

# Responsibility, Rhetorical Accountability, and the *Techne* of Environmental Communication.

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As a point of provocation and departure from what may be the general thrust of this roundtable discussion, I want to borrow the words of psychologist E. Scott Geller (2002):

When you are held accountable, you are asked to reach a certain objective or goal, often within a designated time period. But you might not feel responsible to meet the deadline. Or, you might feel responsible enough to complete the assignment, but that’s all. You do only what’s required and no more. In this case, accountability is the same as responsibility. There are times, however, when you extend your responsibility beyond accountability. You do more than what’s required. You go beyond the call of duty as defined by a particular accountability system. This is often essential when it comes to protecting environmental resources. Long-term proenvironmental behavior requires that people extend their responsibility for the environment beyond that for which they are held accountable. (p. 535)

If Geller is correct (and I think he is), when we speak of rhetorical responsibility *qua* accountability in the public sphere of environmentalism, to whom are we thus beholding? Is it merely our well-intentioned selves seeking a sustainable world for loved ones and offspring? Are we responsible for places that provide a much larger abiotic and biotic backdrop for the drama of human accountability? If we indeed have a rhetorical ability to respond to environmental crisis, do we not also shoulder the burden of gaining responsible knowledge, at least insofar as we avoid misrepresentation? Alternatively, as scholars of environmental communication regularly called upon to advise students, activists, and clients, are we only responsible for teaching others how to sound an alarm of pending ecocide and thus not accountable for any side effects that may attend our listeners’ actions? Or are we, in fact, accountable for encouraging truly communal processes that privilege oftentimes divergent values or means-to-ends and, in doing so, entice the entire community to be responsible for what happens in the environment?

My experience in research, teaching, consultation, mediation, facilitation, administration, and activism leads me to believe that it is the responsibility of rhetoricians (i.e., “rhetoric” *per se*, can neither be held responsible nor accountable since it is an unthinking thing) to encourage community responsibility for shared environmental resources; as scholar-citizens, we must be accountable for ensuring that those we teach or advise maximize stakeholders’ voice, standing, and influence whenever they engage in environmental communication (Senecah, 2004; cf. Simmons, 2007). In other words, a rhetoric of response-ability goes well beyond having good intentions when addressing environmental exigence or advising others. Rather, as one of my students has observed (Mareck, 2008), we ought consider the possibility of trying “to control the

fundamentally amoral nature” of rhetoric in practicing an “intentional hegemony” (p. 16). We need to encourage those we engage to *accept* that others in our communities typically believe that they are doing what is right by the environment, *understand* the science and politics that ground environmental controversies, *appreciate* that opponents may be more correct in their assumptions than we in our own, and *act* in concert with others to achieve consensual outcomes without prejudice.

The relationship I am suggesting between rhetorical purposes (as well as, by extension, sophistic pedagogy) and community engagement is certainly not a new idea. For example, Aristotle placed rhetoric in the hierarchy of wisdoms as a *techne*, or knowledge of how to produce material benefits for a larger society, directed by a socially magnetized moral compass, or *phronesis* (Atwill & Lauer, 1995). In turn, any effort after environmental rhetoric, including what we might advise activists to *do* to advance their causes, has an implied *telos* to serve the *common* good. A careful reading of Quintilian and Cicero would reveal the same bead and horizon (e.g., Walzer, 2006). And, in a more contemporary epoch, Habermas conflates *techne* with *praxis*, knowledge of how to act for the good *as well as* to take right action (Dunne, 1993). To accept the very idea of community is to be held accountable to its standards more so than personal norms, in addition to being responsible for the continuance of that community in excess of self-interest.

I believe a bonafide commitment to community engagement better serves the ends of environmental sustainability and better reflects the bases for rhetorics of response-ability than that which is all too commonly found in the fracas of resource conflict. For example, in my home community an international mining company has identified the only domestic source of nickel we have at present in the United States. The value of this ore body is estimated in the billions of dollars resulting in millions of dollars of potential influx into the local economy during the life of the project. Aware of the company’s intent to extract an ore that is associated with sulphide minerals (which, historically, have resulted in Superfund-size legacy issues)—fearing that the aesthetics of a locally-valued place would be corrupted even if scientific industry could mitigate ecological disasters—grassroots and national environmental organizations mobilized quite early on in the process to stop the mine.

The first step in opposition to the mining venture was to proclaim through the use of graphic images-from-elsewhere and appeals to the irreparable that an “open-pit” mine would result in environmental devastation for the whole region, including two watersheds and the entirety of Lake Superior. In response, the environmental engineer heading-up the proposed project insisted that this would be an underground mine with a quite limited surface footprint, that the company had a good track record with another sulfide mine in the region, that acid mine-drainage could be prevented through the application of modern science, that habitats would be restored and preserved in the wake of operations, and that a community advisory board would be empanelled to provide oversight. Next, the opposition argued that the State of Michigan did not have sufficient regulatory control and that a new set of standards would have to be crafted; thus, the company participated with state government and NGO representatives to create what has been called some of the most stringent sulfide mining laws in the country. Nonetheless, even as they celebrated a victory in promulgating regulations they abetted, mining opponents bemoaned the fact that intangible issues such as quality-of-life impacts were not included in the legal standards.

Consequently, a campaign was initiated to petition state and federal agencies to deny the mining permit insofar as the company was not taking into account such extra-legal issues not addressed in the new laws. Following the ensuing and lengthy NEPA-governed Environmental Impact Statement process, the company took several additional steps to address local concerns (e.g., offering to build a new road to lessen truck traffic on an existing byway) as it filed the necessary permits. When the permits to extract the ore were eventually granted, opposition groups filed suit; the company continued to work with its community advisory board until direct action on the part of the mining opponents disrupted the ongoing process and prevented dialogue and an exchange of information that is at the heart of risk communication processes. What we are left with is a divided community, a group of well-meaning stakeholders now largely excluded from the public process, the prospect of lengthy litigation, and dim chances for future collaboration.

The upshot of the preceding tale is to suggest that “the will to do well” is not a sufficient condition for the cultivation of communal stewardship if, in effect, saplings of distrust and failed expectations rise up from the rhetorical field. Crying “Wolf!” (e.g., all-too-often we charge industry with a rapacious need to devour resources thereby irreparably ruining landscapes or ecosystems) and attendant blowback effects (i.e., since risk did not materialize into ruin, future abuses *may* be more likely due to lack of vigilance or widespread skepticism) generally outlive pyrrhic victories won at the cost of community engagement and empowerment. I would argue that, in the case at hand, mining opponents eschewed their responsibility to *accept* that the company believed that it was conducting business in an environmentally benign manner, to *understand* the science-based risks of modern mining methods in a highly regulated context, *appreciate* that the company might be more correct in its science than they were in their passions, and to *act* in a collaborative fashion to ensure that the natural and social community would not be harmed. It is a rhetorical disservice that, at the end of the day, the whole community may be held accountable for the arguably irresponsible action of a few zealots who had the ability but not the sensibility required of all who engage in the *techne* of environmental rhetoric.

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