29. Rhetoric

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Very simply, *rhetoric* is the art of effective communication—in a wide variety of situations, from technical reports, web videos, ***social media*** postings, scholarly articles, proposals, and memos written at work, to everyday oral and written interactions among colleagues, friends, and family.

But rhetoric takes in more than spoken and written words. It includes all forms of symbolic interaction used to express, instruct, persuade, build relationships, and delight, including images, ***data visualizations***, bodily gestures, facial expressions, tattoos, mathematical expressions, music, movies, a thumbs up emoji at a Zoom meeting, a #BlackLivesMatter sign displayed at a ***public*** march, an Aztec codex pictogram (Baca, 2009), a quilt containing coded instructions to guide slaves to freedom (Banks, 2006), and other multimedia and nonverbal forms of expression. How a parent speaks to a child—both what they say and how they say it—that's rhetoric, too, or even just smiling at the child to express love. We practice rhetoric all the time, whenever we interact with others, even if we do not always label it *rhetoric*.

Rhetoric is also a formal academic field of study and of teaching—a humanistic, university-level discipline where scholars evaluate and critique communication practices and build theories, conduct ***research***, and recommend best practices for effective communication. At the university, rhetoric scholars are typically housed in departments of writing and rhetoric, communication, media studies, English, and/or technical/professional communication. But rhetoric as an applied field of practice extends across all university disciplines—business, engineering, ***science***, nursing, psychology, mathematics, computer ***technology***, graphic ***design***, music, education, etc.—since all academic disciplines form their ***knowledges***, necessarily, through writing and communication practices.

Rhetoric has long been closely linked with technical (and scientific and professional) communication, as evidenced by the considerable body of scholarship and ***research*** that builds upon and develops this connection and by the number of graduate and undergraduate degree programs whose identities link these two areas. Rhetoric provides the vital historical and theoretical grounding for technical/professional communication—that is, the operative principles that help us understand how to communicate effectively in professional contexts.

The definition that rhetoric is the art of effective communication sounds simple, but it begs a lot of questions and hides numerous complexities and several long-standing historical arguments. In fact, there are many competing definitions of rhetoric (Burton, 2016; Eidenmuller, 2020; Smit, 1997)—and many different

views of the scope and usefulness of rhetoric, even within the field of technical/professional communication.

There are two main competing views of rhetoric: a robust historical and scholarly one, but also a more pejorative, public usage that sees rhetoric as **style** in the superficial sense, as artificial ornamentation, verbal flourish, and bombast; rhetoric is dressing up ideas to make them seem more persuasive. The artificial ornamentation has the potential to be harmful, if it distracts, distorts, misleads, or skews the truth to achieve persuasive effect. In the public realm, the term *rhetoric* is almost always used in a disparaging way to refer to the lies or distortions of others. It is seen as the opposite of clarity, facts, reality, truth (Porter, 2020).

The more accurate historical view sees rhetoric as a noble art of truthful and **ethical** communication aimed not at deceiving an **audience** in order to persuade but rather at engaging audiences in order to teach them or interact with them cooperatively to address social needs and problems. Rhetoric is the necessary means by which we interact productively, cooperatively, collaboratively—in order to avoid conflict, promote positive relations, and achieve our goals. Rhetoric is inherently good, in other words—though of course it can be practiced badly.

Etymologically, *rhetoric* is a Greek (Attic) term: *Rhētorikē* is the art of speaking. *Rhētōr* refers to the speaker, orator, artist of discourse, or teacher of speaking. Roman rhetoricians sometimes referred to the art as *rhetorica*, using the Greek, or the Latin *oratoria* (MacDonald, 2014). Rhetoric theory certainly existed before and beyond the Greeks—different rhetorical concepts from other locations and ancient cultures (Lipson & Binkley, 2004)—but the term *rhetoric* itself comes from the ancient Greeks.

In the Mediterranean tradition, rhetoric emerged as a formal area of study in the 5th century BCE Athens, in the treatises of the Sophistic rhetoricians and in the schools of Isocrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The classical Greek, and then, later, Roman, rhetoricians recognized rhetoric as being its own distinct realm of knowledge important to the functioning of the *polis*, the Greek city state of Athens, and the republic of Rome. Rhetoric was the means by which civic life happened—at least in a democracy that permitted different voices to be heard. (Though not all voices were heard—not the voices of women or slaves.) The realm of rhetoric, according to Aristotle (*Rhetoric*, Book 1.3), was political speeches in the Athenian Assembly (deliberative), legal arguments (forensic), and speeches of praise (or blame) at ceremonial events (epideictic). In short, rhetoric was synonymous with public oratory. Rhetoric was also closely aligned with persuasion, as Aristotle defined rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (*Rhetoric*, Book 1.2). As writing technologies improved and became more widely available (paper, stylus, ink), writing, too, became part of rhetoric.

The negative view of rhetoric in the Western tradition comes from Plato, specifically from his dialogue *Gorgias* (380 BCE). In *Gorgias*, Plato seems to dismiss rhetoric as "flattery . . . cookery . . . counterfeit," as largely a false art of placating or manipulating audiences. And yet in a later dialogue, *Phaedrus* (370 BCE), Plato

acknowledges that, if used properly, rhetoric can move us toward the truth—if the rhetor possesses true knowledge and is motivated ultimately toward achieving good for others.

The Roman rhetorician Cicero had a broad view of the art: "The greatest orator is the one whose speech instructs, delights, and moves the spirit of the audience. To instruct is an obligation, to give pleasure a free gift, to move them is required" (*De Optimo*, I.3-4). Here, Cicero identifies rhetoric as having multiple purposes, with instruction as key—that is, to teach, instruct, inform is a requirement for rhetoric. That obligation has always been a strong purpose in technical/professional communication, and perhaps the primary one: reporting ***information*** in a way that instructs and helps audiences understand and use technology.

Quintilian's definition of rhetoric, from *Institutio Oratoria* (96 CE), even more strongly links rhetoric to ethical obligation, and particularly to the ***ethics*** of character. He defines rhetoric as "the art of speaking well" (2.14.5) or "a good man speaking well" (12.1.1). That definition insists that the rhetor must, first, be a virtuous person—*vir bonus*—or else they will not have the rhetorical credibility (*ethos*) to compel an audience. The good rhetor speaks with knowledge and expertise, and that expertise is very much guided by their public position, by their commitment to the pursuit of truth and knowledge, and by their obligation to the *polis*.

In other words, all acts of rhetoric should produce value, achieve some positive result for somebody—with the ultimate goal being the good of the *polis*, the republic, the state, and the citizens within it (Porter, 2020). Technical/professional communication has long defined its rhetorical mission as helping the reader or end user—in using clear and concise language, in designing usable documents, in creating accurate and valuable data visualizations, in conducting valid usability studies as a means of creating usable/useful interfaces, etc. These are ethical obligations to audience implicit in the rhetorical practices that define technical/professional communication.

Historically, rhetoric has had a queasy relationship with science—which led to disputes in the 20th century about the relevance of rhetoric to technical and scientific communication: i.e., about whether rhetoric was a helpful theoretical framework for the field. That debate has been settled now—yes, it is highly relevant and helpful—but it was not a given at first.

The European Enlightenment philosopher scientists of the 17th and 18th centuries saw rhetoric as antithetical to science. The Royal Society of London, founded in 1660, provides plentiful examples of hostility to rhetoric, seeing it as standing for unnecessary ornamentation, elaborate expression, and metaphoric bombast. Thomas Sprat, one of the founders of the society, referred to rhetoric as "this vicious abundance of Phrase, this trick of Metaphors, this volubility of Tongue, which makes so great a noise in the world" (1667, p. 111). The Royal Society certainly contributed to enshrining the degraded notion of rhetoric as false, as trickery, as ornamentation, and as a means of hiding the truth rather than revealing it.

According to Carolyn Miller (1979), this tension between science and rhetoric pertains to the positivism that science often promotes: "Science has to do with observation and logic, the only ways we have of approaching external, absolute reality. Rhetoric has to do with symbols and emotions, the stuff of uncertain, incomplete appearances" (p. 611). Because rhetoric deals in uncertainties, ambiguities, complexities, and probabilities—rather than certainties—it seems opposed to science.

However, the communication of scientists requires rhetorical knowledge (Gross, 1990)—e.g., about how to assemble data, organize it, design charts and graphs, and express conclusions clearly. Science relies on logic, reasoning, facts, and analysis, which is the rhetorical realm of *logos*—one of the three key persuasive appeals Aristotle emphasizes. In other words, science is not opposed to rhetoric; it *needs* rhetoric in order to develop and communicate scientific knowledge.

Historically, rhetoric has always had to adapt to change—to technological changes in communication media certainly, but not only those. How will rhetoric continue to adapt to meet the changing needs of society and recent developments in technology? Two key developments are the emergence of *cultural rhetorics* and *machine writing/rhetoric*, both of which fall under the heading of *posthumanist rhetorics* (Sackey et al., 2019)—i.e., rhetoric theories that challenge traditional humanistic assumptions about the nature of human communication.

For many years, scholars in rhetoric, technology, and technical/professional communication have argued the need to treat matters of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability/disability, and culture broadly understood as central to the field. The traditional inclination to treat these concerns as neutral," as monolithic, or, worse, as extraneous or irrelevant to considerations of technology and technical communication, needs to end (Cobos et al., 2018; Haas, 2012). Cultural concerns, especially the recognition of diversity as well as the acknowledgement of inequity in power relations (e.g., colonialism), are essential to the *techne* of rhetoric.

For technical communication, such a concern would mean, for example, viewing the Flint Water Crisis of 2014 as not simply a neutral technological failure but also as a failure of social relations involving race, socioeconomic status, power, inequity, and politics (see Sackey et al., 2019). Writing a technical report in this context without acknowledging how a white political power structure operated to deny, neglect, and ignore the material needs of the Black community is to instrumentalize the technology by removing the human element. It is, in short, to miss the point altogether. Technology, or technological communication, cannot overlook or neglect the broader social context and the material conditions of the human experience, the human suffering, the Black bodies, many of them children, that are the core of this rhetorical context. Similarly, cultural factors are important in the design of technology, as effective design needs to consider the diversity of users and the varying expectations, attitudes, and abilities that different users are likely to bring to technology use (Sun, 2006, 2012).

Technical/professional communication needs to prepare for the day when writing and communication will be produced mostly by machines, with humans functioning more in the role of editorial oversight. Artificial intelligence (AI) writing systems are already doing writing tasks previously done by humans—not just *editing* and simple text processing, but actual full text composition. AI writing agents transcribe meetings and produce minutes (Voicea's Eva), write emails to set up appointments (x.ai's Amy), and communicate via text chat with customers (customer service bots). AI systems publish news stories (the *Washington Post*'s Heliograf), create financial reports (Narrative Science's Quill), produce marketing copy (Persado), (co)write emails (Google Compose), and even produce entire documents from simple prompts (ChatGPT). Quite simply, we are already immersed in AI-created professional communications (McKee & Porter, 2020, 2021). Increasingly, technical com municators will be expected to collaborate/co-write with machines.

Rhetoric must always reinvent itself for new times, adapting to new media, new technologies, and changing social attitudes about what is appropriate, just, fair, logical, and factual. Nonetheless, the fundamental definition remains unchanged: *Rhetoric is the art of effective communication*—learning it, practicing it, teaching it—in whatever time and place and cultural moment we are in, with whatever communication technologies we are using.

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