

Diffusion of Responsibility: Ethos and the Technologized Rhetor

by Stephen M. Weinstock

The following paper was presented to the Eastern Communication Association Rhetoric and Public Address Fall Conference, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, September 1986. It was scanned January 2005 and is presented here for historical purposes. The paper summarizes some of my earlier research and begins to extend the material into ethical questions.

For the most part, the substance is presented as it was in 1986. However, some minor stylistic revisions have been made. New material added includes the following: (1) additional support regarding Bob Dylan's self-described intent from a 2004 interview and (2) additional references to possible unintended consequences of video games.

For several years much of my research has been guided by one central question:
What are the implications for the history, theory, practice, and criticism of rhetoric given that our society is both a mass society and a technological society?

Rhetoric is, after all, a mutable art of communication which has been adapted and adopted throughout history to serve prevailing patterns of communication. Since the mass and technological characteristics of our culture affect communication patterns today more so than any other qualities, as future historians of rhetoric, we should be concerned with questions of how our art is currently being transformed by these two elements.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the mass and technological transformations of the rhetor's ethos. What happens to this single component of the much larger system we call rhetoric in an age of technologized specialization and bureaucratization? This paper poses an answer to this question by addressing a very significant consequence--what I call diffusion of responsibility.

In order to discuss ethos and the technologized rhetor, it is necessary first to identify and describe several important transformations found in an emerging contemporary theory of rhetoric. Three features of this 'New and Improved Rhetoric' are: (1) socio-suasion, (2) the committee of rhetors approach, and (3) TechnoCiceronianism.¹

Sociosuasion and the Committee of Rhetors Approach

Sociosuasion is a rhetorical version of enculturation--the interaction of individual and culture whereby one develops and maintains a sense of cultural competence extending

from childhood into adulthood.² For "competence" we could also read "appropriateness." If by "persuasion" we mean overt acts where a rhetor has intent to influence attitudes, values, beliefs and/or actions, then "socio-suasion" can be used to identify suasive acts where there is no overt attempt at influence (or where no such intent is discernable). Such a distinction between persuasion and socio-suasion is based upon two trends in the speech communication literature. First, there is the linking of rhetoric with such social sciences as anthropology and sociology.³ Second, there is the expansion of rhetoric's domain to include (1) all uses of symbols, (2) mass media of communication, and (3) various cultural institutions.⁴

Consider for example, "Sunday Woman" a magazine-style supplement designed in the late 1970's as part of the weekend edition of the *Seattle Times*. Though "Sunday Woman" was clearly designed to appeal to women, it is doubtful that the designers intended any overt attempt to influence attitudes, values, and beliefs by associating women with such things as food, cooking, health, beauty, and home-making. Moreover, it is likely that the editors presumed an interest existed within their potential audience and designed the magazine-style supplement with the simple intention of selling newspapers. Nonetheless, even without an intent to persuade, by selecting certain cultural values over others and by distributing them in print, the paper contributed to a process of assisting adults to achieve "cultural competence."

Consider, too, the case of persuasion and popular music. Some music, most notably "protest" music, clearly seems designed to influence by expressing and advocating certain attitudes, values, and beliefs. However, rhetorical intent is not always discernible. The music of Bob Dylan in the late 1960's and early 1970's, for example, reportedly influenced many of our nation's youths. However, Dylan publicly stated he was simply expressing himself and not trying to influence anyone else.⁵

Nonetheless, audiences who overheard his poetic acts of self-expression claimed to be influenced. Similarly, new wave "punk" music based on a technologically induced nihilistic philosophy may just be a matter of poetic self-expression. Yet, the music does represent a particular set of values and attitudes, and it does provide a means of societal identification and communion amidst a certain population of our culture.

Thus, socio-suasion refers to **acts of societal communion where values are shared through various symbols of communication but where no overt influence is attempted by a single agent.**

Another feature of contemporary rhetoric that foreshadows a technologized adaptation of ethos is the committee of rhetors approach. With oratory, we may presume that the rhetor is the individual we hear speaking. However, with print, film, and such electronic artifacts as popular music, video games, and television news shows, we can no longer identify a single individual as the rhetor. Moreover, the rhetorical artifact (be it persuasive or sociosuasive) is produced by a committee. In our technological era each committee member is a specialist, or a technician. Each has a certain quality akin to the classical notion of techne with regard to his or her own specialty.

Rhetorically speaking, each communication technician can engage in five functions paralleling the five oratorical duties of Neo-Ciceronianism. Each technician must have knowledge of a specified range of communicative options special to that individual's area of expertise (that is, medium-specific technological commonplaces). A motion picture photographer, for example, must discover visual possibilities (lighting, angles, special effects and conditions, and so on). With this knowledge, the technician must make judgments about how to dispose of what has been discovered. The technician also converts ideas discovered into medium-specific symbols and preserves them in some form that can be presented to (or shared with) others. This brings up a third feature of our "New and Improved" system of communication--what I call "TechnoCiceronianism."

TechnoCiceronianism

From is critical standpoint one could address contemporary artifacts of communication using any (or all) of the five functions of rhetoric.

1. invention: the discovery of possible communicative options or ideas,
2. disposition: the judgment, selection, and prioritizing of the possible options or ideas already discovered,
3. symbolization: the conversion of options or ideas into symbolic form,
4. preservation: the fusion of symbolic forms into a rhetorical artifact, suitable for presentation, and
5. enactment: the sharing of a rhetorical artifact by a definite or an indefinite audience.⁶

These five communicative functions can be applied on at least two levels. First, they can be applied to an overall production or artifact without addressing a definite rhetor.

For example, a critic could examine sexism and the rhetoric of sports journalism. Or, a critic could examine the value premises, implied reasoning, structuring of ideas, style and presentation of a film such as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. On another level, the five functions can be applied to each committee member's contribution to the artifact. For example, a film-oriented critic could examine the musical rhetoric of a film composer such as Aaron Copland, Bernard Hermann, or John Williams addressing the composer's use of sonic invention, disposition, and symbolization.⁷

In terms of actual practice, the five functions may be done either independently or in cooperation with other technicians. Committees of rhetors might work contemporaneously together (as would be the case with musicians, singers, and audio engineers working together in a recording studio to produce a sociosuasive pop song). They might work contemporaneously apart (as in the case of journalists researching and writing stories for a news magazine). Or they may work non-contemporaneously apart (as in the case of photographers shooting a film, composers writing music for the various images of the film, and then editors splicing together the completed scenes and sounds.

The Question of Ethos

One key question in the production of both technological artifacts and mass culture is this: Who is the rhetor; who takes the responsibility for the message? In other words, who's ethos (or character) shapes the influencing and, more importantly, who takes the responsibility for the influencing?

In the case of a ghost--written speech, it is generally agreed that the speaker shapes the message and assumes responsibility for it. But what about other more complex committees of rhetors? Consider, for example a campaign brochure or a set of television spots designed by an agency to promote either a political candidate or a product. We would probably tend to agree that the candidate (or the parent company, if we were talking about a commercial product) is the responsible party, even if the character of the message is designed by a committee of rhetor-technicians, from copy writer to make-up artist to video technician.

Consider a mass mailing designed on behalf of a political candidate by a subordinate rhetor which inadvertently causes the candidate some embarrassment. There is the potential for the candidate to shift the blame to the preparer of the mailing, although the political repercussions of pointing the finger might be greater than if the candidate assumes responsibility for the mailing. However, when we start to consider such

controversial artifacts as contra-ceptive ads, we find a definite shift of responsibility. The television station or the television network is made to be the responsible party, not the parent company who wants to run the ads or the agency of rhetors who used all their tools of persuasion to make what they believed would be a "tasteful" and "non-offensive" ad.

We can see then, with acts of persuasion involving committees of rhetors (for we are not yet talking about sociosuasive acts), there is much potential for the shifting of suasory responsibility. But when we start to examine sociosuasive artifacts the question of ethos and responsibility becomes even more complex. Again, our concern is for this question: who is the rhetor? (Whose character shapes the artifact and who takes responsibility for the message?)

Consider the genre of technological symbolization known as video games? Is the computer programmer who designs a game which teaches how to aim and fire missiles and which promotes warfare a rhetor? How about the person who computerizes the music and programs the aurally appealing sound effects--the explosions and the cries of wounded victims? Or is the rhetor the corporation which invests in these projects? Perhaps it is the Marketing researchers who say, "This is what the public wants. This is where they will spend their money. Or perhaps it is the person who designs the flashy and alluring box for the home video version of the "Star Wars" game. Clearly, each of the specialized rhetors uses his or her own techne in the creation of the final socio-suasive artifact. Each specialist engages in invention, disposition, symbolization, preservation and enactment. Yet, does each assume responsibility for teaching and promoting warfare? And if it turns out that video games cause violence and other behavioral problems like attention deficit disorder, does the programmer simply claim, "Hey, I'm only doing my job?" Does the musician/sound effects person say, "I've got a husband and two kids to feed?" Does the game company say, "We're only providing what the customers want?" And do the marketing researchers say, "We're Just getting paid to mirror the needs and wants of the American consumer?" My guess is that most (if not all) of these (and perhaps other) technologized rhetors perceive themselves as but cogs in a wheel-not as rhetors with ethos in the classical sense, but as workers without responsibility for their parts in creating sociosuasive artifacts of culture.

This is not to say that the specialist is unconcerned about his or her ethos. Certainly it is an important factor in one's career. For example, the cover girl photographer has a specialist's reputation within the magazine publishing industry. There are critical and aesthetic requirements that the photographer's work must satisfy if his or her reputation

is to be maintained or enhanced. However, we may still question the responsibility which the photographer has in the creation of the sociosuasive artifact known as the magazine cover. For whether or not it is the photographer's overt intent, surely he or she is influencing magazine readers and many others who must walk past the symbolized standards for "the beautiful woman" (the cover girl) in supermarkets, at newsstands and elsewhere. Though the photographer may not assume any responsibility, without question he or she is using medium-specific techniques of influence to help members of a particular culture to become culturally competent or at least to feel a sense of what is culturally appropriate.

As rhetoricians gravitate towards anthropological and sociological lines of inquiry, they contribute to what may be called the rhetoric of institutions. One of the more fascinating sociosuasive analyses presented in this scholarly arena is Donald McClosky's literary analysis of economics.⁸ His work suggests a few questions that demonstrate the problem of responsibility and the technologized rhetor's ethos: who is the rhetor that makes current economics the anthropomorphic deity that it appears to be? Is it the academic economist who publishes and teaches? Is it the news editor who chooses to interview the economist? Is it the graphic artist who designs monumental charts, diagrams, and illustrations? Is it the radio broadcaster who interrupts my morning music to read the economic news? Is it the economics reporter who uses anthropo-morphic language to discuss economics? Falling back on the committee of rhetors approach and the notions of sociosuasion and TechnoCiceronianism I have discussed, all of these are to be considered as specialist-rhetors who contribute to the deification of our reigning system of economics, though we cannot be sure which ones would be willing to assume the responsibility for their sociosuasive efforts.

Another dimension of the diffusion of responsibility problem involves coalescence of motives. Consider an example of political debate in a mass-mediated arena. Ronald Reagan, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Jesse Helms, Tim LaHaye, and countless others may not be members of a single "New Right" organization. However, their activities as politically conservative, self-proclaimed "Christians" coalesce. As a loosely organized committee of rhetors, these men collectively argue against another loosely organized committee of rhetors characterized as secular humanists, liberals, and so on. The verbal assaults and persuasive campaigns are not directed at anyone or two or three particular individuals. Rather, the persuasion is presented before an audience about a third party. In doing this, no one is directly called upon as being responsible to answer such charges as may be leveled. Similarly, some feminist discourse directed at the so-called reigning patriarchy has been generated from a feminist committee of rhetors verbally

attacking another committee presumably representing the so-called dominant patriarchy. Again, no one is asking responsible advocates to defend or justify such a patriarchy. From a critical standpoint, any attempt to discover overt persuasion in support of patriarchy might exclude sociosuasive rhetoric which may be just as influential as persuasion, if not more so.

In this paper I have explored changes in the notion of ethos in an emerging system of rhetoric serving the communicative patterns of our mass and technological society. I have spoken of the transformation as diffusion of responsibility, though perhaps it might better be termed confusion of responsibility, or at times, obfuscation of responsibility. In addressing sociosuasion as rhetorical enculturation, I offer suggestions for what some have termed cultural criticism.⁹ In developing the committee of rhetors approach and in formulating TechnoCiceronianism, I suggest a rhetoric of organizational communication.

In exploring the obfuscation of responsibility and the technologized rhetor, I may be opening more doors here than I am locking shut. Indeed Marcusians in the audience may liken my efforts to the opening of a closed universe of discourse with regard to the use of symbols to influence attitudes, values, beliefs, and/or action (whether it be persuasively or sociosuasively). McKeonites may look at my efforts as another assertion of rhetoric as an architectonic productive art in an emerging 21st century renaissance. Burkeans may see potential for critical analysis aimed at demystification.

Whatever your persuasion, I offer sociosuasion and TechnoCiceronianism as terms for an emerging rhetoric and this introductory exploration of ethos and the technologized rhetor as an example of the kinds of concerns teachers of rhetoric can address.

¹ These features were discussed more fully in "Sociosuasion and Techno-Ciceronianism," paper presented to the Speech Communication Association, Chicago, Illinois, November 1-4, 1984, as part of a panel entitled "Towards a 'New and Improved' Rhetoric. "

² See Victor Barnouw, *Culture and Personality*, (Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey Press, 1973), p. 4; Mary Ellen Goodman, *The Individual and Culture*,

(Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey Press, 1967), pp. 5 and 128-64; Julius Gould and Willian L. Kolb, eds. *A Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, Compiled under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, (New York: Free Press of Glencoe-Division of Macmillan, 1964), pp. 6-7 [acculturation], pp. 169-18 [culture change], p. 239 [enculturation]; and David L. Sills, editor, *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1968), pp. 21-27 [acculturation], pp. 545-51 [socialization: anthropological aspects], and pp. 551-55 [socialization: political socialization].

³See for example Barnet Baskerville, *The People's Voice: The Orator in American Society*. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1979), p. 4; William R. Brown, "Ideology as Communication Process," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 64 (April 1978), pp. 123-40; Hugh Dalziel Duncan, *Communication and Social Order*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1962; *Symbols in Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968; *Symbols and Social Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1969; Thomas B. Farrell, "Knowledge, Consensus, and Rhetorical Theory," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. 62 (February 1976), pp. 1-14; Thomas B. Farrell, "Social Knowledge II," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. 64 (October 1978), pp. 329-34; Bruce E. Gronbeck, "The Rhetoric of Political Corruption: Sociolinguistic, Dialectical, and Ceremonial Process," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 64 (April 1978), pp. 155-72; Bruce E. Gronbeck, "The Scholar's Anthology': An Introduction," *Central States Speech Journal*, 34 (Spring 1983), p. viii; Scott Jacobs, "Recent Advances in Discourse Analysis," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 66 (December 1980), pp. 450-60; John Lyne, "Discourse, Knowledge, and Social Process: Some Changing Equations," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 68 (May 1982), pp. 201-14; Ray E. McKerrow, "Marxism and a Rhetorical Conception of Ideology," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. 69 (May 1983), pp. 192-215; Michael Calvin McGee, "Secular Humanism: A Radical Reading of 'Culture Industry' Productions," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 1 (March 1984), pp. 1-33; Philip Wander, "The Ideological Turn in Modern Criticism," *Central States Speech Journal*, 34 (Spring 1983), pp. 1-18; and "Responses to Wander," *Central States Speech Journal*. 34 (Summer 1983), pp. 114-127. See also the primary sources "outside" our field which any of these communication scholars cite as well as more recent articles in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*.

⁴ Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black, eds., *The Prospect of Rhetoric*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 187-244; Wayne C. Booth, "The Scope of Rhetoric Today: A Polemical Excursion," in *The Prospect of Rhetoric*, pp. 93-114; *Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974; Mike Reagan, "The Pious Rhetoric of Country Music," *Music Journal* (January 1969), p. 50; Cheryl Irwin Thomas, "' Look What They've Done to My Song, Ma': The Persuasiveness of Song," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 39 (Spring 1974), pp. 260-68; John David Bloodworth,

"Communication in the youth Counter Culture: Music as Expression," *Central States Speech Journal* 26 (Winter 1975), pp. 304-309; Bruce E. Gronbeck, "Celuloid Rhetoric: On Genres of Documentary," in *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*, edited by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, (Falls Church, Virginia: Speech Communication Association, n.d), pp. 139-61; Thomas S. Frenz and Mary E. Hale, "Inferential Model Criticism of 'The Empire Strikes Back'," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 69 (August 1983), pp. 278-89; Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas S. Frenz, "'The Deer Hunter': Rhetoric of the Warrior," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 66 (December 1988), pp. 392-406; Mart in J. Medhurst and Thomas W. Benson, "The City: The Rhetoric of Rhythm," *Communication Monographs*, 48 (March 1981), 54-72; and Jerry Hendrix and James A. Wood, "The Rhetoric of Film: Toward Critical Methodology," *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 39 (Winter 1973), pp. 115-22; John Fiske, "The Discourses of TV Quiz Shows or, School + Luck = Success + Sex," *Central States Speech Journal*, 34 (Fall 1983), pp. 139-50; Cathy Schwichtenberg, "Dynasty: The Dialectic of Feminine Power," *Central States Speech Journal*. 34 (Fall 1983), pp. 151-61; and Dennis K. Mumby and Carole Spitzack, "Ideology and Television News: A Metaphorical Analysis of Political Stories," *Central States Speech Journal*. 34 (Fall 1983), pp. 162-71. See also recent articles in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*.

⁵Dylan maintained this position in a 2004 *CBS: 60 Minutes* interview with Ed Bradley. "My stuff were songs, you know? They weren't sermons," says Dylan. "If you examine the songs, I don't believe you're gonna find anything in there that says I'm a spokesman for anybody or anything really." "Dylan Looks Back." *CBS: 60 Minutes*. December 5, 2004.

⁶ This five part adaptation stems from a number of significant ideas found in Russell H. Wagner, "The Meaning of Dispositio," in *Studies in Speech and Drama in Honor of Alexander M. Drummond* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1944), pp. 285-94. For other recent adaptations of Neo-Ciceronian rhetoric, see Nancy L. Harper, *Human Communication Theory: The History Of a Paradigm*, Rochelle Park: Hayden, 1979; Richard McKeon, "The Uses of Rhetoric in a Techno-logical Age: Architectonic Productive Arts, in *The Prospect of Rhetoric*, pp. 44-63; and Ronald Primeau, *The Rhetoric of Television*. New York: Longman. 1979.

⁷ For related materials, see Frederick W. Sternfeld, "Copland as a Film Composer," *Musical Quarterly* 37 (April 1951), pp. 161-75 and Robert U. Nelson, "Film Music: Color or Line?" *Hollywood Quarterly* 1 (October 1946), pp. 57-64.

⁸ Donald N. McCloskey, "The Rhetoric of Economics," *Journal of Economic Literature* 21 (June 1983), pp. 481-517; "The Literary Character of Economics," paper presented at The "Burke" Conference, Philadelphia: March, 1983; and *The*

Rhetoric of Economics. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

⁹ See for example, Bruce E. Gronbeck, "The 'Scholar's Anthology': Televisual Studies," *Central States Speech Journal*, 34 (Fall 1983), p. vi.

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Thanks.