BOOK REVIEWS


The corporate voice, not surprisingly, is the loudest in the land.

-Schiller, 1989, p. 4.

Organisational messages, from a variety of organisations, confront us every day. For example, media companies asking listeners to stop downloading music without paying for it; an energy company wanting customers to believe that the solutions it is developing will solve the world’s energy problems; employers asking employees to work hard to make decisions in the interest of the organisation, and so on. These messages appear online, on television and radio, on billboards and print media, 24/7 around the world. All kinds of organisations—multinational corporations, national corporations, non-governmental organisations, trade associations, small and medium organisations, and not for profit organisations—at some point want to promote their identity, manage an issue, resolve a crisis or recruit and retain employees.

All of these messages are rhetoric—they strategically use symbols to influence thoughts, feelings, or behaviours. These messages are designed to promote an organisation’s interests, sometimes at the expense of others involved in a situation. Given the immense influence that organisations have in our daily lives (Deetz, 1992), it is important to have a set of skills for slicing into the possible meanings of such messages in order to draw our conclusions about them. This book provides a systematic approach to analysing and critiquing organisational rhetoric. The book is organised into ten chapters and each chapter begins with a model and has a variety of teaching/learning tools to assist instructors.

Chapter 1 sets the stage for an exploration of the organisational rhetoric construct by defining what is meant by an organisation, rhetoric and organisational rhetoric. It also lays down a process for studying organisational rhetoric and the possible outcomes of such a study along with reasons for undertaking such a study.

Chapter 2 covers five canons of rhetoric—the canons of invention (artistic proof of ethos, pathos and logos, non-artistic proofs), organisation, style, memory and delivery as well as their application in organisational rhetoric. The identification of these fundamental rhetorical strategies is an important step in any analysis of organisational rhetoric. Critics begin slicing into a text by identifying the rhetorical strategies found in a piece of discourse. These strategies are the most basic elements commonly found in almost any sample of rhetoric, no matter what the rhetor’s goals may be. The authors provide a summary of these strategies in the form a worksheet at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 3 underlines the importance of understanding a situation in order to understand the goals of the rhetoric being employed because all communication is situated in a context. As organisations are open systems, it is critical that they attend to what is happening around them, monitor their impact on the organisational environment and respond appropriately. Though there are several approaches to describe rhetorical situations, the authors point out two of these, viz., Bitzer’s Approach and Vatz’s Approach.

Organisations wield tremendous influence on society through messages to influence the likelihood of their desired outcomes. This influence flows from the position of power organisations enjoy in society. From the perspective of organisational communication and rhetoric, what is important to study is how power is created and maintained in organisations. Chapter 4 explores the critical approach that looks at how organisations use rhetorical strategies in order to establish and maintain their power in society. This approach provides organisational critics with tools to recognise, value, and examine whether multiple voices are reflected in organisational decision making to ensure that messages are ethical.

Chapter 5 covers the evaluative approach to analyse organisational rhetoric. The goal of any organisation is to create an effective message and this approach seeks to evaluate the rhetoric’s ability to meet its goal. It describes the characteristics of messages that would meet the organisational goal. The evaluative approach offers the best tools for this purpose.

Like individuals, organisations use similar processes in presenting themselves to audiences and in addressing events that could enhance the identity of the organisation. For example, a website is a good example of
organisational identity. Identity creation and maintenance are important because they help an organisation build and maintain its relationships with the audience or society at large. Chapter 6 provides rhetorical perspectives on organisational identity and maintenance as the identity rhetoric is an important category of organisational rhetoric on its own and plays a central role in the other types of rhetoric.

Organisations spend a great deal of time and money attempting to influence public policy and perceptions of public policy. Since organisationally influenced public policy can have an enormous impact on the lives of individuals and because of the inherent power imbalance between individuals and organisations, it is important to apply a critical lens to issue management rhetoric. Chapter 7 provides a framework for analysing and critiquing issue management and maintenance rhetoric.

Organisations, either by their nature or because of a particular action they plan to take, can pose potential risks to their communities. For example, an energy company may want to construct a nuclear reactor, and this may cause anxiety among local audiences about health and safety. Situations like these can threaten an audience’s perception of both an organisation’s competence and its concern for the community, and threaten the organisation’s positive identity. These challenges require a special type of rhetoric and Chapter 8 covers organisational risk rhetoric.

Organisations face challenges to their reputations every day, a recent example being the BP oil well leak in the Gulf of Mexico. These situations endanger the faith and trust of audiences in those organisations and result in what is termed rhetorically as an ‘organisational crisis’. Chapter 9 explores the rhetorical situations created by crisis events and highlights the role of rhetorical strategies in planning for and responding to crises in organisations.

Apart from influencing external audiences, organisations use rhetoric to influence internal audiences such as their employees. This is done through orientation programmes and training material, in-house newsletters, or activities such as displaying employee of the month plaque etc. Each of these symbolic creations attempts to influence how members (or potential members) think, feel, and behave towards the organisation. Chapter 10 explores the rhetorical situation inside the organisations and examines how a variety of organisational rhetorical strategies are used to address internal exigencies, audiences and constraints.

In summary, the authors have made a commendable attempt to simplify an otherwise difficult construct of organisational rhetoric. The book is full of tools, templates and worksheets to help a practitioner of organisational communication use this book effectively. The book is also relevant to scholars and researchers of organisational communication as it is the first of its kind, focusing on the area of organisational rhetoric.

References


The decentralisation of public services to the urban local bodies (ULBs) became effective in India in the early 1990s with the inclusion of the twelfth schedule in the 74th constitutional amendments. The schedule had a list of 18 functions that should be devolved to the urban local governments. This book addresses an important issue that has plagued the urban local governments: effectiveness and efficiency in service delivery by the local governments. The authors have used the marginal cost approach in the water sector to drive their methodology and policy perspectives. The authors have argued that the phenomenon of urban service delivery in India has to be placed within the context of either controlled migration or changes to the user charges (p5). This is in line with Williamson’s (1988) analysis on migrants and the social costs created by them.

The book can be divided into three parts: the different approaches to the calculation of costs for the provision of urban water services; the status of other services and the reform process; and case studies to comprehensively analyse the reform process and draw conclusions from the same. One of the main points of justification given for estimating the marginal cost of water has been the data intensive nature of the variable. For other services like solid waste management and street lighting, the authors have compared the actual expenditure with the desired level of expenditure to determine the nature of services delivered. Another interesting assumption the authors have made has been the impact of migrants on services like road infrastructure: ‘Among other factors, migrants could be responsible for the damage caused to the roads, if they do not last for the entire period for which they were built’ (p 18). Along with this assumption, there are important questions that are being tested by the authors with respect to the issue of marginal costs. One set of research queries deals with the financial status of service delivery outcomes, and the second set argues that irrespective of the finances, the institutional structures in a particular urban centre are highly influential for effective service delivery in a multistier government setting.

The second set of questions has been analysed with the in-depth case studies of Ludhiana and Rajkot. These case studies analyse in depth all the aspects of city administration, right from the demographics to the institutional structures of the local governments and the relations of the local governments with their state counterparts. The overlapping jurisdiction between the city corporations and the other agencies, though mentioned in other literature,