What is the role of rhetoric in public relations practice and how does it relate to the management of an organisation's reputation?

This paper will explore the role of rhetoric in public relations practice and examine how it relates to managing an organisation's reputation. It will discuss academic definitions of what rhetorical practice entails alongside Heath's controversial view that all public relations *is* rhetorical persuasion. Alternative arguments will be examined alongside practical examples of how rhetoric and persuasion are used both positively and counterintuitively to either manage an organisation's reputation or present it in specific manner.

Heath (2001) defines rhetoric as the art of persuasion. "The art is committed to knowing which propositions an audience should and will accept and reject" (p32). Likewise Elwood (1995, p4) defines rhetoric as "the communicative means that citizens use to lend significance to themselves and to extend that significance to others." He claims that "public relations is a rhetorical practice; public relations people use rhetoric to argue for a definitive ethical perspective that, of course, will be encoded in rhetoric" (ibid).

Fawkes (2006), writing in Tench & Yeomans, argues that rhetoric in public relations is the study of language and how it is used to create shared meanings. She contends that the rhetorical approach to examining persuasive messages looks in detail at "the language used by communicators and the exchange of information, or discourse, between parties seeking to influence each other through the use of words and symbols" (p276). In this sense, persuasion is not inherently good or bad, but is the "stuff of human interaction" (ibid).

She outlines that rhetoric itself is an ancient area of academic study stemming essentially from ancient Greece where (2006, p271) "persuasion was seen as an essential skill for leadership and democracy where one party would produce rational arguments to persuade others to support or oppose a particular point of view." As such, it has formed an essential element of current western democratic processes where its use to maintain the reputation of a political party or to campaign or lobby over a specific issue using public relations techniques is most prevalent.

Edward Bernays, the oft quoted "father of public relations" (Tench & Yeomans, p270) regarded the practice of public relations as the engineering of consent. As such, all public relations practice could be viewed as an attempt to persuade a public to accept a particular point of view or idea, using a series of communication techniques and rhetorical messages.

Elwood (1995) argues that Bernays traces attempts to influence or control opinion from the dawn of humanity to contemporary practices. "Intriguingly, the man we recognize as a public relations pioneer argues that public relations emerged concurrently with human society because people soon recognized the necessity for planned interrelationship and … leaders even then had an awareness of their public relationships" (p4).

He further suggests that "the seemingly incongruous leap from the rhetorical theory of ancient Athens to… rhetorical practice of the late twentieth century

illustrates an enduring human phenomenon: the everyday reality we take for granted is created, changed, and maintained through rhetoric" (p6). In this sense, rhetoric constructs reality because it endows reality with meaning. It is a political practice where "politics does not refer to election campaigns or legislative practices, but to a strategy in obtaining any position of power or control" (ibid).

Pratkanis & Aronson, quoted in Tench & Yeomans (2006, p268) argue that we are bombarded with one persuasive communication after another every day; "these appeals persuade not through the give-and-take of argument and debate, but through the manipulation of symbols and of our most basic human emotions." Thus rhetoric could be viewed as part of an insidious power struggle, rather than the condition of public relations discourse. Its use serves to manipulate and obfuscate, positioning the organisation and its reputation how the organisation wishes to be perceived, rather than necessarily how it is.

Conversely Heath (2001) argues that any discussion about public relations emphasises the subject's rhetorical heritage as "the rationale for suasive discourse" (p31). He champions what he describes as the human "commitment to rhetorical dialogue as the process for forging conclusions and influencing actions" (ibid). Public relations itself is therefore a rhetorical process which assists in building society, whereby "through statement and counterstatement, people test each other's views of reality, value and choices relevant to products, services and public policies" (ibid).

Rather than taking a benign view of how publics interpret communications and make decisions, Heath argues that rhetoric recognises participants have their own self interest as well as altruistic reasons to become engaged in any debate and that meaning is constructed in the interpretation of communications, rather than in the transmission of messages. In this sense, Heath claims, rhetorical public relations practice is essentially ethical because "it empowers participants to engage in dialogue" (p32).

Edwards (Tench & Yeomans, 2006, p269) argues that, just as rhetoric itself is an ancient art, so the ancient sister concept of ethics is inextricably linked to the practice as rhetoricians "may use their skills to their own ends, rather than to further the process of democracy" (ibid).

This classical view of rhetoric emphasises it as a persuasive science which separates the process from the individual and highlights the requirements for success as being research into audiences and the structure of the argument (Edwards, 2006). Along with L'Etang (2008), she contends that this view of rhetoric must be tempered in the modern environment by relativism where the ethical structure of our society provides the framework for the truth and validity of rhetorical arguments that are made. Without this, rhetoricians can use their skills to create an imbalance of power through communication, for example "Big Tobacco's" promotional techniques aimed at discrediting research into the links between smoking and lung cancer (Hendrix & Hayes, 2007).

Edwards argues, therefore, that "power, influence and access to communication must be considered if the full implications of rhetorical analyses are considered when examining public relations practice" (2006, p169). The intent and

imbalance of power in any communication must therefore be examined when considering the use of rhetorical persuasion. For example in the recent court findings against Swedish file sharing site Pirate Bay, the International Confederation of Music Publishers, representing such corporate giants as Sony, EMI, Universal and Time Warner, used rhetoric to position their action against the bit torrent downloaders as safeguarding the future of struggling recording artists (http://www.icmp-ciem.org/news/music-publishers-comment-pirate-bay-trial-verdict.htm, retrieved 17 April 2009). There is a significant imbalance of power between the two sides of the argument and the language used by the ICMP is emotive, vitriolic and designed to convince consumers that Pirate Bay users are thieves who harm actual artists rather than corporate profits.

Conversely Pirate Bay positioned itself as a "sort of 21st century digital robin hood, stealing from fat cat media companies to redistribute creative wealth among the poor consumers" (Mulligan, M., http://www.telegraph.co.uk/scienceandtechnology/technology/technologynews/5170684/What-does-The-Pirate-Bay-ruling-mean-for-the-web.html, retrieved 18 April 2009).

Franklin et al (2009, p158) argue that public relations operates in the realm of "persuasion, in which the target audience is aware and complicit." Most public relations practitioners, they argue, use persuasive techniques to some extent "whether this is the use of eloquent and powerful rhetoric, or the creation of notions of social desirability in a target audience" (p159). However, they propose that a combination of the "recognition and rejection of spin, an increasingly media savvy public and the importance and necessity of ethics" (ibid) make the presentation of convincing and persuasive information a key part of contemporary public relations practice.

Moloney (2006) claims that trust in an organisation comes only after a sustained "record of truthfulness" (p39). He cites Heath's view of the emergence of truth where "the interpretation of fact, soundness of arguments and accuracy of conclusion can only be hammered out on the anvil of public debate" (ibid). This runs contrary to critical perspectives of public relations such as that proposed by L'Etang, where public relations practice is ultimately defined by the power relations of the protagonists engaged in its application.

L'Etang (2008, p255) argues that rhetoric as advocacy and persuasion is only workable outside the dominant paradigm or majority approach to public relations practice and "the effort to incorporate the rhetorical approach within systems and symmetrical frameworks [is] an attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable."

Parsons (2007, p107) describes the use of strategies designed to influence attitudes and opinions as a "perfectly acceptable approach in a democratic society." She argues that the difference between persuasion and propaganda is based on intent where propagandists persuade to satisfy their own needs, while "persuasion takes into consideration the mutual benefit of both the persuader and those being persuaded" (p107).

She recommends the following steps to avoid the label of propaganda (adapted from Parsons, 2007):

Avoid false, fabricated, misrepresented, distorted or irrelevant evidence to support your point of view.
Avoid intentionally specious, unsupported or illogical reasoning.
Avoid trying to divert the public's attention by using such approaches as smear campaigns, or evoking intense emotions.
Avoid asking your public to link your idea to emotion-laden values, motives or goals to which it is not really related.
Don't conceal your real purpose (or the real supporters of your cause).
Don't oversimplify complex situations into simplistic, two-valued or polar views or choices.

Current examples of communications from the main political parties of the UK defy many of these guidelines, including the instigation of smear campaigns by Damian McBride on behalf of the Labour party (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/ news/newstopics/politics/ gordon-brown/5179928/Emails-smears-Now-Brown-pays-the-price.html retrieved 19 April 2009), concealment of donations to the Conservative party by George Osborne (http://www.telegraph.co.uk /news/newstopics/politics/ conservative/georgeosborne/4903011/George-Osborne-Visit-to-Russian-Yacht-with-Mandelson-a--mistake.html retrieved 24 April 2009) and the release of misleading information regarding knife crime by Jacqui Smith (http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article 5347037.ece retrieved 24 April 2009).

Williams and Moffitt (1997, p239) argue that "corporate image has been recognized as the result of a dual process of corporate image production by the organisation and audience consumption by the populations and publics that relate to the organisation." In this context, public relations messages should be seen as persuasive communication that seek to frame a public's conception of an organisation's corporate image.

Edwards also argues that rhetorical persuasion within public relations includes non-verbal and visual cues used by organisations and therefore includes symbols. By shaping an organisation's identity, therefore, the public relations practitioner creates "understandings of the world for their organisation and its audiences" (p170). For example, the iconic corporate identities created by the Nike "swoosh", or the Guiness harp and the rhetorical positioning inherent in the formulation and projection of those identities. Even without the word Nike the "swoosh" is almost universally recognised in the western world and is immediately emblematic of the corporate personality and qualities imbibed by the organisation's public relations practice.

Hall (2002) argues that in practice, rhetoric is based on "ideographs" which he describes as an abstraction representing a community of shared or clustered values. For a governmental campaign, Hall argues, these would include notions such as family, work, neighbourhood, peace, and freedom in the US, while in the UK, previous election ideographs have revolved around rhetoric such as Tony

Blair's "education, education, education" (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6564933.stm, retrieved 23 April 2009)

Hall describes, somewhat cynically, how these ideographs are constructed and approved through polling by political parties then used to justify policy proposals and engender trust in a particular politician or political party, therefore building the reputation of the political organisation itself.

Edwards argues that rhetoric is a two way discussion between parties that has a particular goal in mind. She argues (p170) that "truth is necessary in order to engender trust in the rhetor (speaker) but individual perspectives must be brought to bear on the discussion in order to generate interpretation and debate. The ultimate outcome is assumed to be agreement between the two parties involved – the process of dialogue resulting in a meeting of minds somewhere in the middle of the two extremes." This would occur in the "win-win" zone of Grunig's mixed motive communication model, developed from Game theory, where the communication is symmetric (Tench & Yeomans, p150).

Cornelissen (2007) argues that public relations practitioners must be very aware of their role in the organisational process "(which is fundamentally rhetorical and symbolic) in responding to and in exercising power (in public discourse) and in shaping various identities (corporate and individual)" (p17). He highlights that this contrasts to the management and systems strand of theoretical analysis of public relations practice where "the focus is thus not on the symbolic act of communicating, as this is only seen as a means to an end (the end being the building and maintaining of favourable reputations and relationships with key stakeholders), but on the analysis, planning, programming, tactical and evaluative activities engaged in for communications campaigns" (ibid).

This latter, systems approach sits more easily with the Chartered Institute of Public Relation's definition of public relations practice as being about the management of organisational reputation (Tench & Yeomans, p6) whereby "public relations is the discipline which looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour." However the act of earning and influencing does reflect the rhetorical approach to public relations practice whereby discourse and successful debate earn the organisation trust and respect.

Heath claims that rhetoric cannot be sustained by lies and requires those who are committed to truth and a desire to "help key publics to make informed and ethical decisions" (p32). "Organisations … that attempt to use rhetoric to control and manipulate the opinions of key stakeholders… suffer public exposure of their tactics as well as the flaws in the content they espouse" (ibid). For example, Damian McBride fell foul of his own rather cynical attempt to smear the reputations of leading Tory figures (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/politics/gordon-brown/5179928/Emails-smears-Now-Brown-pays-the-price.html retrieved 19 April 2009) and most infamously, Tony Blair used deceitful rhetoric to justify his war on Iraq, including erroneous claims about the presence of weapons of mass destruction and Iraq's capacity to directly attack the UK (http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/

article387285.ece retrieved 19 April 2009). In both instances the protagonists were subject to public censure.

Rhetorical public relations techniques, Heath contends, come into play when "an organisation's routine activities fail to produce the desired results" (p33). An example of this would be government's white paper *Decision on Adding Capacity at Heathrow* which attempts to outline the case for additional runway capacity at the airport. The rhetorical process here that Heath describes is where a large organisation or government publish a communication to which "individual and collective voices respond" (p33). One response in this case is that of the Greenpeace Airplot campaign which uses emotive and clever language to align "runaway climate change" and "uncontrolled runway expansion" by presenting a series of counter arguments discrediting the government's claims that the expansion is needed for business growth (http://www.airplot.org.uk/learn.html retrieved 19 April 2009).

Heath views the practice of rhetoric in public relations as helping organisations to build relationships and strategically adapt to market and public policy positions by using debate and discourse to solve problems that "frustrate the development of mutually beneficial relationships" (p33). In this sense, his view of rhetoric in practice is one of normatively preferable two-way symmetrical communication. This differs from Grunig, who views rhetorical persuasion as an asymmetrical and therefore lesser form of public relations practice (Grunig et al, 1992).

Heath rejects the systems model of public relations as centred on information flow as, using a rhetorical enactment perspective, any discourse is a two-way process. "Publics, markets and audiences interact with any communicator even if they do nothing more than ignore or reject its message" (p34). He identifies common rhetorical problems in public relations practice and reputation management as (adapted from Heath, 2001):

Need to increase or decrease awareness of an organisation, a problem, an issue, a product, a service etc
Need for understanding or agreement on the part of an organisation, stakeholder or stakeseeker regarding a fact, issue or position
Need to build, repair or maintain mutually beneficial relationships
Need to create, sustain, repair or apply identification
Need to create, repair and maintain a clear and consistent corporate personality
Need to understand and implement appropriate standards of social responsibility
Need to accept stewardship by taking issue stands

In each case the public relations practitioner takes on the role of rhetor or advocate, arguing or enacting a particular case both internally and externally, while taking account of the perspectives, motivations and potential interpretive positions of each public involved. Those perspectives, in Heath's model, centre

on "choices that yield to rhetorical dialogue, the dispute or contest of preferable choices" (p34).

To conclude, the practice of rhetoric is therefore inextricably linked to public relations techniques and reputation management by the need to persuade publics of a particular point of view. Heath's view of public relations *as* rhetoric is hard to sustain in the European context where the corporate power balance is regularly questioned both in the press and by sector commentators.

In this context the act and art of persuasion has become a fundamental aspect of reputation management for the communications practitioner where public relations has become a "large part of the public conversation" of liberal democracies such as the UK (Moloney, p39).

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