

## RHETORICAL SITUATION AS BEDROCK OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Daniel CIUREL

*Tibiscus* University of Timioara, Romania

**Abstract:** *Kairos* and *stasis*, two vital concepts employed to account for the rhetorical situation, are still valued and valuable in today communication contexts. As starting points of (corporate) discourse, the two terms prove to be particularly relevant. Both *kairos* and *stasis* point to the situatedness of the corporate discourse, since crisis always happens in a specific situation. *Stasis* and *kairos* do not perform separately, they function inter-dependently. *Stasis* focuses on *logos*, while *kairos* concentrates on *ethos* and *pathos*. They set rigor and let PR practitioners know at any moment where they are in solving a crisis, what questions to ask and how to act further in managing crisis communication.

**Key words:** stasis; kairos; rhetorical situation; crisis management; crisis communication

### 1. Introduction

Rhetoric was both dismissed and acclaimed over the last 2500 years, from Plato to Perelman, to name but two leading figures. But it has survived till today and its perspectives seem brighter than ever. Scholars and practitioners alike and, in fact, all communicators use rhetoric, whether they are aware of this or not. Within the field of Public Relations, rhetoric is particularly relevant.

Rhetorical invention is the first canon of the art of persuasion. Invention has always been central to rhetorical theory and practice (Lauer, 2004: 1-2). The term *invention* has historically encompassed strategic acts that provide the rhetor with direction, multiple ideas, subject matter, arguments, insights or probable judgments, and understanding of the rhetorical situation. Such acts include initiating discourse, exploring alternatives, framing and testing judgments, interpreting texts, and analyzing audiences.

Scholars differ over the range and scope of rhetorical invention. In some theories, invention is confined to exploratory activity: constructing or finding lines of argument, examining subjects, searching for material to develop texts, articulating goals, and/or researching for inter-textual support for a discourse. In other theories, invention is also conceived to include the initiation of discourse, e.g., posing questions or selecting subjects; the formation of probable judgments, focuses, insights, or theses; and the rhetorical situation: contexts, readers, and discourse communities (Lauer, 2004: 3).

The method of rhetorical invention and its use in crisis management can involve revisiting the classical concepts of *kairos* and *stasis*. These concepts are complex,

multi-dimensional terms, employed by classical rhetors to make sense of the rhetorical situation and to initiate discourse. But they can be used equally well today, in relation with crisis communication strategy, for instance. *Stasis* and *kairos* do not perform separately, they function inter-dependently. *Stasis* focuses on *logos*, while *kairos* concentrates on *ethos* and *pathos*.

## 2. *Kairos* and *stasis*: two discourse initiation concepts

*Kairos* is a principle of discourse initiation. The two basic elements of *kairos* are the principle of right timing and the principle of a proper measure (Kinneavy, in Sipiora and Baumlin, 2002: 60). Usually they are joined in a single concept, although individual occurrences of the term may focus on one or the other aspect.

Considering the features of time-based *kairos*, it is important to point out three distinct but related concepts (Smith, in Sipiora and Baumlin, 2002: 52). There is, first, the idea of the “right time” for something to happen in contrast to “any time,” a sense that is captured adequately in the word “timing”. Second, *kairos* means a time of tension and conflict, a time of crisis implying that the course of events poses a problem that calls for a decision at that time (urgency, currency or immediacy). Third, *kairos* means that the problem or crisis has brought with it a time of opportunity for accomplishing some purpose which could not be carried out at some other time. Implicit in all three meanings embraced by *kairos* is the concept of an individual time having a critical ordinal position set apart from its predecessors and successors.

Another important consideration for using *kairos* involves the specific arguments that are currently circulating about a particular issue. Considering the interests at stake in an issue can help a rhetor decide the most advantageous way to frame an argument for a particular audience at a particular time (Crowley and Hawhee, 2004: 49). To examine and invent arguments using *kairos* is to consider the power dynamics at work in a particular issue in addition to the recent events and arguments that press on it.

Also, the kairoic skill means understanding the minds of the audience and fitting the discourse sensitively to this public. *Kairos* involves the principle of a proper measure (*prepon* or *decorum*).

*Stasis* is a strategy used to initiate discourse, to accurately identify the tension or dissonance at which discourse ought to begin. It functions as a practical method based on the established laws and customs of any given people for disputing issues. Associated with forensic rhetoric in the classical tradition, *stasis* provides a theoretically grounded strategy whereby opposing parties can identify the exact point at which they disagree.

Ancient rhetoricians divided questions into two kinds: theoretical and practical (Crowley and Hawhee, 2004: 56-58). Some questions concern what people should do (action); but these are always related to questions about why people should do something (theory). Rhetoricians used the term *hypothesis* to name a specific question

that involved actual persons, places or events and the term *thesis*, in contrast, to name general questions having wide application – matters suited to political or ethical debates.

Stasis theory is a four-question process developed in the ancient Greece by Aristotle and Hermagoras. Later, the stases were refined by Roman rhetoricians, such as Cicero, Quintilian, and Hermogenes. Working through the four stasis questions encourages knowledge building that is important for research, writing, and for working in teams. Stasis theory helps communicators conduct critical analyses of the issues they are investigating.

Specifically, stasis theory asks communicators to investigate and try to determine: the facts (conjecture); the meaning or nature of the issue (definition); the seriousness of the issue (quality) and the plan of action (procedure).

The four basic stasis categories may be broken down into a number of questions and subcategories to help researchers, communicators, and people working together in teams to build information and compose communication. The stases also help people to agree on conclusions, and they help identify where people do not agree. Here are the stases and some questions (Crowley and Hawhee, 2004: 68-73) PR professionals can ask in order to get the focus of crisis communication strategy:

#### **Fact**

- Did something happen?
- What are the facts?
- Is there a problem/issue?
- How did it begin and what are its causes?
- What changed to create the problem/issue?
- Can it be changed?
- Where did we obtain our data and are these sources reliable?
- How do we know they are reliable?

#### **Definition**

- What is the nature of the problem/issue?
- What exactly is the problem/issue?
- What kind of a problem/issue is it?
- To what larger class of things or events does it belong?
- What are its parts, and how are they related?
- Who/what is influencing our definition of this problem/issue?
- How/why are these sources/beliefs influencing our definition?

#### **Quality**

- Is it a good thing or a bad thing?
- How serious is the problem/issue?

- Whom might it affect (stakeholders)?
- What happens if we don't do anything?
- What are the costs of solving the problem/issue?

#### **Procedure**

- Should action be taken?
- Who should be involved in helping to solve the problem/address the issue?
- What should be done about this problem?
- What needs to happen to solve this problem/address this issue?

There are a few observations to be made at this point. All arguments come into being at some point of clash or *stasis*. A person who creates an issue wants to describe the issue so that the clash takes place at a point of advantage.

One can argue at a given point of *stasis*, or one can try to rephrase the question at another *stasis*. In other words, with *stasis* theory a rhetor can take a question and rephrase it in at least three different ways (many more, in fact). Instead of arguing at the point he is offered, it is often worth playing around with the *stases*, seeing which ones work, so that he can respond at a point of greater effectiveness. If the rhetor can change the question, he has a real advantage – especially if he can keep it changed.

*Stases* are related in a hierarchical way. Arguments at the *stasis* of definition have already accepted the conjecture. Arguments about value have already accepted both conjecture and definition. And arguments about policy have usually – though not always – accepted conjecture, definition, and value. In other words, conjecture is far upstream in the argument, and procedure is (usually) downstream.

Using *stases*, PR practitioners can cover a wide range of communication strategies, from conjecture to procedure: rumor management, issues management, risk management and communication, crisis management and communication.

### **3. The Rhetorical Situation**

Both *kairos* and *stasis* point to the situatedness of crisis, since crises always happen in a specific situation. The term *rhetorical situation* belongs to the American scholar Loyd Bitzer, who elaborates on issues previously covered by *kairos* and *stasis*. His theory comprises three primary constituents of the rhetorical situation: exigence, audience and constraints.

The exigence is “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (Bitzer, 1995: 304). Not every exigence is rhetorical:

“An exigence which cannot be modified is not rhetorical; thus, whatever comes about of necessity and cannot be changed – death, winter, and some natural disasters, for instance

– are exigences to be sure, but they are not rhetorical. Further, an exigence which can be modified only by means other than discourse is not rhetorical; thus, an exigence is not rhetorical when its modification requires merely one's own action or the application of a tool, but neither requires nor invites the assistance of discourse. An exigence is rhetorical when it is capable of positive modification and when positive modification requires discourse or can be assisted by discourse.”

The audience must be distinguished from “mere hearers and readers” by their capacities of “being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change” (Bitzer, 1995: 305). The first condition of a rhetorical audience is that its members are capable of being influenced. People who refuse to consider an advocate's arguments and appeals or who are completely closed to alternative perspectives cannot, in Bitzer's judgment, constitute a rhetorical audience. In order for an individual to be part of a rhetorical audience or for a group of people to function as a rhetorical audience, they must manifest a certain degree of attention and a willingness to entertain the advocate's arguments or proposals. The second condition of a rhetorical audience is that they can function as mediators of change. At times, an advocate might need to convince his or her listeners or readers that they possess the capacity to act as agents of change. At other times, a group of people might not have the power to make the final decision but may possess an ability to influence those with final decision-making power.

Constraints are such things as “persons, events, objects and relations” that “have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence” (Bitzer, 1995: 305). Standard sources of constraint include “beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, motives and the like; and when the orator enters the situation, his discourse not only harnesses constraints given by situation but provides additional important constraints — for example his personal character, his logical proofs, and his style.” (Bitzer, 1995: 305)

These three constituents (exigence, audience, constraints) comprise everything relevant in a rhetorical situation. When the rhetor, invited by situation, enters it and creates and presents a discourse, then both he and his speech are additional constituents. In Bitzer's view, the contextual factors determine the textual (discursive) characteristics.

Some elements of the rhetorical situation (The Rhetorica Network, viewed January 19 2013, <http://rhetorica.net/kairos.htm>,) include:

1. Exigence: What happens or fails to happen? Why is one compelled to speak out?
2. Persons: Who is involved in the exigence and what roles do they play?
3. Relations: What are the relationships, especially the differences in power, between the persons involved?

4. Location: Where is the site of discourse? e.g. a podium, newspaper, web page, etc.
5. Speaker: Who is compelled to speak or write?
6. Audience: Who does the speaker address and why?
7. Method: How does the speaker choose to address the audience?
8. Institutions: What are the rules of the game surrounding/constraining numbers 1 through 7.

A rhetorical problem arises when exigencies call for a statement from the organization's management. Because it is timely and urgent, crisis communication demands speed, especially in gathering facts, meeting deadlines and sending messages (strong *kairos*). This need for speed is so overarching that it influences characteristics of crisis communication. If PR professionals do not work quickly, the initiative of communication is taken by others (e.g. media or authorities) and they can impose a certain *stasis*, usually harmful for the organization.

The *kairotic* competence of the PR professionals in crisis situations is critical, not only in seizing the right time to communicate, but also in determining the amount and extension of communication content. PR people compete over *stasis* and *kairos* concerning a crisis with media and stakeholders.

#### **4. Rhetoric and Crisis Communication: three approaches**

From a rhetorical point of view, a crisis can damage the organization's attempts to generate understanding and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders (Heath and Millar, 2004: 3).

"A rhetorical approach to crisis explicitly acknowledges that the responsibility for the crisis, its magnitude, and its duration are contestable. It stresses the message development and presentation part of the crisis response. It underscores the role of that information, framing and interpretation play in the organization's preparation for a crisis, response to it, and postcrisis comments and actions." (Heath and Millar, 2004: 5)

Rhetorically speaking, each crisis has an actual dimension and a perceived dimension. There are mainly three schools of thought at the rhetorical level of crisis communication: corporate apologia, image restoration theory and renewal (Coombs, 2010: 30).

Apologia is a rhetorical concept that covers the use of communication for self-defense. Corporate apologia can be applied in specific crisis communication cases. When the organization's *ethos* is attacked, one of four communication strategies can be used to defend it: denial (the organization was not involved in any wrongdoing), bolstering (remind stakeholders of the positive accomplishments of the organization), differentiation (remove the action from its negative context), and transcendence (place the action in a new, broader context that is more favorable). Another strategy of

corporate apologia is the rhetorical dissociation. Dissociation splits a single idea into two elements. Crisis managers use dissociations in the attempt of reducing the threat a crisis poses to reputation. For example, one dissociation is individual-organization. This dissociation argues that a person or group within the organization is responsible for the crisis, not the entire organization.

Image restoration theory (IRT) uses communication to defend the organization's reputation (*ethos*). IRT was not developed specifically for crisis communication, but it fits very well, since a crisis is a reputation threat. IRT holds that corporate communication is goal-directed and a positive organizational reputation is one of the central goals of this communication. Drawing from rhetorical communication, IRT offers a list of potential crisis response strategies (image restoration strategies). The main strategies are: denial, evading responsibility and reducing offensiveness. IRT has been applied to a vast array of crises, including corporations, celebrities, and politics. The primary communicative recommendations to emerge from IRT have been an emphasis on apology and accepting responsibility for crises.

Rhetoric of renewal is the latest approach to crisis communication. Unlike corporate apologia and IRT, it focuses on a positive view of the organization's future rather than dwelling on the present. The organization grows from a crisis – it finds a new direction and purpose. The crisis communication strategies emphasize the future and how things will improve for the organization and its stakeholders. The rhetoric of renewal is consistent with some IRT strategies, but it is limited in its applicability, because it implies a strong pre-crisis *ethos* of the organization (high ethical standards and excellent stakeholder relationships, among others).

## 5. Conclusion

The rhetorical theory proves to be extremely relevant in devising and implementing a communication strategy in crisis situations. Both classical rhetoric and its modern developments can be used successfully in the framing of disruptive events or crises by employing the concepts associated to the rhetorical situation (*kairos* and *stasis*) and by acting upon the lines of argument engendered by them in order to recover or diminish the damages to the reputation (*ethos*) of the organization.

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