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Visual Rhetoric in Virtual Spaces

Rozália Klára BAKÓ

Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania
Social Sciences Department
bakorozalia@sapientia.siculorum.ro

Abstract. The Internet has reshaped the way organisations convey messages to their target audiences. Despite the availability of interactive web applications, online presence of companies, foundations, or governmental agencies lag far behind individual use. We propose a comparative case study of organisational online spaces, with a focus on ethno-pagan groups and movements from Romania and Hungary. Our analysis looks both at the use of Web 2.0 features like blogs, RSS feeds, video- and audio applications, and at the visual rhetoric of the ethno-pagan web pages under study. Main results show a minimal interactivity on the organisations' official websites, and more advanced online communication practices on alternative spaces, such as Facebook and other social networking sites. Visual metaphors used are concerned with both religious iconography and right leaning political messages. This paper is part of a broader research project funded by the Institute for Research Programmes.[1]

Keywords: ethno-pagan organisations, visual rhetoric, online spaces

[1] Institute for Research Programmes – Sapientia Foundation, Cluj: *Magyar és román újpogány csoportok web-retorikája* (*Web Rhetoric of Romanian and Hungarian Neopagan Groups*). Project description at: http://semeistos.wordpress.com/projects/neopagans/

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1. Introduction

1.1. Topic analysis: concepts and methods

The way information and communication technologies have reshaped the organisational landscape is hardly contested: interactions among individuals and groups and their daily spaces, either real or virtual, are equally affected (Ropolyi 2006: 112). The process of organising has changed dramatically, with the increased mobility of individuals and communities: informality – the ability of "organising without organisations" – is expanding rapidly (Shirky 2008: 143). We are linked in a tight net of resources and relationships (Barabási 2002), and "networked individualism" (Coco 2011: 2) is becoming part of our lives.

Although organisational actors strive to catch up with the new communication opportunities, there are multiple divides between "digital natives" and "digital immigrants", as Prensky put it (2001: 3). Argyiris observed that improving communication, innovation and learning "are inhibited by both individual defensive reasoning and organisational defensive routines" (1994: 80). Changing habits is a disruptive move from the comfort zone to the realm of challenges. How does online communication work for organisations built on the "recombinant narrative" of *mythos* and *logos* (Cardone 2007: 5), or – as Hubbes has formulated it (2011: 181) – of ancient and youth voices? Our comparative analysis of Hungarian and Romanian neopagan organisations is aimed at answering this question.

A key concept of this study is "ethno-paganism", a term coined by Hubbes (2011b: 102) in order to describe both the strong ethnic character and the reconstructionist nature of Romanian and Hungarian religious movements labelled as neopagan. Previously Schnirelman (2002: 197) has highlighted the ethnocentric touch of neopagan discourses originating from the former Communist countries of Central-Eastern Europe.

Our comparative analysis is aimed at mapping similarities and differences between Hungarian and Romanian ethno-pagan web spaces in terms of interactivity and visual rhetoric. We have chosen an unobtrusive research focused on multimedia content freely available online for two main reasons, as noted in a previous study (Bakó & Hubbes 2011: 129): on the one hand, online communication is concerned with "presentational rhetoric", as opposed to "operational rhetoric" or insider interaction (Van Maanen & Schein 1977: 20); on the other hand, one can gain access to religious groups' and organisations' inner life only if s/he is immersed in their daily realities.

We have used two main frameworks of analysis: for the interactivity, we applied Hock's criteria of digital environment assessment (2003: 629); for visuality, we selected a set of criteria from Hoffman and Ford's Aristotelian framework of

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logos, ethos and *pathos* (2010: 49). Hocks proposed a comprehensive framework for assessing rhetorical style in World Wide Web environments:

I. *Audience Stance*: whether the audience is invited, encouraged (or not) to participate in online spaces.

II. *Transparency*: whether online spaces use established conventions for print, graphic design, film, and Web pages. The more they use familiar conventions, the more transparent they are to the audience.

III. *Hybridity*: whether online spaces combine visual and verbal designs. Hybridity encourages both authors and audiences to create multifaceted identities.

A more traditional, or Web 1.0 online communication is less interactive and less multimedial, whereas a more advanced, "Web 2.0" space (O'Reilly 2007: 17) is connected to a wide range of audiences through a large set of tools and channels. A rhetoric that employs mostly traditional, text-centred tools – or "Web 1.0 rhetoric" – has a low level of audience involvement (low interactivity), a high level of transparency (or a scarce use of hypertexts) and a low level of hybridity (the lack of, or static use of multimedia), with more room given to plain texts than to hypertexts. In contrast, a "Web 2.0 rhetoric" has a high level of audience involvement (it is very interactive), a low level of "transparency" as defined by Hocks (because information is organised hypertextually, not in a linear way) and it is very hybrid, by using multimedia features: images, slideshows, sounds, videos and sharing buttons for Twitter, Facebook, Delicious and similar applications.

Hoffman and Ford (2010) have developed a set of criteria in order to apply the Aristotelian theory to organisational rhetoric: *logos* is concerned with reasoning, *ethos* is focused on ways of legitimation and community building, whereas *pathos* is related to value advocacy and the use of unifying symbols. A detailed presentation of the framework is shown in Table 2, section 2.2. of this study. Parts of this analysis have already been published, either concerned with theoretical issues (Bakó & Hubbes 2011), or with empirical ones (Bakó 2011), while visual analysis is an original contribution of this paper, based on accumulated knowledge and empirical research.

1.2. Strengths and limitations of online rhetorical analysis

While providing a rich set of data in a comfortable manner, unobtrusive research has several limitations in general, and for organisational research in particular. Online environments take an increasing share of the global communication space, and researchers gain affordable access to an emergent social

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reality worth studying. However, when it comes to shades and nuances, it is crucial to "intrude" into the human environments cached behind the scene.

Organisations are particularly vulnerable to a simplifying vision on front-stages' and back-stages' symbolic interaction, to put it in Goffman's terms, requiring a careful analysis in online spaces (Robinson 2007: 93). Meanwhile, religious organisations are expanding their ties in cyberspace, and thus online communication is an important dimension to consider (Berger 2010; Campbell 2010). At the same time, visual approach is gaining space in the field of organisation studies: research networks, collaborative projects and conferences are arising globally, such as the InVisio initiative[2] (Warren 2012: 124).

A productive continuation of the present research would be an obtrusive research, by using sociological and ethnographic methods: observation, interviewing, focus group discussion and survey. Expanding research from a selection of neopagan organisations to a wider range of stakeholders – individuals, groups and institutional actors involved in shaping religious life – would be also beneficial for a broader picture on the neopagan phenomenon under study.

2. Organisational rhetoric online: interactivity and visuality

2.1. Interactivity of the organisations under study

Building on a previous research (Bakó 2011), we shall highlight the way Hungarian and Romanian ethno-pagan organisations are inhabiting virtual spaces, both through their official websites and through alternative channels such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and blogging platforms.

We have selected three Romanian and three Hungarian organisations, based upon the principle of variety in terms of their level of institutionalisation and ideology.

Most ethno-pagan organisations analysed are in the Web 1.0 stage, with a low or medium level of interactivity and a high level of transparency – namely a traditional, text-centric design. The only organisation using properly Web 2.0 features is B (Dacia Liberation Front) – a Romanian ethno-pagan organisation founded by a young sociologist working with media. There is presumably a generational digital divide between the guru and his/her young followers – a theme to be analysed by more obtrusive research methods.

[2] International Network for Visual Studies in Organisations, at http://in-visio.org/

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Table 1: Interactivity of the ethno-pagan organisation under study (Bakó 2011: 175)

Criteria of analysis Organisations analysed	*Audience stance*	*Transparency*	*Hybridity*
A. Dacia Revival International Society[3] (Ro)	**Low** Static webpage, poor content provision	**High** Linear, text-centric, traditional design	**Low** Mainly texts are available
B. Frontul de Eliberare a Daciei[4] (Ro) [Dacia Liberation Front]	**Medium** No comments, yet Facebook causes	**Low** Blog features better used in the sidebar	**High** Video, text, Facebook links
C. Gebeleizis Association[5] (Ro)	**Low** No comments, no interaction	**Medium** Broken links, difficult navigation	**Medium** Some video, audio tools used
D. Magok Vagyunk[6] (Hu) [We Are Seeds]	**Medium** Several online spaces of the guru linked	**Medium** A wide range of topical links	**Medium** Scarce use of video and other tools
E. Ősmagyar Egyház[7] (Hu) [Ancient Hungarian Church]	**Low** No interaction with audiences	**High** Linear, text-centric design	**Low** No use of multimedial tools
F. Tengri Babba Community[8] (Hu)	**Medium** Forum for registered users, ordering forms	**Medium** Intuitive button, yet difficult to navigate	**Low** Text-centric; audio streaming available

Note: Ro= Romanian, Hu=Hungarian

2.1. Online visuality of the organisations under study

A complex rhetorical analysis of organisational discourses can be performed by using Aristotelian criteria, adapted by Hoffman and Ford (2010: 49), as in the table below. Criteria used for visual analysis by the present study are shown in boldfaced characters.

[3] http://www.dacia.org/dacia-rev/
[4] http://casanoastra-romania-dacia.blogspot.com/
[5] http://gebeleizis.org/
[6] http://magokvagyunk.blogspot.com/
[7] http://www.osmagyaregyhaz.hu/nyitooldal
[8] http://tengri.hu/

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Table 2: Organisational rhetoric according to Aristotelian criteria

Aristotle's Canons	*Overarching Rhetorical Categories*	*Traditional Forms*	*Forms as Found in Organisational Rhetoric*	
Invention	Ethos/ Credibility	Intelligence Character Goodwill	Corporate social legitimacy: Competence, community	
	Pathos/ Emotion	**Needs** **Values**	Values advocacy	Explicit appeals Upholding of shared values Philantropic activities Praise for individuals
			Identification	Identification Antithesis Common ground **Assumed "we"** **Unifying symbols**
			Needs	
	Logos	Claims, evidence, reasoning: inductive, deductive	Claims, evidence, reasoning Organisational entymeme	
Organisation	**Organisational patterns**	Cronological **Topical** **Spatial** Problem-solution	**Traditional organisational patterns** **Visual placement of arguments** **Website navigation**	
Style	Style/ Aesthetic categories	**Metaphor** Language devices	**Visual elements** **Branding** Language or other choices Music or other sound	
Delivery	Verbal and nonverbal behaviour	Gestures, movements, vocal quality	Media selection: TV, print, Internet, public meeting etc.	
Memory	Memorisation	Memory tricks	Non-relevant in organisational rhetoric	

For the purpose of assessing visual rhetoric we have selected a few relevant criteria from the framework above: pathos, organising information, and style of presentation. A more text-centric analysis should be rather concerned with logos,

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ethos, delivery and memory – the latter also relevant for organisational rhetoric.[9] For a visual analysis, text-centric criteria are less relevant. On their official websites, the six organisations under study show little attention for aesthetic and style, except for two of them: the Hungarian Tengri Babba Community and the Romanian Gebeleisis Society – both analysed in detail in a previous article (Bakó & Hubbes 2011). Below we shall look at the six organisations according to the selected Aristotelian criteria, as highlighted in Table 2.

Pathos: assumed "we", unifying symbols – we have analysed the level of visual assertiveness connected with the organisations' potential audiences: the use of appealing symbols, the link between textual and visual messages in relation with key stakeholders. Since these groups claim to be religious, we also looked at the level of religiosity as stated visually and in their key presentational messages at the "About" or "Who we are" sections. Each organisation analysed has made visible efforts to galvanise its target audience around more or less explicitly stated values and symbols. However, if we rank these efforts from the best to the worst performance, the order is C, B, F, D, E, A.[10] The most aggressive visual rhetoric is shown by the Gebeleisis Society (C), with a far right supremacist discourse and an effort of rebranding during 2011. As a result of the redesign effort, the dark background-based imagery has been replaced with a light grey, more friendly colour scheme, but the red header still reminds us of the visual assertivity of the original Gebeleisis Society web space. The most religious rhetoric is shown by the Tengri Babba Community (F), with a consistent use of shamanist symbols throughout its sub-pages: the world tree in the middle is surrounded, in a genuine visual design, by intuitive buttons directing the viewer towards the Tengri Community (symbolised by a Shaman drum), Images, Music, Poetry, or Traditions – represented with minimalist, colourful and more or less conventional symbols. The less effort for visual branding is clearly shown by the Dacia Revival International Society (A), focused mainly on displaying the minimal texts for a bureaucratic legitimation, on a visually neglected online space – as presented in a previous study (Bakó 2011: 177). B, D, and E are more concerned with ethno-centric messages than with religious symbols.

Organisation patterns: topical and spatial placement of visual arguments, website navigation – almost each organisation, except for F (the Tengri Babba Community) are placing their online visual elements in a traditional way: in the header of the online space and on side-bars. The Tengri Babba Community web page is built around a vertical axis of symmetry and the leading symbol is the

[9] We disagree with Hoffman and Ford (2010) and consider that in line with current research, organisational memory and its corrolar, organisational amnesia are relevant for organisational rhetoric analysis.

[10] See Table 1 for the organisations' names

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world tree. The Gebeleisis society (C) website is also visually compelling, with dark northern mythological symbols, yet hard to navigate and not user-friendly. If we rank the level of visual organisation of information, from the most organised to the least navigable one, the order is: F, B, D, A, E, C.

Style and aesthetics: visual elements and branding are concerned with the quantity and the quality of multimedial elements displayed on the organisational websites. Again, the most visible and productive efforts were made by the Gebeleisis Society and the Tengri Babba Community, with several sub-sections directing the viewer towards pictures, or music. The Dacia Liberation Front and We are Seeds seem to make efforts towards visualising their messages, but their spaces lack usability and aesthetics of web design: clearly the focus is on the content and the textual messages. The lowest visual performance has been attained by the Ancient Hungarian Church and the Dacia Revival International Society, with their lack of user-friendly features such as appealing colour schemes, good contrast for readability and the sort. The high-low ranking of the web design aesthetics would be, accordingly: C, F, B, D, E, A. Let us summarise these results by assigning points to the ranks: I=5, II=4, III=3, IV=2, V=1, VI=0, as shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Visuality of the ethno-pagan organisations under study

Criteria of analysis / Organisations analysed	*Pathos*	*Organisation*	*Style*	*Total score*
A. Dacia Revival Society	0	2	0	**2**
B. Dacia Liberation Front	4	4	3	**11**
C. Gebeleizis Association	5	0	5	**10**
D. We Are Seeds	2	3	2	**7**
E. Ancient Hungarian Church	1	1	1	**3**
F. Tengri Babba Community	3	5	4	**12**

The results are not surprising: even at first glance, the differences concerning visual performance, navigability and the power of symbols are compelling. The Tengri Babba Community and the Dacia Liberation Front have the highest scores, followed by the Gebeleisis Society – a strongly branded organisation with few user-friendly features though. Dacia Revival Society, Ancient Hungarian Church and even We are Seeds lag far behind in terms of visual performance.

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3. Conclusions

This study of organisational rhetoric was focused on three Hungarian and three Romanian ethno-pagan online spaces. The two main areas of assessment – interactivity and visuality – were based on frameworks developed by Hocks (2003) for interactivity and by Hoffman & Ford (2010) for visuality.

The results of the assessment along the two main criteria are interrelated: organisations with a better performance on interactivity – the Tengri Babba Community, Dacia Liberation Front and the Gebeleisis Society – have also achieved better scores on visual performance. This is a surprising result because even a passive online space can be designed in a well-structured, aesthetically compelling manner. The scarce use of Web 2.0 features, despite the "facebook effect" (Kirkpatrick 2010: 287) show that recombinant narratives of *mythos* and *logos* are more loaded with tradition than with innovation. Perhaps the rise of "networked individualism" (Coco 2011: 2) will change this landscape in the near future.

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