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Ethical Grounds for Public Relations as Organizational Rhetoric

Abstract

Organizational rhetoric is critically questioned for ethics of its strategic processes and aspirational goal of persuasive, inescapably self-interested influence. Such critique pits strategic engagement needed for self-governance against self-interested framing (spin) and other dysfunctions. This theoretical essay takes stock of research literature to evaluate the ethics of organizational rhetoric, as rationale for public relations, and justify shifting from a strategic functional to an ontological, agonistic view of public relations. Relevant literature justifies the ethics of *fairness* (which features regard for others' interests) to guide rhetorical processes and prefer outcomes as societally responsible. From classical Greece to postmodern theory of agonism, analysis of rhetoric centers on self-governance: achieved by stakeholders addressing rhetorical problems in rhetorical situations to deliberate strategic legitimatization. The discursive role of public relations intersects ethics of fairness and rhetorical citizenship, advocacy and dialogue, discourse and engagement at individual and societal levels. Public relations should be linked to an ontological ethics regarding strategic means of rhetorical influence toward ends accomplished collectively by agonistic pursuit.

Key words: Organizational rhetoric; Self-governance; Civil society; Social capital; Fairness; Caring; Rhetorical citizenship

Ethical Grounds for Public Relations as Organizational Rhetoric

1.0 Introduction

Public relations is frequently questioned for its rhetorical goals and strategic processes of persuasive influence, which can include spin, disingenuous communication compromised by self-interested framing (e.g., Berman, 2018, see also Callison, Merle, & Seltzer, 2014). What draws especially unfavorable attention to organizational rhetoric, in general, and to public relations, in specific, is its functional ability to provide facts and address morality while reframing issues, in this instance “kicking people off airplanes” (caught on video by a fellow passenger) into “re-accommodating customers” (Nastasi, 2017, December 19). “Re-accommodation” earned United Airlines the euphemism-of-the-year honor. Its attempt at self-interested, “information sharing,” one-sided framing seeking concurrence, even consensus, with other parties to the decision.

United Airlines used “re-accommodation” to justify actions taken after only two passengers voluntarily gave up their seats agreeing to take a later flight. The third—a 69-year old doctor who refused to give up his seat—was injured as he was dragged from his seat and ejected from the plane. The airline took this action because the plane was overbooked, and it needed to move a crew to maintain its schedules. The action and accompanying statement were self-serving: was it *fair* to the man dragged off the plane and whose contracted arrival was delayed? Seemingly “minor,” this incident raises ethical questions about the morality of corporate actions and statements. Such instances allow critical investigation of the damage such moments do to the ethics of rhetoric, not merely as an example of “spin” but as an assault on democratic decision making by those who seek to control self-interestedly the discourse process and outcome (Dinan & Miller, 2017). The ethical flaw in United’s plan became more apparent after the circulation of a video of the event—the counter statement.

Instrumental emphasis on the capability (proficiency) of rhetoric can underplay the

intentional desire and purpose to gain advantage for an organization, without necessarily fostering the interests of others. That paradigm can, in the face of uncertainty, narrow the scope, purpose, and ethical rationale for rhetoric which has endured as a means for negotiating relatedness for 2500 years.

Uncertainty is the universal motive of rhetoric; people tend not to debate certainty. Rather than achieving a narrow, singular influence, ethical organizational rhetoric can and should serve mutually important and interdependent goals through emergent, ontological strategies and operant texts that enlighten decisions in the face of uncertainty. The ethical rationale for such statements is the role rhetoric plays in self-government, humans' ability to solve problems, make enlightened decisions, and align interests for the common good. Although the challenges of democracy created rhetoric, it can serve tyranny. To facilitate collective decision making, Greeks preferred dialogic argument, statements set against statements; they recognized the ethical value of societally responsible, rational problem-solving and decision making. With rhetoric, contextually relevant problems can be settled in arenas governed by epistemic and ontological guidelines to making collective decisions in the common good.

Based on discussion of the societal role rhetoric plays and its ethical challenges, this paper seeks to explain and justify the ethics of organizational rhetoric as supporting public relations. The discussion that follows focuses on the historical need for ethical rhetoric, summarizes the paradoxes of ethical decision making, addresses ethical parameters, emphasizes the ontology of fairness, citizenship, and agonism at individual and societal levels. The purpose is to emphasize how rhetorical decision making is potentially corrected in rhetorical arenas where voices engage to carefully scrutinize the epistemic and ethical value of assertions.

2.0 Collective Need for Ethical Rhetoric

Historian of classical rhetoric, Kennedy (1963, 1991) emphasized how rhetoric reflected ancient Greeks' love of rational, collective (polyvocal) decision making (see also Wenman, 2013). In arenas, citizens co-enacted democratic decision making as the praxis of argument, advocacy, and counter statement dialogically set against statement to enlighten civic decisions. This deliberative decision-making heritage justifies how discourse creates personally and socially relevant meaning. Reflecting critically on the substance of rhetoric, Campbell (1996) observed, "The issues it [rhetoric] examines are social truths, addressed to others, justified by reasons that reflect cultural values. It is a humanistic study that examines all the symbolic means by which influence occurs" (p. 8). Aristotle (384-322 BC; see Kennedy, 1991) was keenly interested not only in what was said, but also why and how it was said. Each speaker's character told him a lot about the strategic purpose, substance and ethics of public address as a strategic means for collective solving problems, setting and affirming standards of character, and aligning interests.

Isocrates (436-338 BC), like Aristotle, believed that rhetoric is essential to self-governance; citizens must take responsibility for maintaining the state apparatus, its decision-making abilities and integrity. To help them accomplish that goal, he challenged citizens to be effective rhetor's committed to the good of society, not merely desiring to win individual arguments. In that sense, rhetoric was the means by which to constitute democracy. Following that line of reasoning, Marsh (2010) advocated using Isocrates' thoughts on rhetoric and citizenship to give solid footing to ethical, effective public relations theory and practice.

Ethics is not superimposed on rhetoric but is inherent to judging the capability and integrity of what and how each voice plays a role in collective decision making. Discourse enables civil society (Taylor, 2009; 2011) and builds social capital (Ihlen, 2005). According to Isocrates, citizens were expected to understand, appreciate and reflect on the larger societal context for their actions and statements. The challenge is to use discourse to live together in

relative, collaborative harmony. In Isocrates' time, citizens were challenged to understand the citizenship consequences of their words and deeds for the good of society; so too today's public relations theory builds on reflectiveness—responsible citizenship. Citizenship is responsible for the integrity of rhetoric, its ethical role in collective decision making as the means for constituting self-government. Recent emphasis has been placed on dialogue, discourse, and engagement as both macro and micro processes (Johnston & Taylor, 2018).

Conrad and Cheney (2018, see also Cheney & Conrad, 2018) reasoned that however important discourse is as a macro-strategic process, focus on that phenomena should not slight the critical examination of individual rhetorical acts. Acts become parts of discourse and therefore deserve specific critical attention. The need is “to examine critically the influence wielded by organizations in contemporary society and evaluate the ethicality of their actions and rhetoric” (p. 34). “*Discourse* is a knowledge system that creates its own *truths* and *truth effects* through culturally biased ways of thinking and perceiving” (p. 34, italics in original).

The reasoning by Conrad and Cheney blends the ethical and functional tension between individual and collective acts. Each is a point of analysis for agonistic investigation. So too, such analysis is inherently classical (Greek) in origin, a blend of rhetorical decision making and functional, pluralistic democracy (Barker, 2009; Wenman, 2013). Davidson (2016) emphasized the classical origins and ontology of the process, “central to agonism is the idea that protagonists perform openly in public, seeking to win acclaim and admiration” (p. 148). He drew on Hornig's work (1993) to emphasize how “the value of classical agonism is its commitment to open public discourses that are able to contest closure and domination by a single or overlapping forces” (p. 148). Rather than being “musty” and ethically neutral, the ponderings of the Athenian culture emphasize how long ago rhetoric in practice arose to

answer citizens' need for a propositional, disputatious means for achieving sufficient harmony of thought and purpose to be able to enact resilient self-governance.

2.1 Places and Paradoxes of Ethical Decision Making

Rhetoric is propositional, contingent, issues-based, problem- and decision-oriented and crucial to the ethical search for sufficient concurrence to accomplish self-governance (in organizations and in communities) in the face of, and confounded by, competing perspectives, interests and uncertainty (Ihlen & Heath, 2018). Rhetoric is never immune from deceit, deception, distortion, and a willingness to use it to co-opt mutual benefit and social responsibility. Even though it cannot not affect the physical realm of human existence, it can influence humans' adaptation to one another in their physical realm.

By this logic, public relations practitioners serve to advance organizations' public citizenship by using rhetorical knowledge to communicate strategically. Rhetorical problems incentivize collective decision making. Problems, as they are shared in communities, invite solutions because of the pressures of uncertainty and need for association.

In classical times, problems raised in the appropriate fora focused decision-making attention on matters of public policy, guilt/innocence, and praise/blame. Arenas, therefore, exhibit at least two dimensions: one is physical (place) and the other is conceptual (cognitive) space devoted to communicative decision making. Focusing on crisis (one of many rationale for the nature and functioning of an arena), Johansen (2018) reasoned that "arena is a social space where communication processes are taking place, not necessarily emanating from the organization in crisis but from the numerous voices that are present in the arena where the crisis exists" (p. 1324). The dynamic, narrative nature of arenas consist of place, actors, themes, plots and tension.

Arenas may be internal to organizations; there statements are vetted to improve planning and execution of individual and group policy, identity, core values, and

identification. Arenas external to organizations arise from tensions within political economies and social arrangements. Arenas are necessarily polyvocal but the expression of arguments, opinions, and judgements does not inherently achieve concurrence, let alone consensus. One agonistic challenge is assuring that arenas are truly polyvocal by assuring that voices are heard and given due regard (Davidson, 2018). Any spirit of discourse neutrality, such as information sharing, cannot truly and ethically deny the role disruption plays in society:

Consistent with the ethos of modern agonism, it does so with a particular regard for understanding how public relations can interrupt power relations in a manner which is biased towards the needs of the socially disadvantaged. (Davidson, 2016, p. 163)

Arenas are power places, places where power is exerted, including that of inclusion and exclusion. For instance, persons can attend, usually, court proceedings. Law prescribes who must attend and the roles they play. Members of the audience may attend but cannot participate. (However, outside of a court voices can seek to be heard and comment on court proceedings and decisions. Arenas change and interlock.)

Decisional insights are brought into strategic, ethics-driven processes in arenas. Critical examination may focus on the ethical character of individual rhetorical statements and the persons/organizations (rhetors) who make and enact them, and on societal, polyvocal, situated discourse processes and the interests they serve. Discourse consists of multiple rhetorical acts, that polyvocally produce layers of analysis, that are joined by converging and diverging themes that express agreement and disagreement. At the levels of individual statements and societal decision-making processes, ethics pose problematic choices for those who participate, how and why they participate and in whose interests.

For these reasons, ethical distinctions need to be made between instrumental tactical and ontological process-based (agonistic) judgments in a manner that ultimately addresses agency, legitimacy, and social responsibility as ethical boundaries of organizational rhetoric.

Such discussion interlocks rhetorical acts into conceptual processes of dialogue, discourse, and engagement. Rhetoric is a pursuit of shared interest however compatible or fraught with conflict, and even dysfunction.

2.2 Ethical Conditions of Problem Solving and Decision Making

Analysis of organizational rhetoric requires the imperative of addressing ethics on individual and societal levels. Thus, we emphasize 1) the virtue of *fairness* as a moral principle (Mikkelsen, 2002); 2) the concept of *rhetorical citizenship* (Kock & Villadsen, 2012b) which includes the *moral obligation* of caring (Theunissen, 2018), and 3) agonistic theory that appreciates *conflict as a productive motive* (Mouffe, 2013). Rhetoric is a relational concept, one that defines the quality of relationships, as the quality of fairness defines relationship quality. Notions such as mutually beneficial relationships, consensus and concurrence are interrogated through the lens of agonistic theory, which will be discussed below. Fairness relies not on any fixed evaluation standard, but rather on qualified and pragmatic evaluation of one another's texts, as search rather than revelation (truth revealed).

Scholarship focuses on the ethics of persuading people (influencing judgments, decision-making and problem-solving processes) (e.g., Gehrke, 2009; Johannesen, Valde, & Whedbee, 2008; Weaver, 1985). The critical approach to rhetoric's ethics started (in detailed explication and analysis) with Plato's (1960) concern that rhetors placed truth second to strategic outcomes as they sought advantages through cleverness rather than sound, principled reasoning—dialectic. One problem with Plato's critique was his theory of forms (ideas), absolutes that could be known by philosophical discussion (dialectic), but not by rhetorical debate. If absolute truth cannot exist, then rhetoric must suffice to guide human agency in the face of uncertainty and contingency by searching for social truth both in the formulation and execution of statements (Campbell, 1996).

Criticism of rhetoric as “empty words” reasons that it lacks means for accomplishing

“substantial action” and addressing “reality” insightfully and responsibly. It is seen as inherently deceptive and intellectually vacuous. Similar criticism of public relations produces suggestions for how to strengthen its ethical practice (Bowen, 2010; Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006; Parsons, 2016) to justify its being perceived as a valuable social activity (Coombs & Holladay, 2013; Holtzhausen, 2012; Taylor, 2010).

Such social activity starts when individual statements by rhetors ontologically facilitate (or short circuit) discourse, dialogue, and engagement (Johnston & Taylor, 2018). Such activity is inherently advocative, agonistic which presumes ethical judgments inherent to the societally productive role of discourse. It can be collaborative in process but does not protect against one party betraying another as was the case when pro-fracking organizations coopted anti-fracking activists (Smith & Fergusson, 2013). Such analysis presses for the ethical distinction between engagement as collaboration versus engagement as collaborative control (Dhanesh, 2017). This corrective effort offers a rationale to justify rhetoric as means for *fair* decision making and thus supports the strategic practice and legitimizing societal role of public relations.

Much of the criticism of rhetoric, primarily its association with “persuasion,” results from the narrow critical perspective that ethics must be the critical watchdog (presuming there are universal ethical norms) regarding the tactics of rhetoric’s persuasive influence over individual and collective decision making. Critics might inaccurately see objectivity as being at odds with persuasion, and persuasion as only able to influence by manipulation. The ethics (including the challenges of credibility) of persuasion and rhetoric can focus narrowly on the rhetor out of context of each rhetorical arena. That rubric misses the emergent ethical judgment inherent to stakeholder expectations. Expectations vary with different stakeholders and translate into the rationale for and strategies of ongoing rhetorical engagement to correct what they judge to be unethical participation in dialogue and decision making.

Insofar as such expectations are relativistic, a view of organizational rhetoric's ethics can be criticized as accepting relativism (L'Etang, 1997; L'Etang & Pieckza, 1996). However, as stakeholders judge individual rhetors' ethics (as tactics and strategies, even messaging), this judgment becomes grist for emergent, strategic societal discussion of matters of individual and public interest, especially those of ethics and agency. Expressed expectations of others become reflexive standards of self-expectation. Such tensions presuppose the forged ethics of expressing, defending, and sharing interests through discourse positions and dialogic processes. Thus, ethical judgment is capable of constituting agentic engagement as opposed to narrowly self-interested judgments.

Even when mindful of credibility expectations, narrow focus on strategic tactics (to achieve ethical judgment) ignores the reality that each rhetorical statement is part of a larger dialogue and discourse, which in and of itself is about ethical engagement regarding ethical choices as collective interest, as stakeholders engage with one another in various rhetorical arenas. Engagement is judged by how well individuals participate in the service of community through the collective management of communal interests (see Johnston & Taylor, 2018). By shifting from individualized tactics to socially responsible stakeholder engagement "communication questions move from reporting, guidelines, and goal attainment, to construction of social and institutional norms, alignment, sensemaking, and dialogue" (Bartlett & Devin, 2011).

By this shift, the ethics of rhetoric expands from consideration of which tactics are individually legitimate to the more enriching ethical consideration of how individual acts of rhetoric contribute ethical judgement to strategic processes that legitimately serve collective interests above self-interests or as the fair adjustment of self-interests to one another. Thus, rhetoric is that process of adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas (Bryant, 1953), but only if the people involved have sufficient agentic and infrastructural space in the public

sphere to seek appropriate adjustments with other discussants (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2010). Such reasoning presumes that ethics supports the enactment of strategic processes as means by which individual participation for all of its strengths and weaknesses can be ethically improved once judgements are pitted against one another. This position presumes that ethics is inherent to the critical assessment of individual rhetorical acts as part of societal rhetorical acts. As such, ethics is inherent to practice, content, and purpose.

The key question is whether ethics can guide rhetoric so that public relations texts serve organizations' rhetorical participation in society. Rhetoric results in strategic choices by which organizations and communities are enacted as discursive judgement is "suspended in self-spun webs of significance" (Green, Li, & Nohria, 2009, p. 11). The central ethical question is whether a univocal text prevails or whether socially responsible textual webs are forged on the anvil of rhetorical discourse. Whether occurring in social media, or other arenas, persuasion and dialogue are entangled (Theunissen, 2015) and are more constructive, and less narrowly hallow when inspired by the morality of caring about the ethical quality of individual statements as societal discourse (Theunissen, 2018). Caring presumes a commitment to assuring that rhetorical statements and discourse processes aspire to the ethics of fairness.

3.0 Ethical Parameters

Contributors to public relations literature have championed explicitly the link between public relations (including the ontology of issues management) and rhetoric through a programmatic focus on the inherent interconnection of ethics and meaning (Heath, 1980). Rhetoric is the *essence* of an organization's relationship to its environment (Heath, 1992). 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 cultures to achieve mutually beneficial relationships" (Heath, 2001, p. 36; recall Bryant,

1953). The ultimate question for public relations, even if mutually beneficial relationships are not utopian, is how each individual voice can serve its own interests while fostering (and suffering) those of others (Davidson, 2016). A singular voice, such as that of the NRA, is particularly challenged to find corrective means to achieve fairness and overcome bias and misjudgment. Voices, such as those of the Parkland students, provide counter statements to the NRA. Competing voices can enlighten choices and achieve fair resource management.

Emphasizing the interdependence of rhetoric and citizenship, Marsh (2012) posited that Isocrates (2000) should be the rhetorical star for public relations practice. Thus, Marsh (2012) featured “values-driven discourse of responsible citizenship” as a “productive guidance to modern public relations” (p. 12). Isocrates mixed rhetoric and philosophy to explain the good citizen’s rhetorical success. Isocrates was not content with “only” identifying the available, functional means for persuasion. Instead, he emphasized the ethics of citizenship in service to community. Citizens were expected to understand, appreciate and reflect on the larger societal context for their actions and statements; this rhetoric constitutes civic community as decision-making arena. In Isocrates’ (1929) time, citizens were challenged to understand the citizenship consequences of their words and deeds for the good of society; so too today’s public relations theory builds on reflectiveness—responsible citizenship. Isocrates presumed “that a discourse of praise can lead men to moral excellence” (Poulakos, 1987, p. 317). He blended analysis of ethical behavior and the narratives that guide socially responsible actions, so that by recalling and forecasting such acts, audiences discover themselves as moral agents (Poulakos, 1987).

Grounding his view of rhetorical citizenship, Aristotle crafted two treatises, in addition to one on rhetoric, that integrated it with politics (self-government) and ethics. The means of enduring self-government, ethos is the constitutive means of organizational rhetoric as self-governing relatedness. Discourse can produce identification, as constitutive of

enactments, strategic discursive processes, social recognition, the transference of trust, and interest alignment (Baumlin & Scisco, 2018).

Ancient Greeks reasoned that rhetoric, politics, philosophy, and ethics intertwined to benefit the moral needs of community. Propositions were contested in arenas where decisions could be made in the collective interest of citizens. By this logic, choice was the inherent rationale of rhetoric, and contention was its driving force. These principles focus ethical attention on the relationship between words and reality, and between organizations and stakeholders. The ontology of fairness obligates citizenship to serve the interests of all, not merely some.

3.1 Ontology of Fairness

Acknowledging the problematic notion of what is truth, Mikkelsen (2002) proposed the concept of *fairness* as a cornerstone of rhetorical ethics. Fairness offers a normative and an imperative heuristic to address the roles bias and injustice play in rhetorical decision making. Ethical constructs have universally accepted, broad meanings, but the real agon occurs as the concept is used to guide rhetorical acts, dialogue, discourses processes, and engagement. Is the concept of re-accommodating customers “fair,” even when it is executed by random (neutral) selection? Perhaps the person selected by the computer for re-accommodation truly needs to be on this flight to be responsible to the interests of others. Fairness includes demands like “don’t lie,” but also “don’t suppress or distort” information. It is a relational concept; the quality of argumentation should not rely on the receiver’s being able to detect and understand bias but can presume that rhetors acknowledge bias and inadequacies of proof and reasoning as they consider what needs to be said and how. Fairness relies on no fixed evaluation standard, but rather on evaluation of each text by that of another; this strategic process ontologically constitutes search rather than revelation. Rhetors can correct instances of unfairness rather than exploit them.

Unfairness can be defined as ways of arguing that deceive the audience and of hiding the reasons why a statement should be questioned as well as supported. This flaw is not necessarily tied to rhetor intention but to what elements, what proofs, reasons, and ethics have been suppressed. The standard of fairness asks when such suppression is reasonable from the audience's (community's) perspective. Rhetors always make selections, as Burke (1966) opined: "Even if a given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality" (p. 45).

While terministic choices are not inherently unethical, the ways terms are adopted and the frames thereby assumed should be open for critical questioning, before, during, and after each rhetorical act. Each rhetor addressing some matter should insist that it be judged by others to determine the veracity of claims of fairness. The correcting nature of rhetoric results when ideas are forced to survive in public contest, engagement that enlightens choice. Corporate rhetoric may often be presented as definitive, not contingent. But is it not always contingent? Is it not inherently exploratory; even as it advocates, it asks, what do others think?

The ethics of rhetoric becomes enriched if the notion of fairness is combined with the golden rule of behaving towards others as one would want others to behave towards oneself. Fairness presumes the reflective importance of authenticity and transparency. Are either of these terms compromised in practice by the difficulties of being fair? Are polyvocal decisions more likely to be fair than monovocal ones? Are comparisons that are made truly relevant for the subject matter? Is the rhetor sidestepping important problems? Are the examples that are used relevant and representative—even sufficient? Questions such as these emphasize the ethical challenges of rhetorical citizenship.

3.2 Conflict as Ethics

A fruitful perspective on such paradoxes is added by Mouffe's (2005) political philosophy; society is seen as "the product of a series of practices whose aim is to establish order in a context of contingency" (Mouffe, 2013, p. 2). The institutions, practices and discourses of democracy that seek to establish hegemonic order Mouffe labels *politics*. She drew a distinction between politics and *the political*. The latter term refers to a certain characteristic or dimension of society, namely the antagonistic dimension that society cannot escape. Mouffe argued against liberalist or rationalist versions of democratic theory that sees rational debate as being able to forge a universal and inclusive consensus.

Such viewpoints negate the antagonistic dimension and the hegemonic order it installs necessarily as an expression of power relations. Some viewpoints are excluded; you cannot achieve absolute harmony as there will always be division and power differential. When "the inescapable moment of decision" arrives, the limit of rational consensus is demonstrated by remaining antagonism (Mouffe, 2013, p. 3). As such, conflict, difference, social division, and emotions are constitutive for society, the search for relatedness through dialogue and discourse. Indeed, identity necessitates difference, so there will always be an "us" vs "them" dimension, but also a "we" is implied. The danger for democracy, however, depends on whether this antagonistic dimension develops into a friend/enemy dimension (irreconcilable division) and becomes ossified dissension. A related concern is the ability of one interest to coopt another.

Rather than ignoring, suppressing or condemning conflict, or opting for expedient bipartisanship, ethics of rhetoric focuses on how to turn the struggle between enemies into a struggle between adversaries. Conflict should not be avoided; indeed, such avoidance is inherently unethical. Ethics demands the pursuit of agreement, but conflict serves individual and societal interests best when they opt for a less antagonistic form than a more aggressively agonistic one. Struggles and emotions (as *pathos* and *ethos*) constitute a vibrant democracy

(Mouffe, 2013).

The ontological challenge is to reach conflictual concurrence about certain democratic values and how they should be implemented. An example Mouffe mentioned is the adherence to democratic values, for instance “liberty” and “equality.” Society needs democratic designs that uphold such values, but lets people debate whether and how their interpretations of these values should become hegemonic, at least for a while. The fairness and legitimacy of this right to fight for a particular interpretation should not be questioned. Recognizing the legitimacy of those holding opposing views is central, but so is the ability to move dissent forward (Davidson, 2016; Mouffe, 2005; Ramsey, 2015), to use it constructively. Vital to the societal vibrancy of dialogue (and fundamental to rhetoric) is not the muting of self-interest or the inherent applauding of bi-partisanship as such. Rather, “agonistic democratic theory elevates the value of permanent contest, dissensus and performance in vibrant public spaces which expose and test the legitimacy of those who hold power and privilege” (Davidson, 2016, p. 145).

In this paradigm, passion as a driving force needs to be recognized, both as something that creates engagement and contributes to identification. For Mouffe (2013), however, passions should be sublimated “by mobilizing them towards democratic designs, by creating collective forms of identification around democratic objectives” (p. 9). In other words, deliberative rhetoric can be used for good democratic purposes. Rage, for instance, can motivate democracy, or confound it.

Such reasoning poses the Isocreaten question, does the role(s) each rhetorician plays serve the ethics of citizenship as the test of propositions ethically bound to the well-being of society? Is the ethical decision one of individual preferences and strategic choices alone, or is the decision necessarily societal service? The ethical judgments of individual statements become magnified, clarified, and contested as they collide agonistically: rhetorically,

dialogically, discursively, and toward engagement.

3.3 Agonism as Ethics

Rhetorical outcomes relevant to public relations role in organizations and society presume shared influence rather than the guiding hand and mind of one entity. Mindful of the agonism inherent in such conquests, Heath (2000) pointed to how concurrence is a goal for public relations, because consensus is often too daunting a hurdle to jump. With either outcome as incentive, rhetoric is inherently agonistic as Burke (1969) reasoned: “Since persuasion so often implies the presence or threat of an adversary, there is the ‘agonistic’ or competitive stress” (p. 52). Such is the case because as one voice says “Yes,” another says “No,” and for marketing appeals (Buy x/Don’t buy X.), agree/disagree (climate change), fundraising (give/donate, or don’t), internal organizational communication (identify/don’t identify), external organizational communication (admire/don’t admire), risk (no likely risk occurrence/harm and harm/substantial risk occurrence), and crisis (crisis/no crisis, offender/no offender). Such contexts, as arenas, and choices that arise are the essence of rhetorical challenges, statements/counter statements. Thus, Burke explained what can be the rhetorician’s creed:

Bring several *rhetoricians* together, let their speeches contribute to the maturing of one another by the give and take of question and answer, and you have the dialectic of a Platonic dialogue. But ideally the dialogue seeks to attain a higher order of truth, as the speakers, in competing with one another, cooperate towards an end transcending their individual positions. (p. 53)

Such aspirational positions assume human motive which should foster but can confound collaborative benefit.

Public relations rhetoric is needed for collaborative decision-making. In his exploration of *agonistic theory*, Davidson (2016) investigated the positive role of *conflict* and

its implications for public relations. The argument goes that while “consensus and agreements are functionally important, ... for agonistic democracy they must be recognised as temporary and open to challenge” (p. 149). Conflict is a precondition of growth as is change a desired outcome. Like-mindedness, if uncritically accepted, can become trained incapacity.

Permanent contest and dissensus are needed—although not to the extent that chaos and division reign, alongside the creation of “vibrant public spaces which expose and test the legitimacy of those who hold power and privilege” (p. 147). Recognition of such contest suggests, by extension, that conflict may be inventively productive rather than dysfunctional while some overly harmonious status quo means that nothing changes. Legitimacy is partner to ethics. The collective search for legitimacy drives strategic processes to produce outcomes that justify individual and societal agency.

However well such questions can be asked in the abstract, the answers become more apparent as public relations scholars acknowledge the ethical boundary setting of activism, whether external or internal (Wolf, 2018). This sentiment echoes the work of Holtzhausen (2012) who advocated that public relations practitioners need to be activists. Similarly, Deetz (2001) reasoned that the contrary voice, dissensus, tries to disrupt the prevailing discourse, and provide either “forums for and modes of discussion to aid in the building of more open consensus,” or “to show the partiality (the incompleteness and one-sidedness) of reality and the hidden points of resistance and complexity” (Deetz, 2001, pp. 26-31). As such, asymmetry of power and opinion provides incentive to change.

The next two sections further investigate distinctions between ethics of individual level and societal level adjustments to the influence challenges inherent to rhetorical situations. The ethics of individual level (statements by one rhetor) depend on challenges relating to purpose, message design, content (reasoning and evidence), bias in language used, and desire to serve others as well as self. That topic is developed in the next section, which is

followed by analysis of societal level ethics.

4.0 Individual Level Ethics: Message Design and Execution

Rhetorically oriented scholars argue that advocacy and persuasion (and by implication, argumentation) *are* the main currents in which public relations operates and are inherently linked by the virtue of strategies that can produce influence and counter influence (Heath, 2007; Pfau & Wan, 2006). Rhetoric should in practice be linked to an ethics regarding strategic means as well as ends: enlightened choice making as moral ends.

Emphasizing means/ends logics, Edgett (2002) favored an organization-centric framework for public relations rhetoric that “conferred moral superiority on objectivity at the expense of persuasion” (p. 2). She addressed “whether persuasion is a legitimate public relations function” and “whether it can be performed to high ethical standards” (p. 1). Her discussion emphasized how each rhetorical statement is an “act of publicly representing an individual, organization, or idea with the object of persuading targeted audiences to look favorably on—or accept the point of view of—the individual, the organization or the idea” (p. 1). Her ethical criteria could judge the merits of the organization, its preferred issue positions, and means available to it for advocacy. She preferred that the organization’s interest is not paramount but a means by which all interests can be satisfactorily aligned. Veracity can be achieved by one entity, but as is the case of legal argument and science, the test of truthfulness is the ability of any conclusion to withstand public scrutiny. Respect exhibits “regard for audiences as autonomous individuals with rights to make informed choices and to have informed participation in decisions that affect them, as well as well as willingness to promote dialogue over monologue” (p. 20). Consent presumes that situated discourse “is carried out only under conditions to which it can be assumed all parties consent” (p. 20).

Such ethics has relevance to public relations, reasoned Porter (2010): “the ultimate outcome of public relations efforts will always remain influencing attitudes and ultimately,

behavior. Public relations professionals are paid to advocate ideas and to influence behavior” (p. 132). The discussion should explore how to conduct persuasion in an ethical manner, which may need to emphasize the ethical value of each voice added to a multiple-voice, multiple-text approach to rhetoric that serves multiple, even conflicting interests.

Discussion of ethics has focused on the *goal, process, and means* of rhetoric. Rhetoric should aim for self-discovery and social knowledge, rather than *just* persuasion, if it is to accomplish its humanizing potential (Johannesen et al., 2008). Persuaders should include sensitivity criteria (caring and concern) that balance clients’ needs with social responsibility (Edgett, 2002). The challenge for each rhetor is to balance the intention of ethics that is directed inwards to the individual rhetor with the intention of rhetoric that is directed outwards (Aasland, 2009). Voicing one’s interests without sufficient attention to the interests of others confounds matters of fairness, social responsibility and legitimacy.

This societal productivity (power resource dependency) model of legitimacy challenges organizations to meet corporate social responsibility (CSR) standards that are evaluative (moral legitimacy) and cognitive/pragmatic (financial/material legitimacy) (Golant & Sillince, 2007; Suchman, 1995; on the association of CSR and organizational rhetoric as cooption, see Davidson, 2018). This view of CSR is recursive and reflective. Socially responsible actions, including participating ethically in discourse, presume that organizations demonstrate social responsibility by bending to the service of the community rather than seeking to bend community to serve the organization.

Focusing on whether one *should* use the means of influence available through the rhetorical heritage has helped critics of rhetoric and public relations to discover another debate (Johannesen et al., 2008). That critical debate focuses on how the audience is treated. As argued by Ricoeur (1992), ethics demands reciprocity in every asymmetric communication situation. One view of this challenge emphasizes the notion of the audience as vessel into

which information is poured to achieve influence. Rather audiences need to be assumed capable of gaining informed judgement leading to enlightened choice and to be capable and encouraged to participate in dialogue. The essential nature of rhetorical citizenship is support for community and productive relatedness both of which presume the ability to shape rhetorical arenas, infrastructurally and advocatively. Willingness to accept democratic institutions and processes are preconditions if public relations is able to gain acceptance as democratic (White & Imre, 2013).

To right the narrow asymmetry of the kind of rhetoric called instrumental or functional, champions of the rhetorical paradigm investigate the embracing ontological and existential principles of rhetoric which presumes a balance between disembodied dialectic and dialogic or ontological rhetoric. One key to unlocking this tension exists in Buber's (1965) discussion of dialogue with its emphasis on between. Functional rhetoric can be biased to serve one voice and conflict to be "overly-againstness." A key distinction at play is not only ethical regard for others, including their opinions and interests, but also awareness of doubt, uncertainty, and exploration. The qualitative difference between discourse types is that of emergent relationship quality not as rhetorical leverage but as qualitative assessment of interaction quality and outcome fairness, the means for cooperation and inclusion (Czubaroff, 2000, see also Buber, 1965, Toledano, 2018).

One tragic flaw of instrumental rhetoric is the inability to avoid the agency of narrow victory as its rationale. A key differentiation is whether a specific outcome is sought (such as a verdict of guilt or innocence) or whether the spirit, and ethics, of cooperation (collective agency) constitutes the pursuit of shared interest and resolution of uncertainty as quest. Resoluteness, openness, gentleness and compassion are ethical principles that should characterize statements that build dialogue (Johannesen et al., 2008). Truly ethical rhetoric involves listening for and thinking about (regard) the merit of each other's arguments rather

than merely to discover flaws that can be exploited for victory (Booth, 2004). That claim does not ignore the importance of listening to "Hitlers" (as trope) so as to create an argumentative counterpunch and/or redirection (Bang, 2017).

This argument echoes the "true" rhetoric of Plato's *Phaedrus* (1998), as well as Habermas' (1991) discourse ethics. In the ideal speech situation, everyone can and should take participative initiative. All issues can be discussed. Participants become empowered, and empowering, by yielding to the better argument, rather than narrowly following self-interested preferences. Kent and Taylor (2018) build on their long-term interest in dialogue and rhetoric to emphasize the metaphor of Homo Dialogicus. They "treat dialogue as *a genuine, propinquitous, synchronous, interpersonal, relational orientation towards others*" (p. 315, italics in original). Ethics is inherent to the purpose as well as the processes of dialogue: "Dialogic communicators are committed to engaging in challenging and meaningful interactions that lead to conclusions, solve problems, and resolve differences" (Kent & Taylor, 2018, pp. 315-316; also Kent & Taylor, 2002). Thus, asymmetry of rhetoric is corrected by assuring that ethics leads to expressions of dialogue that occur in rhetorical arenas where voices engage because assertions are proposed and carefully scrutinized.

Ethics guides the means that are employed to bracket the goal of the rhetor and evaluate those means separately (Johannesen et al., 2008). For instance, rhetors must base their arguments on their *honest moral conviction* about what it is best to do or which decision is most just (Irwin, 1996). However, the quintessential ethical question regarding means is whether or not the rhetor speaks truth and seeks virtue. The simplest communication ethics principle is the deontological position that *you must not lie* (e.g., Kant, 2002). Is a difference of opinion, a lie, or merely a conflicting assessment of fact, value, policy, and identification? Such questions become the grist of discourse.

A problem arises, nonetheless, since rhetoric deals with uncertainties and even chaos,

with contingencies and expedience rather than the certainties and mathematical logic and universal moral principles. Public debate can seek to correct misstatement and misjudgment. Rhetoric leaves open a grey, messy area since it deals with possibilities, probabilities and contingencies—and moral relativism complicated by ambiguity and uncertainty. As courtship, it presumes that identification can overcome division.

Rhetoric is epistemic (Scott, 1999). The rigors of epistemology make sure that each rhetor does not embrace a naïve perspective on what truth is, as something that can be unearthed with absolute certainty and led away from dialogue to monologue. If some truths are permanent, unchangeable and non-contingent, “rhetoric did make the reality of our discovery [of these], but it did not make the ethical truth itself” (Booth, 2004, p. 13).

One of the best ways for each rhetor to judge the ethics of such matters is to expect, invite and suffer the expression of others’ opinions. Decision presumes situation, arena and the need and potential for influence. All choices, in any situation, are not equal. How does rhetoric help people to choose? Burke (1969) faulted classical rhetoric (Greek and Roman) for stressing “the element of explicit design in rhetorical enterprise” (p. 35). By focusing too much on acts of individual (instrumental) rhetoric, tactics are over-emphasized and strategic processes are underemphasized as are inherent ethical choices (ontology). Burke warned that too much emphasis can be placed on the rhetor and too little on people who are seeking influence. Could Hitler have been effective if a vital segment of the population was not eager to adopt his position on key issues (Rees, 2012)? Ironically an accepting audience ostensibly lightens the ethical burden shouldered by the rhetor and becomes, in its acceptance, part of the rhetor’s voice. What is lost, however, is not only the ethics of the rhetor but the ethical agency of counter statement as community decision making.

The crux of ethics, as much as character counts, is the quality of the rhetorical arena, the public sphere, where discourse occurs, and engagement becomes mutually enlightened

choice-making. Since rhetoric can hardly tolerate the status quo, counterstatement is deliberately progressive. Such is the nature of Isocreaten citizenship. A rhetorical theory of public relations can provide value by featuring the individual burden of individuals engaging with one another toward some end which is worthy of discourse. Rhetoric is issue-oriented, a matter of focusing judgment on contestable matters. Discourse ethics begs that each individual rhetorical act end by asking the question, “what do you think?”

Individual rhetorical acts influence ethical choice-action ratios. Strategic decision-making elements become less relevant to context (arena) specific decision making as they are more generalized around ethical tensions as societal tensions of public interest. Thus, some scholars have taken issue with the “public relations-person-as-corporate-construct” (St. John III & Pearson, 2016). Individual rhetorical acts must suffer ethical scrutiny by being expressed in layers of discourse.

In sum: the ethical question is how well each (individual) rhetorical statement fairly supports the ontological processes and epistemic meanings needed for societal self-governance. To solve that quandary, open and responsible dialogue is the ethical ideal (Edgett, 2002; Pfau & Wan, 2006; Porter, 2010). Recently, Lane and Kent (2018) claimed: “Dialogic engagement is therefore both a context and a process that demonstrate dialogic principles, a rhetorical undertaking requiring relational co-orientation and effort” (p. 61). Emphasis on dialogue and discourse shifts the focus of ethical judgment from individual to collective statements as each plays against another in the ontology of citizenship conflict.

5.0 Societal Level: Citizenship as Conflict

Individually and organizationally, rhetoric helps people participate in society’s debates. Rhetorically, public relations is a means by which situated discourse is organizationally brought to bear on matters of fact, value, policy, identity, and identification (Heath, 2001, 2007). This normative ideal of public relations presumes that it is not merely

descriptive but also emergent and always ethically challenged. The discursive role for public relations is to help organizations ontologically become “stewards for democracy” (Heath, Waymer & Palenchar, 2013, p. 271). A critical view of the ethics of public relations in society is warranted (e.g., Edwards, 2015; Ihlen & Fredriksson, 2018; Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012). So, what is the way forward?

Fairclough (1989), one of the founders of discourse analysis, articulated two themes relevant to using a linguistic lens for ethically examining society:

The first is more theoretical: to help correct a widespread underestimation of the significance of language in the production, maintenance, and change of social relations of power. The second is more practical: to help increase consciousness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others, because consciousness is the first step towards emancipation. (p. 1)

Terministic and ethical conditions for empowerment/disempowerment can instrumentalize publics to serve organizational ends. For example, an instrumentalized public opposes “job killer” and champions “job creator” when the choice is posed descriptively, evaluatively, preferentially, and politically.

As well as evaluative language, public relations can facilitate (or not) the needed infrastructures (physical place, rhetorical means, and public arenas) for issue contests that support collaborative, engaged decision-making. Relationship quality depends on how well interested parties can advance private interests as collective interests. Since no entity controls an arena, at least not for long, competing interests can and should come into play. As such, public relations can help create “discourse space[s] in which public and private interests collide and become public interests” (Heath et al., 2013, p. 278). How and to what extent such infrastructures occur is a matter of ethical judgment.

Thus, Kock and Villadsen (2012a) emphasized “rhetorical citizenship”: Democracy

realized through open, transparent, fair, and authentic communication. Building on the ideas of Isocrates and Burke, Villadsen and Kock (2008) stressed that humans use symbols to induce cooperation, to reach decisions and compromises, and thus build and sustain societies as places where concurrence overcomes differences, divisions and uncertainty. The practice of rhetoric, they argued, grounds citizens' participation in the political side of civic life, a very Isocretan idea. As Burke (1969) reasoned, rhetoric as courtship calls on identification to overcome division.

Rhetorical citizenship is “a conceptual frame” for descriptive and normative studies of how citizenship is enacted discursively (Kock & Villadsen, 2014). Discourse analysis raises questions of rhetorical agency (Gunn & Cloud, 2010; Hoff-Clausen, 2013), public modalities (Brouwer & Asen, 2010), emergence of publics and counter-publics (Fraser, 1992; Hauser, 1999), and the forms and norms of deliberation (Kock & Villadsen, 2012b). Hoff-Clausen and Ihlen (2015) discussed how this conceptual frame provides a constructive *metaphor* for corporations to critically examine their public relations content and strategy. Additionally, Green and Li (2011) extended Alvesson's (1993) argument that organizations *are* rhetoric, an analytical means for finding a constructive relationship between knowledge, institution, judgement/choice, and agency: “Rhetorical institutionalism is the deployment of linguistic approaches in general and rhetorical insights in particular to explain how institutions both constrain and enable agency” (Alvesson, 1993, p. 1662)

From a normative standpoint, this principled framework reasons that organizations' rhetorical activities address what is best for the public good—and by assuring that infrastructures are in place and so well utilized that interested parties can speak on what is good for them and others. Organizations can enact rhetorical citizenship by creating platforms where they can be approached and issues discussed, and idiomatic meaning formed, a current theme in social media studied. Whether social media are dialogic, they are interactive, and

facilitate participation. They can silo discussion into tribal identification, scapegoating and blameplacing. Anyone can participate in social media, but there are no gatekeeping journalists to prefer one set of ideas to another as a means for balancing coverage and commentary.

Scholars and others, however,

should be aware of how deep such discursive enactments of citizenship run, and whether the rhetorical activities are rooted in organizational reality or serve as mere external displays of concern for the public good. In the long run, the latter will only hurt our social capital, as well as the symbolic capital of the corporation. (Hoff-Clausen & Ihlen, 2015, p. 34)

Critical appraisal of actual practice needs to delve into the rhetorical situations in which organizations find themselves asked to engage.

A problematic view of organizational rhetoric as public relations is that the organization can be institutionalized to communicate so as to promote itself to its own good by bending others to its will (Heath, Motion, & Leitch, 2010; Rothkopf, 2012). A neo-institutional view reverses that notion and positions organizational rhetoric as a polyvocal means of defense and protection that integrates private and public interests. Institutional legitimacy presumes each organization's ability to deservedly get others to affirm it as it bends itself to serve community. Such bending inherently couples CSR and legitimacy as communication ethics.

In short, conflict is a democratic good as long as it enables "transparent rhetorical rivalries" and nurtures expansive hegemonies, rather than exclusionary ones (Davidson, 2016, p. 147). Humans need decisions (constructive decision making) because of the omnipresence of uncertainty and need for agreement. Coordinated behavior installs order and hegemonic arrangements. But hegemony needs to be questioned and challenged. Supported by rhetorical theory, public relations theory must "develop the tools for scholars and practitioners alike to

be better able to evaluate the democratic implications of any given hegemonic order” (p. 157). As Burke (1989) reasoned, rhetoric “*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, italics in original).

This approach to rhetoric draws on agonistic theory to place high hopes on practitioners and their autonomy (Moloney & McKie, 2015). Ethical limits are imposed on practitioners stemming from social norms, relatedness, and socialization in the work place, as well as the political-economic systems in which corporations are embedded (Ihlen & Levenshus, 2017).

Corporations often have a very limited, narrowly self-interested perspective on the world given that their profit motive typically reduces society, people, and the environment to means to this end. That incentive can confound power and control so that the uncertainty of outcome inherent to rhetoric limits rather than motivates discourse. Systemic limits constrain what can be accomplished, even when embracing an agonistic mind-set. This, however, should not preclude organizational rhetors from holding up and advocating ethical ideals. In fact, the pressures against doing good, being moral, point exactly to the ways in which rhetoric can enrich societal decision making, enact citizenship, and bend organizations to serve communities. Matters change; the challenge of ethical change is to proactively seek new terministic frames, identifications and solutions to enduring and recurring problems.

The ethics of rhetoric poses a constant march toward individual and collective institutionalization of social responsibility and pragmatic/moral legitimacy (Golant & Sillince, 2007). Legitimacy is a demonstration of control, including corporate control, which is inspired by the need to justify the license to operate. Such control is not only the result of internal rhetoric, but rhetoric external, by which an organization and its stakeholder

participants engage. Green, Babb, and Alpaslan (2008) addressed the constitutive nature of organization and society by emphasizing how “discourse or language shape the reproduction of practices and structures with an institutional field” (p. 41). Organizing practices and logics are relevant to the shaping of sociopolitical environments. As means for institutionalization, rhetoric is a tool by which the webs of judgment are created by organizations that need existential justification. Texts bring cognition to judgments which become public hegemonies that are prone to change from the moment they are constituted and instituted.

6.0 Conclusion

The ultimate problematic examined in this discussion is to explain and institutionalize public relations as organizational rhetoric. Its ethical grounding is moral principle concerning both means and ends, tactics and processes. At the individual level, rhetoric constitutes propositional discourse which presumes that the ideas advocated are not inherently accepted unequivocally. No matter how clever the rhetor, the outcome is affected strategically by fact, reasoning, ethos, pathos, values, structure/organization, style/language, identifications, and such. Each statement invites counter statement. Rhetoric calls for consensus and accepts concurrence. At the social level, public relations as organizational rhetoric enacts rhetorical citizenship. It is judged by its commitment to fairness for the interests of others as for oneself. An agonistic perspective supports democratic values constructed to serve many interests not merely a few. Ethics is more than a strategic option, a quality added to rhetoric to make it more effective.

Ultimately, ethics of organizational rhetoric expresses caring and appreciation for the presence of other voices and their interests. Caring and appreciation must balance the ethics of strategic process and personal need. Robust advocacy can disable and should situationally defeat the cases some voices make. A quandary is how ethics drives such rhetorical stances, and how rhetoric drives such ethical stances. Rhetoric is an expression and enactment of

fairness, the obligation of agonistic citizenship.

As long as rhetorical situations occur, as uncertainty exists, risk/reward ratios require resource distribution that calls for problems to be solved and decisions made. The question is not whether, but when and how discourse can make organizations better places to work and societies better places to live.

Rhetoric is a sociopolitical force. Rhetorical theory of public relations incorporates public and private citizenship through dialogue and discourse (layers of advocacy and shared meaning) for purposes of self-governance as relatedness. As much as rhetoric is a person (or organization) thinking out loud, it is fundamentally a community thinking out loud, engaging. Rhetoric is language, text-centric. Organizations and societies exist as text. Communities' shared interests come to own such language however compatible or discordant as means for overcoming division while championing relationship.

The challenge facing public relations as organizational rhetoric is that ethics is inherent to the quality of character, strategy, form, content/substance, purpose, and outcome. Thus, individuals and organizations go onward into the fog of uncertainty contesting ethical imperatives needed to make society more fully functioning (Heath, 2006). The point is not that a single statement can ethically, ontologically be definitive, but one voice among many as dialogue, discourse, and engagement is the democratic process that defies being static. That is ethical rationale for investigating how discourse can empower decision making while also constraining, in the process, each individual nexus of power (Davidson, 2016).

Agonism is heavy on factors of controversy, not dependent on consensus, and not focused on the directions that rhetorical battles take. One direction might be the defeat of one side. Another is the amalgamation of both sides, but not in equal amounts. It presumes asymmetry and does not like stalemate. Rhetoric agonistically seeks to make decisions, always falling short of agreement, consensus. The aspiration to get voices involved in the

discussion of their destiny requires engagement “if we wish to build a fully functioning society” (Lane & Kent, 2018, p. 59).

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