

Expediency and Ethics

TylerSmeltekop

ABSTRACT

In this piece by Steven Katz, he analyzes a memo written by a Nazi officer named Just that made several recommendations regarding improvements to be made to a gassing truck; the goal being to facilitate more expedient extermination. Katz ties in concepts from Aristotle's teaching, asserting that the lack of ethos in the memo allows for such professional discourse on incredibly controversial issues. Ultimately, he argues that ethos in communications within a discourse community must exist in order for it to be healthy, and that Hitler managed to actually create an "ethical" justification for the Final Solution.

I agree with his assertions, and will attempt to show how the points he puts forth directly impact professional writers and technical writers.

References to class readings

Katz, Steven. The Ethic of Expediency. Central Works in Technical Communications. Ed. Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Stuart A. Selber. New York: Oxford U. Press, 2004. 195-210.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Nazi regime was an organization like any other political party, in that its members required standardized forms of writing communication that would ensure even understanding among any who read a communiqué or memo. In addition, they also had their own discourse community, complete with its own jargon, morals, and beliefs.

However, there is no denying that unlike any other political party, it killed millions and caused the death of millions more. Katz drills into the rhetorical content of this memo, noting especially that the particularly cold tone of the memo allows for efficient discussion of the "load".

Aristotle weights heavily here, with his teachings in the *Rhetoric* that asserts "deliberation seeks to determine not ends, but means to ends, i.e. what it is most useful to do." Katz goes a step further, and says that the teachings of Aristotle were followed almost to the letter to use rhetoric as a propaganda tool for Nazis.

2. ETHOS IN JUST'S MEMO

First, it is important to note, as Katz did, that the memo written by Just is perfectly composed. It follows the traditional structure and is crystal clear in his recommendations and discussion of his observations. However, there is one critical flaw.

Ethos is defined as "the moral element of character". Katz demonstrates through the example of the Nazi memo that communication without ethos is flawed in its lack of

humanistic discourse. Following is a list of what I would call non-human classifiers:

- Normal load
- Full capacity
- Pieces
- Merchandise

These terms are used to refer to Jews who are packed into gassing trucks. The word choice, no doubt carefully picked by Just, dehumanizes the topic to the point where it is possible to discuss the issue without evoking strong emotional response. I imagine Just pulling out his thesaurus at one point, judging by his unusual choice of "merchandise", showing perhaps he had simply run out of synonyms. By removing the ethos of the situation, Just makes it possible to recommend the most efficient, expedient manner in which to employ a Final Solution-on-the-go.

2.1 Ethos, Hitler, and Aristotle

Since so much of Katz's arguments revolve around Aristotle's teachings in relation to Hitler's propaganda program, I feel it necessary to summarize them here.

Aristotle's teachings play a heavy role in Katz's arguments that ethos must be a part of technical communication, and quotes him frequently. Essentially, the main points cited are as follows:

- Katz: "*Praxis* (social action) is not amoral, but rather ethical insofar as praxis involves *phronesis* (practical wisdom or prudence)." This interpretation of Aristotle's concept of expedient rhetoric is one I prefer, as it allows for praxis to be humanistic to some extent by acknowledging that it does involve the human process of cogitation.
- Aristotle: "Practical wisdom must be accompanied by moral virtue to supply the right end, that it is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom, nor practically wise without being good." Here the assertion is made that a balance must be achieved to effectively communicate. However, Hitler manipulates what is moral virtue, and this is the key to his justification of the Holocaust.

2.1.1 Applied to Hitler

We have already seen what the removal of ethos can allow a writer to do in treatment of sensitive topics. However, this alone cannot make a mass murder even remotely morally acceptable. This is where Aristotle's concept of means to ends comes in. "Science and technology as moral expedients could be used to generate a 'new philosophy,' a 'spiritual foundation,' a 'fanatical outlook.'" Hitler realized that science and technology embody objective ethos, and can become an

ethical argument in of itself. By making “progress” the ultimate end, he can justify anything—even the Holocaust—if he can show that these “sub-humans” have to be exterminated for the safety of the Aryan race.

This is where propaganda comes in. As Hitler said, “The whole art consists in doing this so skillfully that everyone will be convinced that the fact is real, the process necessary, the necessity correct.” He further notes that the only effective way to (ab)use rhetoric is to make it directional, focusing only on one side, one view, and indoctrinate that into the members.

3. *ETHOS* IN TECHNICAL WRITING

We already see this justification of expediency in our own culture. Indeed, it is not a new idea that the Western society is very progress-oriented. Look at the products we buy. Invariably now, they are marketed in ways that highlight their efficiency (in the case of machines), convenience (in the case of cleaning products, for example), or health (in the case of food). Nearly all contain some scientific or technological rhetoric in the reason as to why we need the product, or should have that particular brand over another. Suddenly, the justification methods used by Hitler become very easy to understand.

Hitler showed only one side, a small set of “facts” to the proletariat, in the same way that advertisers hawk only the most important features of their product. As technical writers, we must keep in mind what we are writing about. In certain situations, ethos is not a factor—instruction manuals, for example. There is no passion or emotion involved in describing the procedure of using a stick shift. There is, however, in the death of a family. A journalist may be faced with the challenge of providing the balance Aristotle spoke of, by factually presenting the event, but without alienating the

inherent emotional content from interpretation. Website designers must keep in mind the “means to ends” that their visitors come to the site for, but also at the same time, observe the ethos of design and aesthetics.

Another example is one that we have just seen in class, a letter written in response to a woman fearing for her life, believing her car’s air bags may kill her if deployed. The response is cold, indifferent, and completely fails to assuage the woman’s concerns. The tone and style of writing in the response does not acknowledge the very human manner of which the woman writes to the company, as if she were writing to an individual, not a multinational car company.

4. CLOSING THOUGHTS

There is a lesson to take from this reading: by ignoring the emotions inherent both in the writer and reader, or by manipulating the method/means-to-ends relationship, the final product will be *false*. I use the term in the sense that the writing will fail in its goal to transmit Truth in a way that is acceptable for both the author and audience.

We, as technical writers, must keep in mind the vast network of human experience that is at work every time a document is read and interpreted. Remember Just’s memo as an extreme example of what can happen if ethos is no longer part of the equation.

5. REFERENCES

- [1] Katz, Steven. The Ethic of Expediency. Central Works in Technical Communications. Ed. Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Stuart A. Selber. New York: Oxford U. Press, 2004. 195-210.