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Aesop's Trumpeter, Aristotle's Orator, and the Technical Communicator

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Abstract

This paper discusses the orator and the audience's roles in both Aristotle's rhetoric and contemporary rhetoric. Moreover, it argues that technical communicators should revive Aristotle's rhetoric because it allows them to take ownership of their work.

Æsop's Trumpeter, Aristotle's Orator, and the Technical Communicator

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Introduction

In his *Fables*, Æsop describes the story of a trumpeter who had ventured too close to where his enemies camped. With ease, his antagonists captured and prepared to execute him.

"Wait!" he pleaded. "I do not fight! I blow this trumpet—I have no weapon. I won't hurt you! Why would you kill me?"

To his cries for mercy, one soldier replied, "You may not fight yourself, but you encourage and guide your men to the fight."

 And so, concerning the unfortunate trumpeter Æsop writes, *Parem delinquentis et suasoris culpam esse*: the fault belongs alike to the wrongdoer and the persuader (Jacobs 1964). Unfortunately, the distinct melody of a trumpet call does not always accompany persuasive discourse. Much persuasive rhetoric remains latent in communication. Just as audiences may not recognize when they encounter persuasive rhetoric, so technical communicators may also fail to recognize how they persuade audiences. Too often, communicators identify themselves with Æsop's trumpeter—since they do not believe their rhetoric is a weapon that allows them to persuade audiences, they do not believe that they perpetuate social action. They do not realize that they rally their troops.

Although many classical theorists delegate ethical responsibility to communicators, contemporary rhetorical theorists often do not. In the broad discourse of technical communication especially, many communicators do not call themselves authors and would not say that they persuade their audiences. Many communicators operate in the discourses of science and technology where they argue that they mediate, translate, or transmit information. They act as though their rhetoric is simply a tool of communication. Because they believe their work is linguistically neutral, they often blow their trumpets without first understanding for whom they play. Since they do not see the ways in which they perpetuate social action with their rhetoric, they often do not question the implicit values of their discourses.

Thus, the question arises: how do technical communicators employ their rhetoric, and to what extent are they responsible for it? This paper attempts to revive an Aristotelian perspective of rhetoric and authorial responsibility in order to assert that technical communicators are authors who are ethically culpable for their rhetoric and who should

use their skills in political discourse. Although contemporary scholars of technical communication and rhetorical theory tend to suggest that communicators operate as neutral parts of the communication paradigm, communicators use rhetoric to persuade their audiences that reality exists in a particular way. Consequently, they are responsible for what and to whom they communicate. Although many communicators may not realize it, they are authors with powerful skills, trained rhetoricians who should engage in political discourse. This essay explores the literature that surrounds both classical and contemporary rhetoric as it applies to communication; analyzes the particulars of both Aristotle's rhetorical theory and contemporary rhetorical theory; challenges the current notions of rhetoric as an amoral tool; and finally asserts that as ethically responsible authors, technical communicators should pursue political discourse. Because technical communicators employ rhetoric to persuade their audiences of particular views of reality as Aristotle suggests, they write content and are culpable for their rhetoric; moreover, as stewards of rhetoric, they should not be afraid to pursue political discourse.

Literature Review

Recent scholarship has shown that many researchers have considered how classical rhetorical theory relates to technical communication. Kallendorf and Kallendorf (1989) note that scholars have been "rediscovering the flexibility and diversity of classical rhetoric" (55). In their article "A Bibliography of Works Published in the History of Professional Communication from 1994-2009: Part 1," Moran and Tebeaux (2011) catalogue the recent scholarship concerning classical rhetoric and technical communication. They note that *Starring the Text: The Place of Rhetoric in Science Studies* by Alan Gross (2006) justifies classical rhetorical models; that "Techne and Technical Communication" by Jay Gordon (2002) explores the utility of rhetoric; and that "Ethos: Character and Ethics in Technical Writing" by Charles Campbell (1995) argues for a stronger presence of ethos in technical communication. In the second part of their bibliography, Moran and Tebeaux (2012) write that "Ethics and Technical Communication" by Dombrowski (2000) reports that the ethical considerations that follow rhetoric have grown in the past thirty years. Likewise, Moran and Tebeaux (2012) report that "Business Communication: Present, Past, and Future" by N. Lamar Reinsch (1996) traces how classical rhetoric has developed into contemporary communication. Several other scholars also discuss how classical rhetoric and technical communication intersect (Dubinsky 2004; Hughes 2002; Johnson 2004; Kallendorf and Kallendorf 2004; Katz 2004; Miller, 1989, 2004).

A Review of Classical Rhetoric

Contemporary scholars are not the first to consider the fundamental principles of rhetoric; classical scholars such as Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle considered the subject in detail as well. Although scholars can trace much of contemporary rhetorical theory to Aristotle's treatise *On Rhetoric*, Aristotle wrote his works to respond to the contemporary theories of his day, specifically those of Plato and Isocrates. In much of their work, both Plato and Isocrates argue against the Sophists. According to both men, many of the Sophists claim to teach virtue but fail—fail to pursue truth. They serve themselves rather than the common

good (Benoit 1991; Corbett and Connors 1999; Poulakos 1985). Since the Sophists used rhetoric to manipulate, Isocrates limits its role in communication to protect the audience. He calls rhetoric the "worker of persuasion" and suggests that "orators pursue nothing else than persuasion" (Benoit 1991, 34). Likewise, he asserts that rhetoric alters how audiences perceive reality since it deals directly with absolute truth (Benoit 1991; Black 1958).

On the other hand, Plato writes that "rhetoric produces persuasion. Its entire business is persuasion; the whole sum and substance of it comes to that" (Benoit 1991, 64). He also writes that since rhetoric often exists in the public sector, some orators use it for unjust ends. Because orators may use rhetoric to manipulate their audience members as many of the Sophists did, Plato disagrees with Isocrates and suggests that rhetoric does not relate to absolute truth (Benoit 1991; Black 1958; Corbett and Connors 1999; Poluska 1985). Consequently, although both Plato and Isocrates disapprove of the way the Sophists ignore truth as they employ rhetoric, neither Plato nor Isocrates defines truth in the same way (Benoit 1991; Black 1958; Corbett and Connors 1999).

Like Plato and Isocrates, Aristotle responds to the notion that orators seem to be "more concerned with words than with matter" (Corbett and Connors 1999, 492). Aristotle replies to what Plato writes to elevate rhetoric where Plato limited it. Much of what Aristotle considered in his treatise concerns the "matter" of rhetoric: how it intersects with ethics and politics (Duska 2013; Johnson 2004; Kallendorf and Kallendorf 1989; Rorty 2011; Yack 2006). Unlike Aristotle, Plato asserts that rhetoric indirectly relates to absolute truth, and Isocrates links rhetoric directly with truth. However, Aristotle suggests that rhetoric deals with opinion and contingent truth rather than absolutes (Hunt 1920; Johnson 2004; Yack 2006). Aristotle also emphasizes that orators must know what to say and how to speak appropriately within their discourses (Hunt 1920; Yack 2006). As scholars study Aristotle's rhetoric, they broadly define several of its functions. When Isocrates considers the topic, he delineates three distinct ways orators may employ rhetoric: to display their skill, to promote the good of the audience, and to consider important issues (Benoit 1991). Similarly, Plato writes that the orator should pursue "the engendering of justice in the souls of his fellow citizens and the eradication of injustice, the planning of self-control and the uprooting of uncontrol, the entrance of virtue and the exit of vice" (Benoit 1991). Aristotle seems to define rhetoric as a means by which orators discover probable truth and pursue social action (Grimaldi 1980; Katz 1999; Kennedy 1991).

When Aristotle defines rhetoric, he notes that the skill itself is amoral. Fuller notes that since rhetoric is an amoral tool, "[w]hether [the rhetor] uses this power [of rhetoric] in the interest of truth or falsehood, of right or wrong, makes no difference. Rhetoric is good or bad rhetoric according as it wins its case" (quoted in Rowland 1985, 26). However, scholars have debated whether Aristotle completely separates rhetoric from ethics. Even though he considers rhetoric an amoral tool, Aristotle prescribes some ethical principles for orators (Duska 2014; Johnstone 1980; Kallendorf and Kallendorf 1989; Katz 1999; Sullivan 2004). According to Aristotle, orators should use rhetoric to present both sides of an argument since rhetoric leads to social action (Garver 1985; Johnstone 1980; McKeon 1947; Miller 2004). Since orators may employ rhetoric to discuss any subject, they must judge how to

accommodate their audiences (Johnstone 1980). Moreover, when orators persuade audiences, they must allow audience members to deliberate (Johnson 2004; Kallendorf and Kallendorf 1980; Katz 2004; Moore 1997). Dubinsky (2004) notes that because Aristotle links rhetoric to "public deliberation and effective citizenship," (246) he defines rhetoric as a fundamental element of political discourse. As orators use rhetoric, Aristotle considers the ethical and political implications of how they persuade their audiences.

A Review of Contemporary Rhetoric

Some scholars have argued that rhetoric and technical communication are not compatible. Moore (1997) and Carliner (1995) suggest that rhetoric has little to do with the problems students ultimately find in the workplace. For example, Moore (1997) asserts that rhetoric concerned public speakers who "defended or condemned a person's past behavior, who praised or blamed someone in the present, or who tried to persuade an audience to accept a point of view about the future of an action" (107). Since Moore (1997) asserts that technical communication is task-oriented and thus does not persuade, he concludes that classical rhetoric is not the catholicon other scholars suggest.

However, many scholars embrace Aristotle's rhetorical theories. Cooper (1935) notes that Aristotle has had a pervasive influence on rhetoric: "[E]very student of discourse is sure to be a debtor to the works of Aristotle whether the student is aware of it or never has read either of the works. No one can be a reader of books, and not read someone who has profited by reading Aristotle"(11).

Like Cooper, Rapp and Wagner (2013) write that what Aristotle articulated provides a basis for historical and contemporary methods of persuasion. Rapp and Wagner (2013) even assert that although not all contemporary argumentation theorists are necessarily Aristotelian, "down to the present day argument theorists have been profoundly inspired by Aristotle's theory of argumentation" (np). Moreover, Rowland and Womack (1985) say that rhetoric suits a democratic society since it "commands attention to both the emotional and rational faculties" (13). Thus, although some scholars suggest that Aristotle's work is not relevant, other scholars look to Aristotle as they explore rhetorical theories today. In recent years, as scholars have considered rhetoric, they have also evaluated the nature of the rhetorical situation. Bitzer (1999) suggests that all rhetoric is an appropriate response to an event, like a fitting answer to a question. He suggests that events necessitate rhetoric. Communicators approach the latent rhetoric of events so that "a work is rhetorical because it is a response to a situation of a certain kind" (Bitzer 1999, 3). Moreover, he claims that rhetoric is a pragmatic tool since it ultimately produces an action (Bitzer 1999).

Like Bitzer (1999), Vatz (1999) argues that rhetoric leads to action; however, Vatz opposes Bitzer and argues that orators use rhetoric to give events meaning. Vatz (1999) writes that meaning is not intrinsic to events since communicators must judge how they frame events for their audiences. He borrows Bitzer's example to say that rhetoric structures rather than answers a question. Moreover, he asserts that communicators create meaning rather than discover it, contrary to what Bitzer (1999) argues. Vatz (1999) elevates the communicator's status, saying that "it is only when the meaning is seen as the result of a

creative act and not a discovery, that rhetoric will be perceived as the supreme discipline it deserves to be" (161). Although both Bitzer (1999) and Vatz (1999) assert that rhetoric leads to action, they disagree as to whether rhetoric itself creates meaning.

As scholars have debated about rhetoric, so they have argued over the communicator's role in the rhetorical situation. In fact, much of the scholarship of technical communication attempts to define the field since scholars believe that if they outline the discourse, they may also articulate communicators' roles (For representative essays, see Dandridge; Harris; Hays; Hogan; Kelly and Mass; Limay; MacIntosh; Stratton; Walter; Zall). In his article "What is Technical Writing? A Redefinition," Britton (1975) defines technical writing as a positivist skill, a communication that has "one meaning and only one meaning" (11). However, Dobrin (1983) redefines technical writing as "writing that accommodates technology to the user" (242). Neither Britton (1975) nor Dobrin (1983) are the first or the last scholars to define technical communication. As the field expands to accommodate new technologies, so the definition will also change.

In light of such definitions, many scholars assert that technical communicators transfer or translate knowledge (Hughes 2002; Johnson-Eilola 1996; Katz 2004; Rutter 2004; Slack, Miller, and Doak 2004). Slack, Miller, and Doak (2004) note that if communicators transmit knowledge, then they purvey meaning as neutral parts of larger power systems. Likewise, if they translate information, then they mediate meaning and create delegate power between sender and receiver but do not influence communication themselves. However, Rutter (2004) and others suggest that technical communicators actually generate knowledge (Katz 2004; Miller 2004; Slack, Miller, and Doak 2004; Vatz 1999). If technical communicators author knowledge, then they articulate meaning and become equal parts of larger power systems (Hughes 2002; Slack, Miller, and Doak 2004). As scholars have deliberated how technical communicators influence communication, they have also considered how technical communicators operate in the political realm specifically (Auerbach, 2015; Johnstone 1980; Sullivan 2004; Yack, 2006). Although many scholars attempt to define the communicator's role, Allen (1990) suggests that the negative effects of defining the discourse outweigh the positive ones since defining technical writing would divide the field. However, scholars will likely continue to define—or attempt to define—the discourse.

As scholars have discussed the ideas surrounding classical and contemporary rhetoric in technical communication, they have outlined different roles for the orator and for the communicator. However, an Aristotelian perspective of rhetoric better serves contemporary technical communicators because it gives them both power and responsibility. Of course, Aristotle's notion of the ethical communicator contrasts aspects of contemporary scholarship, especially scholarship that suggests that rhetoric in technical communication is linguistically neutral. However, just as Æsop's trumpeter blew his horn to rally the troops, so technical communicators employ rhetoric to persuade their audiences to act. Because communicators use rhetoric to persuade their audiences, they must embrace the power and responsibility of authorship. If technical communicators accept their responsibility as authors, they equip themselves to engage political discourse.

Analyzing Aristotle's Rhetoric

Aristotle posits a complex though perhaps vague definition of rhetoric. He defines rhetoric as "the faculty of discovering all the available means of persuasion in any given situation" (Kennedy 1991, 1). He writes that rhetoric not only determines how one might persuade an audience but also perpetuates reasonable discussion (Grimaldi 1980). Miller (1989) notes that rhetoric is a *techne* situated between art and science. According to Aristotle, rhetoric concerns itself with contingent human affairs, a realm where universal truth is not always apparent (Corbett and Connors 1999).

Aristotle notes that orators pursue truth and justice and intend to persuade their audiences to some kind of action. Because Aristotle suggests that the ultimate goal of rhetoric is to advance truth and justice, he gives the orator and the audience equal ethical responsibility as they discuss topics that lead to social action. For Aristotle, orators are responsible for what and how they communicate while audiences are responsible for how they respond to what orators have posited. Moreover, he says that since rhetoric persuades, it is a fundamental element of political discourse (Auerback 2015; Duska 2014).

The Orator's Responsibility

According to Aristotle, as orators persuade their audiences, they lead them to act in some way. Although Plato suggests that orators produce virtue in the souls of their listeners, Aristotle proposes that as orators persuade, they should help their listeners evaluate and respond to rhetoric. Rorty (1996) suggests the orator must center rhetoric on prudence and justice and consider how the audiences will respond. As they consider how their audiences will react, orators must display what Aristotle considers practical wisdom. They must know when it is appropriate to use *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos* as they persuade (Miller 1989). Aristotle notes that orators must use appropriate rhetoric to serve citizens as they deliberate for the good of the polis. Orators must present their topics with excellence and with balance.

When Aristotle defines rhetoric and describes how it functions in public deliberation, he seems to consider it an amoral tool (Hunt 1961; Randall 1960; Rowland and Womack 1985); however, he does not actually separate rhetoric from ethics. Aristotle suggests that orators argue both sides of an issue so that the audience can determine how to proceed with virtue. Moreover, he notes that orators cannot use rhetoric to manipulate others (Duska 2014; Johnstone 1980; Kallendorf and Kallendorf 1989; Katz 1999; Sullivan 2004). Since Aristotle warns that orators might use rhetoric to accomplish a negative end, he implicitly asserts that language creates both negative and positive meaning. Because Aristotle does not evaluate rhetoric apart from its context, he ultimately does not believe it is ethically neutral. He does not evaluate how orators find answers apart from how they articulate them (Kallendorf and Kallendorf 1989). Thus, in Aristotle's rhetorical paradigm, the orator is responsible to see all available means of persuasion and to use appropriate rhetoric so that the audience can respond with virtuous action.

Although Aristotle does not separate rhetoric from ethics, he does not codify an ethical treatise. He gives enough information in his works to say that rhetoric is not ethically neutral, but he does not develop the matter in detail (Rapp and Wagner 2013). Perhaps the most important ethical concept that Aristotle describes is that rhetoric is a social practice that should better the community (Katz 2004). He considers rhetoric a skill and requires that those who use it share some ethical responsibility for how they employ their practice (Sullivan 1989). Rorty (1996) notes that deliberative rhetoric "most clearly reveals the primary importance of truth as it functions within the craft of rhetoric itself" (6) since orators must convince their audiences that what they argue will actually happen in order to maintain their *ethos*. Consequently, although Aristotle may not have clearly defined ethical boundaries for rhetoric, he notes that orators cannot advance truth and justice if they manipulate their audiences. He holds them responsible for both what and how they communicate.

The Audience's Responsibility

Just as orators have an ethical responsibility to advance truth and justice, so the audience plays a key role in the practice of rhetoric. According to Aristotle, the orator and audience share a feedback loop. The orator enters into public discourse and articulates a topic, and the audience works to "uncover, assess, and resolve shared problems" (Goodnight 1999, 251). As audience members deliberate, they test what the orator has argued and attempt to discover what is true (Kallendorf and Kallendorf 1989; Kennedy 1991,). Johnstone (1980) describes how audiences evaluate rhetoric, saying:

> The more a proposition can withstand the scrutiny of other minds, the more likely it is to be true; and, conversely, an inadequate articulation of what we believe to be true and just undermines its claim on our belief. (quoted in Kallendorf and Kallendorf 1989, 60)

Aristotle asserts that since orators should easily prove what is true, audiences can decide whether orators have discussed topics fairly. Figure 1 illustrates how orators and audiences communicate with one another in a feedback loop. In the Aristotelian paradigm, audience members become judges who actively evaluate rhetoric.

Figure 1. In the Aristotelian feedback loop, orators receive immediate feedback.
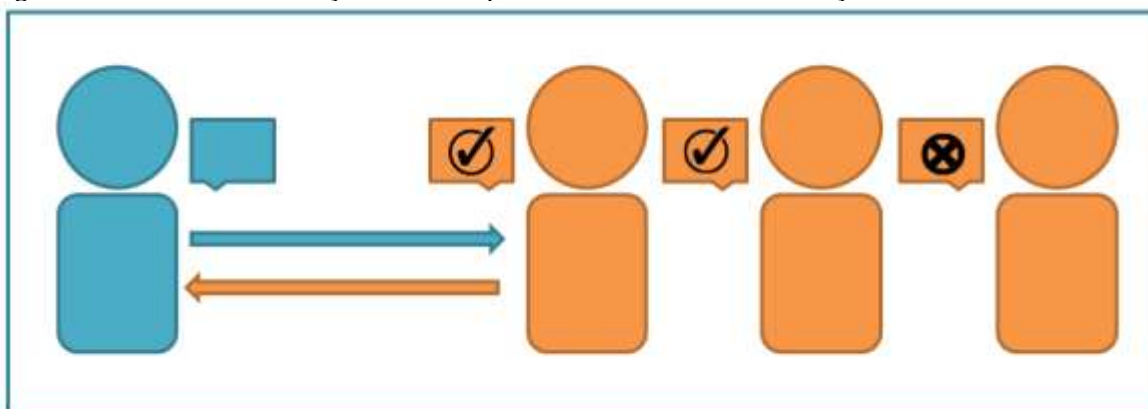
Although Aristotle may not address it specifically, proximity is an important aspect of the Aristotelian feedback loop. As orators argue, they persuade live audiences. If audience members recognize that an orator is manipulating them, they can react publicly—perhaps even with force. Consequently, like Aristotle himself, audiences hold orators directly accountable for what and how they communicate.

Analyzing Rhetoric in Contemporary Communication

As scholars have begun to embrace classical rhetoric in recent years, they have applied Aristotle's rhetorical theories to many disciplines outside of public speaking, including technical communication. As Ong (1975) writes, although rhetoric originally dealt with oral communication, "it has gradually extended to include writing more and more" and is even a principle concern of writing today (9). Although contemporary rhetoric certainly falls within the Aristotelian paradigm, the rhetoric of technical communication differs from what Aristotle originally suggests. Consequently, it seems that modern writers have accepted only part of Aristotle's rhetoric.

The Communicator's Responsibility

Like Aristotle, modern technical communicators believe rhetoric is itself amoral. They use it as a tool that operates within a larger paradigm. Although the classical orator and the modern communicator might both define rhetoric itself as ethically neutral, they would not define the role of the communicator the same way. Technical communicators do not claim that they are authors; they prefer instead to remain anonymous parts of larger systems. They argue rhetoric is "the process of transferring information from someone who possesses it to someone who needs it. It moves the reader from a state of uncertainty to a state of certainty" (Warren quoted in Rutter 1985, 705). As technical communicators assert that they transfer or transmit instead of author information, they use rhetoric as the tool that mediates information between groups of experts and novices.

Since they consider rhetoric an amoral tool, communicators often do not consider the ethical implications of their work. As science and technology have developed, so technical communication has also assumed the empirical values of such discourses. Technical communicators have removed themselves from their rhetorical situation and have undervalued ethics as technical communication has adapted to suit objectivism, technology, and standardized methodology (Jacobi 1990; Miller 1989). Charney (2004) suggests that technical communicators gain power when they associate with empiricism since they elevate their status as professionals if they work within the sciences. Charney (2004) also notes that to move technical communication away from the sciences would "[divorce] technical communication from the source of its power" (283). She considers objectivism the means by which communicators protect themselves from "powerful outsiders who want to steer work toward their own ends" (Charney 2004, 288). Some scholars have suggested that technical communicators should not associate themselves with the sciences exclusively (Miller 2004; Rutter 2004; Slack, Miller, and Doak 2004; Sullivan, 2004). Still, technical communicators commonly assert that their work is merely a means to an end. They suggest that they only mediate information between groups.
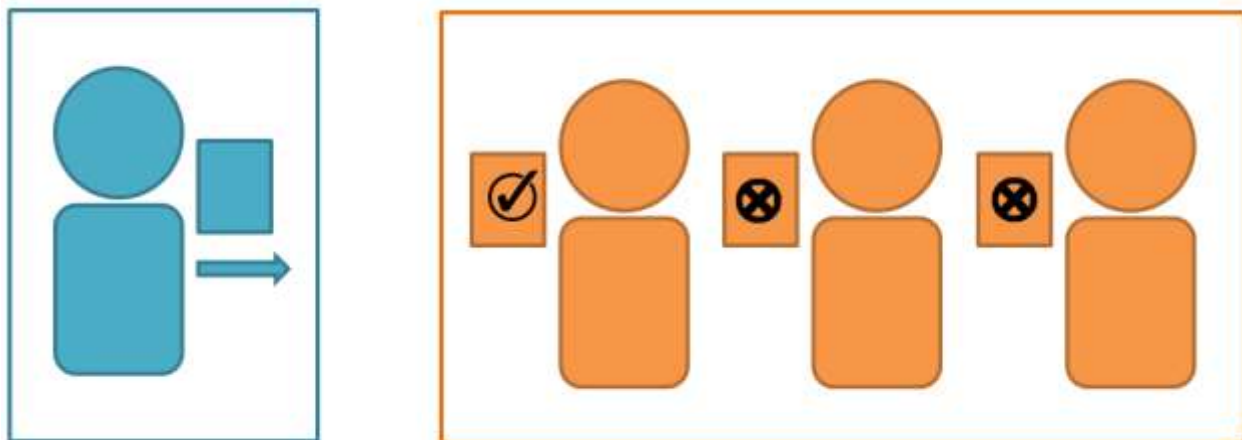
Consequently, technical communicators have come to devalue their rhetoric and use it as a mere tool of industry. The technical communicator employs skills, *techne* to Aristotle, that are forms of technology in themselves and exist separately from the writer and apart from the writer's ethical responsibility (Sullivan 2004). Unlike Aristotle, modern technical communicators neatly separate what they write from the context in which they write it.

The Audience's Responsibility

Although Aristotle's orator and the modern communicator may not agree that rhetoric necessitates ethics, both would agree that they serve their audiences. However, unlike Aristotle's orator, modern communicators do not enter directly into a feedback loop with their audiences. Ong (1975) suggests that since the rise of the printing press, the audience has become more distant—and at times more fictional. However, audience analysis techniques have been prevalent since Mills and Walter (1950) wrote *Technical Writing* and since Doge and Westinghouse (1960) advocated audience-centered document design. Although technical communicators be distant from their audiences, ideally, they still seek to address a specific audience.

However, communicators today do not always seem to remember that their audience exists since they cannot access their readers immediately as classical orators did. Thus, Johnson (2004) writes "the audience has been marginalized by a preponderance of scholarship that hegemonically places the receivers of discourse literally at a distance, rendering them invisible to the writers' naked eye" (93). Since many technical communicators cannot access their audiences directly, they cannot enter into the same feedback loop that profited classical orators. Figure 2 illustrates that contemporary communicators do not interact directly with their audiences. The communicator and the audience remain at a distance. The audience may never give feedback, and the communicator may never receive it. Aristotle's audience may have accosted a poor orator or praised a successful one; however, the modern audience cannot hold communicators directly responsible for their rhetoric. At best, readers may abandon manuals or proposals with poor rhetoric, but writers may never know—and may never alter how they communicate.

Figure 2. In the Contemporary Feedback Loop, communicators do not receive feedback for their rhetoric.

Moreover, as technical communicators have adapted their writing to suit the discourses of science and technology, they have actually come to favor formal writer-reader relationships (Ede and Lunsford 1984). Since they may never encounter their audience members, their audience members cannot hold them directly responsible for what they communicate. They may learn to analyze or imagine their audiences, yet they remain anonymous.

Since technical communicators have assumed a neutral position in their discourses, they do not believe they are responsible for what they communicate. They believe they are information channels who do not add or detract value from communication. They do not believe they are authors. Like Æsop's trumpeter, they do not understand how their work—the blasts of their instruments—rally their audiences to action. They do not understand the power of their rhetoric or the responsibility they have for what they communicate.

Reviving Aristotelian Rhetoric

Although many technical communicators seem willing to divorce rhetoric from ethics, they must accept ethical responsibility for their rhetoric. Rhetoric and rhetorical situations necessitate ethics because rhetoric always involves judgment. Since technical communicators tend to assume a neutral position between sender and receiver, they do not receive credit—or perhaps do not want to receive credit—for how they decide to construct their rhetoric. However, like Æsop's trumpeter, technical communicators cannot ignore the larger contexts in which they work, since whether or not they participate directly, they too persuade audiences. Ultimately, because technical communicators intentionally employ rhetoric to persuade their audiences to act, they are responsible for how and to whom they communicate as Aristotle suggests. Moreover, if they understand the power and responsibility they have, they should not be afraid to engage in political discourse.

As technical communicators employ rhetoric, they must accept authorship because when they write, they persuade their audiences that reality is one way or another. For example, as communicators draft a report, they organize data they have collected, draw conclusions, and suggest how management should react. As they draft, they frame information to create meaning. Perhaps their data reveals that their corporation needs to have a friendlier social media presence to compete with other companies. The data points they choose to highlight and the ways in which they choose to structure their report determine what version of reality they present—and whether management believes what they have framed. Consequently, because language is the means by which communicators order realty, good writing is "a persuasive version of experience" (Miller 1989, 52). Whenever communicators employ rhetoric, they persuade their audiences.

Moreover, as technical communicators write, they select and organize information and assess their audience members' realities to create meaning. Since all communication happens in particular places and times and influences particular people, technical communicators should use what they know about theory and human nature to persuade their audiences (Kennedy 1991). Edelman states that language does not always correspond

directly to reality, rather it creates a perspective of reality by "organizing meaningful perceptions abstracted from a complex, bewildering world" (quoted in Vatz 1999, 160). Just as Edelman asserts, as individual communicators draft documents, they order syntactic units intentionally. They decide what information to include or ignore, what verbs to employ, what punctuation to use. Like Æsop's trumpeter, they choose which melody they play to rally their troops. They use their rhetoric to persuade.

The rhetoric a technical communicator chooses to employ determines the meaning that communicator creates. Since people encounter events from different perspectives, one perspective cannot objectively define an event (Vatz 1999). Consequently, communicators first choose what information to communicate and then "transmit" that information to their audience. As they "transmit" information, they frame reality and create meaning. Vatz (1999) delegates a tremendous amount of power to the communicator, saying that "events become meaningful only through their linguistic depiction" (157). Since communicators generate meaning, they are also responsible for what and to whom they communicate. Again, they must choose the melodies they play and which troops they rally. Although communicators cannot be responsible for every possible action an audience member may take in light of the realities they create, they are at least responsible for their own intentions and to what extent they understand their own rhetorical situations. As Aristotle argues, they are responsible for what and to whom they communicate.

The writer's role in a rhetorical situation—and the tremendous power and responsibility a writer possesses—become evident when a communicator fails to frame a rhetorical situation well. One example of failed rhetoric concerns the crisis of Three Mile Island. As communicators attempted to frame the nearly catastrophic event, Farrell and Goodnight (1981) write that "discourse [failed] to fulfill ordinary epistemological and axiological expectations" (272). In one of the first public statements officials made, they handled the situation poorly: before one spokesperson quite finished calling the event an "accident," he named it an "incident." As officials dealt with the infamous "accidi-indent," Farrell and Goodnight (1981) describe that communicators "searched awkwardly for language capable of defining, explaining, and assimilating urgent events" (273). Since the orators did not have a full picture of what had happened or would happen to the plant, they could not frame the situation effectively. Moreover, since they could not frame the situation, their audience struggled to understand the crisis, evaluate it, and respond appropriately.

As the situation at Three Mile Island developed, communicators clearly attempted to frame the event. They seemed to understand that their audience would react to the rhetoric they chose. Farrell and Goodnight (1981) note that, "[i]n general, the accidental rhetoric at Three Mile Island, however inconsistent and tension-ridden, was a continual attempt to depersonalize the accident itself while reassuring the public sector as to its human costs" (282). Officials structured their rhetoric to minimize panic. Moreover, as they responded to the crisis, they developed their rhetorical style, selecting their diction and structuring their sentences according to their needs. They initially attempted to project the idea that officials still maintained control over the event; however, when officials learned more about the crisis themselves in the days following the initial alarm, they eventually labeled the "incident" an "accident." Through their rhetoric, they intimated that management did not

have total control over the plant's operations. Just as orators at Three Mile Island failed to relate and frame the event successfully, so communicators also relate particulars of events. The rhetoric by which communicators frame events creates meaning.

Reviving the Communicator's Responsibility

Since communicators deliberately select how they frame events, they are responsible for their rhetoric. An example of failed rhetoric such as Three Mile Island shows that audiences and orators alike often acknowledge the power of rhetoric when it fails to meet its audiences' needs. Although communicators may not understand the entirety of a situation, they are responsible for both what they understand and what they choose to communicate. However, since contemporary rhetorical theory distances communicators from the feedback their audiences might give, it also allows them to ignore the latent values of their discourses. Since technical communicators persuade their audiences to act, they must understand their rhetorical contexts. As Aristotle suggests, they cannot accept that what they write has no impact on its larger context. While it may be true that writing itself is amoral, communication always leads to action. If communicators separate their rhetoric from the action it perpetuates, they blindly serve their rhetorical discourses, for better or worse.

Since communicators are responsible for what and to whom they write, they succeed or fail to the extent that they understand the values of their discourse communities. The example of Three Mile Island also shows that rhetoric functions as a means to an end, whether communicators explicitly acknowledge that particular end or not. As officials framed the catastrophic event, Farrell and Goodnight (1981) note that they "had specialized ends to serve" (282)—they did not simply communicate information about the possible disaster for the sake of communicating it. Instead, they needed to reassure civil officials as well as the public that they had contained the situation. However, as they communicated, they operated under the pragmatist ideas that they had tacitly accepted. They used their rhetoric to serve technology and progress rather than their audience. Thus, they attempted to hide information as it emerged. Since technical communicators operate in the world of mathematics and science more and more, they cannot fail to acknowledge the values of their discourses.

Because technical communicators do not employ linguistically neutral rhetoric, they ultimately perpetuate social action. As they articulate meaning, they become equal parts of larger power systems (Hughes 2002; Slack, Miller, and Doak 2004). Just as Æsop's trumpeter aligned himself with a particular army, so they work in particular discourses. Technical communicators must understand for whom they write since they are responsible for what they communicate. Otherwise, they become like Æsop's trumpeter—persuaders who align themselves with wrongdoers and who are equally at fault. Technical communicators are responsible for how they communicate and to whom they communicate.

The Communicator's Responsibility

Because contemporary rhetorical theory often divorces communication from its context, communicators need to revive Aristotle's ideas of ethical rhetoric and authorial responsibility. As Corbett and Connors (1999) note, communicators should not embrace classical rhetoric simply because it becomes more venerable as it ages. They should model their work after Aristotle's ideas because what he suggests is both relevant and useful. Since persuasive rhetoric is latent in society, technical communicators especially must understand how rhetoric works within their discourses. Moreover, as they take responsibility for what they communicate, they should use their newfound power to empower audiences in other discourses.

Just as Aristotle's orator considered "any subject which [was] open to discussion and deliberation" (Grimaldi 1980), so the technical communicator is also qualified to write in any discourse. Communicators today find themselves working in a wide range of fields where they exchange information; however, they should not feel that their discourses limit them. If they understand that they are responsible for what they communicate, they should feel prepared to decide how to employ their rhetoric.

Since technical communicators often operate within pragmatist or positivist paradigms, they separate the means of communication from its end; however, communicators cannot ignore the larger contexts of their discourses. If communicators separate their work from its contexts, they miss what Grimaldi considers "the essential link between deliberation and action" (Katz 2004, 199). Technical communication—maybe even more than any other kind of communication—leads to action. Since technical communicators always persuade others to act, they must do so ethically. Whether the communicator drafts a manual or a presidential speech, audience members interact with and respond to communication. Moreover, technical communicators often work within government and industrial hierarchies, and their work reflects the ideas of such entities. Consequently, as Miller (2004) asserts, "[i]f we pretend for a minute that technical writing is objective, we have passed off a particular political ideology as a privileged truth" (52). If technical communicators do not identify the values latent in their discourses, they will perpetuate the goals of larger power systems. Consequently, since communication is not objective, technical communicators cannot ignore their authorial responsibility. They must acknowledge that they create meaning and motivate action.

If technical communicators understand that their rhetoric is a powerful tool that advances social action, they will realize that they must consider the good of their audiences above all else. As Aristotle asserts, when communicators attempt to write to their audiences and suit their needs, they will combine *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos* in an ethical manner. Of course, an audience-based approach to technical communication is not a particularly novel idea. However, if technical communicators assert themselves as authors, then they can envision their audiences as judges like Aristotle suggests. Moreover, if they revive a more tangible feedback loop, they will have more incentive to operate with wisdom so that they can best serve their audiences. Kennedy (1991) notes that Aristotle's orator could succeed only by "[attending] and [adjusting] to the ethos of varied types of auditor" (148). Although

modern communicators may not enter into the direct feedback loops classical orators and their audiences shared, they must revive their audiences—a group of "actual living, breathing [figures] in the discourse production" (Johnson 2004, 93). Although their audiences may not be able to hold them directly responsible for successful or unsuccessful rhetoric, technical communicators must hold themselves responsible to their audiences. When they persuade their audiences, technical communicators must remember that their audiences will react in some way.

The Audience's Responsibility

As technical communicators write with real audiences in mind, they will use their own newfound power to empower others. The audience will become a real rather than imaginary group who will react to rhetoric. Just as Aristotle delegates power to the orator and the hearer (Kennedy 1991), so the communicator and the audience will also share responsibility in their feedback loop. Ideally, technical communicators will accommodate their audience's real needs. Likewise, ideally, audiences will hold technical communicators responsible for how and for whom they employ rhetoric. As technical communicators revive an Aristotelian feedback loop, they will prepare themselves to engage in political discourse.

Pursuing Politics

If technical communicators learn to envision themselves as authors and take ethical responsibility for their rhetoric, they will be equipped to engage in discourses outside of science and technology. Aristotle suggests that rhetoric operates in any discourse where individuals may deliberate (Kennedy 1991). Communicators who understand how to use rhetoric ethically should also operate in any discourse where individuals may deliberate as Aristotle suggests. Since technical communicators are trained rhetoricians, they should not fear the political realm—or any field of discourse for that matter.

Technical communicators who revive an Aristotelian concept of the ethical communicator are well suited to engage the political realm because they are wise rhetoricians. Auerbach (2015) writes that rhetoric communicates a point while political rhetoric communicates a point to advance the goals of a political entity. Thus, without rhetoric, a politician would not succeed. With rhetoric, technical communicators can succeed in the political realm. Yack (2006) suggests that ideally public deliberation should be a means of "shaping individual judgments about the proper collective action to take" (420). However, current political discourse does not mirror the political discourse of Aristotle's time. Often, political rhetoric in democracy seems to pit opposing views and serve the false dichotomy of bipartisanship. However, if technical communicators are true rhetoricians, they will understand the nature of compromise. If they understand the power and responsibility of rhetoric, they will be willing to argue both sides of an issue. Moreover, they will be more willing to serve their audiences rather than their discourses. If technical communicators engage political discourse, they could have a profound positive impact on society.

Moreover, technical communicators should engage political discourse because the realms of science and public policy are becoming harder to separate. Initially, technical communicators brushed against the political realm as they wrote grants for government sponsorship of scientific research in the 1960s (Gibson 2013). Gibson (2013) writes that the technical communicator already occupies a pivotal role between politics and science since "the translation of scientific research into government-friendly language requires a specific set of scientific, rhetorical, and ethical skills" (4). As industrial and political hierarchies continue to intertwine, technical communicators will find themselves negotiating the intersections of various discourses. Consequently, technical communicators need to prepare themselves to engage the political realm. They must see themselves as authors, take responsibility for what they communicate, and persuade their audiences ethically as Aristotle prescribes. They must realize the power their rhetoric has. Ultimately, technical communicators can operate in any discourse. However, they must realize first that "wise people who can speak and write well are still the best assets we've got" (Rutter 2004, 23). Of course, wisdom is a rather high standard for any professional to attain. However, Aristotle simplifies the issue, suggesting that wisdom amounts to doing the right thing in the right place in the right time. Consequently, if communicators envision themselves as authors, if they accept responsibility for their rhetoric, and if they write for their audiences, they can attain wisdom as Aristotle defines it. As Aristotle suggests, they can use their power to empower others.

Conclusion

In his treatise on rhetoric, Aristotle defines rhetoric as a tool by which orators advance truth and justice. Although many theorists rely on what Aristotle wrote, they separate rhetoric from ethics and allow rhetoric to serve empiricist ends. However, modern communicators cannot divorce what they write from its rhetorical context. An example such as the crisis at Three Mile Island shows that communicators apply rhetoric as a framework to organize situations and create meaning. Thus, communicators persuade their audiences that reality exists in a particular way. Since communicators use rhetoric to persuade their audiences, they must accept that they author information rather than translate or transmit it. Perhaps more importantly, they must also accept ethical responsibility for what they communicate. As they employ rhetoric, they must write as classical orators spoke—that is, they should write as though they stand before and are responsible to living, breathing audience members who will react to their rhetoric. Moreover, as technical communicators assume their roles as authors, take responsibility for their rhetoric, and write for their audiences, they should not be afraid employ their rhetoric in any discourse. Specifically, they should engage in political discourse since they are wise communicators who understand how to employ rhetoric for the good of the audience rather than the good of a discourse.

Technical communicators occupy a pivotal position in rhetorical situations and in industry as well. Like Æsop's trumpeter, they blow their horns and persuade their troops to action. However, they cannot assume as Æsop's trumpeter did that how they employ their skill has no impact on the greater context around them. As the trumpeter chooses a melody, so the

communicator selects rhetoric—and so the audience should consider both the trumpeter and communicator culpable for their work. Therefore, technical communicators must revive Aristotle's concept of ethical communication as they intentionally employ rhetoric to persuade their audiences. As they accept their authorship, they must also remember the ethical responsibility they have to assist audience members as they publicly deliberate, despite the distance of their feedback loop. When they learn to persuade their audiences well, they will perpetuate social action. Therefore, they should strive to empower others with their rhetoric—even in the political realm. Perhaps if communicators come to understand that they are powerful assets in their discourses, they will encourage and guide others with their rhetoric. Perhaps they will enter into new discourses and perpetuate just social action. Perhaps they will learn, *"Et similia persuadens illa potestas audientis"*—the power belongs alike to the hearer and the persuader.

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