

DOI: 10.35643/Info.26.1.5

Dossier temático: Ética de la Información

Rhetorical ethics in handling of information

Ética retórica en el manejo de la información

Ética retórica no tratamento da informação

Francesca Vidal^a

^a Director of the Centre of Rhetoric at the University of Koblenz-Landau. ORCID: [0000-0003-1592-7119](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1592-7119). Correo electrónico: vidal@uni-landau.de

Abstract

In a world in which the strategic use of disinformation is becoming more and more the rule, it is necessary to ask how the credibility of information can be measured. The text gives indications as to why rhetorical skills are necessary for this and what the criteria for a credible style of speech are.

Keywords: DISINFORMATION; RHETORICAL ETHICS; INFORMATION CREDIBILITY.

Resumen

En un mundo en el cual el uso estratégico de la desinformación viene transformándose cada vez más en la regla, es necesario preguntarse cómo debe ser medida la credibilidad de la información. Este texto aporta indicaciones (indicios) de por qué las herramientas retóricas son necesarias para ello, y cuáles serían los criterios para un estilo discursivo que sea creíble.

Palabras clave: DESINFORMACIÓN; ÉTICA RETÓRICA; CREDIBILIDAD DE LA INFORMACIÓN.

Resumo

Num mundo em que a utilização estratégica da desinformação está se tornando cada vez mais a regra, é necessário perguntar como se pode medir a credibilidade da informação. O texto dá indicações sobre a razão pela qual as capacidades retóricas são necessárias e quais são os critérios para um estilo de discurso com credibilidade.

Palavras-chave: DESINFORMAÇÃO; ÉTICA RETÓRICA; CREDIBILIDADE DA INFORMAÇÃO.

Received: 20/08/2020

Accepted: 02/05/2021

1. About the difficulty of construing information

The colloquial use of the term information encompasses a broad spectrum, ranging from description via notification to instruction, and the academic debate has not yet yielded a uniform definition that would clarify what is it to be understood by information. Today's media plurality has enabled people to access ever larger amounts of data and to acquire 'information' or say 'knowledge'. Thus, on the one hand, the knowledge available is ever augmenting. On the other hand, the communication media increasingly determine the forms of representation and in this way presuppose such changed forms of handling of information. Robert Feustel (2018), for example, traces the contradictions of today's so-called information society; his thesis is that the inflationary use of the term information would contain something quasi-religious. He refers to a religious handling of information in those cases in which the guiding principle is their fundamental usefulness, thereby forgetting that the question of meaning and validity must always be asked.

Moreover, it sometimes seems as if currently we are living in a world in which there is little that can be set against the strategic use of disinformation and the idea that complexity of social problems can be countered with simple solutions. To promise simple solutions to the world that has become complicated, as a new message of salvation, so to speak, seems like an ever-valid recipe for success. Besides, the illusion seems to be gaining ground that, in order to get along in this world, taking decisions does not depend on having knowledge, i. e. being educated, but on being able to access existing information, rarely being able to construe them. The jeopardy of then uncritically relying on – sometimes even self-appointed – experts is undoubtedly due to the complexity of information the interpretation of which one is afraid of. What are the criteria for selecting the data that are offered in an increasingly confusing manner? How is it possible to

preserve a certain distance to the filter bubbles and to assess which services you can trust? Precisely because it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain clear knowledge about certain circumstances or conditions, it is crucial that the information provided remains verifiable.

The allegation that the technologies currently available make it possible to handle information in a new manner and that this is exactly the potential for self-determined action, turns into another difficulty. The expanded possibilities of access to resources shall promote the ability to appropriately interpret important situations, to develop the right strategies and to act independently with and on the basis of information.

For Feustel, this has led to the fact that apparently everything can be translated into information. He ascertains as follows:

They are stored, processed, passed on or retained, collected, falsified or traded. You can inform yourself or be disinformed. We consist of genetic information and process it neuronally. When we communicate, we exchange information. Even physical interactions can be understood in this way. Gestures and clothing, for example, send out information in a hidden and sometimes unintentional way, as pick-up artists and behaviorists say. The significant right neighbours in the grammatical sense of information are - technology, -center, -management, -service, -system, -lifestyle, -officer, -security, -act or -worker. But it is precisely this universal distribution, this omnipresence of information that is perplexing [\[1\]](#).

And in my opinion, he is right with the thesis that if everything is information, then information is nothing, it just doesn't help us further in the search for knowledge. How shall we understand implemented communication in its reciprocity if it is just a matter of exchanging information? How can meaning, the semantic aspects, attract attention?

However, to create knowledge, to gain findings and insights, a thinking subject is required who processes and structures information so that it can be used. What is needed is receptivity and reflexivity, and thus the ability and activity of interpretation. After all, it does not matter how the term 'information' is used, e. g. in the sense of the rhetorical «terminus technicus» as «representation of the characteristic features of a person or an object»[\[2\]](#) or as a very vague term. For the necessity to interpret the received information remains decisive. Without a thinking subject, information remains a dead commodity; it is only relevant if it

contributes to finding problem-related solutions in the dispute of opinions. Of course, this always implies that there must be something inherent in the information that enables it to be assessed as correct or credible. The absolute question of the responsible citizen will be, how to handle information, or, in other words: How can an ethically justifiable handling of information be developed, and how can the necessary critical distance be achieved in order to filter out the important data from this great wealth of information? At a time when the manipulation of data is becoming technically ever easier, when so-called 'fake news' or even 'deep fakes' are being massively distributed, primarily via the WWW, it is becoming more difficult to rely on the integrity of information. As ignorance increases at least as much as the knowledge that is available to society, it becomes more difficult to assess the credibility of information. This is always and simultaneously an ethical issue which, according to Rafael Capurro (Capurro 1992; 2020), is to be assigned to the field of information ethics.

Moreover, as a general point, it is not the data that embody ethics, but the way they are construed and the way they are handled. Ethics always feature a change-bearing moment, because they do not aim at consolidating the factual, but require cooperation, i. e. they serve the objectives of a society or a group or even an organisation to be worked out through communication (cf. Burisch 1982). It is therefore a matter of the ability to express both agreement and disagreement, in the sense of dialogical ethics, the basis of which can be grasped by the category of credibility.

The discipline of rhetoric has been interested in the issue of credibility (cf., on the topic, F. Vidal 2010) since its beginnings in the ancient world, because only the «zoon politicon», who promotes his or her view through his or her speech, who wants to convince others, needs rhetorical skills. If there is no guaranteed access to the truth, people must be trained in the virtues of eloquence in order to gain knowledge through communication. The scientific research of rhetoric very consciously does not primarily talk about truth or correctness, precisely because, with regard to political decisions, this is often only revealed in retrospect; this is why the definition of Aristotle is recollected, who declared that rhetoric is the ability to recognise what is credible (Rhetoric 1995, 12.). Decision-makers are

very often faced with the problem of having to make and represent decisions without being able to completely rely on facts and reliable forecasts.

Despite justifiably demanded scepticism about overly simple explanations, they must find a way to communicate their objectives in an appropriate manner. Admittedly, appropriateness always means that everyone must meet the exigences of rationality, verifiability and justification. In the case of speakers who want to be considered to be credible, the claim to truthfulness must not be lost. This raises the question of what criteria are available for this. How can we credibly handle the truth which exactly in crisis situations cannot exist? And how can we handle the fact that even the obvious does not automatically lead to the right action, but must be communicated?

The COVID-19 pandemic may serve as an example for everyone here, on the one hand of the problematic question of where a lack of information can lead with regard to necessary action, on the other hand of how important it is to be able to interpret the information.

2. The handling of information in crisis situations

The current pandemic (COVID-19), known as the Corona crisis, has been the predominant topic in all the media for several months now, partly because of the uncertainty as to the most effective way of combating the spread of the virus and partly because the measures introduced by the political authorities have had a major impact on public life. At times like these, people demand for reliable information: How dangerous is the virus? How can I protect myself and others? When will the measures take effect and when will they be withdrawn? What impact will current actions have on democratic and economic conditions and ethical concepts? And finally the question that can no longer be answered: What will the world of tomorrow look like? There is generally an increased need for true statements which, despite all the uncertainties, are supposed to give hope that the crisis will end soon. At the same time, however, there is also a great uncertainty as to whose statements can be trusted.

As a result, digital platforms such as Google, Facebook and Instagram are even deleting fake news and conspiracy theories and automatically directing those

searching for supposedly reliable information on the internet to reputable sites, in Germany for instance those of the Charité Berlin, the Robert-Koch-Institute or various ministries. Marc Zuckerberg, who previously refused to delete fake news under the name of freedom of opinion, now talks about the necessity of saving human lives, which is why fake news would be deleted immediately (Bender in: FAZ.Net 22.03.2020). It is precisely the fact that these deletions are now so easy to implement that increases the credibility of the information on these sites, but not that of the platforms themselves. To the contrary, the ease of the deletion process confirms its arbitrariness.

Serious sources refer to science, especially virologists, as regards the spread of the virus. However, they can only explain the respective current situation, make assumptions and point out that they are not able to be held responsible for the decisions. The German Ethics Council, for example, has also emphasised that the democratically elected representatives are the decision-makers, that they must evaluate how health and civil rights and liberties can be equally respected. Nevertheless, politicians depend on the advice of scientists, even though their advice may contradict each other corresponding to the respective developments in the spread of the virus. A good example of this is the virologist Christian Drosten, who defended himself against claims and hostilities, which expect him to provide reliable statements at one hundred percent:

I do not see my job in cutting the truth, but rather in explaining the aspects of truth, but also in allowing uncertainties to arise and saying: You don't know it that way - and that a political decision is then necessary. And as long as it is communicated as a political decision, I think that's fine [3].

His warnings of the potential dangers have also led some people to believe to have to hold him responsible for them. These people seem to be guided, as it were, by the ancient-medieval idea that the messenger should be punished for the news. This shows that many a citizen in Germany, too, has little confidence in the independence of science and, moreover, feels «von der Komplexität der Erklärungsversuche der intellektuellen Eliten erdrückt» (Renn 2019, 7) (translation: overwhelmed by the complexity of the intellectual elites' attempts at explanation). For the virologist Christian Drosten, who in the first weeks of the crisis constantly presented the results and forecasts of science in the media and in

his own podcast, the idea that the scientist is also the decision-maker has meanwhile led to the consideration of whether it would be better to withdraw from the media world (Drosten 2020b).

What becomes obvious here is that political decision-makers are called upon, on the one hand, to make it clear that it is they who take these decisions and, on the other hand, to communicate this in such a way that citizens support the decisions without creating panic, defence or aggression and without the need to threaten punitive measures. Many examples could be consulted to demonstrate the persuasive means that are currently being used, be it the appeal to solidarity, the mixture of admonition and encouragement within a contribution, the envisioning of the otherwise possible horrors, but also war metaphors or the attempt to recollect times unknown to the majority of the population, such as the times of curfews. Striking are also comparisons with representations in visual arts and literature that depicted loneliness, wasteland or damnation. At this point, however, the question should be asked in general terms what the claim to truth is all about, i. e. how seriousness and trust in the correctness of the decisions can be conveyed to the population. After all, the aim of persuasion is to achieve agreement and thus at the same time to implement the measures. Just how difficult this is, becomes clear when you look at the revival of crude conspiracy theories propagated by opponents of the measures.

The mistrust towards rhetorical skills, which still exists today, is justified by the art of the speakers, who can use emotions to lead on the wrong track, thus knowing how to instrumentalise the art of speech for their own purposes alone. Rhetoric would then only be rhetoric of affects, according to Aristotle «all those affections which cause men to change their opinion in regard to their judgements, and are accompanied by pleasure and pain; such are anger, pity, fear, and all similar emotions and their contraries»[\[4\]](#).

Of course, scepticism about using emotions for persuasion is absolutely necessary. This is not only taught by the experiences with National Socialism or with today's demagogues, this is already conveyed to us by the simple messages of advertising. A thinking that is committed to rationality wants to convince men through participation in reason, and no one will deny that this is a goal to be held high. But

everyone must be aware that a focus on rationality deprives itself of the mediating power which comes into effect in the medium of rhetoric (Ptassek 1993, p. 51).

All those who change their style of speech accordingly and want to address the listeners also on the level of emotions remain quite credible if it is not a matter of acting solely through affects, Aristotelian-speaking through pathos, but rather of the interaction of ethos, pathos and logos. Especially Aristotle's «Rhetoric» is primarily argumentation theory, in which affective arousal is bound to factual reasons and thus linked to the argument.

3. The importance of credibility

Current textbooks of rhetoric also emphasise the different ways of making a credible case that should work together: these are «three methods of making credible: first, the arousing of a certain view of the speaker, second, the arousing of a certain psychological disposition in the listeners, and third, the logical-argumentative proof in the matter»[\[5\]](#).

In the canonical words of Aristotle:

Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself [\[6\]](#).

In order to acquire the ability of a credible style of speech, the expectation to wish to gain and convey true insight must therefore be internalised. This means, related to today's decision-makers, that they too must be convinced of the need to apply, or at least refer to, scientific methods. Proper rhetoric therefore requires plausibility and credibility. It knows about the importance of pathos, i. e. emotions, as a way to find access to the recipient, and at the same time and to the same extent, it emphasises the importance of logos and ethos. Plausibility depends on the form of the argumentation, it thus depends on criteria such as whether the statements made are consistent in themselves, as traceable as possible, whether there is transparent proof, and thus whether the source is verifiable. Both the speaker and the listener should be able to recognise whether something is credible or not. Credibility thus becomes the basis of communicative processes, because

«credibility is, so to speak, the basis on which communication works; it is the communicative basic trust without which nothing works»[7].

Sure enough, it has nothing to do with blind trust, nor with loyalty or the desire to obtain simple solutions to complicated questions, because it is always a dynamic rather than a static construct. In other words, even if communication can only succeed if the communicating parties consider themselves credible, this does not happen because of leadership positions, social status, charisma or simply due to the relief of oneself, but due to signs that are recognisable in the process. Credibility in no way implies the abandonment of one's own ability to critically judge, and it does not render verifiability unnecessary. It does not replace the necessity of justification, but rather presupposes it. In rhetoric, the reference to truthfulness is explained by the focus on the listeners. In order to reach them, the speaker approaches conventional wisdom. In order not to lose the listeners during the justification of their point of view, in their argumentation, they use the enthymeme rather than syllogism, at the same time being aware of always having to approach the listeners' world of emotions. Even if everyone must be aware that it is precisely those who want to make untrustworthy assertions public who like to use affectively charged language, even those who argue plausibly and credibly, who rely on facts, will only reach their listeners if they are aware of their moods and feelings, i. e. if they take them seriously, and thus arrive at a most balanced approach to logos, ethos and pathos.

4. Conclusion

All those who consider themselves committed to rhetorical ethics when handling information and thus want to represent their actions as a responsible actor before themselves and others, make credibility a decisive element within the argumentation. These insights also result in an increasing importance of rhetoric, because the present times are characterised by the indeterminacy of the social situation, the difficulty of handling information and therefore require rhetorical skills to an increasing extent.

Bibliography

- Aristoteles (1995). *Rhetorik*. Sieveke. Munich: Fink. (Translated, with a bibliography, explanations and an epilogue by Franz, G.).
- Bender, J. (2020). Facebook kämpft wie noch nie gegen Falschmeldungen. *FAZ.net*. Available at: <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/corona-krise-facebook-bekaempft-fake-news-wie-noch-nie-16690141.html>.
- Burisch, W. (1982). Zu einer organisatorischen Ethik. In: Hubig, C. (Ed.). *Ethik institutionellen Handelns*. Frankfurt / Main; New York, Germany; America: Campus. p. 192-202.
- Capurro, R. (1992). What is information science for? A Philosophical Reflection. In: Vakkari, P., Cronin, B. (Ed.). *Conceptions of Library and Information Science*, 82-96. London, Great Britain: Taylor Graham.
- Capurro, R. (2020). Pseudangelia – Pseudangelos. On false messages and messengers in Ancient Greece. *Informatio*, 25, 1, 106-131.
- Drosten, C. (2020a). Podcast. In: <https://www.zeit.de/wissen/gesundheit/2020-03/christian-drosten-coronavirus-pandemie-deutschland-virologe-charite> (last access 23.03.2020).
- Drosten, C. (2020b). *Deutschlandfunk*. Available at: https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/covid-19-virologe-christian-drosten-erwaegt-rueckzug-aus.2849.de.html?drn:news_id=1116032 (last access 23.03.2020)
- Feustel, R. (2018). *Am Anfang war die Information. Digitalisierung als Religion*. Berlin: Verbrecher Verlag.
- Heringer, H. J. (1990). Politische Glaubwürdigkeit. Betrachtungen eines moralisierenden Linguisten. In: Stickel, G. (Ed.). *Deutsche Gegenwartssprache. Tendenzen und Perspektiven. (Jahrbuch 1989 des Instituts für Deutsche Sprache.)*. Berlin; New York, Germany; America: de Gruyter. p. 30-44
- Kant, I. (1959). *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. Hamburg: Meiner.
- Knape, J. (2000). *Was ist Rhetorik*. Stuttgart: Reclam.
- Ptasek, P. (1993). *Rhetorische Rationalität. Stationen einer Verdrängungsgeschichte von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit*. Munich: Fink.

Renn, O. (2019). *Gefühlte Wahrheiten*. Orientierung in Zeiten postfaktischer Verunsicherung. Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung.

Vidal, F. (2010). *Rhetorik des Virtuellen*. Die Bedeutung rhetorischen Arbeitsvermögens in der Kultur der konkreten Virtualität. Mössingen: Talheimer.

Footnotes

[1] Sie werden gespeichert, prozessiert, weitergegeben oder zurückgehalten, gesammelt, gefälscht oder gehandelt. Man kann sich informieren oder desinformiert sein. Wir bestehen aus genetischen Informationen und verarbeiten sie neuronal. Wenn wir kommunizieren, tauschen wir Informationen aus. Selbst körperliche Interaktionen lassen sich auf diese Weise verstehen. Gesten und Kleidung etwa versenden versteckt und mitunter nicht intendiert Informationen, wie Pick-up-Artists und Verhaltensforscher sagen. Die signifikanten rechten Nachbarn im grammatischen Sinn von Information sind -Technologie-, -Center, -Management, -Service, -System, -Lifestyle, -Officer, -Security, -Act oder -Worker. Doch gerade diese universelle Verbreitung, diese Allgegenwart von Informationen macht stutzig. (Feustel 2018, 11).

[2] Darstellung der charakteristischen Merkmale eines Menschen oder eines Gegenstandes (Bernecker HWRh. Vol. 4: 376).

[3] Ich sehe meinen Job nicht darin, die Wahrheit zu verkürzen, sondern darin, die Aspekte der Wahrheit zu erklären, aber auch Unsicherheiten zuzulassen und zu sagen: Das weiß man so nicht – und dass dann eine politische Entscheidung nötig ist. Und solange es als politische Entscheidung kommuniziert wird, finde ich das in Ordnung (Drosten 2020a).

[4] Alle solche Regungen des Gemüts, durch die Menschen sich entsprechend ihrem Wechsel hinsichtlich der Urteile unterscheiden und denen Schmerz bzw. Lust folgen: wie z. B. Zorn, Mitleid, Furcht und dergleichen sonst sowie deren Gegensätze (Rhetoric II 1,8:84).

[5] Drei Methoden der Glaubhaftmachung: Erstens das Hervorrufen einer bestimmten Ansicht über den Sprechenden, zweitens das Hervorrufen einer bestimmten psychischen Disposition bei den Hörern und drittens der logisch-argumentative Beweis in der Sache (Knape 200, 34).

[6] Von den Überzeugungsmitteln, die durch Rede zustande gebracht werden, gibt es drei Arten: Sie sind nämlich entweder im Charakter des Redners begründet oder darin, den Hörer in eine gewisse Stimmung zu versetzen, oder schließlich in der Rede selbst, d. h. durch Beweisen oder scheinbares Beweisen (Rhetoric I, 13).

[7] Glaubwürdigkeit ist sozusagen die Basis, auf der Kommunikation funktioniert; sie ist das kommunikative Urvertrauen, ohne das nichts geht (Heringer 1990. 32).

Author contribution

The entirety of this manuscript was prepared by Francesca Vidal.

Editor's notes

The editor responsible for the publication of this article was Rafael Capurro.

Style editing and linguistic revision to the wording in this text has been performed by Prof. Adj. Hugo E. Valanzano (State University, Uruguay).

Nilzete Ferreira Gomes (Universidade Federal Rural da Amazônia (UFRA), Pará, Brazil), was in charge of translating from Portuguese to Spanish.