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This article introduces and explains rhetorical models of the 'orator', and applies these models to business and corporate contexts. It provides an overview of both ancient and modern theories of the orator as a strategic communicator, and details ways in which contemporary rhetorical theory has begun expanding this conception to model persuasive communication by hierarchically organized groups and more diffuse social networks. The practicality of each oratorical concept is briefly illustrated by providing examples of how they can be applied to persuasive corporate communication.

>> The Rhetorical Concept of the Orator in Corporate Contexts <<

Alan Fortuna

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Herausgeber: Prof. Dr. Ute Reuter, Professorin für Betriebswirtschaftslehre,
insbesondere Unternehmensführung, Personal und Organisation an der
VWA-Hochschule für berufsbegleitendes Studium

Prof. Dr. Tobias Loose, Professor an der Hochschule Heilbronn
sowie Prorektor und Dekan der Ingenieurwissenschaftlichen Fakultät der
VWA-Hochschule für berufsbegleitendes Studium

Wolframstraße 32
70191 Stuttgart

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Abstract:

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Key Words:

Corporate Communication, Rhetoric, Orator, Rhetorical Theory, Network Analysis.

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Literature

1. Introduction

Although the discipline of rhetoric has a rich tradition that stretches back to antiquity, since the middle of the 19th century it has been largely displaced in higher learning institutions by subjects such as psychology and social psychology, political science, media studies, semiotics, linguistics, and communications studies. In the more practically oriented business world, fields such as marketing, advertising, public relations, human resources, and management theory have all integrated elements of rhetorical theory and practice while restricting their focus to specific facets of commercial communication and human interaction.

This explosion of scholarly diversity has led to a broad patchwork of concepts and approaches to the topic of communication, and to theoretical fragmentation. As one observer put it in 1999, “except within the[ir] little groups, communications theorists apparently neither agree nor disagree about anything.”¹ When it comes to rhetoric in particular, the discipline has largely become “the victim of modern academic differentiation” and “must now reestablish its position within current systems of knowledge.”² This is especially the case in non-academic settings, where for all intents and purposes “rhetoric” has become “an informal plastic word that can be used to designate just about anything that has to do with language or communication.”³ In many contexts, rhetoric has even become synonymous with manipulation and deception, and it is often used as a pejorative term.

This image is unfortunate, because rhetoric has much to offer modern society as both a scholarly discipline and as a practi-

cal set of tools for analyzing and creating certain kinds of communication. To be more specific, the discipline of rhetoric focuses on *persuasive strategic communication*—on communication that is planned, intentional, and goal-oriented.

According to this definition, rhetorical communication is the norm in the corporate world. To name just a few examples: business presentations, meetings, strategic negotiations, marketing and advertising campaigns, the motivation and management of employees, spin control and public relations during corporate crises, as well as corporate lobbying all involve strategic and persuasive communication. And in all of these cases, rhetorical approaches and categories can help make sense of otherwise opaque processes behind the creation of such communication.

This essay focuses on one central rhetorical unit—the concept of the *orator*—and illustrates how it can be profitably applied to modern business communication. While traditional and even most contemporary rhetorical models have focused on the orator as an individual strategic communicator, recent scholarship in the field has begun the necessary work of expanding the concept to include hierarchically coordinated groups (*orator complexes*) and more loosely coordinated networks of strategic communicators (*oratorical networks*). By defining these concepts and showing how they too can be applied to corporate communication, this essay helps demonstrate the practical usefulness of rhetorical theories to practitioners of business communication.

2. The central concept of the orator in rhetorical theory

In comparison to other scholarly fields that deal with human communication, rhetoric places the strategically active speaker (*orator*) at the center of its theoretical and

¹ Craig [Communication] 119.

² Knape [Orator] 10. All translations by author.

³ Knape [Adressat] 24. Translation by author.

analytical focus. As one modern scholar has put it, the discipline of rhetoric views “communication *sub specie oratoris*, that is to say: completely from the perspective of the orator.”⁴ This disciplinary focus was established at least as early as Plato’s writings in *Gorgias*, and continued throughout antiquity in the writings of authors such as Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. Contemporary rhetoricians have followed suit, seeking to further develop and modify these ancient theories to fit with the realities of the modern world. And despite the fact that many of their ideas are well over 2000 years old, much of what ancient scholars had to say about individual orators and the discipline of rhetoric is easily applicable to communication today.

2.1 The orator in ancient rhetoric

In *Gorgias*, written around 380 BCE, Plato depicts a dialogue between Socrates and the politician Gorgias about the nature and definition of rhetoric. While Socrates is skeptical that rhetoric should be considered an “art” (*ars*), Gorgias insists that it is, and that its subject is “the ability to persuade with speeches either judges in the law courts or statesmen in the council-chamber or the commons in the Assembly or an audience at any other meeting.”⁵ After Gorgias and Socrates debate the ethical implications of persuasive communication, they both agree “that rhetoric is a producer of persuasion,” and that speakers use rhetoric to “effect persuasion in the minds of an audience.”⁶

Similarly, Aristotle’s *The Art of Rhetoric* (ca. 350 BCE) defines the discipline as “the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever.”⁷ But while Plato’s work focused largely on the moral dimensions

of the subject, *The Art of Rhetoric* is much more concerned with practical matters: how a speaker can analyze a given situation in order to best persuade their audience. As a result, its three books contain detailed accounts of the core means of persuasion, a classification system of persuasive texts, in-depth discussions of situational analysis, lists of argumentative categories, and stylistic guidelines.⁸

To put it in contemporary terms, Aristotle’s work is a ‘handbook’ for the strategic planning of persuasive communication. This was also the approach taken almost 400 years later by Quintilian in his foundational work *Institutio Oratoria*, in which he “summarizes the entirety of contemporary knowledge in the discipline of rhetoric and at the same time provides both an educational curriculum and didactic concepts.”⁹ As Quintilian himself puts it in the preface to the first book: “It has been my design to lead my reader from the very cradle of speech through all the stages of education [...] My aim, then, is the education of the perfect orator.”¹⁰

Quintilian’s conception of a “perfect orator” was similar to the views of the earlier Cicero, who had devoted multiple works over the course of his lifetime to the fundamental category of the orator.¹¹ And like Cicero, Quintilian was convinced that the moral character of a speaker was of critical importance: “the first essential for such a [perfect orator] is that he should be a good man [...] we demand of him not merely the possession of exceptional gifts of speech, but of all the excellences of character as well.”¹² At the same time, Quintilian was clearly aware that the art of rhetoric can be practiced by anyone who learns the disci-

⁴ Knappe [Modern Rhetoric] 5.

⁵ Plato [Gorgias] 452e.

⁶ Plato [Gorgias] 453a.

⁷ Aristotle [Rhetoric], Rh. 1.2.

⁸ Cf. Rapp [Aristotle].

⁹ Knappe [Rhetorik] 133. All translations by author.

¹⁰ Quintilian [Institutio] 1.pr. 6-9.

¹¹ See, for instance: Cicero [Orator].

¹² Quintilian [Institutio] 1.pr. 9.

pline, regardless of their moral rectitude: “I am not describing any orator who actually exists or has existed, but have in my mind’s eye an ideal orator, perfect down to the smallest detail.”¹³

One of the most important contributions of ancient rhetorical theory was its focus on the practical craft of creating persuasive texts. From Aristotle’s listing of rhetorical topoi in *The Art of Rhetoric*, to the exercises found in Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria*, ancient rhetorical thinkers presented formalized models of text production that were meant to be used as strategic roadmaps for orators to generate persuasive texts. The most common model of production, known as the *officia oratoris* (“tasks of the orator”), included six stages that encompassed strategic mental activities (*intellectio, inventio*), compositional processes (*dispositio, elocutio*), and performative considerations (*memoria, actio*).¹⁴

Taken as a whole, classical theorists took pains to clearly define the disciplinary boundaries of rhetoric and the theoretical categories that made up the discipline in their time. The ‘art’ of rhetoric dealt with persuasive speech that was carefully formulated by an orator in order to influence an audience. Because this faculty was seen as critical in ancient society, rhetorical theorists emphasized the practical nature of the art and wrote manuals, guides, and handbooks for experts and non-experts alike. And although there was significant disagreement about the moral dimensions of such persuasive communication, most theoreticians agreed on the practical methods by which they could effectively produce and deliver such speech.

¹³ Quintilian [Institutio] 1.10.4.

¹⁴ Cf. Knappe [Orator] 13, 18.

2.2 The orator in modern rhetoric

Modern rhetoricians have often looked to this ancient foundation as both their anchor and their point of departure. And while many ancient concepts are clearly still useful tools, it has been important to both further formalize them and to adapt them to contemporary communicative practices. Today, the practice of rhetoric is understood as “the mastery of success-oriented, strategic processes of communication.”¹⁵ And in order to act ‘rhetorically’—that is, to communicate strategically and persuasively—an orator must plan and undertake a number of actions in order to influence their audience. In short, they must follow a productive process similar to the ancient *officia oratoris*.

One modernized conception of this ancient model compresses the classical oratorical tasks into three functional roles: the “conceptor”, the “texter”, and the “performer.”¹⁶ During the initial phase of conceptual work, an orator must clearly analyze their real-world goals and identify how persuasive communication can help them reach those goals. “The result of a conceptor’s work is the strategic masterplan that serves as the guideline for all further stages of production.”¹⁷ Such *rhetorical strategies* are success-oriented plans based on an orator’s underlying instrumental calculation: certain rhetorical instruments are intentionally selected for use in a given setting because the orator judges them to have a potential for influence that seems conducive to their concrete persuasive goals.¹⁸

Once they have laid out their strategy, an orator must switch productive roles. They must become a “weaponsmith” who “pro-

¹⁵ Knappe [Orator] 33, cf. 76f.

¹⁶ Luppold [Orator] 159–163. All translations by author.

¹⁷ Luppold [Orator] 160.

¹⁸ Cf. Luppold [Orator] 223.

duces a concrete text that successfully integrates the goals and arguments formulated during conception and that is appropriate for the communicative context within which the text will be presented to the target audience.¹⁹ The ultimate shape of this text depends on a wide variety of contextual factors that can largely be divided “into two subcategories: the *audience* that rhetorical communication seeks to influence, and the *setting* in which such communication takes place.”²⁰ As a result, a significant portion of an orator’s productive function involves attempts to formulate a text that can overcome various forms of resistance to persuasion in a given communicative situation.²¹

Finally, after they have successfully translated their rhetorical strategies into instrumentalized persuasive texts, orators must deliver the product of their labor to their audience. This performative stage involves “making the coded text [...] communicatively available for the addressee.”²² It may involve personally performing the text in front of a situationally present audience, or it may involve disseminating the text through medial channels to ‘dismissive’ audiences who are not co-present with the orator. To extend the metaphor used above, the orator shifts from a tool maker to a tool user—from a weaponsmith to a swordsman.

This contemporary model underlines the centrality of intentionality to rhetorical theory. There is no such thing as ‘accidental’ rhetorical communication; it is *always* strategically planned to influence people in such a way as to help an orator meet real-world goals. As Nathan Crick has put it: “the productive art of rhetoric concerns itself with improving how something is pro-

duced, and one cannot improve accident or luck.”²³ As a result, non-persuasive communication (or communication that is merely incidentally persuasive) is also outside the realm of rhetorical consideration. As indicated in the introduction of this essay, this distinction is critical to ensure rhetoric’s disciplinary boundaries: “rhetoric is not a general theory of communication: it is highly specialized.”²⁴ And this specialization hinges on the core idea of the orator as an intentional and strategically acting persuasive communicator.

2.3 Application of the orator concept to corporate communication

One advantage that rhetorical theory has over other scholarly disciplines that deal with communication is its proximity to real-world communicative practice. As Joachim Knape put it recently: “modern rhetoric derives a theory of production from the field of real-world rhetorical communication [...] rhetoric is ultimately concerned with gaining understanding for use in future communicative action.”²⁵ In other words rhetorical theories must be practically useful for real-world communication. The same goes for the concept of the orator.

When it comes to corporate communication, it is clear that Luppold’s model of the orator can be directly applied to a myriad of everyday situations. To provide just a few concrete examples: when a businessperson wants to sell a product, gain support for a new project, or receive a promotion, they need others to act in ways that are beneficial to them. And the use of persuasive communication is the best (and possibly only) way to achieve their goals. In short: in each of these situations, a businessperson must take on the role and functions of an orator.

¹⁹ Fortuna [Polarization] 13. See also: Luppold [Orator] 161.

²⁰ Fortuna [Polarization] 24.

²¹ Cf. Kramer [Audience].

²² Luppold [Orator] 163.

²³ Crick [Rhetoric] 2.

²⁴ Knape [Modern Rhetoric] 26.

²⁵ Knape [Modern Rhetoric] 10.

First, they need to transform their real-world goals into a rhetorical strategy. They must determine what, exactly, they need others to do for them, and how they can use language to get these people to act. They will need to come up with arguments for their proposed actions, counter-arguments against contrary positions, and ways to mitigate possible obstacles or sources of resistance to persuasion. Strategic rhetorical calculations might include answering questions such as:

- What qualities of their product should the salesperson highlight?
- Should they first try to gain the support of their coworkers for their project, or go directly to management?
- How can they link their project with the goals of the overall organization?
- Should they directly approach their boss, or talk to the human resources department about their desire for a raise?

Once they have set their communicative strategy, the business communicator must translate their goals into persuasive texts while considering possible sources of resistance to their persuasive thrust. As text-producers, they must make decisions regarding the appropriate format for their communication, the stylistics and organization of their arguments, and the overall tone of the text. Questions that might be addressed during this stage of production could include:

- How can they make their sales pitch more memorable and impactful?
- What kind of metaphors, cultural references, and imagery can they integrate into their advertisements?
- Should they present their project at a team meeting, in a written memo, or in a face-to-face conversation?
- Should they make a formal, written request for a pay increase? If so, how should it be structured?

Finally, a business communicator must then successfully deliver their text to their target audience(s). In face-to-face oral communication, typical elements such as body language, intonation, and self-confidence play a significant role in the persuasive force of a given text. But purely situational factors such as audience makeup and attitude, room configuration, and even the time of day can drastically influence the way a performed text is received by an audience. When it comes to texts that are recorded and transmitted to dismissive audiences, business communicators must ensure that their text is effectively delivered through the available channels and with the appropriate “gesture.”²⁶ In concrete terms, the performative aspect of business communication might deal with the following questions:

- When and where should they schedule a meeting with potential clients?
- How will they ensure that their advertisement is effective based on the limitations of the medium (e.g. TV, internet, print) they have chosen?
- Is their direct superior in a foul mood and better approached later regarding the raise?
- How can they present themselves as confident, but not too demanding, in their one-on-one meeting?

As these examples illustrate, rhetoric provides business communicators with important frameworks and models for the effective production of persuasive communication. And even classical writings can offer modern communicators a range of good advice regarding the strategic production and delivery of texts. From an analytical perspective, oratorical theory can easily be applied to preexisting business communication: approaches might include assessing the strategic calculations that may have taken place behind

²⁶ Knappe [Orator] 120.

the creation of a product presentation, describing the process by which the presentation was created, or even evaluating the personal presentation style of a given speaker.

3. Orator Complexes

While the vast majority of rhetorical theory has dealt with orators as persuasively acting individuals, a robust contemporary model of the orator should also be able to deal with instances where multiple individuals work together to create persuasive communication. When it comes to corporate contexts, for instance, such division of labor is often the rule rather than the exception. As Knape put it succinctly: “rhetorical theory cannot avoid dealing with the question of corporate or institutional authorship (institutions or groups that to a certain extent, speak ‘with one voice’ in advertisements, public relations, etc.).”²⁷ In order to do so, it is necessary to conceptualize the orator as “an abstract entity that [...] can be observed from different perspectives: as a cognitive calculation, a social role of action, or as a factor of communication and text constructing entity.”²⁸ As Luppold puts it: “By no means is the orator always to be understood as a single person. Instead, complex—corporate or collective—actors such as companies, parties, associations, etc. often claim the oratorical role for themselves in public.”²⁹

In other words, the role of an orator is not limited to strategically acting individuals, but rather can consist of a collective group of actors. And when considering the production of persuasive communication in the corporate world, it is clear that the oratorical functions of conception, text formulation, and performance are often divided

among different individuals and groups. In such situations, the “institutional author” can also be described as an *orator complex*: “a group of individuals working together within an organizational structure with a common goal of crafting and delivering a persuasive message to a given audience.”³⁰ The analysis of a given orator complex (and the persuasive texts it produces) should detail the productive responsibilities of individual actors and the relationships between these actors within a formal institutional structure. In this way, analysts can trace the path of text production and identify the oratorical functions that each actor fulfills.

3.1. Orator complexes in corporate communication

It helps to provide an example to illustrate how this theoretical model can be applied to corporate communication. When an auto manufacturer creates a television advertisement for its newest model, for instance, the actual process by which the advertisement gets made is quite multifaceted. The oratorical roles of strategist, weaponsmith and swordsman are divided among different departments and individuals. A verbal description of the productive process might include: detailing how the persuasive strategy and core message were created (perhaps in discussions between executive management and the marketing and sales departments), how these decisions were translated into a concrete advertisement (perhaps by assigning it to an in-house production department, which interfaced with the brand management office to create the video), and how this text was then ‘performed’ to its audience (for example through the selection of appropriate television stations and programs by the advertising office within the marketing department).

²⁷ Knape [Orator] 35.

²⁸ Knape [Orator] 33.

²⁹ Luppold [Orator] 18.

³⁰ Fortuna [Polarization] 14.

A visualization of this situation can be helpful for analytical purposes. Using the same example, a diagram can be created based on organizational hierarchies, functional roles, and individual and collective responsibilities regarding the production of persuasive communication in the organization. Such visualization (Fig. 1) clearly illustrates, for instance, that when it comes to advertising decisions, the marketing department acts as a ‘central coordinator’, interfacing with upper management and the sales department during the strategic decision making processes, and then assigning different teams within the department to produce and disseminate the advertisement. Depending on the level of available information, it may be possible to identify individual actors involved in the production of the ad, and to detail their respective motivations, productive tasks, and actions taken.



Figure 1: Visualization of hypothetical orator complex. Arrows indicate the path of production. The division of oratorical labor is identified by color coding: gold stands for the central coordinating node, blue stands for conceptual functions, red for productive functions, and green for performative functions.

The primary practical benefit of visualization is to trace and document decision making processes and intentionality in the production of persuasive texts by collective entities. A related benefit is that it helps establish both individual and collective responsibility for the results. By identifying both positive and negative experiences, organizations can establish best practices and better optimize their future

rhetorical communication. If a company produces a particularly effective advertisement, for instance, it would be beneficial to know who was responsible for what. How did the company decide on their target audience for the advertisement? Who came up with the catchy slogan? Who was responsible for choosing the placement of the advertisement?

Such analysis (and the attribution of responsibility) can be even more important when it comes to rhetorical communication that goes wrong. To refer to just one recent example: when Volkswagen released an advertisement on Instagram in May 2020 that was widely criticized as racist, many asked how such an ad could be made in the first place.³¹ A detailed rhetorical analysis of the production process could help identify those responsible and also the extent to which the company as a whole was culpable. Was the advertisement really the work of a few rogues in the social media office? Were the racist tropes and images really a “misunderstanding” as the company claimed shortly after it was released?³² Who was involved in the decision making, production, and release of the ad? If they were “horrified” and “ashamed” once they found out—as VW’s board member for Sales and Marketing and their Head of Diversity Management wrote in a public apology—what were their individual roles in the creation process?³³

3.2. Theoretical considerations

The Volkswagen example also helps illustrate some of the limitations of the orator complex concept within a corporate context. The first and foremost problem is a practical one: how can rhetorical scholars outside of an organization gain access to

³¹ Cf. Abdul [Volkswagen].

³² Kröger [Volkswagen]. Translation by author.

³³ Cf. Abdul [Volkswagen].

the necessary information to do such an analysis? While certain aspects of an orator complex may be publicly available, much if not most of the information necessary for a detailed analysis will be unavailable to external investigators. This will negatively affect the fidelity of any description of the complex as a whole or the specific production process behind a given persuasive text. On the other hand, those within an organization—especially those who have been involved in the production processes themselves—may have better access to the actors and decision-making structures, but may also have less incentive to critically analyze such processes given their positions.

A second issue with the idea of an orator complex is at once much more fundamental and yet less of a practical problem: how can central oratorical attributes such as “strategy” and “intention” be legitimately applied to collective actors at all? Although common vernacular has no problem with the phrase “Volkswagen produced a racist advertisement”, what does that actually mean from a theoretical and analytical perspective? What kind of an entity is ‘Volkswagen’, and is it even possible for such collective entities to have intentionality, or to act strategically? At what level of coordination can observers legitimately attribute collective responsibility to the whole for the actions of individuals within an organization?

The full answers to such questions lay significantly outside the scope of this essay. Still, the approach taken by moral and legal philosopher Larry May offers a good starting point.³⁴ May holds that when an organization is analyzed as a set of relationships between individual actors that are governed by a formalized structure, it is possible to demonstrate a form of “vicarious agency” (and thus collective respon-

³⁴ Cf. May [Collective Responsibility].

sibility) that does not break down to the individual.³⁵ He emphasizes the importance of identifying and describing the decision-making structure that outlines each individual’s formal duties, responsibilities, and functions. In his words, anyone “who acts in conformity with the job description and whose actions are most likely not countermanded by a higher employee, acts [...] in some sense for the corporation.”³⁶ At the same time, May insists there is also a form of vicarious negligence: when individuals higher up in the organizational hierarchy could have reasonably predicted that the harm would occur and could have acted to stop it but didn’t, then the corporation can also be said to be partially responsible for their actions.³⁷

To apply May’s model to the Volkswagen example: the critical question of (rhetorical) collective responsibility for the company hinges on the question of who knew what, how the decisions to produce and publish the Instagram advertisement were made, and whether anyone in a higher position tried to stop it. If the advertisement was conceived, created, and approved according to established procedures within the corporate structure, and if no objections were raised (or if a decision maker objected but was overruled or ignored), then it is legitimate to say that the Volkswagen orator complex is collectively responsible for the opprobrium it received in the media.

4. Oratorical Networks

While the theoretical concept of an orator complex allows modern rhetoric to deal with highly organized, persuasively communicating collective actors, it rapidly begins to break down when the situation gets

³⁵ May [Collective Responsibility] 45.

³⁶ May [Collective Responsibility] 47f.

³⁷ Cf. May [Collective Responsibility] 85.

more complex or when the analytical lens zooms out even further. When a loose association of multiple organizations and individuals work together to create and deliver persuasive communication, the situation becomes too complex—and the number of individual actors is often simply too high—to profitably use the framework of an orator complex to describe them. Without a formalized hierarchy, the theoretical foundation necessary to legitimately attribute collective intentions and strategies also comes into question.

At the same time, the real-world production of persuasive communication by organizations *does* often involve the coordinated action of multiple orators and orator complexes, who divide the productive labor amongst each other within a network of roles and responsibilities. It is thus more profitable to consider these situations as examples of an *oratorical network*: an “affiliation of individual orators and orator complexes that mirror and match each other’s rhetorical strategies to constitute a broader and less coordinated oratorical unit than an orator complex.”³⁸

In this sense, one could make the analogy that while an *orator complex* takes a ‘microeconomic’ perspective by focusing on the collective rhetorical actions of hierarchically structured organizations, *oratorical networks* take a ‘macroeconomic’ perspective by describing and analyzing the common rhetorical strategies of, and interactions between, multiple orator complexes across society.

4.1. Oratorical networks in corporate contexts

Like above, it helps to provide a few examples of how the description and visualization of oratorical networks might work. To start at a relatively small scale, a simi-

lar example as above will suffice. What if, instead of producing the television advertisement in-house, the marketing department of the hypothetical car company contracted external service providers to create their ad? Instead of having an internal production office create the video, the marketing department might hire an external advertising agency, which in turn might engage a production company and freelance creative director to shoot and edit the video. Similarly, the marketing department might reach out to a company specialized in placing television advertisements, which itself interacts with various television stations on a one-on-one basis. In this situation, the car company represents an orator complex that establishes and interacts with an oratorical network to create and disseminate its rhetorical communication.

A visualization of the hypothetical oratorical network (Fig. 2) illustrates the connections and functional roles that each node plays. Similar to the diagram of the orator complex above, the individual departments within the car company are depicted here in a semi-hierarchical arrangement. Arrows indicate the general flow of information and decision making within the company: each of the satellite nodes around the marketing department provide input in the conception of the advertisement.

³⁸ Fortuna [Polarization] 18.

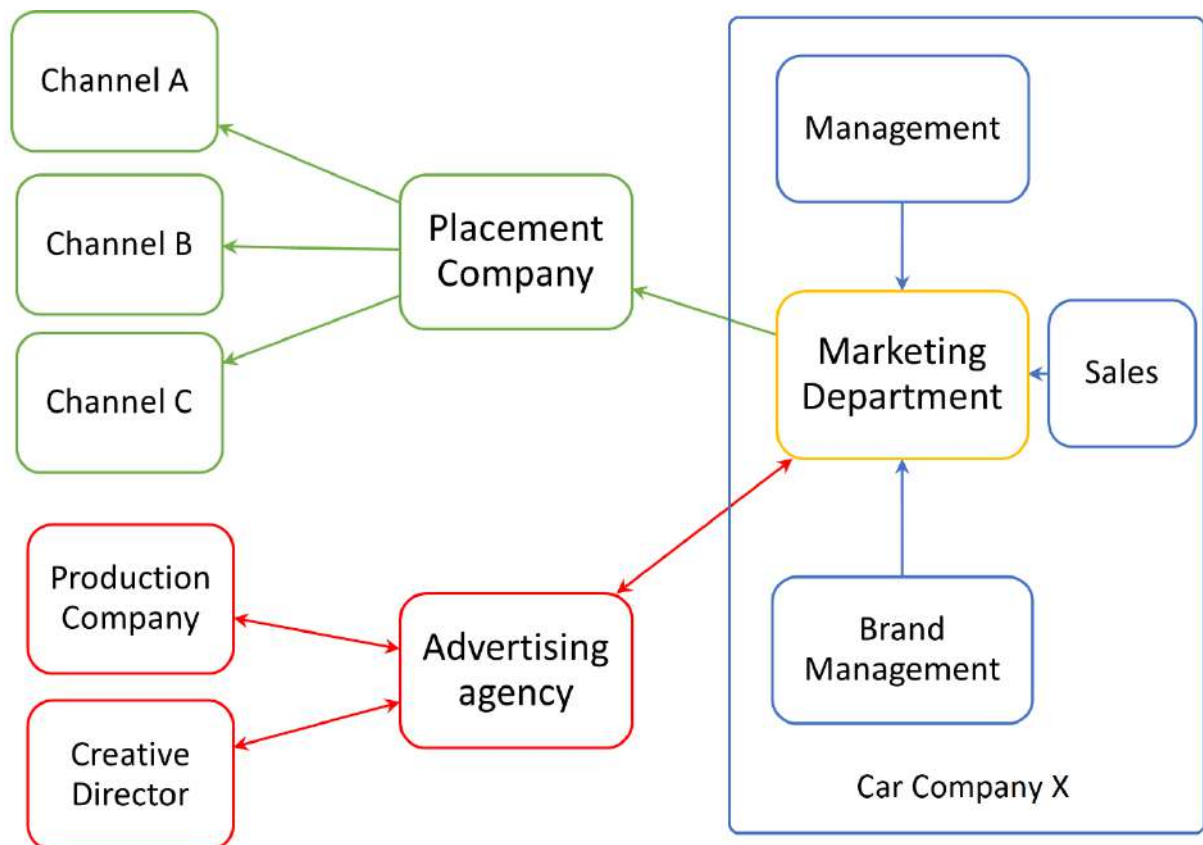


Figure 2: Hypothetical oratorical network for the production and dissemination of television advertisement by a Car Company X. Arrows indicate productive paths and interfaces between nodes, while color coding represents functional roles performed by nodes: gold for the central coordinating node, blue for conceptual functions, red for productive functions, and green for performative functions.

In this network, the car company functions as the strategist within the network (marked by the blue colored boxes), while the marketing department within the company serves as a central coordinating node. The car company passes the work of production to an external orator complex (the advertising agency) which in turn hires further individual orators and orator complexes (the creative director and the production company) to help create the television ad itself. Together, these nodes in the network act as the weaponsmiths—marked by the color red—before passing the finished product back to the marketing department (marked by a two-way arrow). Finally, the marketing department passes the finished rhetorical product to the ad placement company, which in turn provides it to three different television channels for distribution. This performative role

of swordsman is marked in green in the figure.

This brief example neatly demonstrates how the concept of an oratorical network can be profitably applied to coordinated rhetorical action between different organizations in the business world. First, it allows for an analysis that reflects the everyday reality of corporate communication. When it comes to the production of persuasive communication—be it in advertising, public relations, brand management, social media, or a wide range of other areas—organizations regularly engage and interact with external individuals and groups to produce and deliver their content to target audiences. Visualizing such connections can help clearly identify individual nodes, map the connections between those nodes, and trace the process of text production through different in-

stances across the network. Such analysis can in turn help organizations optimize the decision making, production, and performance of future rhetorical communication and also help them attribute responsibility for such communication. Which nodes in the network worked particularly well, and could be activated again in the future? Which should be avoided? Which production pathways might be more efficient, or more effective in conceiving, producing, and performing persuasive communication for the organization in question?

4.2. Theoretical considerations

As briefly noted, a central theoretical problem when it comes to the category of oratorical networks is the attribution of intentionality. How can it be legitimate to speak of ‘strategic’ communication when individual nodes of the network act of their own volition, and there may not be any direct coordination between them? When it comes to even broader networks, such as social movements, political organizations, or trade associations, the attribution of intention seems even more fraught. To put it in more concrete terms, is it legitimate to refer to something like the ‘environmental movement’—which consists of a vast patchwork of different organizations, individuals, and institutions—as a strategically communicating entity?

In his 2011 book *Strategy in Information and Influence Campaigns*, political communications scholar Jarol Manheim offers a framework that provides some answers by inverting the traditional connection between orator and intentionality. Instead of a strategy being the mental product of a single actor, the presence of a shared strategy among various actors serves as the “unifying glue that binds disparate individual actors into a coherently acting” oratorical network.³⁹ As Manheim himself puts

it: “a campaign strategy is an overarching directional framework for action, a concept or idea that integrates the many diverse parts of the campaign into a more or less unified whole.”⁴⁰

Manheim’s conception is directly derived from a contemporary sub-discipline known as constitutive rhetoric. With close ties to sociology, social psychology, and political science, constitutive rhetoric focuses on: “the study of the ways which we constitute ourselves as individuals, as communities, as cultures, whenever we speak.”⁴¹ According to this conception, individual orators and orator complexes that seek to influence others “engage in a process of meaning-making and community building,” of creating shared narratives, collective group identities, and common goals.⁴² These commonalities may also lead to the parallel use of rhetorical strategies, and the emergence of a form of collective intentionality to influence target audiences. As Manheim puts it: “while there can certainly be isolated actors and actions [...] the essential structural form and dynamic is the social network — a connection of inter-connected and/or interacting participants [...] to exercise influence upon the target.”⁴³

By analyzing the use of common narrative frameworks and shared strategies among different orators, rhetorical analysts can productively describe and map oratorical networks, even when individual actors do not explicitly coordinate their communication. Instead of the tripartite framework of productive oratorical roles described above—which itself is derived from the ancient *officia oratoris*—Manheim takes a

⁴⁰ Manheim [Networks] 21.

⁴¹ White [Constitutive Rhetoric] 35. See also: Burke [Constitutive Rhetoric] and Charland [Constitutive Rhetoric].

⁴² White [Constitutive Rhetoric] 39f.

⁴³ Manheim [Networks] 109f.

³⁹ Fortuna [Polarization] 15.

more functional perspective. Manheim's model assumes that each node within a given network acts as a more or less independent actor and that there is a primary "protagonist" that drives (or instigates) the conception, production, and performance of persuasive communication towards a target audience.⁴⁴ He outlines a wide range of different audiences and groups (including, for example, the media, customers, regulators, bankers, employees, and public figures) that may act as relevant nodes within an oratorical network, and then sorts these groups into four broad functional categories: "legitimizing agents", "mediating agents", "tactical targets", and "strategic targets".⁴⁵ He also provides a range of different patterns and structures that might emerge in such networks.⁴⁶

Within a corporate context, this broader conception of oratorical networks can be used to better understand how group identities are formed, how public opinion is influenced, and how shared language spreads within a given segment of the public. Among others, areas of application for the analysis of broader oratorical networks in corporate contexts include market and consumer research, advertising, branding and image control, public relations, and government lobbying. Indeed, one need look no further than the business models of social media companies to see the earnings potential of such analyses.

At this point, it is important to highlight a few fundamental features of oratorical networks, particularly in comparison to the other theoretical units of the orator and orator complexes presented here. First, oratorical networks are made up of individual actors, each of which has their own

rational interests and strategic intentions for being a part of the network. In other words, no individual node acts altruistically, or just for the sake of maintaining the network. Each member of the oratorical network is getting something out of it. At the same time, no explicit rhetorical coordination is necessary between individual nodes of a network. The presence of a shared goal and the parallel use of rhetorical strategies and narratives—of mirroring and matching language—creates a collective identity and collective intention, and thus the emergence of an oratorical network.⁴⁷

In contrast to orator complexes, oratorical networks are also much less organized. Indeed, there may not be any clear structures or hierarchies at all. Instead, networks are structured based on individual nodes fulfilling different functional roles, each of which is critical to the delivery of persuasive messages and the achievement of collective goals. As illustrated here, these roles may be characterized in a variety of different ways. In some circumstances, there may be a clear 'central coordinator' of the network—which Manheim calls the "protagonist" and has been referred to here as the "central coordinating node"—which (at least to a certain extent) controls the production of rhetorical communication. In others, the network emerges more organically, through the symbiotic use of rhetoric. Oratorical networks may also be less durable than orator complexes: as in the example of the car advertisement here, they may emerge temporarily in the pursuit of a single project and then dissolve once it has been completed.

⁴⁴ Manheim [Networks] 3.

⁴⁵ Manheim [Networks] 97.

⁴⁶ Cf. Manheim [Networks] 116.

⁴⁷ Cf. Lange [Constitutive Rhetoric], McGowan [Constitutive Rhetoric].

5. Conclusion

One thing that the brief remarks here illustrate is that significant work is still needed to flesh out both the concepts of orator complexes and oratorical networks for the discipline of modern rhetoric. On the one hand, because classical rhetorical theory lacks the vocabulary and foundations to analyze anything but individuals as orators, contemporary rhetorical scholars must look to adjacent disciplines to build a stable model. While this essay describes a few relevant approaches from moral philosophy, network theory, constitutive rhetoric, and organizational analysis, there is much profitable interdisciplinary research to be done by applying models from neighboring fields to the rhetorical framework.

On the other hand, practical case studies must be undertaken to demonstrate the effectiveness of these concepts at adequately describing and analyzing rhetorical communication by collective actors. This area in particular represents fertile ground for students and scholars of rhetoric in corporate settings. By providing detailed analyses of real-world strategic communication by orator complexes and oratorical networks, scholars can demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of these concepts, and can develop the empirical foundations upon which better models can be built. Particularly scholars that have knowledge of internal processes and access to the actors involved in producing corporate communication could provide illuminating insights into how tasks can be divided, texts are produced, and decisions are made within corporate orator complexes and across oratorical networks.

The overarching goal of this essay has been to introduce the central entity of the orator in contemporary rhetorical theory and to illustrate how different conceptions of the orator as a theoretical unit can be

applied in corporate contexts. First, it introduced both ancient and modern models of the orator as a strategic actor; as someone who uses communication to persuade others in order to achieve a real-world goal. In order to be successful, orators must set clear communicative goals, translate these into coherent rhetorical strategies, and ultimately produce persuasive texts that can be effectively delivered to their audience(s). A series of small examples illustrated how this model can help strategic communicators produce and analyze persuasive corporate communication at the individual level.

The following chapter introduced and detailed the contemporary concept of orator complexes as it applies to corporate contexts. Orator complexes consist of a hierarchically organized group of individuals acting in coordination to produce persuasive communication. They exhibit a clear division of labor, with central oratorical functions assigned to different units within an organizational structure. From an analytical perspective, visualizing an orator complex can help organizations streamline and improve their production of persuasive communication. From a more scholarly (and perhaps moral) perspective, such analyses can help with the attribution of both collective intention and collective responsibility to corporate entities. As the recent example of Volkswagen's controversial Instagram ad illustrates, such considerations are not purely academic.

Finally, this article outlined a concept of oratorical networks as an even broader category within modern rhetorical theory. Instead of a group of individuals working within a single organizational hierarchy, oratorical networks consist of a number of individual orators and orator complexes that are linked together by a common project or campaign. As shown here, this explanatory model is best applied to situa-

tions where an individual or organization interacts with others in society to produce and deliver its persuasive communication. This category can also be applied much more broadly to explain and describe the parallel use of rhetorical strategies and narratives within groups such as social movements, political parties, or trade associations.

Both of these theoretical models require further development, and detailed case studies would help demonstrate both their explanatory power and their practical usefulness. But their importance is not simply that they offer new research opportunities. Instead, by extending the classical conception of an individual orator to collective entities, they provide contemporary rhetoric with a new vocabulary that can describe persuasive communication by groups, yet remains consistent with classical theory. Developing such a new vocabulary, and the broader perspective that comes with it, is critical if rhetoric is to reestablish itself more widely as an independent field of scholarship in contemporary society.

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Contact Information:

Dr. Alan Fortuna

Professor für Wirtschaftsenglisch,
VWA-Hochschule für berufsbegleitendes
Studium

Wolframstrasse 32
70191 Stuttgart

Tel. 0049-(0)711-21041-9082
E-Mail: alan.fortuna@vwahs.de



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