the rhetorical situation is that little weight has been given to the rhetor’s being part of the audience and having to adjust him- or herself to discourse traditions that generate needs, promote interests, cultivate the expectations of audience members of what is fitting in a situation, and influence their perception and interpretation of a problem. The discourse tradition within which a rhetor operates produces the conditions for its own continuation, recirculation, and reproduction (Garret & Xiao, 1993). In focusing on the audience, some of the issues related to whether a pressing problem is real disappear. The important point for the rhetor is what the audience perceives to be a problem. Biesecker (1999) extends this point and argues that rhetoric is not a linear process but rather one whereby persons and collectives articulate identities that are influenced by shifting historical conditions. This aspect is obviously interesting, but
such a focus overshadows the importance of the problem that the rhetor faces (Garret & Xiao, 1993).

In sum, the most important point is that there is a need to dissolve the deterministic dimension that persists in the model of the rhetorical situation despite later incorporation of interests into it (Bitzer, 1980). Rather than talking about how a problem can be controlled, the causal direction should be questioned in line with the notion of the active and creative rhetor who sees possibilities to create or influence a situation (Ihlen, 2007a; Smith & Lybarger, 1996).

Case Examination

To further theoretical development of external organizational rhetoric and consider the consequences that organizational rhetoric has for society, a short case will demonstrate how the concept of the rhetorical situation can be used to analyze public relations rhetoric and its contribution to society. The Norwegian oil industry and climate change issue serve as a case. I first sketch the background and then give some details about the setting, exigence, public, and constraints of the situation, following which I discuss three broad strategies that the industry used in this situation.

Background

Climate change is considered by many to be today’s most important environmental challenge, and scientific evidence increasingly points toward manmade carbon dioxide emissions as a leading cause of the problem (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2007). This poses a problem for high-polluting industries such as the oil industry, as its legitimacy and continued existence depend on public goodwill and support (e.g., Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Wæraas, 2007). A legitimacy gap occurs when there is a discrepancy between a company’s performance and the expectations that society has of such performance (Sethi, 1977). To be perceived as legitimate, corporations have to respect the boundaries and norms established by society.

Setting

In 1987, the World Commission on the Environment and Development issued a pivotal report titled “Our Common Future,” which put global warming on the public agenda (World Commission on the Environment and
Development, 1987). The Commission was led by the then Norwegian Prime Minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland. Following the publication of the report, Norwegian politicians decided that Norway should be a driver to establish an international climate agreement, and a so-called stabilization goal was established. After 1990, the enthusiastic goal-setting phase was replaced by a phase in which new actors entered the scene and environmental goals were relegated to the wings as economic and regional interests took center stage. As Norway relies on oil production while having hydropower-based electricity production, the costs of cutting emissions in Norway would be higher than those in many other industrialized countries. It was argued that it would be more cost-effective for Norway to finance climate measures in other countries, which led to the development of the international approach to climate change (Andresen & Butenschøn, 2001; Furre, 1991; Hovden & Lindseth, 2004).

**Exigence**

Polls show that the Norwegian oil industry is respected for its safety record and for being the backbone of the Norwegian economy; however, they also reveal that the population thinks oil and gas production represents a huge threat to the environment (Ihlen, 2007b). With climate change a topic of widespread, and increasing, concern, it has been imperative for oil companies to demonstrate that they do not take this problem lightly. Much attention has been directed toward companies that have questioned whether climate change is human induced (Rowlands, 2000). Nevertheless, Norwegian oil companies have expressed agreement with the conclusions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Ihlen, 2009b). The question then is, “If these companies have acknowledged that their basic activity is problematic, how can they claim that the same activity is legitimate?” This is the pressing problem that oil companies have to tackle.

**Publics**

Five groups are deemed to be important for the oil industry—politicians, authorities, the media, environmental organizations, and the public at large. Politicians construct the policy framework and decide on the tax level and whether the industry will be given access to new areas. Thus, they are the ultimate stakeholders of the industry, and other groups are important only indirectly as means to reach the politicians. Analysis shows that the majority of Norwegian politicians look very favorably on the oil industry and that the
industry with few exceptions has gotten its way (Sejersted, 1999). As mentioned, however, polls have presented a mixed picture; most people agree that oil has been a blessing for Norway, but a fifth of the population doubts whether the oil industry has been putting the nation’s interests first (Ihlen, 2007b).

**Constraints and Possibilities**

Bitzer (1968) stresses that each response has to fit the unique situation. The first thing to note is that given the political push for an international climate agreement, the Norwegian oil industry has had to acknowledge the climate change issue. In recent years, only one of seven major political parties in Norway has expressed doubt about the conclusions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (see www.frp.no).

Still, the oil industry has sought refuge in the projections and statements from the International Energy Agency (IEA) and others who have pointed to the ever-increasing energy needs of the world. The IEA have stated that “oil is the world’s vital source of energy and will remain so for many years to come, even under the most optimistic assumptions about the pace of development and deployment of alternative technology” (International Energy Agency, 2008, p. 3). Furthermore, the oil industry is Norway’s largest industry and accounts for more than a quarter of its national value creation. The Ministry of Petroleum and Energy (2009) estimated that 200,000 people are employed in petroleum-related activities. This situation helps explain the positive treatment that the industry has received in Norway and the adoption of the so-called international approach to curb emissions.

In addition, the “Our Common Future” report has helped popularize the notion of sustainable development: “[Sustainable development is] development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on the Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43). Although notoriously vague, this concept provides the basis for arguing that it is possible to pursue both economic growth and environmental quality (Fergus & Rowny, 2005; Hopwood, Mellor, & O’Brien, 2005).

**Rhetorical Strategies**

The rhetorical situation described above has led to the use by the Norwegian oil industry of three specific rhetorical strategies that address the constraints of the situation while exploiting its possibilities. First of all, the industry has
tapped into the collective discourse around the notion of sustainable development. The Norwegian oil industry has argued that it is sustainable because it has been striving to cut emissions and manage oil resources with a long-term perspective until such time as technology will provide alternative solutions. Second, the industry has argued that there is no realistic alternative to oil. Comparison was used to discredit other energy sources and served as the basis for the third strategy: comparing oil production in Norway with higher polluting oil production elsewhere (Ihlen, 2009b). The latter comparison was then used to argue that the world would be better off if Norway actually increased its oil production.

The rhetorical situation “demanded” that oil companies recognize the climate change issue but not that oil production be reduced (that the environmental situation may call for such a reduction is another matter). Norwegian politicians seemed to take for granted that the present level of production should be maintained, if not increased. Given Norway’s dependence on income from the oil industry and the jobs it has created, the majority of Norwegian politicians can be relied on to support the industry.

The oil industry was not a passive “victim” of the rhetorical situation in which it found itself after the publication of the “Our Common Future” report. Rather, it became actively engaged in the climate change issue by, for example, proposing a strategic definition of sustainable development and supporting an international approach to climate change. For the time being, it seems that the rhetoric of the Norwegian oil industry is a fitting response to the situation, as it has for the most part helped to bolster the industry against attempts to curtail its activity (Ihlen, 2009b).

This case examination helps to demonstrate how an organizational rhetor found itself in a certain rhetorical situation that demanded a rhetorical response. The rhetorical response was constrained by elements in the situation—for instance, dominant political views—but the organizational rhetor could also make use of other elements—ideas as well as their relative economic importance. As argued in the literature review, the epistemological basis of the rhetorical situation must be reworked to make room for the active rhetor (Garret & Xiao, 1993; Ihlen, 2007a; Jasinski, 2001; Smith & Lybarger, 1996).

**Conclusion**

The case illustrates both the elements of a rhetorical situation and the complexity of a situation in which many organizations find themselves. It shows that a rhetorical situation is not a singular instance but rather a complex situation that must be read against a larger, constantly evolving historical, cultural,
economic, and sociological backdrop. Ancient rhetors faced rhetorical situations that were relatively few and stable; modern ones must deal with the challenges presented by an increasingly fragmented, rapidly changing, and complex world (Kaufer 1979, in Kjeldsen, 2008).

Although external organizational rhetoric will necessarily reflect the changes noted above, rhetorical commonalities recur in rhetorical situations. Various historical and political contexts and traditions have led to different responses by oil companies to the challenge of climate change, but it is an ongoing challenge for the oil industry and several other voices. Although merging multinational corporations face a multitude of stakeholder interests and an increased speed of communication, they still have to answer basic questions such as why the merger is necessary, what effect will it have for the employees, and so forth. Corporations may be the topic of several blogs and at the receiving end of attacks on the Internet, but they still need to build relationships with their local communities.

In brief, some activities and rhetorical situations recur, although they are not easily isolated or defined. The three rhetorical strategies identified above—strategically defining sustainability, discrediting alternatives, and choosing objects for comparison that make the rhetor look good—may be used as a springboard for discussing the archetypal arguments that high-polluting industries continue to use to justify their existence. A critical analysis could address the particular choices employed by the rhetor by questioning the definitions and assumptions of the rhetor (Ihlen, 2009b). The situation is not deterministic but rather one in which the rhetor exploits existing discourse traditions and conceptual ambiguities.

While organizing principles can be found in similar recurring situations that generate discourse (Harrell & Linkugel, 1978), it is noted that rhetorical genre criticism has had its share of detractors, who argue that it leads to determinism and useless taxonomies (Patton, 1976 and Conley, 1979, in Miller, 1998). Another trap to avoid is the “rhetoric-as-technique, rhetor-as-magician pole” (Conrad & Malphurs, 2008, p. 134). There exists a complex, dialectical relationship among action, agency, and structure that can help in defining rhetorical action and that should guide inductive theory development. This could help scholars to steer clear of the reductionism that Burke, Perelman, and others warned against when they sought to revitalize the rhetorical tradition.

This discussion is not carried out for typical instrumental public relations purposes but rather to understand public relations in a wider cultural, economic, and political context. Such analysis may help in the creation of an external organizational rhetoric that goes beyond the descriptive to allow the
analysis of the power of this type of communication and the institutions it supports. This is the promise of rhetoric: In Burke’s words, it helps us understand the scramble in the human barnyard (Burke, 1950/1969). In the particular case examination, the organizational rhetor first and foremost served its own needs. Using rhetorical theory to criticize this type of rhetoric is one contribution to making society a good place to live.

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