

RHETORICAL THEORY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS:  
Opening the door to semiotic and pragmatism approaches

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### **Abstract**

*The 2001 Handbook of Public Relations edited by Robert Heath contains a prominent article advocating the use of rhetorical theory or 'rhetorical enactment rational' as a fruitful way of advancing theoretical understandings of public relations. In 2004 Heath and Dan Millar edited: Responding to Crisis: A Rhetorical Approach to Crisis Communication. These are the latest excursions into a perspective on public relations reflecting the extensive study of rhetoric in North America. Other examples are Public Relations Inquiry as Rhetorical Criticism (Elwood, 1995); Rhetorical and Critical Approaches to Public Relations (Toth and Heath, 1992); and a chapter Public Relations? No, Relations with Publics: A Rhetorical-Organisational Approach to Contemporary Corporate Communication (Cheney and Dionisopoulos, in Botan and Hazleton (Eds.) 1989).*

*The conventional notion of rhetoric is argumentation and persuasion stemming from the ancient Greek sophists, such as Aristotle, and from the Romans, particularly Cicero and Quintillion. Rhetoric became a fundamental plank of the trivium of ancient and medieval education: grammar, logic and rhetoric. Then in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Kenneth Burke, Stephen Toulmin and Chaim Perelman with Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca extended Aristotle's suggestion that: "Rhetoric is the counterpart of dialectic" Aristotle (trans. 1991). To use the rhetorical approach to argue that rational discourse cannot describe the world on its own. Instead living, enculturated human beings have to perceive 'their' truths. They take a perceptual 'position' on reason.*

*Public relations, is an industry for influencing perceptual 'positions'. But the study of perception and attempts to influence perception cannot be claimed by rhetorical scholars alone. Semioticians and linguists who take the perspective of linguistic pragmatics also claim this field. This paper takes the example of 'public relations' as a focus for the confluence of rhetorical, semiotic and pragmatism approaches to the 'problematic' of understanding and truth.*

### **Introduction – Heath's rhetorical turn: Wider implications**

There is currently what might be called a 'Rhetorical Turn' in the field of public relations studies (Cheney and Dionisopoulos, 1989; Elwood, 1995; Heath, 2001; Heath and Millar, 2004; Toth and Heath, 1992) The turn is largely centred on Robert Heath, whose early CV involved studies of rhetoric (1986) and who has recently edited major composite publications in the field of public relations (2001; 2005). This paper criticises this rhetorical turn as adhering to dated notions about what rhetoric is. The turn seems to take the notion 'rhetoric' as a given and then use rhetoric as a term which is used to theorise the activity of public relations. What is missing is engagement with the flourishing theoretical field which is currently revising the notion of 'rhetoric'. This present paper is particularly interested in the aspect of this engagement which is the link between the notion 'rhetoric' and the notion 'semiotics' – the study, or science, of the role of signs in thought processes. Below we will try to illuminate the potential for a massive change to understandings in the field of public relations. This change would be unleashed if Heath's rhetorical turn for public relations is connected to the turn of events in the field of rhetorical studies itself.

Co-opting all 90 contributors to the *Handbook of Public Relations* (2001) as rhetoricians or 'rhetors' Heath implies his notion of rhetoric in the following way:

This handbook exemplifies the rhetorical heritage – the rationale for suasive discourse. In these pages many rhetors have their say on the theory, research and practice to shape the future of public relations ...this book champions humans' commitment to rhetorical dialogue as the process for forging conclusions and influencing actions (p. 31).

In his own chapter contribution Heath stresses his notion of rhetoric as persuasive dialogue designed to bring about specific thinking and behaviour in a reciprocal

manner. This extract also shows Heath's approach to rhetoric as an instrumental technique to be deployed within objectivist ontology<sup>1</sup>:

Rhetoric is organic; it assumes that policy and preference are forged through assertion and counter assertion...Rhetoric is strategic; it requires planning in response to a rhetorical problem. Rhetoric is predicated on the superiority of some ideas, evidence, policy options and produce/service preferences that are improved through the contest of alternatives (p. 49).

Heath advocates an infusion of the rhetorical approach into public relations scholarship because: 'It is the communal or communitarian aspect of discourse. Through communication people form communities that liberate individuals through mutually beneficial interests and shared meaning' (p. 50). Heath quotes Kruckeberg and Stark (1988, p. 58) who suggest: 'Communication is instrumental because it liberates us from otherwise overwhelming pressure of events and enables us to live in a world of things that have meaning.' However critics may read into Heath's intentions the sort of motivation mentioned by Vickers (1988). While welcoming a late 20<sup>th</sup> Century increase in the number of academic journals on rhetoric Vickers none the less suggests:

Previously the only long lived journals have been the organs of ...departments...in American universities, some of which did include valuable historical or cross-cultural essays, but which tended to reflect the emphasis within those departments, a parochial concern with rhetoric...adapted to the needs of a contemporary American undergraduate who had been granted little or no access to the classical or European traditions, and wished to apply rhetorical skills to modern commercial and professional life (p. 474).

Heath fits into Vicker's category of someone who has carried out "valuable historical or cross-cultural" work. Heath's study, some years ago, of the rhetoric of slavery was presumed incorrectly, by at least one person, as the work of a person of colour<sup>2</sup>. However, Heath's current work does not discuss the 'invitation' – so to speak – which this turn to rhetorical theory throws out to contemporary theorists of rhetoric, communication and discourse. This present paper by contrast attempts to accept this intentional or unintentional 'invitation'. This paper advocates that the current use of the rhetorical mode in public relations should be a progressive move which aligns public relations with the contemporary study of rhetoric. It warns against this turn degenerating into a 'modernised' return to training in the instrumental techniques alluded to by Vickers and Ong (1977). Ong stresses the oral aspects of rhetoric while describing its historical development in the West as the Latinate mode of verbal and written communication and assertion in the fields of government, law and administration:

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<sup>1</sup> By this I mean Heath assumes the world has real facts which can be compared and argued over. A post-objectivist ontological perspective would imply that these facts are created by the discourse, rather than the discourse being 'about' these facts (Mackey 2004; Pearson 1989; Bernstein 1983 ). This criticism is further elaborated in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Heath gave a personal aside on this reaction to his early paper on rhetoric and slavery at the session entitled: "Public Relations Honours it Scholars" at the National Communication Association Chicago convention in November 2004.

The development of the vast rhetorical tradition was distinctive of the west and was related...to the tendency among the Greeks ...to maximise oppositions in the mental as well as in the extra-mental worlds... (Ong 1982, pp. 111-112).

Ong says that up to the nineteenth century academic rhetoric was the mainstay of teaching institutions designed to turn out clergy, lawyers, physicians, diplomats and other public servants who were deemed to require this persuasive, or subtle combative mode of speaking and writing (p. 112). This paper warns against a return to the Latinate *trivium*<sup>3</sup> amended to include reference to media training, the corporate rhetor and the possible excusing of corporations' responsibility for the degeneration of society by using public relations to foster community relations – as discussed by Kruckenberg and Stark (1988, p. 118). Instead this paper welcomes the application of rhetorical studies as an opportunity for a much broader intellectual examination of public relations through the lens of contemporary cultural and communication studies. This paper is intended to demonstrate that contemporary academic theories of rhetoric offer the possible attainment of a clearer picture of what public relations is and what its effects on society and individuals are. As a consequence this paper also suggests that the rhetorical turn offers the possibility of a powerful critique of the ethics of public relations.

### ***Inter-related notions of rhetoric, discourse and communication***

There is an extensive and sometimes contradictory literature about what rhetoric is and how it combines with or contrasts to the study of 'discourse' and 'communication'. The study of 'rhetoric' is familiar in United States universities, but it is unusual in universities outside America (Ong 1977<sup>4</sup>; Vickers 1988). European communication academics are more familiar with the study of 'discourse' or 'linguistic pragmatics' with which rhetoric is intertwined. Linking discourse to rhetoric *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* says *inter alia*:

In the first handbook of discourse analysis van Dijk (1985) identified classical rhetorical writers (e.g. Aristotle, Quintillion and Cicero) as the first discourse analysts...classical rhetoric is the intellectual starting point for much of what goes on in the communication field today. [Although] Scholars who label themselves rhetorical theorists and critics are rarely the same individuals as ones who consider themselves discourse analysts (Schiffrin, Tannen and Hamilton, 2004 p. 727).

Schiffrin et al. suggest 'rhetorical scholars' are more interested in analysing the meanings in literature and other art from a humanities perspective while 'discourse analysts' tend to be social scientists looking for psychological or sociological implications in texts and symbols.

The *Encyclopaedia of Rhetoric* says:

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<sup>3</sup> The '*Trivium*' was the three disciplines of 'logic, grammar and rhetoric' which were the foundation of the classical education curriculum.

<sup>4</sup> ...in the United states where verbal rhetoric is more studied and less practiced than in Great Britain and its dismantled empire' (Ong 1977, p. 214).

Commonly defined as the transmission or exchange of ideas, communication relates to rhetoric in various small and large ways...In larger ways, communication as a whole can be nearly synonymous with rhetoric, subsume or be subsumed by rhetoric...Communication relates to rhetoric in these diverse ways in part because communication no less than rhetoric itself, has been conceptualised on radically different models...Modern rhetorical theory has elaborated and problematised the epistemological, sociological, and political dimensions of the classical tradition [of rhetoric] in ways that further contribute to communication theory (Collins, 2001 pp. 125-127)

The *Encyclopaedia of Rhetoric* then lists ‘seven major traditions of communication theory’ of which ‘Rhetoric’ is listed first and ‘Semiotics’ – the study of signs stemming from Locke, Peirce and Saussure, and involving Derrida, is listed second.

Summarising conventional scholars of the field of rhetoric Jarratt (1991, p. xv) writes that rhetoric is normally described as having originated with the fifth century BC Athenian sophists who are usually depicted as: ‘...well travelled, charismatic teachers [who] offered...an intensive training in...speaking persuasively in the public assembly and before judges’. The writing and speaking skills of the sophists were in demand because of the emergence of democracy which required enfranchised men to participate in government and legal affairs.

### ***The slightly old ‘New Rhetoric’***

The decline of rhetoric as an academic subject, from the mid nineteenth century in Europe accompanied the rise of modernism and positivistic science explanations of the world. But in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century the study of rhetoric was revived. The recognition that there is an ‘economy of understanding’, in other words that there are limitations to our ability to understand things through logic, led to a reconsideration of the discursive and the persuasive elements in the reaching of understanding. This recognition of the limits to logic and dialectical reasoning spurred the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century creation of a ‘New Rhetoric’. Kenneth Burke, Stephen Toulmin and Chaim Perelman with Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca were the leading figures of this revival of a new slant on rhetoric. They undertook this project at a time when faith in modernity and its scientific objectivism was on the wane. Their project anticipated the French structuralists and the later postmodernists (Mayhew 1997, p. 32). In *The New Rhetoric* (1971, originally 1958) Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca suggest:

The publication of [this] treatise devoted to argumentation and this subject’s connection with the ancient tradition of Greek rhetoric and dialectic constitutes a break with concepts of reason and reasoning due to Descartes which has set its mark on Western philosophy for the last three centuries...

Here is a cut down quote which attempts to encapsulate Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca followed by an explanation:

Our treatise will consider only the *discursive means*<sup>5</sup> of obtaining the adherence of minds...This...by no way implies that the technique in question

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<sup>5</sup> Emphasis in the original

[persuasive discourse or rhetoric] is the most efficacious way of affecting minds. The contrary is the case...the most solid beliefs are those which are not only admitted without proof, but very often not even made explicit<sup>6</sup> ...But recourse to argumentation is unavoidable whenever these proofs are questioned (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1971, p. 8).

What Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca are arguing is that the aspects of Cartesian thought which still prevail impose a way of understanding reason which is wrong. The modern scientific method induces people to think along rules extrapolated from 'facts' of observation. What Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca are arguing against is the widespread common belief that we can see the world as it is by using our senses and reasoning empirically and logically from those observations. What they are arguing for is the suggestion that communication, persuasive discourse and in fact rhetoric constantly constructs the world which we see. Burke (1969 originally 1950), makes a similar point:

For rhetoric is not rooted in any past condition of human society. It is rooted in an essential function of language itself...and is continually born anew; the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols (p. 43).

Susan Jarratt is an example of contemporary scholars re-thinking rhetoric. Jarratt critiques the traditional, stereotypical, negative accounts of the sophists, which are coloured *inter alia* by Plato's attitude towards the sophists. Jarratt's thesis is that the sophists were the propagators of a 'Greek enlightenment' where an understanding of the world as the creation of gods was declining in the face of questions about how reality was conveyed through language:

Rejecting traditional religion as an explanation for natural phenomena, they [sophists] evinced a special interest in human perceptions as the only source of knowledge in all fields including nature, and emphasised the significance of language in constructing that knowledge. (1991, p. xviii).

The 'new rhetoricians' were returning to language from positivist science while the sophists were progressing to language from religion. This return to language and semiotics will be explicated throughout this paper, but first we have to deal with the diversion of sophistic thought brought about by Aristotle. Like Plato, Aristotle was critical of the purported excesses<sup>7</sup> of sophists. This ancient criticism still gives the word 'sophist' negative connotations in the English language. But while intending to bring cohesion to the sophistic-rhetorical field by writing his mostly instrumental 'instruction manual' *The Art of Rhetoric*, Aristotle's can be argued to leave an opening for a more complex, philosophical interpretation of rhetoric's construction of understanding:

Rhetoric is the counterpart of dialectic. For both treat of such things as are in a way common for all to grasp and belong to no delimited science...For all men

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<sup>6</sup> Is not public relations often accused of being opaque in this way?

<sup>7</sup> The sophists were accused of using overblown exaggerations and far fetched arguments.

attempt in some measure both to conduct investigations and to furnish explanations. (Aristotle, trans. 1991, p. 66)

'New Rhetoric' suggests that the above quote from Aristotle leaves room for argument that empirical epistemology is in fact a product of rhetorical or discursive construction. So, when we think we are seeing the world clearly, what in fact we are seeing is a world filtered through a particular metaphysics – a particular way of seeing the world – a way which has been set up for us by the discursive or rhetorical activity which has shaped the culture into which we were born and by which we were and continue to be educated<sup>8</sup>. If this is the case, and if public relations can be analysed in terms of rhetorical practices, essentially, in terms of the construction of the ways people conceive of things, then an understanding of the ethical responsibilities of people commissioning and conducting public relations is brought sharply into focus. But further – if one of the measures by which public relations is judged as effective is that the work of the public relations people was not made explicit, was not even noticed, or even was deliberately concealed – then many ethical questions hang over those engaged in affecting the way the world is conceived.

### ***Rhetoric and signs***

The next section of this paper will consider a specific mode of contemporary-rhetorical critique of public relations or, what might be called post-modern critique, which has already been alluded to by Botan and Soto (1998). The paper will conclude by suggesting how this theoretical work links to the conventional concepts of public relations planning and practice which are the content of standard undergraduate public relations degree textbooks.

The below argument will be along the following lines, of whether for some academics and in particular contexts, rhetoric either overlaps with, or is closely related to, or is the same as: persuasive discourse and communication. Further the field of semiotics descending from Charles Saunders Peirce and the closely related field of semiology descending from Ferdinand de Saussure are branches of the study of communication (Fiske, 1998; Collins, 2001; Littlejohn, 1989). For a discussion of the difference between semiotics and semiology as well as an argument that Peirce's semiotics is much more appropriate for public relations than de Saussure's semiology, see Botan and Soto. Despite the differences highlighted by Botan and Soto they also agree with other specialists in this field that semiotics and semiology can be regarded together as the study or science of the role of signs in language and discourse (Littlejohn; Fiske; Collins). But the science of signs started earlier as an approach to understanding communication and persuasive discourse.

In *The Art of Rhetoric* Aristotle uses the concept of 'sign' to stand for a pre-conceived notion which is not subject to debate on its nature. He employs this concept of what we might call 'thought-markers' for what is already held, and therefore which needs no debate, in his explanation of the concepts enthymeme and syllogism. A syllogism is a reasoning system of the nature: papers at this conference are academic; this is a paper to this conference; therefore this is an academic paper. There is a debate about the way Aristotle intended the notion enthymeme, but it can be held to be a short cut of the syllogism which requires more background conceptualisation by the auditor. In

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<sup>8</sup> This argument will be elucidated further in relations to semiotics below.

comparison to the above syllogism enthymeme might go: This is a paper to an academic conference; therefore this paper is academic. Aristotle uses the concept 'sign' to stand in for pre-conceived concepts such as, for instance in the above case, 'academic':

The premisses [sic] of rhetorical deductions are seldom necessary. For most of the objects of judgement and investigation admit of being otherwise. [i.e. they are not open to debate]...So it is obvious that, while some premises of the enthymemes will be necessary, most will be probable, and since enthymemes are in fact derived from probabilities and signs, probabilities must correspond to the probable and signs to the necessary premises. [signs are the received wisdom] (Aristotle, trans. 1991, p. 77)

The next great rhetorician to be noted for using the notion 'sign' was professor of rhetoric and a founder of the Christianity which underpins much of today's dominant culture: St Augustine of Hippo. Augustine studied literature and grammar at Madaura, in what is now Algeria, then taught rhetoric at Carthage in what is now Tunisia before taking a chair in rhetoric at Milan. He was later Bishop of Hippo in what is now Algeria from 396 (Augustine, trans.1952). There is much discussion about the nature and instrumental use of the notion 'sign' in his *On Christian Doctrine, inter alia*:

...[S]o now when I come to discuss the subject of signs, I lay down this direction, not to attend to what they are in themselves, but to the fact that they are signs, that is, to what they signify. For a sign is a thing, which over and above the impression it makes on the senses, causes something else to come into the mind as a consequence of itself...(p. 636)

One of the architects of the Enlightenment, English philosopher John Locke was the next major exponent of the science of signs:

Besides articulate sounds therefore, it was further necessary that [Man] should be able to use these sounds as signs of internal conceptions; and to make them stand as marks for the ideas within his own mind...it was necessary that Man should find out some external sensible signs, whereof those invisible ideas, which his thoughts are made up of, might be made known to others (Locke 1952, p. 252-253).

This paper will now briefly sum up Charles Saunders Peirce's approach to signs on which much of the present 'semiotic' branch of communication studies rests. We will continue to bear in mind the link, demonstrated above between semiotics and rhetoric. We will also refer to Peirce's concomitant notion of 'pragmatics' or 'pragmatism'. This will lead to suggestions for contemporary theorising of public relations on the basis of semiotics and pragmatism. The paper will terminate with an exposition of the application of this theoretical method to conventional public relations studies and teaching.

### ***Peirce's rhetoric, semiotics and pragmatic maxim***

US philosopher Charles Saunders, Peirce left a vast legacy of writings which have been collected into various edited volumes and which have been pored over and had ideas developed by many writers. There is an excellent series of lectures on Peirce by

Joseph L. Esposito at <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/epc/srb/cyber/espout.html>. John L. Lyne (1980) has written an excellent article describing Peirce's specific conceptualisation of a new rhetorical notion:

[Peirce] revived an old sense of the term "discourse" which covers both talk and reasoning (reasoning being talk with oneself). Thus he undermines the notion often used to distinguish logic from rhetoric, i.e. that logic is thought that is essentially unaddressed. All thought as a sign process must be understood as somehow addressed. (p. 158)

This quote is making the same point as discussed with reference to Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca above and at the same time it provides a critique of Aristotle's position quoted above. The argument is that there are no 'facts' which arise independently of their construction, or which are not reviewed or internally discussed when these 'facts' are in the form of signs in the mind. This argument is consistent with Augustine and Locke as quoted above. What appears to people as truth, facts and reality are thus the results of some sort of process involving conscious or unconscious thinking in terms of signs. This implies that reasoning which holds that 'facts' can be gleaned unproblematically from sense experience, as advocated by the empiricists, is simplistic and does not account for what the process of 'understanding' actually is. Similarly the basis of a logical formula given by Descartes (1977):

...it follows necessarily that I who thought thus must be something; and observing that this truth: I think therefore I am, was so certain and so evident that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were not capable of shaking it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking (pp. 53-54).

This does not account for the constant semiotic activity which goes on in the 'I' of the thinker. That is, the world will look different moment to moment depending on how the 'I' is conceptualising itself depending on the signifying processes which are raging internally in people and their communities to identify who they are. This is a constantly active semiotic process which is only anchored by 'habit' – a term used by Peirce to explain why realities appear to be stable in a way which fools the Empiricists and some unwary logicians. In this argument the notion: "...therefore I am..." is thus debatable in a rhetorical sense, where 'who we are', is constantly being constructed by discourse, including deliberately persuasive discourse.

It is impossible to do justice to Peirce's notions in a short space, but in an attempt to follow his meanings closely, below we will try to continue the argument by extracting from his original works rather than from secondary sources. For Peirce (1974):

A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the

representamen. “Idea” is here to be understood...in that sense in which we say that one man catches another man’s idea...and in which when a man continues to think anything, say for a tenth of a second, in so far as the thought continues to agree with itself during that time, that is to have a like content, it is the same idea and is not at each instant of the interval a new idea (p. 135).

This passage is in line with the arguments above in suggesting that thought arises in the mind as a person compares signs with existing signs in their mind. But it goes further to map a schema where there are representing or message signs which interact in the mind to modify or produce thinking signs. Only thinking signs provide a purchase on what the message was about because representing or message signs do not have the capacity for comparison to fit the stimulus into a sense making system: A spoken word sign is heard; or a written word sign is read; or the symbolic image sign is viewed; or the mental thought sign is retrieved from memory or conjured up in imagination. These signs, or in fact whole matrixes of signs then interact with pre-existing internal matrixes of signs – that is with the array of signs – the particular signs and the ordering of those signs – which were there before, and which then become co-ordinates to the new signs. The initial signs are the representamen which stimulate the mind to have interpretant signs. The important point is that for Peirce it is the interpretant - or. the secondary or ‘idea’ sign - which has been stimulated later by the representamen or ‘message’ sign – which holds a notion of the ‘object’ – essentially: what the idea is all about. This object is only the ‘ground’ of the initial representamen or message sign. What is being described here is clearly a rhetorical process. Peirce is saying that there is no direct knowledge of anything. He is saying that things – whether internal thoughts or external objects are only conceived of in the mind as a secondary process of comparing message signs to pre-existing orders of thought signs. Message signs - representamen – such as written or spoken words, or the bang when a stick of dynamite goes off, or the aghast and concerned epistles from the referees of this paper – do not make sense in themselves until they are turned into understandings in the interpretant sign producing process of the thought of the auditor. This interpretant process does not spin out of control, as some readings of Derrida may imply, because of what Peirce refers to as ‘habit’ or what this paper prefers to call an ‘economy of understanding’:

What is a conclusion of reasoning? It is a general idea to which at the suggestion of certain facts a certain general habit of reason has induced us to believe that a realisation belongs. How slight is the difference between this and the description of an expectation! (p. 78).

The point Peirce is alluding to here is that the material conditions of our lives are not infinite. We all live within extremely confined and directive cultural, political, workplace, familial and so on material conditions. These circumstances of our lives set up an economy of the matrixes along which we are likely to think. For instance Habermas accuses that the strategic communication processes and ‘lifeworld’ conditions of late capitalism cause people to think in predominately purposive rational and instrumental ways - for personal economic survival - rather than as members of healthy communities (Habermas 1991, pp. 285-286). Whatever the message signs we receive, we are confined to view them and process them to become the sort of interpretant sign matrixes which fit the perspective of the life we know and expect. Thus ultimately we confine ourselves within the ontology we have been led to expect.

Now before rushing to the end of this paper there is just one more Peircean concept which we need to grasp.

There is a contradictory literature<sup>9</sup> on the notion of ‘pragmatism’ or pragmatics which was a term originated by Peirce, changed and popularised by his colleague William James<sup>10</sup> and currently used in the context of:

Pragmatics as a field of linguistic inquiry was initiated in the 1930s by Morris, Carnap and Peirce...In this program pragmatics is the study of those context-dependent aspects of meaning which are systematically abstracted away from in the construction of content or logical form [sic]. (Horn and Ward 2004)

For the purposes of this paper Peirce’s original ‘pragmatic maxim’ is more appropriate:

Pragmaticism<sup>11</sup> was originally announced in the form of a maxim, as follows: Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearings you conceive the objects of your conception to have. Then, your conception of those effects is the whole of your conception of the object. (p. 293)

Though a bit baffling at first this maxim can be understood in terms of Peirce’s notions of semiotics and habit as described above and can be directly applied to the practice of public relations. It becomes clearer if we read the maxim backwards. The last sentence says that all we can know – the whole of our conception of anything – comes from other conceptions. These other conceptions are the conceptions or thoughts which formed our original ‘thinking reaction’ to something. Our original thinking reaction to something was edited by our habit, that is by what we conceive as practical in our particular lives among the myriad of possible interpretations or interpretants which may arise – say our conceptions are directed by an ‘economy of understanding’ - by how our culture and circumstances orient us to think about the something which was the ground of the original conception. All the pragmatic maxim is, is a harnessing of Peirce’s semiotic schema to his notion of habit, or as suggested here, to the economy of understanding within which a semiotic system operates. And so to conclude and apply the above arguments to conventional public relations study and teaching:

### ***Conclusion***

This paper is aimed at readers of Heath who agree that public relations is, or can be conceived as rhetoric. But it points out that the whole world is in fact conceived through rhetorical processes. One implication of this is that how public relations is understood, how it is controlled and employed and the ethics of public relations are far more important than most people seem to realise. This paper embraces the notion that the whole of the public relations process from research to planning, resource allocation, execution among its publics and evaluation can be viewed as parts of a rhetorical process. But this paper points out that since the time of Aristotle rhetorical

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<sup>9</sup> See Lovejoy, A. (1963). *The thirteen pragmatisms and other essays*. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press.

<sup>10</sup> See Peirce’s teasing of James (Vol. V, pp. 276-277) where Peirce threatens to rename the concept: “‘pragmaticism’ which is ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers.’”

<sup>11</sup> See footnote 10

processes are understood to proceed along semiotic steps. However, from the work of Peirce we can see that semiosis has pragmatic boundaries which are to do with the economies of understanding in particular societies. This economic phenomenon is half acknowledged by the term in public relations studies: 'news or information subsidy'. But what is not acknowledged by most contemporary public relations scholarship and teaching material is the core of the individuals and the societies which the heavily financed sign systems of expensive public relations campaigns are aimed at. If Peirce is right habit ensures we only have a limited capacity with which to think and conceive. Our target audiences have only a limited capacity with which to interpret the conceptions which are aimed at them by forces with bigger and better financed capacities to create and deliver the client's preferred signification of the world. Such a realisation on the part of a truly professional public relations academia and industry should make recourse to analysing public relations in terms of Peirce, Habermas, Foucault, Bourdier and similar analysts of culture and communication not just advisable, but fundamental.

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