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Ethos, Pathos and Logos on Facebook. The Network User as New «Rhetorician» of the 21st Century

Abstract

One of the «black holes» of academic research in Communication is the shallowness of reflections on the classic origins of Communication, its aims and points of entry. In this respect, the study of communicative processes on the Internet becomes particularly relevant (specifically the social networks processes) when observed from the classic rhetorical perspective. We focus on the use of persuasion strategies (ethos, pathos, logos) as well as the abundant use of rhetorical figures. Such parameters, along with the resources that emergent technologies offer, unleash creativity and afford humanist aspects to network communication. These give on-line platforms an extremely persuasive strength. Thus, we may speak of the network user of the 21st century as the new «Rhetorician». Our research on Facebook addresses the presence of rhetoric in online social network communication: the user of these platforms applies communicative strategies described by the Rhetoricians dating back to Greco-Roman antiquity. The methodology in this work (the study of three typified cases and the content analysis of conversations generated on Facebook walls) allows us to intertwine rhetoric and communication today, mediated by the emergence of online networks. We propose the retrieval of certain parameters of deep, critical thought to the benefit of a more human communication.

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1. Introduction and state of the art

This article tackles the presence of rhetoric in communication in online social networks. Specifically, the research intends to show how the user of these platforms makes use of communication strategies described by rhetoricians since its origins in Greco-Roman antiquity. The use of «ethos, logos and pathos», and –notably–the abundant use of rhetorical figures, anticipates the presence of humanist aspects in network communication, endowing it with a great deal of creativity. Such parameters, along with the resources that emergent technologies offer, shape these platforms' typical persuasive strength, because of so-called collective intelligence (Flores, 2009: 78; Aguaded et al., 2009). In a very short time, an «all-communication» society became established, one in which information circulates mainly through social networks, connecting millions of people all over the world. Social networks prevail, playing a significant part in our personal, social and work life (Boyld & Ellison, 2008). By getting closer to social network discourse –technology-mediated Communication– it is easy to observe deep epistemological changes within the Communications field. The authors of this study think, along with Cuadras (2009: 23), an expert in Semiotics, that one of the theoretical paradoxes of our time lies in that «together with the great techno-scientific mutations which redefine the communication phenomenon, the models which try to explain it are logo-centric and literary-based». We therefore share the need to review the communication phenomenon from a techno-generated communication theory. This phenomenon has proved difficult to apprehend with the usual models, i.e. communication theory models, which have been the guidelines for communication thought--, and now appear likely to undergo revision in order to reveal their limitations and, therefore, open them up to new constructions of their elements.

Within this changing process, classic rhetorical elements and strategies are still clearly recognizable, and now reinforced by the possibilities which emergent technologies offer.

Faced with the shift of the above-mentioned models, we need to study and look for new standards in order to critically these models. Thus, St. Amant (2002) states the need to compare computer-mediated communication models with intercultural communication in order to find convergences. Along this line, the presence of rhetoric on the Internet is at the origin of many interesting academic articles (Albaladejo, 2007; Warnick, 2011; Berlanga & Alberich 2012: 143-144); Internet is a rhetorical space in its configuration (Barbules, 2002) and in its interface, due to the presence of rhetorical figures (Clément, 1995; Gamonal, 2004). Nevertheless, mutual transferences between rhetoric and the social network appear to be an innovative field of study with no concluding results so far. Within this changing process and concept replacement, the present study contributes to the current research trend by looking into its widening scope and possibilities.

In the same way, and being active within the communication field, we consider it apt to shift our view to the classics. This is not only due to one obvious reason: that the art of persuasion was born and structured precisely in Greco-Roman culture through discourse based on principles that are still valid today. It is also

timely and convenient to go back to classic principles, original –there is nothing more original than going back to the origins– in a historic moment such as ours, characterized by such vibration, immediacy and information surplus, which makes us head willy-nilly towards a depersonalized and superficial communication. In contrast, this research is framed within a generic line of humanism and classic anthropology recovery in the field of technological communication (Sanderson, 1989; Victoria, Gómez & Arjona, 2012).

1.1. Communication on the Internet, a new paradigm

When analyzing communicative processes on the Internet, we face certain theoretical problems which stem from online communication's own features. This communication is interpersonal and collective, synchronous or asynchronous –in combination of both modalities for social network interactions–, which breaks with linearity and requires, based on its virtuality, new approaches for its constitutive elements. The communication subject, or in this context the user, becomes relevant in the face of the traditional model: interpersonal communication shows important differences in the structure of sending-receiving. By user, we mean someone taking an active part in the Web, as sender or receiver, as actor or mere spectator. Some authors are very critical of the user: «As a new Ulysses of the twenty-first century, net users navigate this virtual ocean, it being a network, a crossroads word for: being nobody» (Cuadras, 2009: 22-32). However, it is true that the user is open to new suggestions through possibilities for interaction (Rintell, Mulholland & Pittam, 2001).

Kiss and Castro (2004: 227-231) explain the construction process of the subject of enunciation. The possibility we have for creating real or invented worlds on the Internet begins with the construction of the individual referent: the subject of enunciation elaborates a self-image to communicate. In turn, we may only think of the network functionalist model as a multipolar whole of integrated nodes through which flows of messages occur according to Web-based codes and languages. Interaction participants are no longer required to share the same reference frame or the sociocultural paradigm, as required in communication described by traditional models. Referentiality is displaced by the concept of virtual «trans-contexts: digital constructs which act as devices in the communicational space. These contexts «set up beyond progression taken as «calendar time and cardinality»: we face an unhistorical and territorialized space » (Cuadras, 2009: 26).

1.2. Convergence of classical rhetoric and online social networks

We perceive deep, underlying changes in this type of communication, a clear-cut analogy and convergence between the social network format and the resources of persuasion, such as the creators of rhetoric conceived them. Each user intervening in the social networks acts in order to communicate with diverse persuasive aims (convince, seduce, please, move, be interesting, etc.); rarely do the users just «share their life», and when they do, it is with the aim of prompting certain re-

sponses amongst friends-users within the social network, an intention with a certain degree of persuasion. In order to attain these persuasive aims, social network users turn to −most probably unconscious of it− several rhetorical strategies. We may even establish that they follow a similar process in discourse construction to that of classical orators (inventio, dispositio, elocutio, actio and memoria): they look for ideas and arguments (inventio) which they then somehow organize, even though not in the typical discursive order (dispositio). The users express them according to certain elocution strategies, and finally they represent these strategies using new forms of pronunciation (actio). Thus, such discourses give feedback to the treasure of contents within the social network (memoria) once they belong to it by having been «spoken out». By contrast, social networks allow for the inclusion of multiple text variants (text, fixed image, video, multimedia, etc.). These widen their expressive potential and support discourse to achieve their persuasive aim. Thus, with a short message one may say a lot. In other words, these are all typical aspects of rhetoric, well suited for written communications and interpersonal communication.

Along these lines, network users display the typical features of the classical orators, those persuasive techniques passed down without interruption throughout history, now evidently reinforced by technology. We hereby refer to the frequent use of literary figures such as creative language deviations, and specifically, to the use of ethical, logical and pathetical strategies (Aristotle, 1991), and thus we can call this user the new 21st century rhetorician.

2. Materials and methods

We formulate our initial research question as follows: H1 - social networks may be referred to as the new rhetorical space or the 21st century agora. Rhetoric has a long-standing presence in audiovisual communication generated on social networks. To this hypothesis can be added: H1a) the discourse of social network users is full of rhetorical figures; H1b) rhetorical figures employed on social networks generate thought, dialogue and more efficient communication.

Our research objectives are: to underline the presence of rhetoric in social network discourse, specifically the use of persuasive strategies by the user. Following on from this, we will present our interpretations of the studied phenomenon looking at the specific features of the various selected profiles. Finally, as an operational objective, we will evaluate research results and put forward theoretical and practical applications.

The research mainly follows the case study method. According to Stake (1995: 28-29), we need to study and look for new standards in order to understand these models from a critical viewpoint. Case studies are welcome in underdeveloped fields of knowledge in which new theories should be stated. We believe that using this methodology in the rhetorical study of a social network, Facebook, may prove interesting, since it is a seldom-used point of entry. We also use data collected in the content analysis (Berelson, 1952) of discourses on users' walls to extract data about the rhetorical figures employed. This quantitative content analysis stems from a prior research work (Berlanga & Alberich, 2012: 146): wall discourses were

studied across 16 micro-networks, with 200 intervening users. Following a rigorous selection rule, daily screen shots were taken of the users' wall over 3-4 weeks: with just a few screen shots we already perceived an enormous quantity of rhetorical figures so it was deemed unnecessary to continue taking shots for any longer. The users did not know about the screen shots, in order not to influence their activity. Obviously, those finally selected to take part in the research were informed about the project and we asked them for permission to use personal data. For the present research work, we extract percentages and the use of different rhetorical figures, and three profiles are analyzed in depth.

The study uses as its sample social network users from among the Spanish population in 2011-2012. Three subjects, Facebook users, make up the sample; each of them represents one typified profile in the fourth report of the Social Networks Observatory, «The Cocktail Analysis» (2012)[2]. We chose these users as we needed easy access to their user wall. Therefore, it is an incidental sampling method. We selected conversations over a period of 30 days throughout February-March 2011.

We chose Facebook because of the data supplied by that report, and because Facebook absolutely predominates, reaching 85% of net users, whereas Tuenti has a 36% share, and Twitter (32%) is developing fast to become the third social network by penetration.

In each case in the analysis, the following aspects have been taken into account: personal profile data, one question of the survey undertaken by each user on the conscious use (or not) of rhetoric; wall content: discourse, conversations and interventions; and finally, the rhetorical density/intensity of their discourses. We understand by density the ratio of total rhetorical figures by space. Diversity is the ratio of different rhetorical figures by space, and intensity defines the relationship between the figure and its strength (García, 2000: 29-60).

3. Analysis and results

3.1. Profiles on Facebook

The three cases studied in this research correspond to three types of social network user profile listed by the Social Networks Observatory, in their 2012 «The Cocktail Analysis» report.

- Case 1: Female, 59, teacher. The user responds to a profile called «Social Controller» (40%). This is the oldest profile age, 43% are over 36. It represents a user segment, which already has significant network usage experience, but needs to be in «control» of their use. To the questions: Do you consider that classic rhetoric, specifically the use of figures, is present in Facebook wall conversations? And particularly in your conversations? Have you ever thought that your discourse on Facebook may be following rhetorical strategies? The subject answers: «I love rhetoric, and I think that it is a creative way of expressing feelings. To do so, helps me to de-dramatize, it is a way to say something more indirectly; or it helps me to exaggerate things I want to emphasize, I find it very amusing. I think I use rhetoric each time I want to express something more about me on Facebook».

- Case 2: Male, 34, lawyer. The user responds to the «Social Media Addict» profile (25%). This is a particularly male profile and the average age is 31. Although «hooked on» social networks, the subjects do not feel this to be a problematic. In response to the question about the intentional use of rhetoric, the subject answered: «Hum, it never occurred to me…I usually make sure I write properly because there are many people reading your stuff and I guess the use of those figures is implied. However, getting to it is another question». Case 3: Male, 16, high school student. The user responds to the «Youth in Search» profile (35%). This is the youngest profile, more than half of its components are 25 or younger. The profile is quite heterogeneous: some «hooked on» subjects coexist with others who are less active. To the question about the intentional use of rhetoric, the subject answered: «Rhetoric? On Facebook? No. Absolutely. I don't think we spend our time making metaphors, ha, ha, the Spanish teacher would be thrilled!».

3.2. Discourse rhetoric

Each of the users analyzed in the study has employed persuasion to «share their lives» but also with the aim of generating a particular response among their friends-relatives-users of the same social network. A hint of persuasion may be present in this particular aim. The users turn to different rhetorical strategies in a particular way, and make frequent use of rhetorical figures. The following wall excerpt is an example: the user uses figures such as metaphor, rhetorical interrogation, synecdoque, pleonasm, hyperbaton, epanalepsis and personification.

Image 1. Screen shot of user wall. Case 1.

The authors have noticed that user postings have different objectives (to inform about a certain matter, show support, congratulate…). But often the senders only wanted to express their mood when posting, and by doing so, they expect a cer-

tain reaction from their audience by using an essentially emotional argumentation. No matter how short the message is, it can still be rhetorical, for this modality of influence may become persuasion. Thus, in most cases, the interventions consist of short sentences, which are the most appropriate to this modality of persuasion. This is particularly clear in Case 3, the prototype of an adolescent user deploying typical resources of cyber language (Paolillo, 1999).

One of the social networks' advantages when configuring rhetorical discourse, is particularly clear on these users' walls: the availability of multiple textual variants (writing, fixed image, video, multimedia, etc.) which considerably increase the expressive potentiality of discourse and support it to enable the discourse to reach its persuasive objective. This advantage also means that a short message can convey a lot of information. We are, therefore, dealing with synthetic language frequently dominated by image. In Case 2, the user writes on the wall to talk about politics, generate debate and criticize the government. The wall was also used to campaign for votes when there were elections at a certain lawyers' association. In the two remaining cases, we noticed references to social topics that were generating public opinion at the time. As in the old agora, there is now a public space which allows for communication without hindrance or censorship (Dahlberg, 2001: 617).The scarce participation of User 3 and the tone of his communication messages correspond to the profile type: on the one hand, these users are mainly active on Tuenti, a social network: on the other hand, the language used by this age range is usually poor and full of grammatical mistakes. Oral speech infects this kind of written communication (Yus, 2011). Looking at the rest of his wall activity, User 3 seems to have used this social network to keep in contact (accepting friendships, profile cataloguing, or video uploading).

3.3. Rhetorical strategies of discourse

Each of the wall conversations analyzed in this study presents one objective (to inform, convince, move or attract attention to something), and in order to reach these persuasive goals social network users have turned, perhaps unknowingly, to ethical, pathetical or logical reasoning. The Web displays those three communication strategies –already described by Aristotle-- in every discourse. The logic lies in conceiving Internet as an extension of personal and professional relations. Facebook, in particular, is structured in such a way that enables the use of these strategies.

Ethos. We know the speaker through the posts generated by the user, whose use of written information, pictures or links reveals tastes and preferences…Thus, the user acquires a certain prestige (ethos). Most certainly, an idea of all «authority» survives in the user's discourse. The relationship one maintains or has established in the real world remains in the virtual world. This is indeed the reason why the relation is added as «friend». It is true that on many other occasions contacts are added only to increase the number of friends, in order to create a better reputation within the social network (this is so among younger profile users or among those who use the social network as an extension of their professional

lives). Many conversations revolve around the same person, reinforced by image (different, changing profiles photos).

Logos as rhetorical strategy very rarely appears on this social network; it depends on the other two strategies. Most of the time, topics and messages per se are secondary for persuasion; they may be qualified as irrelevant or trivial, for what becomes essential in each micro-network is the fact that the user relates to friends-relatives. The profile 3 user, who also uses Facebook as an extension of his professional field, is the only one in which the content of «what is said» takes on a more central role.

Image 2. Screen shot of user wall. Case 2.

As far as pathos is concerned, Facebook's very nature makes it the dominant factor within the social network. Facebook walls are clearly oriented towards empathy and affective relationships. That is the reason for naming them «friends» (along with all the semantic depth of the term) all those who enter the micro-network even briefly. Pathos mainly supports communication: adhesion feelings or happiness, congratulations, and is much accentuated by smileys (emoticons). Image and video reinforce text. These stimulate receivers, prompting plenty of adhesion gestures: «like», congratulations, sentences expressing admiration, which constantly underline the reaction provoked, and which indicate the sender as the true persuader: the user has decided to include such images that initiate and reinforce the discourse.

3.4. Figure usage

Conversation flows on social networks are not particularly suited to more elaborate discourse; «ornatus», in addition to knowledge, requires pause and re-
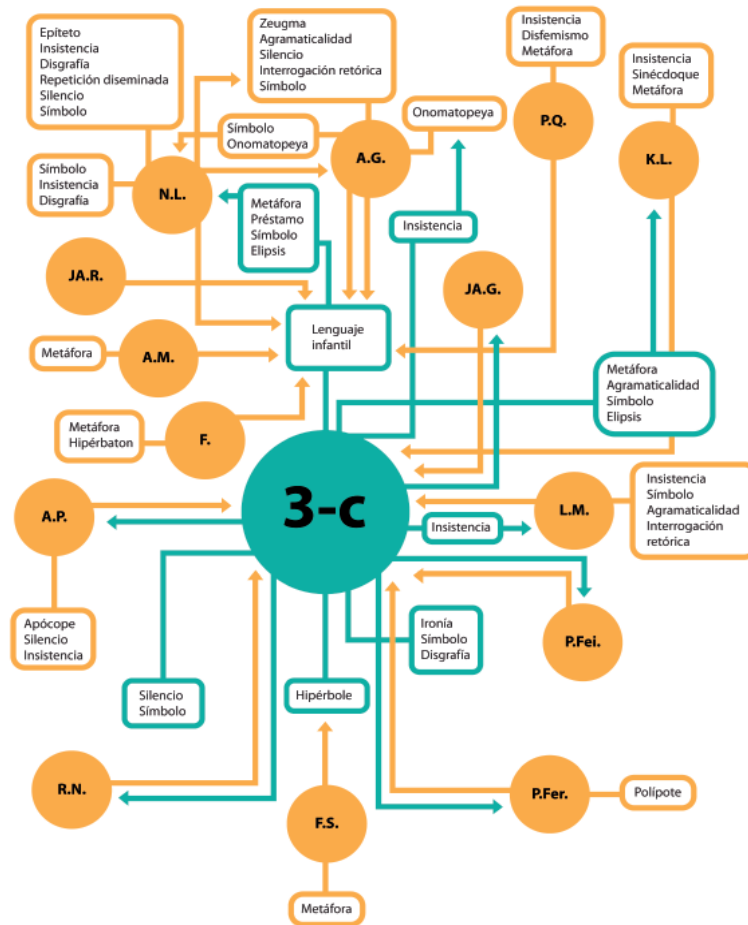
elaboration. Nevertheless, the most outstanding characteristic when analyzing these networks from a rhetorical point of view is the strong presence of figures and tropes in all profiles, regardless of age or education. As we predicted, and these subjects have confirmed, figures and tropes are used in two of the three cases, the sender being unaware of it when writing messages. Average rhetorical density in all three cases is 3.2 figures per intervention. It is a very high average in all cases except for Case 3, an adolescent user who scores 1.5 per intervention. Distribution by figure type is similar across cases: figures of substitution abound, reaching almost 50% of total use, followed by figures of addition (around 25%) and of suppression (around 25%). Cases 1 and 2 are the only ones to use figures of permutation, using hyperbaton on two-three occasions respectively. Regarding figure usage the following stand out in this particular order: metaphor, synecdoque and ellipsis appear in all three cases; only the youngest user exhibits symbols. We may conclude that this particular use of figures adds expressivity, creativity and depth to communication, as displayed below.

Image 3. Screen shot of user wall. Case 3.

As an example, we present a visual representation of the users' discourse. The graph is shaped as a network, with nodes and edges. The particular user's interventions (3c) are in green; his contacts' interventions (indicated by their initials) are in orange. In each box, we show the rhetorical figures used in the particular wall intervention.

Image 4. Graph representing rhetorical discourse as network. Case 3.

4. Discussion and conclusions

After analyzing the wall conversations of three specific users, each representing a social network profile typified for Spain by The Cocktail Analysis report of 2012, we maintain that there is a rhetorical component in the communication taking place within these platforms, especially on Facebook. We reach our objective by showing the rhetorical nature of the conversations, because users employ rhetorical strategies, operations, and figures.

The results point to the use of rhetoric by social network users in the way that rhetoric has been used throughout history: as a social tool. Rhetoric has found new channels and unsuspected dimensions on this social network (in fact on all social networks). We offer as examples, firstly, dialogue enhancing with the interaction of all instances sharing communication; ease of the speaker's productive activity; ease of the receiver's interpretative ability; opportunity to lead the discourse along other lines because of acceptance or rejection by users; possibility of rational storage of information; and finally, ease of linking information and documentary sources. Thus, the micro-network shaped by the Facebook users' wall provides a better fit between discourse, speaker, receiver, and context.

In particular, the Facebook user applies strategies common to all discourses, which Aristotle described as: «ethos, pathos, and logos». Facebook has a structure that enables these strategies to function. Regarding «ethos», an idea of all «authority» can be clearly seen in the users' discourse. The relationship one maintains or has established in the real world, still remains in the virtual world. This is indeed the reason why the user confirms that particular relation as «friend». «Logos» as rhetorical strategy hardly appears on Facebook; it depends on the other two strategies. Topics and messages per se are secondary for persuasion; they may be qualified as irrelevant or trivial, for what becomes essential in each micro-network is the fact that the user relates to friends-relatives. Nevertheless, in other social networks (such the professionally oriented LinkedIn), logos takes on a pre-dominant role. As for «pathos», Facebook's very nature places it as the dominant factor within the social network. Facebook walls are clearly oriented towards empathy and affective relationships. That is the reason why all are called «friends» (along with all the semantic depth of the term), even those who only enter the micro-network briefly. The rhetorical nature of Facebook walls becomes more important because of the dialogic nature of the Web. Dialogue and consent are at the root of joining a social network such as Facebook. Many interventions on user walls prompt an interactive expression: «like». The message senders who participated in our research looked for a reaction from the receivers; that is to say, that the receivers agree with the message content (clicking on this expression), or rather, that the receivers open a debate and write something on the space allowed for comments.

Facebook users employ certain rhetorical parameters, although they are unaware of this fact in most cases. Therefore, it is not really off-topic to conclude that rhetoric has as an inherently human dimension–humans being social and open to dialogue−. Studying rhetoric coincides with human discourse itself, and therefore affects all human activities. According to our results, plotted on a social network image, the use of rhetoric contributes to communication and generates responses.

The abundant use of rhetorical figures enables the listener's active participation in the discourse. This stimulates imagination, avoids the mere passive reception of messages and wraps the conversational partner up in such a personal way that the reply has a touch of originality and creativity. In short, this social network provides persuasion and communication with supporting elements hitherto unseen. All of these particular aspects shape the Facebook user as the new rhetorician of our time. As we predicted, the initial hypotheses in this research are confirmed: the social network can be considered a new rhetorical space or agora of the 21st century. Rhetoric has a strong presence in the audiovisual communication emerging from social networks. Social network users' discourse contains plenty of rhetorical figures which prompt thought, dialogue and a more efficient communication.

We would like to open up new ways of thinking in pedagogy-communication research based on these results. Thus, future research would include a transversal field−rhetoric−whose principles offer many possibilities for achieving a more efficient, humane and creative communication; in short, we provide the opportunity

to read a reality that is breaking up, with parameters that belong to just one standpoint. We offer the opportunity to transcend immediacy, making use of a very different kind of knowledge, theories and experiences. Terence's saying, «I am a human being, I consider nothing that is human alien to me», is very much needed in the present scientific model, where pragmatism imposes itself as the only value. Such pragmatism also floods the social realm and, accordingly, the point of entry to communication studies.

However, with our results in hand, we believe that rhetorical discourse intensity, that is, the ratio between figures used and their strength, could have been deeper and more direct. This point is hampered by the limitations of written conversation analysis and by having contacted with the wall owner only. In order to provide more conclusive evidence, we believe it necessary to include the remaining participants of wall conversation focus groups. Thus, this research work remains unfinished. The research object evolves and demands constant updating and methodological reformulation. Therefore, future lines of research should focus on the rhetorical component in emerging communication media

Notes

[1] Aristotle in chapters I-III, Book I of his «Rhetoric» explains the three types of arguments which are offered in every discourse (1356a): «Ethos», which lies in the behaviors and authority of the speaker; «Logos», when the speaker convinces the audience by the discourse; Pathos, which persuades through emotions aroused in the audience.

[2] «The Cocktail Analysis» is a market research and strategy consultant agency, specialized in consumer trends, communication, and new technologies. Its social network observatory has published several reports in 2008, 2010, 2011, and 2012 (http://tcanalysis.com).

Acknowledgements

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