

Public Relations and the Rhetoric of Civil Society

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Abstract

The intention of this paper is to build on a book by Anne Surma (2005). It takes some of Surma's ideas probably beyond what was originally intended in order to suggest their logical conclusions for the practice of public relations. Surma argues that writing and reading of every type enables or otherwise facilitates or restricts imagination. Further, this shaping or inflection of the imagination leads to the shaping or the inflection of the type of 'ethic' which we are able to hold in our heads about the world which surrounds us. If this is the case then public relations writing, which has the very *raison d'être* of influencing thought, must lend itself to important analysis in this regard. This paper presumes the reader has a basic understanding of Charles Saunders Peirce's notion of semiotics.

Introduction

Surma (2005) explains how the different sorts of ‘ordinary’ writing which we produce and encounter in everyday life have consequences for the ethics of our world:

...ethics, imagination and rhetoric are necessarily interwoven in writing... our first and foremost interpersonal, moral and creative social (humanities centred) practice is not only limited by, but can challenge and change those discourses that preclude us from using our imagination when we write to and for one another. (p. viii-ix)

Surma argues that how we write and how we are encouraged to read by the way others write limits, opens, distorts or encourages the flowering, or the shutting down of all of our imaginations in particular ways. For Surma, writing, any writing, is an engine which may build, pervert, provoke and otherwise fashion thinking – behind the scenes of the conscious mind as it were – in all sorts of positive or worrying ways. This quality of writing to shape, or to at least to tend to shape thinking is what is meant by the term ‘rhetoric’. But as Surma convincingly argues, it is not just the high or low art of the novel or pulp fiction which seeds our thoughts rhetorically. Rather, all writing does this. For instance the mundane job specification of a building engineer is laced with the complex subject positions of competitive capitalism when they tell a client where safety exits should be located. I take ‘subject positioning’ to mean: how is the company regarded (seen) by the client who reads the report? – How does the building engineer ‘appear’ in her reports to her professional engineering colleagues? – How does she appear to the marketers, or those concerned with the finances in her own company when those internal audiences read their copy of the report? And then, how are those internal audiences ‘hailed’ or ‘cast’ as subjectivities, that is, what is the shape or type of subjectivity which is presumed or intended to be induced by the particular writing as an effect of the designed discourse - on those internal audiences? In other words: What is the rhetorical effect of the writing? Take another of Surma’s examples: The report of geothermal engineers has to negotiate a careful path through what it might be ethical and legal to allow a client to imagine about a prospective project which may be considerably lucrative for the engineers’ company, but which may end up like the geothermal project which caused earthquakes in Basel, Switzerland in 2006 (AAP, 2007). How do the writers of the geothermal report regard their audiences? What effects on the imagination are these writers intending to (rhetorically) produce in their potential clients’ minds? How do the writers hope the clients will end up weighing the risks versus the environmental benefits in a way which is created by the particular facts which are given, the emphasis on different facts and the environmental contexts in which the (selected – emphasised or de-emphasised) ‘facts’ are couched? Or is the environmental context ‘boosterised’ at all? Are the risks properly explained? What is ‘proper’ risk explanation in this case? What sort of a (slightly changed?) person goes home that night from the client organisation’s office after reading the report? How has her subjectivity changed: that is - her outlook on life, her imagination of what may be or what may not be the case or the possible case? Or has it changed at all? In another case study Surma implies that an Australian government report on the Stolen Generation¹ may be written in a way which tries to steer the imagination towards: ‘stolen generation is a false ideological term invented by black armband activists who want a current generation to pay for something they had nothing to do with.’ – Can such a style of discourse, albeit a discourse replete with valid ‘facts’, affect, or ‘close down’ the thinking of the reader in such a way that their subjectivity, their possible ways of imagining Australia, becomes unsympathetic to this series of atrocities? In another case study Surma explains how a prime ministerial or presidential web site may be constructed pictorially and semantically to convey the rhetoric

of calm command and order. – As far as our imaginations are (should be) concerned: ‘We live in nations which are in safe hands’. In another she shows how e-democracy online facilities may have the same authoritative-authoritarian-patrician: “Don’t you worry about that.” – ‘Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen’ⁱⁱ *alter-casting*ⁱⁱⁱ rhetoric as the presidential and prime ministerial web sites of the previous example. Or by contrast - with different rhetoric, - that is with different discursive design, those same government agency web sites may be constructed in ways which set out facts and understandings in contexts which invite and facilitate the development of a practical imagination about how government, politics and society could be more open, more egalitarian.

The book draws from the both ancient and extremely topical theoretical schema of rhetoric to argue that these influences on imagination, mediated by writing, translate into potent effects on our lives. Surma is concerned with the massive output of commercial and organisational writing by governments, corporations and by simply you and me, writing which pervades our world and our minds. Surma accepts that:

...the post-structuralist view of language as a signifying system, in which signs are only definable by their relationship to and difference from other signs, means that rhetoric and writing do not reflect the ‘real’ world unproblematically, but instead help to construct (a provisional version of) it. (p. 10)

This paper will suggest how the theory of Surma may be taken further to bolster the claim that semiotic theory can be usefully employed to speculate about how public relations influences imagination and influences the consequent ethic and ethics which civil society holds.

Notions of rhetoric can be improved by current notions of sophistry

Some people from a professional communication background might find it hard to resist describing much of Jacques Derrida’s work as hard to understand to say the least. One can sense a similar irritation which Plato expresses under the guise of “Stranger” in the dialogue ‘Sophist’:

He then, who traces the pedigree of his art as follows—who belonging to the conscious or dissembling section of the art of causing self contradiction, is an imitator of appearance, and is separated from the class of phantastic which is a branch of image making into that further division of creation, the juggling of words, a creation human and not divine—anyone who affirms the real sophist to be of this blood and lineage will say the very truth. (Hutchins, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., & University of Chicago, 1952, p. 279)

Derrida is clearly “an imitator of appearance” of the way “creation” can be spoken about – how understandings can be reached on creation via a “juggling of words” – rather than via “divine” means. In Derrida’s terms, understandings of the world have to be approached linguistically, rather than via the inner essentialism – the extra-linguistic special humanness or ‘logocentrism’ implied by philosophers including Husserl and Plato (Mautner, 1997, p. 132), (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004, p. 300). Derrida’s textual “deconstructive” approach implies that: “...hypothetically, one may envisage an endless regression of dialectical interpretations and readings without any stable, essential meaning.” (Cuddon, 1992, p. 223). For these reasons and others, Derrida’s work is compared to that of the sophists: (Jarratt, 1991, pp. 7-

8), (Herrick, 2005, pp. 253-256). There is no space to detail the history and scholarship of sophistry in this short paper. Rather the reader is asked to accept that current prejudices are sufficient for us to understand 5th century BCE sophists as ‘verbal alchemists’. They were players with words, symbols and cultural expressions. Many of them were itinerants and foreigners to Athens. As such they could see how ‘realities’ were constructed and ‘spoken’ in the words, symbols and mythologies of various contrasting societies. Their stock in trade was the destabilisation and reinstitution of the very meaning of expression in ways which won them accolades in the toughly fought rhetorical contests of the post-Periclean legal and political democratic processes. But if both Derrida and the sophists show that what appears as ‘reality’ is dependent on the way reality is expressed – then the way reality is expressed is, to say the least, rather important! For the ancient Athenians the ‘winning’ reality – the apparent reality which was acted upon – was expressed through the rhetorics of the most able sophists. Perhaps the ‘winning’ realities about global warming and the war in Iraq – the apparent realities which are being acted upon – are those expressed by the most skilful public relations programs? This approach is not fanciful. It fits the position of current scholars of sophistic rhetoric:

[deconstruction]...calls into question knowledge/discourse configurations. Scholars in speech communication as well as in composition theory, rejecting a view of rhetoric dependent on non-verbal object knowledge [logocentrism] as a precondition for discourse about reality, have revived a rhetorical epistemology originating in the sophists. (Jarratt, 1991, p. 8)

If the above gives the reader a feeling of modernist certainties slipping away, all one can say is: Welcome to the world of the postmodern and its intellectual profession *par excellence*: ~~spin doctoring~~, excuse me... public relations.

It is arguably the above sort of postmodern conceptualisations which are needed for a genuine theory of public relations’ role and effects. Understandings of the ‘New Rhetoric’ approaches of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969); of the ‘Argumentation Theory’ of Stephen Toulmin (Toulmin, 1958); and of the ‘Discourse Ethics’ of Jürgen Habermas (Habermas & Outhwaite, 1996: Ch. 15: "Discourse Ethics".) could also be coopted as bases for a rhetorical theory of public relations. However, these latter three approaches imply modernist philosophical presumptions. They are about using ‘normal’ (i.e. non-sophistic, non-deconstructive) dialectic with which to try to get behind the ‘norms’ in which that same ‘investigating’ dialectic is couched. There is no radical break with the basis on which the whole critique is ‘read’ and ‘spoken’ as there is in the approach of Derrida; in the approach of allied postmodernism theorists; and in the approach of the sophists. However, how is the practical theorist of public relations able to ‘anchor’ as it were the spiralling textual deconstruction upon textual deconstruction, - the seemingly infinite polysemy which is implied by Derrida? How can we constrain, or get under control the implication of endless multiple textual significations with endless rhetorical consequences in writings? How can we constrain deconstruction without resorting to modernism, essentialism and logocentrism? Doesn’t postmodernism and post-structuralism inevitably imply critique upon critique of texts leading to infinitely fragmented imaginings with infinite and thus consequently NO ethical positions? How can an infinitely delinquent sophistry be tamed and schooled into manageable, usable and describable rhetorics which might be recognisable in terms of Surma’s project?

Semiotics and post-structuralism need cautious examination

Again the full answer to the above question must await another paper. However the outline of that paper can be indicated in the space which is available. Derrida's and allied post-structuralist theoretical approaches emerged from the late 20th century critique of semiology and the exposure of the problems surrounding the structuralist linguistics approach. These debates have been endlessly described, eg: (Fiske, 1990); (Eagleton, 1996); (Hawkes, 2003) and will merely be indicated here. Essentially structuralist linguistics was self-referential. The logic of structuralism was that codes of language needed to appear all at once in order to comprise the subject's thinking processes, and then the subject was trapped within this 'prison house of language' where signification could only be made in terms of the sign systems which already comprised thinking. See *inter alia*: (Jameson, 1972); (de Man, 1979); (Nietzsche, *passim*). Post-structuralism tries to fix this problem by allowing for multiple readings or multiple connotations of the sign, *inter alia*: (Barthes, 1994); (Eco, 1979); (Derrida, 1970). But it is not clear how these 'multiplicities' can be anchored or limited. In other words, the question is, cannot Surma's writers of all types have their writings understood in limitless ways? Cannot any meaning, any inflection be 'read into' writing by any reader who brings their own conceptions, their own lifeworld contexts, their own mental significations to their linguistic or other symbolic 'readings'? As we have seen above in Surma, despite this difficulty, post-structuralism continues to claim legitimacy as a theory of the way the world is signified by signs despite the implications for indeterminacy or polysemy. Now, as has been said, post-structuralism emerges out of semiology which is accused by Deely (2001, 2003) of being the last gasp of modernism: That is, despite Derrida's work, Deely still claims post-structuralism requires a logocentric or 'essential' subject – a mental essence which is comprised of linguistic codes. According to Deely (2001):

...from Saussure through Barthes to Derrida, to see the possibilities of semiology in their true light, a larger and deeper understanding of the sign is necessary than the original semiologists had the intellectual resources or historical consciousness to allow possible. (p686)

Deely's understandings come from a lifetime of tracing semiotics – as opposed to semiology. Deely says semiotics did not originate with Aristotle. It originated with the discussion of signs by St Augustine of Hippo (354-430 C.E.) in Augustine's '*On Christian Doctrine*' (Augustine, 1952, p. 657). This founding saint of semiotics ☺ had previously been Professor of Rhetoric at Milan. The study of signs progressed through the Latin Scholastics, notably Duns Scotus, Ockham, Soto, Fonseca, Suarez, Poincot and others before it was taken up by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). Peirce refers to the scholastics but not to the most advanced study of semiotics by the scholastics in Poincot *aka* John of St Thomas (Deely, & Powell, 1985). Deely argues for a realist notion of 'semiotics' and is opposed to the way the label 'semiotics' is used by post-structuralists who arise in the semiological tradition and who can be argued to remain logocentric and thus nominalist.

So how can we anchor the Derridean infinite regress, or as Plato might have seen it – the baseless word play of sophists intent on overturning every anchor of solid knowledge? How can we produce a workable theorisation of public relations, writing, imagination and ethics which explains rhetorical processes in civil society without lapsing into the solipsism of infinite semiosis? The answer to this problematic must lie in Peirce's notion of pragmatics and in the notion of 'mental habit', or '*habitus*' as this latter concept is sometimes expressed

throughout the history of ideas from Aristotle to Bourdieu. Peirce's 'Pragmatic Maxim' states that:

Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearings you conceive the objects of your conception to have. Then, your conception of those effects is the whole of your conception of the object. (Misak, 2004, p. 3)

...which for the purposes of the present paper is interpreted as follows: All we can know – the whole of our conception of anything – does not appear directly as a conception of an object. Instead our 'knowing' comes about during the process when our conception of an object is mentally 'related to', or 'debated' dialectically with others of our conceptions. These other conceptions are the conceptions or thoughts which comprise our original thinking or subjectivity, or which in general comprise the thinking and identity-subjectivity of the particular lifeworld or culture which we glean our subjectivities from. The new conception presents itself to the previously existing conceptualisations – which we can also regard as Peirce's "interpretant" (Peirce, Weiss, & Hartshorne, 1974:passim). The interpretant bases much of its reaction or reception of the new concept on 'what-has-been-found-to-be-the-case previously', i.e. on existing habits of thought and behaviour. Thinking reactions are always moderated or edited in this reflexive, *post hoc* manner by our habits of reaction and associated thoughts. That is, unless we are deliberately set on having fictional mental adventures, or there is some pathology at work, we always conceive thoughts by comparing new inputs for a logical fit among the existing myriad of possible interpretations which arise in terms of existing 'habits of our mind'. Of course often adding new concepts to old concepts results in the acceptance of fresh understandings. But the important point is that 'habit of thought' imposes a limit. There is a check. There is reflexivity. There is a dialectic process of considering the 'best fit'. In this way we can argue that. Far from being infinitely polysemous, or 'victim' to 'infinite semiosis' – our conceptions are directed by an 'economy of understanding' - by how our culture and circumstances orient us to think about the something which was the ground of the new conception.

This cultural/ideological constraint and commensurate reflection in terms of habit is, to repeat, a *post hoc* process – a reflective after-the-fact process. It contrasts with the 'before the fact' or 'in the moment', non-reflexive process of immediate correlation or connotation or denotation implied by post-structuralism. The post-structuralists emerge out of the Saussurian logocentric, semiological tradition where 'habit' is not emphasised. This compares with the importance of the 'habitual' component to thought which is emphasised throughout in Peirce. See for instance:

First [belief] is something that we are aware of; second it appeases the irritation of doubt; and third it involves the establishment in our nature of a rule of action, or, say for short, a habit: Peirce (1955, p. 28)...

And

Now the identity of a habit depends on how it might lead us to act...What the habit is depends on when and how it causes us to act...Thus we come down to what is [habitually found to be] tangible and conceivably practical, as the root of every real distinction of thought, no matter how subtle it may be; and there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice. (p. 30)

What Peirce is implying here is that our very whole-mind and bodily orientation is, as it were pre-programmed by previous semiosis. This coincides with the notions of *habitus* in Bourdieu (1977). The implication is that thoughts may be changed, but they will only change within the pragmatic set of reference of the subject's mind-body, or the mind bodies in the extant culture. Peirce develops his theory from the Scholastic tradition which also emphasises habit of thought. See for instance William of Ockham (c. 1280- c. 1349) (1957ch. I & II). In these chapters entitled: 'The notion of knowledge or science' and 'On epistemology' the notion *habitus* is used repeatedly by Ockham in the sense:

For after someone has frequently apprehended an indifferent proposition, he finds himself more inclined to apprehend and think about this proposition than he was before. Therefore he has now a *habitus* inclining him towards acts of apprehension. The fact that there is also a *habitus* inclining one towards acts of judgement is clear from the statement of the Philosopher [Aristotle] in the sixth book of the Ethics. (p19)

The Scholastics drew heavily from Aristotle who also uses the notion of habit of thought. Ockham is here indicating Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics Book VI. See also Books I and II for references to where virtuous or 'incontinent' habits of thinking are implied, eg: "...while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit...none of the moral virtues arise in us by nature" (Aristotle & Ross, 1952, p. 348) In contradistinction to the semiotic tradition arising via Peirce, the approach of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) does not emphasise the notion 'habit'. de Saussure was a Swiss linguist who was perhaps not as *au fait* with this notion of 'habit' in the history of ideas as was US philosopher and logician Peirce. Consequently post-structuralism does not have this buffer against unmanaged polysemy - against infinite semiosis.

So, what practical implications does the above approach to semiotic theory have for public relations writing and other public relations activity? Does this theory help us to understand the alleged power of this industry's deliberately organised use of rhetoric in many facets of civil society? The major claim for the above exposition is that: if we understand semiotics as a *post hoc* process – that is as a process where incoming signification is always engaged in a dialectical – that is a 'negotiation', a 'debate', or a quasi-reasoning 'dance' with extant signification in the individual or her lifeworld, then, what actually happens in public relations processes in terms of semiotics becomes more clear. What happens is this: Public relations activity is about changing minds. But any invocation of new thinking, and change to the orientation of imaginations has to start by taking account of the situation that there are already ingrained, habituated patterns or relationships of signs and sign matrixes which already comprise the individual subject or her culture. Of course these sign relations and the matrixes or complexities of these sign relations – these 'interpretants' in Peirce's terms – are not all stable. Many of them oscillate, or ebb and flow, many of them are prone to toppling. However others are solid and stable. A great weight of these signifying systems HAVE to be stable or in homeostasis. Otherwise there would not be human society. Instead there would be a pathological lifeworld-cultural mess. Now, what happens in public relations, rather like as advocated by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* (1991), is that existing signification, i.e. how people think – how the target public thinks – is assessed and measured by the quantitative and qualitative methods of surveys and focus groups and the like. What these research methods are measuring is the *habitus* of the subjectivities targeted. In a professionally planned public relations campaign it is after this sounding of the extant semiotic constitution of the subject that the semiotic intervention is devised. In other words the 'signs' of the message, for

instance the writing, is devised in such a way that the ensuing ‘negotiation’ between the interpretant sign systems of the habituated subject with the incoming signs of the new argumentation (the campaign) is ‘reasonable’. That is this ‘negotiation’ has to be seen as PRACTICAL in terms of a dialectical process intended to alter, however slightly, the target subjectivity or subjectivities. To re-emphasise: this process is *post hoc*, and reflexive. This is NOT a cybernetic, immediate, automatic, knee jerk activity to do with immediate correlation, connotation or denotation. Instead semiotic activity in the subject proceeds in terms of retrieved experience-memories. This is my understanding of what Peirce intended by his notion of pragmatism or pragmaticism as he later called it^{iv}.

Conclusion: Implications of public relations for the ethics of civil society

So how does all the above translate into theorising the ethical effects of public relations and associated writing on contemporary civil society? Well the implication of the above is that our subjectivity – i.e. who people are and how people think – is created in large degree by the rhetorical processes which are explained in terms of semiotics above. This would mean that how the planet is being destroyed environmentally; how many of earth’s inhabitants live unpleasant lives and die young; or are devastated by war; is ‘normalised’ for many by the way our subjectivities are regarded and negotiated by business and political forces which use powerful rhetorical apparatuses. A leading apparatus is public relation which includes lobbyists and issues managers who are paid well for devising the significations, for instance the writing, which will be the most effective in producing our subjectivities. Peirce describes this ‘subjectivity building’ process in innocent, academic terms when he revises ancient dialectical approaches to the explanation of how people grasp reality – how they attempt to grasp logic and decide what is ‘reasonable’, including what is ethical in this particular society. When this activity is deliberately engaged in by the public relations industry however it is often anything but academic or innocent.

Clearly then what is needed is a much better understanding of the topic of this paper by: public relations people; by what is sometimes referred to as their ‘target audiences’; and by those who set the policies for how civil society is regulated. There can be no justification for opposing much better regulation of public relations and similar ‘subjectivity forming’ practices. Nobody can even get up in the morning without encountering how civil society is regulated in infinite ways in order to avoid harmful or toxic effects. There are the electronics regulations governing the construction of the alarm clock which wakes you; the building regulations to do with the house you live in; the regulations of the food you eat for breakfast; the road, motor vehicle or other transport regulations which impinge on your trip to work. Finance, politics, family and sexual activities, in fact all aspects of our lives, are all regulated in vastly complex ways. Every part of civil society is regulated. Consequently there should be no argument against constant, careful consideration of regulation of the semiological-rhetorical forces which rule over the whole mountain of imaginings and the related ethics which shape, propel, retard, police, that is which form our entire civil society. This is obviously a huge area which this already word-limit-exceeded conclusion can only point vaguely towards. Clearly one of the keys is a much better education of all those involved in these matters.

Endnotes

ⁱ The label given by critics of 19th and 20th century Australian government organised removal of children from aboriginal families into officially sanctioned community homes or adopting families. Such homes were often run by religious authorities and nearly always controlled by white people.

ⁱⁱ Catch phrase attributed by critics to this unusual, right wing, past Queensland Premier known for his patrician and patronising style of rebuffing anyone who questioned him or his policies.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Alter*-casting: A term which Louis Althusser (1918-1990) was fond of meaning ‘casting’ – as in casting in a play *alter*, or ‘the other’. A related term was ‘hailing’ i.e. some deliberately designed, or even accidentally shaped discourse may have the affect of creating particular thinking in the other person – that is altering their subjectivity.

^{iv} Incidentally the implication for memory in this *post hoc* process signals questions about the disappearance of the concept ‘memory’ as one of the important planks of rhetorical theory in former centuries. This now lost component of rhetorical theory is usually flagged in terms of the importance of mnemonics to remembering speeches. However it appears there may be an importance for memory at a deeper level for rhetorical theory in terms of the rhetoric-influenced formation and stability of subjects and their lifeworlds.

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AAP. (January 3, 2007). Quake no problem: Geo. *Australian, The* (Australia) (edition, 2), page19. Retrieved February 23, 2007 from NewsBank on-line database on the World Wide Web: <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>