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IS THERE A SPEAKER IN THIS POST? THE ECLIPSE OF THE ORATOR IN DIGITAL SOCIAL NETWORKS

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Abstract

In 1980, Stanley Fish advocated the reader-response-dependence of the meaning of a textual message. In today's digital social networks, it is not only the meaning of a posted text that becomes unstable, but the traditional rhetorical role of the speaker or orator (as the authorial sender of a message) likewise gets progressively blurred. Based on parallel theories by Barthes and Foucault on the 'death of the author', McLuhan's media theory and Fish's concept of interpretive communities, the paper addresses five points that are responsible for this erosion: a) the multimodality of communication in digital networks that marginalizes orality; b) the interactive character of communication that foils the traditional speaker-audience relationship; c) the potential anonymity of senders that enables offensive speech without accountability; d) the transitivity of communication and the growing distance between sender and recipient that progressively disconnects a message from its initial creator; e) the role of artificial intelligence that completely erases the role of an individual human orator and facilitates the creation of deceptive fake messages. The analysis of the reasons, mechanisms and effects of this eclipse of the orator role in digital media exhibits serious threats to an unbiased exchange of arguments in the public sphere.

Keywords: digital networks, interpretive communities, orator, recipient, rhetoric, social media



1. Introduction

When U.S. literary theorist and legal scholar Stanley Fish published his famous essay “Is There a Text in This Class?” (Fish 1980), his intention was to illustrate by way of a funny campus anecdote his theory that the source of the meaning of a text is not to be found in the text itself, but that it is cognitively created, rather than discovered, by the reader, based on his or her own individual subjective presuppositions and expectations. This theory, known as reader-response theory, has meanwhile gained broad adherence not only in literary criticism, where it is linked with reader-response aesthetics as propounded by Wolfgang Iser (1974; 1978) and Hans Robert Jauss (1977; 1982a; 1982b) in the 1970s and 1980s, but also in communication theory at large. In line with constructivist theories of cognition, the inferentialist model of communication developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson since the 1980s (Sperber 1982; Sperber and Wilson 1996; 1990; 1995; Wilson and Sperber 1986; 2002; 2012) and further refined and advanced among others by Robert Brandom in the 1990s (Brandom 1994; 2000; 2008) likewise claims that communication does not work as a simple transport of units of information from communicator to recipient, but by way of inferences that recipients reasonably and legitimately draw about the communicator’s intentions from the informational input provided.

As an unnoticed by-product, however, this shift of focus in communication and argumentation theories from the message to the recipient has also progressively obfuscated and diminished the importance of the role of the speaker as the sender of a message within the communication process. Not only is the text of a message no longer regarded as a stable item with a determinate meaning, but the speaker’s original intentions are likewise no longer directly relevant to the meaning of a message; they can only be indirectly inferred by the recipient, who ultimately holds full power over the interpretation of a message.

Rhetoric, as an important subdiscipline of communication, has long tried to resist these tendencies and to maintain and uphold the role of the speaker. In the rhetorical communication model, the speaker, traditionally called the orator, is a central figure. Defined as a strategic communicator with a clear, persuasive aim, the orator is a person who has something to say and actively seeks to bring about a change in opinions by way of speech. From the point of view of reception theory, by contrast, the intentions of the speaker seem entirely left at the mercy of the individual recipient’s interpretation. The recipient’s interpretive strategies seem to gain greater momentum than the speaker’s persuasive strategies. This is not to say that traditional rhetoric had not acknowledged the importance of a speaker’s audience. On the contrary, at least since Chaïm Perelman (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958, 22–46), and actually ultimately since Aristotle (see especially *Rhetoric* 1.2–3 and 2.1–17), rhetoricians have always strongly emphasized the role of the audience in rhetorical communication. Christopher Tindale’s book on *The Philosophy of Argument and Audience Reception* (Tindale 2015) is only one more recent outstanding example.

My intention in this paper is to demonstrate that this sneaking devaluation and erosion of the orator’s role and function are particularly prominent in the domain of modern digital social media networks, with partly detrimental effects on society. This is partly going to be a contrastive complement to a recent study by Fiona Rossette-Crake, who rather foregrounds the positive prospects of a novel enhancement of classical oral oratory by the technical means of digital media (Rossette-Crake 2022, especially 283–316: “Enacting Oratory on Social Media”). Both views need not necessarily be in contradiction, since Rossette-Crake mainly focuses on the technical support that digital aids (such as PowerPoint slideshows, real-time video captions or the like) may provide for live oral presentations, yet less on interactive social networks.



Contrary to Rossette-Crake, I see at least five major points that are responsible for an erosion of the role of the orator: a) the multimodality of communication in digital networks; b) the interactive character of communication and the multiplicity of communicators; c) the at least potential anonymity of senders; d) the transitivity of communication and the growing distance between sender and recipient; and e) the role of artificial intelligence that completely erases the role of an individual human orator.

2. Some Remarks and Definitions

Before we turn to these five points, a few preliminary remarks and definitions may be in order. First, in the 1960s already, in accordance with the described tendencies toward a more recipient-centered theory of literary texts, French structuralist critics such as Roland Barthes or Michel Foucault proclaimed the “death of the author”, famously so in Barthes’ short 1967 essay “La mort de l’auteur” (first in English translation in Barthes 1967, then 1968 in the French original in Barthes 1968, reprinted in Barthes 1984) and in Foucault’s 1969 lecture “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?” (What Is an Author? Foucault 1969), affirming the primacy of each individual reader’s interpretation of a particular work over any “authoritative” meaning intended by the author. Hence the whole idea appears not to be really new. But there is still a difference between the author of a literary text and an orator. While a literary text is deliberately put out to the world for any recipient to read and interpret it each in their own particular way, an orator typically addresses a particular audience and with a specific strategic agenda to bring about a change in opinion in the addressees by employing the available means of persuasion. An orator is a person who is convinced that he or she has something important to say on a certain issue and wishes to communicate this with a clear persuasive aim. In rhetoric, the personality of the orator is thus an integral part of the message and cannot be easily disregarded.

It may still be possible in the context of social-media communication to distinguish – in analogy to the distinction between author and narrator in literary theory – between the external author of a message (a real person in the real world) and the internal speaker (a functional role within the posted message), as suggested for instance by discourse analyst and media expert Patrick Charaudeau, who, with explicit reference to Barthes’ and Foucault’s author-theory, calls them “sujet communiquant (Sc)” and “sujet énonciateur (Sé)” respectively (Charaudeau 2023, 123; but see already Charaudeau 1984; 2020). The mere possibility of this differentiation is actually a consequence of the dissociation of a message from its creator, which typically occurs in social media, as we shall see. In direct face-to-face oral communication, which is still the basic model of rhetorical theory, by contrast, this distinction makes little sense, since it collapses in the role of the authorial orator, who is at the same time also the speaker of the message.

Second, the famous media theory by Marshall McLuhan (1964), which defines media as extensions of the abilities of the human body, is basically an extension of this oratorial model of communication to a progressively complex world in which the classical face-to-face communication of oratory is increasingly enhanced by the employment of technical means of communication (see Rossette-Crake 2022). But even the “classical” electronic media that McLuhan had in mind (such as telephone, radio, TV, or video recordings) were still characterized by an ‘unidirectional’ communication model with a clear distinction between the sender and the recipient of a message, and with the governing power over the communication process, at least to a great extent, still in the hands of the sender. As McLuhan, who died in 1980, could not foresee, in the world of contemporary digital social media, however, precisely this clear allocation of roles gets progressively blurred



and leveled out, with the consequence that the rhetorical model of communication is less and less considered adequate for describing the activities going on in these complex media networks. When I speak of digital social networks, what I have in mind are predominantly various blogs and newsletters that pop up everywhere on all kinds of topics, or social networks like twitter/X, telegram, Facebook and WhatsApp, or online photo and video platforms with marked social network functions such as TikTok or Instagram. As we shall see, all of these are in several respects clearly different from the “classical” electronic media that McLuhan still had in mind.

Finally, while since the 1980s at least we have got acquainted with Niklas Luhmann’s ‘systems theory’ that has put into perspective the individuality of speakers by describing them as functions of so-called ‘autopoietic systems’ (see Luhmann 1984; 1995; 2013), from the point of view of reader-response theory it is not only the message and the sender that get fuzzy as individual entities, but the same is true for the recipient. According to Stanley Fish, recipients, too, do not act as self-determined individuals, but as members of what he calls ‘interpretive communities’ (as indicated by the subtitle of his 1980 essay collection; see also Fish 2004). Each of us, as a recipient of a message, is necessarily part of various interpretive communities, each of them defined as “communities” by a specific, distinct cognitive epistemology. We are all prisoners of our interpretive communities, from which we cannot escape; and what is more, we cannot even know their range and limits, nor determine whether some other person is also part of the same interpretive community, because such a determination would again involve interpretation, which would again be biased by our interpretive communities, which creates a vicious circle. This last point will turn out to be crucial.

3. Five decisive points

Let me now turn to my five points. Which are the main factors that threaten and eclipse the role of the speaker or orator in digital social networks?

3.1. Multimodality

A first, almost trivial point is that communication in those media occurs through a multimedia mix of representational modes, within which orality is at best marginal (one more point of difference from McLuhan’s traditional media such as telephone, radio or TV). Instead of oral communication, basic in the rhetorical model, messages in digital media are mostly posted in written or visual form. This fundamentally disconnects the message from its sender. The issue of a written text getting detached from its author and being helplessly exposed to the interpretation by any odd recipient was already raised by Plato in his dialogue *Phaedrus* (274c–278b) as an argument directed against writing and literacy in philosophy, but it equally applies to rhetorical texts. The larger the distance between the author and the recipient gets, the greater the helplessness of the text.

In social media networks, recipients often do not even know the primary author of a message. Hence, the situation is rather similar to that of a literary text. Significantly, social media posters often understand themselves as ‘content creators’ rather than orators. Such content may also appear either completely or partly in visual form, as a picture, video or meme, often without any explicatory text, perhaps just accompanied by a number of guiding hashtags, which need to be interpreted by each recipient according to his or her cognitive and interpretive community background. Hence, the general problems of the concept of visual rhetoric apply. Once a post is out in



the network, its original creator has kind of waived and foregone the authority over its meaning and interpretation. So, even if there was some persuasive intention at the beginning, the poster of a social network message resembles a literary writer much more than an active orator. To be sure, some persuasive effect may very well be produced, but it is not within the original sender's power.

3.2. Interactivity

In contemporary social networks, hierarchies between the sender and the recipient are notably flat. In 1993 already, in his book on *The Electronic Word*, Richard A. Lanham wrote: "What happens when text moves from page to screen? First, the digital text becomes unfixed and interactive. The reader can change it, become writer" (1993, 31). This is a really fundamental difference from the classical one-way electronic media such as radio, TV or video. In fact, as soon as a recipient spots a particular message in a social network, he or she is free to respond, share, forward or rebuke. Thus, within seconds, the recipient can turn into a sender and communicator.

What emerges in this way is a rather complex mycelium-like interactive meshwork of multiple communicators, quite different from the simple idealized model of classical rhetoric with its well-defined roles and agents. It is no longer evident who is active and who is passive in this process. What is more, whereas Rossette-Crake (2022, 103–23) rather perceives a revival of memory and delivery by digital memory aids such as prompters or by multimodal effects such as slideshows for staging presentations more effectively, it may equally be said that even the classical orator-governed rhetorical processes of memory and delivery entirely move over onto the recipient's side: It is some anonymous internet cloud or the recipient's computer hard drive that a posted message gets stored on, and it is the recipient, and the recipient alone, who decides when, and even if at all, the process of delivery will be activated. It is thus the recipient who ultimately controls and navigates both memory and delivery. The speaker's or orator's role, by contrast, gets dwarfed and fades away.

3.3. Anonymity

Another important factor, I think, is the potential anonymity of senders in many social networks. In most of these networks, it is possible to hide one's identity by posting under a so-called nickname. And even if senders are identified by their real e-mail accounts, some e-mail addresses are cryptic enough to effectively hide or obscure the identity of their holders. As a consequence, the important impact of the speaker's character and reliability (*ethos* in Aristotelian terms), so pivotal in the theory of rhetorical communication, drops out and vanishes. This anonymity has at least two unpleasant effects: First, it makes it possible to post any kind of aggressive, offensive or abusive content without any risk of being held personally accountable; and second, the dwindling of the *ethos* factor shifts all the weight of non-rational persuasiveness onto the side of a corrupted *pathos*.

Consequently, even if modern dual models of argument processing such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Petty and Wegener 1999; O'Keefe 2008) explicitly allow for both *ethos* and *pathos* as determining factors of what they call the "peripheral route" of argument processing, in digital social media this well-balanced equilibrium gets seriously disturbed and destabilized in favour of a strong prevalence of irrational appeals to the emotional state of the recipients' minds, especially so to 'bad' emotions such as fear, outrage, hate or envy.



3.4. Transitivity

A particularly typical feature of digital social networks is the transitivity of messages from one sender to another. This effect is basically parasitic on the interactive character of these networks. Due to the latter, recipients can easily switch roles to sender and share or forward particular content to their own community of friends or followers. Moreover, this can happen in almost no time and to multiple addressees simultaneously, which leads to the effect of a particularly popular message “going viral”. But in this process, not only does a message get replicated infinitely, it also gets progressively detached and disconnected from its initial creator. What is more, while the original source gets more and more obliterated and concealed by multiple reposting, each reposter again boosts the message with his or her own parasitic authority. Hence, the paradoxical effect is that the more the distance from the original source increases, the more the impact of the message on recipients will snowball.

3.5. Artificial Intelligence

A pretty novel and most alarming threat to the orator’s role in social networks, however, is the growing influence and impact of artificial intelligence. By the use of automated generative AI chatbots such as ChatGPT or similar Large Language Models, it is meanwhile possible to generate network content completely from scratch without any intelligent human source involved that could be held accountable. In its ultimate consequence, this development would mean the total eclipse of the orator’s role in digital networks. This is to say that uncontrolled purely artificial content may be under way in social networks, or, what is even more frightening, fake content that is created by the use of artificial intelligence to look deceptively realistic.

The danger is pretty real, for examples are not far to seek. For instance, during the turmoil in Los Angeles in the summer of 2025 following protests against mass deportations of allegedly illegal immigrants by agents of ICE, on June 7, 2025 the notorious Trump supporter David J. Harris Jr. posted on Facebook a picture showing a huge pallet of bricks, accompanied by the text “Soros funded organizations have ordered countless pallets of bricks to be placed near ICE facilities to be used by Democrat militants against ICE. What’s your reaction?” A simple fact check by a reverse image search published by *AFP Fact Check* on June 11 (McCarthy 2025) disclosed that the picture actually stemmed from the PR website of a Malaysian construction hardware dealer and had been uploaded no less than eight years earlier to a Malaysian online marketplace.

Such deepfakes even attempt to conjure up alleged catastrophic events in order to create panic and distrust within societies at large. Especially the popular video platform TikTok is a notorious source of such fakes. Quite recently, for instance, in April and May 2025, in Germany, AI-faked sham pictures of a deadly truck attack on a market in Dresden, or of an alleged terrorist bomb attack on a fast-train bridge were posted and broadcast on TikTok (see Rohwedder 2025). The problem was that despite glaring orthographic errors in the accompanying texts all these fakes were not only taken for real by many recipients following TikTok, but also shared and reposted multiply, i.e. they “went viral” and promptly provoked hundreds of outraged comments about these alleged catastrophic events having been deliberately and irresponsibly hushed up by government and standard media, since they were never reported there (of course they could not possibly be, since they had never happened; but none of those blind reposters ever took the pains to double-check). What is more, self-governed algorithms based on and steered by mindless counts of clicks and likes (a mechanism known as clickbaiting) consequently also cybernetically reinforce such effects.



Such cases of rampant misinformation and concomitant societal disruption can only be fought by educating public audiences to take a critical stance and acquire rational and critical ability to effectively debunk utter fakes.

4. Conclusion

These five points (multimodality, interactivity, anonymity, transitivity and the intrusion of artificial intelligence; perhaps more could be added) strongly suggest that communication in digital social networks progressively and rapidly moves toward a complete disposal of the role of a speaker or orator. Content once posted online almost autonomously and uncontrolledly makes its way through the platforms. Especially in recent times, platform owners increasingly refuse to exert any sort of control under the pretext of freedom of speech.

Also, recipient users progressively act irresponsibly by taking at face value whatever they find posted that fits with their preconceived worldviews and 'belief-boxes'. In a paper I wrote a couple of years ago (Kraus 2024), I argued that the selection of content worthy of getting attention by users of social media is basically guided by the cognitive principle of relevance. However, this relevance is mainly defined in terms of their personal views.

Here is the point where Fish's theories come in again. Fish's long-standing theory that recipients do not really act as autonomous individual personalities, but are dependent on the influence of their various interpretive communities, seems to be surprisingly borne out with respect to the effect of the odious filter bubbles and echo chambers that tend to constantly self-reinforce themselves and suppress any potential counterargument. As pointed out earlier, search algorithms lead in the same direction. In addition, since the eclipse of the orator's role also entails a loss of the corrective effect of oratorical *ethos*, appeals to irrational *pathos* also play a decisive role in that selection process.

As rhetoricians and argumentation theorists, we must watch these trends with concern. Unless a new and sustainable model for reliable standards of rational communication in social media networks can be found, there is a serious danger that these self-referred and self-sustaining communicative bubbles will entirely lose contact with reality, yet nonetheless continue to have a detrimental influence on actual politics. Warning examples are at hand. Especially in our professional capacity as rhetoricians, we should therefore resist these developments and actively insist as much as we can on the importance of the classical rhetorical communication model with a strong and visible role of a speaker or orator endowed with good and reliable expertise.

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