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INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE

GRAND CHALLENGES AND THE RHETORIC OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

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This Special Issue investigates how rhetoric mobilizes collective action to address grand challenges. While management research has acknowledged the need for collective action in confronting these issues, the role of rhetoric remains underexplored. The papers that comprise this Special Issue collectively demonstrate how rhetoric is indispensable for shaping public discourse, framing critical issues, and challenging entrenched power structures. Beyond persuasion, rhetoric serves as a medium for constructing meaning, fostering shared understanding, and mobilizing stakeholders. Drawing from diverse theoretical and methodological traditions, the contributions in this issue explore the mechanisms by which rhetorical practices reshape cognition and spur collective action. The papers illuminate how language creates systemic change across a broad range of empirical contexts. New rhetorical techniques—such as rhetorical axioms, commensuration, impersonation, and dystopian rhetoric—emerge as critical tools for influencing societal values and facilitating institutional transformation. This issue advances research by integrating rhetorical perspectives with organizational theories, offering novel insights into adaptive responses to grand challenges. By connecting fragmented research streams, we highlight rhetoric's profound capacity to inspire action, bridge ideological divides, and reimagine societal organization in the face of enduring global crises.

The purpose of our special issue is to extend our understanding of how rhetoric shapes collective action for complex social, political, and environmental problems, also known as "grand challenges." We face a range of acute problems—climate change, geopolitical conflicts and war, inequality and poverty, public health, and human rights—each of which pose an existential threat to our assumptions of human progress. It is not surprising, then, that management literature echoes the need for collective action for grand challenges (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2022; George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi & Tihanyi, 2016; McGahan, 2021),

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arguing that the complexity of grand challenges—often presented as wicked problems (Weber & Khademian, 2008)—tends to hamper joint action. Indeed, stakeholders find it difficult to understand and successfully disentangle (corporate) actors' actual and espoused motives when they voice their engagement for grand challenges (Bettinazzi, Jacqueminet, Neumann & Snoeren, 2024). This involves struggles between institutions, and actors at the local, regional, and global levels compete to shape opinion, influence decisions, and legitimize their interests amid grand challenges.

It is therefore surprising that the rhetorical perspective is largely absent from current research on organizing collective action to address grand challenges. We see rhetoric as a prerequisite for mobilizing collective action and triggering institutional change. By shaping public discourse, rhetoric can frame critical issues and challenge entrenched power structures. Thus, this special issue focuses on the pivotal role of rhetoric, as a strategic tool for communication and persuasion, in facilitating the profound social and institutional change required to address grand challenges. We adopt a broad definition of rhetoric that goes beyond mere persuasion, viewing it as the art of shaping reality through language. In this more expansive view, rhetoric fosters common ground by using language to create shared understanding, and by constructing the categories and values that underpin societal norms. Rhetoric is thus more than a tool of persuasion—it is a medium for creating meaning, organizing stakeholders, and coordinating collective action. It serves as a mechanism for influencing others and for creating and negotiating power in a variety of cultural and institutional contexts.

There is a great deal of research on how rhetoric facilitates institutional change (Brown, Ainsworth & Grant, 2012; Cornelissen, Durand, Fiss, Lammers & Vaara, 2015; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Drawing from diverse disciplines, organizational theorists have elaborated the connection between rhetoric and organizational action in organizational communication (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994), organizational commitment (Cheney, 1983), contingency theory (Sillince, 2005), strategic management (Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere & Vaara, 2014), and studies of organizational change (Heracleous & Barrett, 2001). While this body of literature provides various theoretical tools and methods to examine the wider implications of rhetoric in society—particularly its role in enhancing the legitimacy of change (Drori & Honig, 2013; Sorsa & Vaara, 2020; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005)—the rhetorical perspective has only recently started to be incorporated into the grand challenges debate in management research. This debate emphasizes two aspects: it asks (1) how (a change of) institutional logics can support efforts to address grand challenges (Ferraro, Etzion & Gehman, 2015; Gümüsay, Claus & Amis, 2020), and (2) how powerful incumbents use rhetoric to legitimize and maintain the status quo, to thwart or delay actions aimed at addressing these challenges (Grodal & O'Mahoney, 2017; Lefsrud, Graves & Phillips, 2020; Manning & Reinecke, 2016). While this research offers important insights on the role of rhetoric in the context of grand challenges, it fails to demonstrate precisely how rhetoric shapes collective action. As a result, our understanding of how rhetoric can help resolve critical societal issues remains limited.

This gap in knowledge is critical, as major crises or shocks often raise heated rhetoric that is, by its very nature, political, conflicting, and idiosyncratic. Such contesting rhetoric embedded in persuasive discourse that attempts to promote certain versions of a societal reality drawing on conflicting values and ideologies also contributes to sharp, sometimes unreconcilable, divisions within and between societies (Freedman & Medway, 2003). Consequently, we see this special issue as an opportunity to connect and integrate the currently fragmented research streams on collective action and rhetoric, as combining these theoretical traditions offers new perspectives on research on adaptive responses to grand challenges. As the rhetorical perspective has emerged as both a key theoretical construct and an effective toolkit for practical application in organizational and social life, it helps to explicate strategic choices and outcomes in various setting and among diverse stakeholders. By so doing, it can provide insights on how social actors form coalitions and navigate complex social problems with far-reaching transformational implications.

A PRAGMATIST RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Throughout history, transformative movements—from civil rights to environmental justice—have relied on the power of rhetorical appeals to sway public opinion, galvanize support, and build coalitions across diverse groups. At its core, rhetoric provides the means for constructing compelling narratives that can inspire action for a common cause, generate empathy, and redefine social values, making it a key driver in not only articulating grievances but also envisioning new possibilities for societal organization (Burke, 1969; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, [1969] 1971).

Rhetoric can tap into the emotions, identities, and shared experiences of communities, making it

essential for creating the solidarity needed to sustain long-term change. Whether through speeches, written texts, or social or visual media, rhetoric strategically engages audiences by appealing to their sense of justice, morality, and common purpose. This dynamic and deliberate exchange of ideas, however instrumental it may be, fosters a participatory process where ideas evolve and change is negotiated, ultimately enabling societies and institutions to reflect and adapt.

A contemporary example of how language facilitates institutional change can be found in the strategic use of personal pronouns in public discourse (Gustafsson Sendén, Renström & Lindqvist, 2021; Liu, 2024; Moberg & Eriksson, 2013). The recent shift toward more inclusive and intentional pronoun usage, particularly in discussions around gender identity, reflects a broader transformation in societal values and institutional practices. By encouraging individuals and organizations to adopt gender-neutral or gender-affirming pronouns, rhetoric plays a critical role in dismantling exclusionary norms and promoting inclusivity. This linguistic shift does not merely alter how people speak—it reshapes how institutions think about identity, belonging, and the recognition of marginalized communities. In this way, the seemingly simple act of changing language signals a deeper cultural and structural shift within institutions. The power of personal pronouns lies in their capacity to affirm identity and to challenge the status quo. When institutions such as schools, workplaces, and governments adopt policies that encourage or require inclusive pronoun usage, they are not just accommodating individual preferences—they are participating in a larger rhetorical project of institutional transformation. This shift reflects a rethinking of who is visible, whose identities are valid, and whose voices matter. By embedding these changes in language, institutions help to legitimize and normalize new ways of understanding diversity, equity, and inclusion. In doing so, the adoption of inclusive pronouns serves as a clear example of how rhetoric and language can facilitate both symbolic and material changes within society, fostering greater recognition and respect for all individuals.

The philosophical debate over whether language reflects or shapes reality has been a long-standing and contentious issue in various fields, such as linguistics, philosophy, and cognitive science (Katz & Postal, 1991). One camp, often associated with linguistic realism, argues that language is primarily a mirror of reality—a system that humans use to label and describe the world as it objectively exists. From this perspective, words and linguistic structures are tools for categorizing and communicating what is already "out there" in the world. Proponents of this view suggest that while language may evolve or vary across cultures, it remains fundamentally a way to reflect the preexisting structure of reality. This view aligns with a more classical understanding of truth as correspondence, where language's role is to accurately describe external facts.

On the other side of the debate, scholars influenced by linguistic relativism or constructivism assert that language plays an active role in shaping our perception of reality. This view, often associated with the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, suggests that the language we use influences how we think, perceive, and engage with the world (Kay & Kempton, 1984). From this perspective, the categories, metaphors, and narratives embedded in language do not just describe the world; they actively construct the way we understand it. For example, the absence of certain words for specific emotions, experiences, or identities can limit how individuals conceive of those concepts, while the introduction of new terms can expand awareness and understanding. In this way, language becomes a powerful force in shaping both individual consciousness and collective social realities, suggesting that altering language—whether through new pronouns, terminology, or rhetorical frameworks—can profoundly reshape how we experience and interpret the world around us (Boroditsky, 2001, 2011; Drori, Manos, Santacreu-Vasut, Shenkar & Shoham, 2018; Drori, Manos, Santacreu-Vasut & Shoham, 2020).

In this special issue, we eschew such extreme positions. Our perspective is deliberately broad as we are not only interested in the rhetorical strategies or practices but also want to unpack their use in context and develop an understanding of their impact. Thus, we focus on rhetorical work as the overall term that captures the use of language in context—as part of organizational, social, and societal processes and practices. This view resonates with the overall orientation of New Rhetoric (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, [1969] 1971), emphasizing how language is used to influence or effect change. It also reflects rhetorical pragmatism (Booth, 1988; Rorty, 1979), which highlights the practical consequences and "real-life" effects of rhetoric. We further want to stress that rhetoric is not always as intentional or strategic as it is often assumed to be. Instead, it can be highly context-specific at times, reproducing what is already known or expected, while at other times having transformative effects.

PAPERS IN THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The papers that constitute our special issue draw on a range of theoretical and methodological traditions and focus on different grand challenges (see Table 1). Albeit in slightly different ways and with varying emphases, they all illustrate a dynamic and recursive interaction between language and material changes in human cognition and collective action. The papers show variations in this recursive relationship across diverse empirical contexts—corporate land grabbing in developing countries, online hate speech, the sharing economy, social enterprises in Nepal, and mink farms in Denmark during a virus outbreak. Our authors also combine rhetoric with organizational theories, most prominently institutional theory, stakeholder theory, agency theory, and discourse theory.

The unique contribution of our papers, considered collectively, is twofold. First, they provide detailed insight on the *mechanisms* or processes by which the persuasive use of language produces changes in human cognition and collective action. Second, our papers generate useful insights into the *outcomes*, the nature of the changes, produced by the skillful use of language to change cognition and collective action. We elaborate each of these insights below.

MECHANISMS: HOW RHETORIC PRODUCES CHANGES IN SHARED COGNITION AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

Much of prior research on the use of persuasive language to motivate social change remained closely aligned with the rhetorical categories first outlined by Aristotle. A large and still growing body of research has effectively demonstrated the power of ancient techniques of the rhetorical devices of logos, pathos, and ethos. A smaller body of research has explored the lesser-known, but long-standing devices of synecdoche, hyperbole, and others. These approaches, however, are based on a reductionist reading of Aristotle, who suggested that the use of rhetoric is fundamental in a deep understanding of human affairs and the power of language in connecting communities and shaping political or social reality (Farrell, 1993). It is particularly impressive that our authors have avoided the application of these well-known techniques and instead applied grounded theory approaches to identify new, emergent mechanisms.

In their analysis of the rhetorical strategies used by corporate agents to appropriate agricultural land from farmers in Africa, Asia, and South America, for example, Hassan and Prasad (2025) identify four unique rhetorical strategies that were particularly effective. *Axiomatic rhetoric* refers to the use of specific signifiers—words or expressions—that carry deeply entrenched cultural connotations. Because axiomatic signifiers trigger deeply held and highly emotional beliefs, they help land agents avoid the scrutiny and suspicion typically leveled against outsiders. *Rhetorical commensuration*, a term borrowed from the insight of Espeland and Stevens (1998), is an effective means of reducing the institutional complexity of multiple, conflicting logics to simple choices that direct attention to decisions that facilitate land acquisition. *Rhetorical impersonation* is a technique by which sophisticated agents adopt the language, idioms, and manners of speech that help them appear to be local, common, and therefore, trustworthy. Finally, *dystopian rhetoric* is a form of storytelling (and a common sales technique) that motivates favorable choices for land agents by presenting a bleak and inevitable future if the landowner fails to sell their land.

The four rhetorical techniques—rhetorical axioms, rhetorical commensuration, rhetorical impersonation, and dystopian rhetoric—differ from traditional techniques like logos, pathos, and ethos by extending the scope of how language shapes cognition and collective action. While logos, pathos, and ethos appeal to logic, emotion, and credibility to persuade individuals, these newer techniques focus on broader, systemic effects. Rhetorical axioms establish foundational beliefs that underlie entire discourses, shaping how people perceive reality. Rhetorical commensuration simplifies complex ideas into common metrics or comparisons, enabling large-scale consensus. Dystopian rhetoric taps into fears of societal collapse to motivate action by framing current conditions as a crisis. Impersonation rhetoric, by contrast, strategically adopts the voice or persona of an opposing perspective to challenge or reframe dominant narratives. Together, these techniques reveal dynamic ways in which language persuades *and* reshapes collective cognition and action.

An additional rhetorical technique appears in Lee and Sitruk's (2025) analysis of the growth and decline of the "shared economy" as a legitimate form of organizing production and service in society. Here, the authors focus on the role of *exemplars.* The study of exemplars originates in rhetorical theory, but more recently has become a core part of cognitive psychology where exemplar theory suggests that people categorize objects or ideas by comparing them to specific instances (exemplars) stored in memory. Every time we encounter a new item, we

TABLE 1
Summary of the Papers and Their Contributions

Authors and Title	Context	Theories	Rhetorical Mechanisms	Outcomes	Main Contribution
Hakanen et al: "Signaling collective action in ecosystems"	Fishing in the Philippines	Social identity Institutional Rhetorical Discourse	Communicative cooperation through technology	Communicative democracy	Technology (blockchain) is an emergent meta-linguistic form of rhetorical methods of creating cooperation
Hassan & Prasad: "Terra economicus—Rhetorical strategies of legitimation in land grabbing"	Land grabbing in Africa, Asia, and South America	Institutional Legitimacy Rhetorical	Rhetorical axioms, commensuration, impersonation, and dystopian threats	Delegitimation of one type of land ownership and legitimation of another	Paradox of inequality: Rhetoric designed to address inequality can be easily repurposed to create more inequality
Lants et al: "Overtaken by reality—rhetorical temporality"	Pandemic response in Danish mink farms	Discourse Rhetorical Agency Institutional	Rhetorical temporality: how the rhetoric of time can resolve challenges with nonlinear processes	Cooperation by changing assumptions of time and nature	Collective action can be enhanced or constrained by temporal assumptions embedded in language
Lee & Sitruk: "The double-edged sword of examples"	Decline of the sharing economy as a market category	Institutional Legitimacy Discourse Rhetorical	Strategic choice of illustrative examples used to exemplify a category	Choice of examples in stories can change markets	Changes in market categories are unduly influenced by illustrative examples presented as exemplary
Schwoon: "Navigating grand societal challenges through meta-consensus"	Hate speech in online communities in Europe	Rhetorical Value-conflict Stakeholder	Substantive and procedural rhetoric to create meta-consensus through bridging stakeholders	Convergence of values; categorical change	Overcoming norm conflicts and achieving collective action in social media requires meta-consensus by means of procedural and substantive rhetoric
Spaneth & Urbano: "Unseen heroes—how social enterprises facilitate legitimation of marginalized groups"	Waste management workers in Nepal	Institutional Legitimacy Discourse Rhetorical	Reconditioning work, reframing work, and representing work	Change in norms, values, and meaning of work; identity and legitimacy of work	Legitimacy and stigmatization of work can be changed with the strategic use of capacity-building rhetoric

compare it to various past examples we have seen before, rather than using an abstract, generalized concept (Klein, 2011). For example, when identifying whether an animal is a bird, we might compare it to memories of many specific birds we have encountered (a robin, a penguin, a crow, etc.). Their analysis of how social movements changed their conceptualization of the sharing economy as a market category between 2004 and 2019 demonstrates a growing divide between how the press viewed the category and how the social movement that advocated for it viewed the category. Ultimately, Lee and Sitruk (2025) conclude that the exemplars of the market category failed to satisfy the expectations of both the social movement and the public.

Some of our authors move away from specific types of rhetoric as a means of achieving social change and collective action and, instead, focus on processes of argumentation and communication that are particularly effective (Sillince & Suddaby, 2008). For example, in his analysis of how to organize opposition to online hate speech within multistakeholder initiatives, Schwoon (2025) identifies the creation of a form of collective agreement on communication and discussion styles and patterns termed *meta-consensus* as key to sustain collective active action in multistakeholder initiatives. To achieve that, however, two further processes are pivotal. In one process, through bridging stakeholders, actors switch between *substantive* and *procedural rhetoric*. This is essential, as at the substantive discussion level usually normative value conflicts exist among the various actors on how to tackle the issue at hand (here, online hate speech). By organizing the switch from the substantive to the procedural discussion level and back, actors can move away from their norm conflicts and focus on the development of communication and discussion mechanisms at the procedural level to actually establish meta-consensus. In another process, actors can then *navigate their normative value conflicts* at the substantive discussion level. In other words, actors can make use of the communication mechanisms and discussion agreements they have learned at the procedural level, thus mobilizing the meta-consensus they created to navigate their value conflicts. Schwoon (2025) concludes that the existence of what he terms *bridging stakeholders*—that is, those stakeholders initiating and organizing the switch between discussion levels—is essential in sustaining collective action to find solutions for a complex societal problem like online hate speech that typically involves value conflicts. Schwoon recognizes that a hardened normative value conflict is hindering actors moving forward at a substantive level, leading such bridging stakeholders to advocate for the creation of communicative spaces to navigate conflicts.

Another process of rhetoric used to achieve social change and collective action focuses exclusively on perceptions of time and temporality, a process that Lantz, Feddersen, and Just (2025) term *rhetorical temporality*. In their paper, they address how the Danish government decided to cull the entire population of industrially held mink during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the policy process in "normal" situations can already be ambiguous because of potentially opposing interests of the many actors involved, the grand challenge of the worldwide pandemic made it even more problematic for the policymakers to formulate unambiguous measures. The COVID-19 pandemic did not develop in a linear way, as it saw phases of slow accumulation alternating with rapid escalation toward tipping points. In addition, since there are no linear solutions to such a nonlinear problem, the measures taken by the Danish government to fight the pandemic by killing millions of animals had uncertain outcomes for the long run.

The temporal dimension of the pandemic made it difficult to stabilize rhetorical configurations as a point of departure for collective action: by the time deliberations resulted in collective action by all actors involved, the grand challenge has moved on, rendering the pursued collective action inadequate as new problems emerged. Therefore, the authors suggest the need to deliberately construct and maintain alternative trajectories of collective action when confronted with the nonlinear temporal dynamics of grand challenges. This might involve engaging in persistent scenario planning and acknowledging uncertainties about the relationships between elements involved in the rhetorical configuration of the grand challenge and time. By adapting the scope of decision-making to the speed of developments in the real world, one might preserve agency in decision-making within rapidly changing events and retain some control over the unfolding situation.

Lantz et al. (2025) identify a different set of three mechanisms, organized as a process designed to legitimate stigmatized workers engaged in waste management in Kathmandu, Nepal. The mechanisms or phases—*reconditioning*, *reframing*, and *representing* work—reflect strategies employed by a social enterprise that helped to elevate the status of a marginalized group of informal waste workers from societal exclusion toward conditional legitimacy. The first mechanism, *reconditioning*, involves

transforming the work environment and building the skills of waste workers. The social enterprise provided training in health, safety, financial literacy, and management to enhance workers' professional identities and skills. The restructuring of work conditions was the first step in communicating new norms about working with garbage and waste, an occupation that is traditionally stigmatized as low status. This phase signaled an elevation in both the meaning and the status of this work.

The second mechanism, *reframing*, redefined public narratives about waste workers by portraying them as environmental stewards and essential contributors to public health. Through targeted campaigns, the social enterprise highlighted the positive societal impact of waste work, challenging entrenched biases and fostering respect for these workers. This rhetorical shift, which framed waste workers as "environmental heroes," gradually altered community perceptions, replacing stigma with appreciation. Finally, the *representing* phase engaged waste workers in collaborative networks with local nongovernmental organizations, community groups, and civic leaders, empowering them to advocate for their rights and build social capital. These partnerships helped waste workers gain visibility and foster collective agency, contributing to their societal legitimacy. Together, reconditioning, reframing, and representing created a multidimensional approach to legitimation, transforming both the socioeconomic conditions and public perceptions of marginalized waste workers in Kathmandu.

While the rhetorical techniques described in the above studies focus on mobilizing collective action by rhetoric that draws people together, the study by Hakanen, Eloranta, Shaw, and Töytäri (2025) illustrates a very different process. Here, collective action is mediated by technology—a blockchain mobile app—in a way that mimics social relationships, but in a commercial rather than a social context. The processes of rhetorical organizing in this case are much broader than mere linguistic techniques and focus our attention on the importance of narratives as a critical technology that acts in support of the blockchain technology to alter collective cognition and enable collective action. In particular, this study shows how collective action can emerge as the result of a signaling system based on blockchain technology that uses a decentralization protocol. This is critical for the management of ecosystems where the system needs to build actions that are transparent, are perceived by all members as legitimate, and contribute to the emergence of a shared identity.

OUTCOMES: CHANGES PRODUCED BY THE SKILLFUL USE OF LANGUAGE

While the papers that comprise our special issue have expanded our understanding of the techniques of rhetoric, perhaps the biggest contribution of our authors is how they have deepened our understanding of the ways in which changes in language initiate changes in selected aspects of our institutions as both language and institutions begin a process of change and mutual accommodation. We see this in the distinctive outcomes of rhetoric identified by our authors. Through the (strategic) use of language, rhetoric influences how individuals and societies conceptualize their world, creating new frameworks for understanding, and ultimately guiding collective action. In the papers of this special issue, we observe five key outcomes of rhetoric in generating cognitive changes that lead to collective social transformations: change in *categories*, change in *norms and values*, change in *identity*, change in *legitimacy*, and change in our *understanding of time and nature*.

Change in Categories

Rhetoric often functions by altering the categories through which we interpret the world. These categories define the boundaries of our knowledge and influence how we classify phenomena. When rhetoric introduces new categories or redefines (the meaning of) existing ones, it reorganizes cognitive frameworks and alters social dynamics. For example, the reclassification of "mental health" from a stigmatized concept to a legitimate medical concern represents a shift in public consciousness. This change allows for new social policies, therapeutic practices, and educational campaigns, generating a societal shift in how mental health is understood and addressed. Thus, the rhetorical redefinition of categories reshapes how society engages with complex issues. Three papers in particular demonstrate how skillfully applied rhetoric can resolve pernicious social problems by redefining the structure and meaning of social categories.

The paper by Lee and Sitruk (2025) provides perhaps the clearest description of how rhetoric restructures categorical boundaries as actors seek to resolve grand challenges. This study contributes to our understanding of how rhetoric can produce changes in categories by highlighting the pivotal role of examples and exemplars in shaping and reshaping the meanings of categories. Their study of the historical trajectory of the "sharing economy" demonstrates how the strategic use of rhetorical devices by key actors—such as social movements and the press—

can facilitate the evolution of a category over time. The findings reveal that examples and exemplars serve as dynamic tools for reinforcing or altering categorical meanings, particularly as they respond to shifting expectations and contextual demands. This process of rhetorical induction influences not only the public and institutional perception of the category but also its capacity to address grand challenges. As categories like the sharing economy gain or lose their ability to meet the demands of the actors shaping them, their potential to contribute to solutions for social, political, and environmental issues fluctuates. This insight underscores the critical role of rhetoric in the adaptation and longevity of categories central to addressing grand challenges.

In his paper on combatting online hate speech, Schwoon (2025) shows that collective action can be initiated and sustained by changing the conceptualization of the category "normative value conflict" from a rigid barrier that hinders collective action to an (initially) legitimate condition that can be *navigated* in a multistakeholder setting. Often, actors have a very strong emotional attachment to their own normative values, while refusing to accept those of other actors, making it difficult to align and eventually to get into action. Reclassifying the category in a way that holding conflicting values is just legitimate allows the actors to avoid discussions on different value propositions becoming emotionally charged, which would block their communication on how to manage value conflicts. Reclassifying the category helps to eventually align values and subsequently initiate and maintain collective action.

Beyond changing the categories themselves, rhetoric alters the meanings attributed to those categories. Categories are not static; they are socially constructed and can be reshaped to reflect evolving societal perspectives. The category of "marriage" is a compelling example of this dynamic. Over time, rhetoric around marriage has shifted its meaning from a traditionally heterosexual institution to one that is inclusive of same-sex partnerships. This rhetorical evolution not only redefines the boundaries of marriage but also transforms its social, cultural, and legal implications. Such changes in meaning can challenge entrenched institutions and practices, encouraging broader societal acceptance of diversity and equality.

In Spaneth and Urbano's (2025) study, the use of rhetoric demonstrates how categories and their meanings are malleable, evolving in response to societal needs and perceptions. This is particularly evident in how informal waste workers in Kathmandu, traditionally categorized with stigmatized labels, were redefined through deliberate rhetorical strategies by social enterprises. Rather than merely reassigning a new label, social enterprises such as Doko Recyclers focused on reshaping the meaning associated with waste work itself. Through awareness campaigns and community storytelling, these social enterprises transformed the perception of waste workers from "unskilled laborers" or "rag pickers" to "environmental stewards" or "heroes of sanitation." This rhetorical re-categorization reflects a broader shift in societal values, where sustainability and environmental health gain priority, and those who contribute to these goals are seen as valuable community members. As a result, the waste worker category transitions from being an occupation associated with low social status and stigma to one that embodies positive attributes like environmental guardianship and public service. This example illustrates how rhetoric not only redefines a category but also enriches its meaning, and in doing so fosters societal acceptance and support for historically marginalized groups.

Change in, and Convergence of, Norms and Values

Rhetoric also drives the change in and convergence of social norms and values by articulating shared aspirations, often serving as a vehicle for creating consensus. In advocacy for environmental sustainability, for instance, rhetoric has shifted the values of industrial development toward a balance with ecological concerns. Movements like climate change activism use rhetoric to unify disparate social values, prompting a collective rethinking of consumption, production, and responsibility. The emergence of such normative convergence leads to legislation, cultural shifts, and behavioral changes that align with new value systems. In all this, rhetoric cultivates a shared moral vocabulary that fosters cohesion and mobilizes collective action.

Hassan and Prasad's (2005) study of land grabbing shows how changes in norms and values around land ownership and use play a central role in the rhetoric used to both justify and resist land grabbing. The authors show how, in order to justify land grabbing, market actors construct land as an *economic commodity*, shifting its meaning from a community resource to a tradable asset. This redefinition aligns with capitalist assumptions that the exchange value of land is more legitimate than its use value in the community. It displaces traditional communitarian values, which value land not only for its use but for its

history and meaning in the community. Similarly, by presenting the commodification of land as "natural" or "self-evident," the land grabbers normalize the exchange value of land, and effectively obscure and eventually dismiss alternative cultural or ecological valuations, making local resistance appear to be irrational, unprogressive, and "backward."

Hakanen et al.'s (2025) analysis of a new technology in a fishing community provides fertile ground for showing how rhetoric creates change in norms and values to mobilize collective action. In many collective action settings, interpersonal trust, kinship, or long-standing community relationships have traditionally been the normative backbone of collaboration. The study highlights how a decentralization technology redefines the normative value system of collective action by shifting the emphasis from social relationships to mechanisms of transparency, legitimacy, and signaling based on technological protocols. In such contexts, these qualities replace social accountability mechanisms, such as reputation or cultural obligations. Transparency ensures that individual contributions are visible and verifiable, while legitimacy reinforces confidence in the shared goals of the group. The study also shows the importance of signals to ensure members reliably demonstrate their contributions. The signaling system replaces traditional social contracts with a norm of measurable, verifiable commitments, and reframes collective participation as an act of compliance with systemic values rather than individual ones.

Schwoon's (2025) paper shows the outcome of rhetoric of change in norms and values in the context of multistakeholder initiatives to effectively engage in collective action against online hate speech. In this context, two very different, conflicting normative values are in place on the actors' side, on the one hand protecting human dignity and on the other promoting the freedom of speech. Through the establishment of meta-consensus, rhetoric nurtures mutual understanding and learning, as well as a mutually accepted communication style. In this way, rhetoric can gradually reduce value conflicts and eventually foster agreement on a core value proposition and joint action.

In Spaneth and Urbano's (2025) article, rhetoric is used to drive the convergence of norms and values by framing waste work in a way that resonates with the broader community's aspirations for environmental sustainability and social equity. This rhetorical strategy helps shift public perception by aligning the values of marginalized waste workers with those of the wider community. For example, the "Both are Frontline Workers" campaign compared waste workers to healthcare workers, portraying both as essential to public health, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. By emphasizing shared values, like protecting public health and maintaining a clean environment, the campaign appealed to the public's collective sense of responsibility and respect for those who contribute to these causes. This convergence of values fostered a shared sense of purpose. It encouraged societal stakeholders to view waste workers more positively and recognize their societal importance. By focusing on common goals, the campaign facilitated a shift in norms, promoting greater respect and appreciation for waste workers. As a result, it changed individual attitudes and contributed to a broader societal consensus on the value of waste work, consistent with evolving norms around environmental stewardship and community well-being.

Change in Identity

Rhetoric plays a central role in shaping identity, at both individual and collective levels. Through the use of narrative and symbols, rhetoric can transform how individuals perceive themselves and their place in society. Consider the civil rights movement, where rhetorical strategies centered on equality and justice not only redefined racial identities but also empowered marginalized groups to assert new political and social roles. As a more recent example, the Black Lives Matter movement uses rhetoric to reimagine what it means to be Black nowadays, challenging existing stereotypes and fostering a renewed sense of pride and agency.

Hakanen et al.'s (2025) paper provides an effective illustration of how rhetoric, mediated through a new technology, can restructure narratives of shared identity. In conventional collective action, identity is often rooted in personal relationships, shared history, cultural ties, or geographical proximity. It is deeply embedded in the social fabric of communities. Blockchain technology abstracts identity from these personal and social roots. Instead of relying on interpersonal trust, identity becomes tied to actions, contributions, and their traceability within the system. For example, in the Tracey case the study reports, a fisher's identity is linked to their actions (catching and reporting tuna sustainably) rather than their relationships within the fishing community. Decentralized systems require participants to signal their contributions transparently. This creates an action-based identity, where who you are is defined

by what you do and how it is verified. In decentralization systems, identity is performative—it is continuously enacted and validated through actions. The new technology, however, marks a shift from being (identity as inherent) to doing (identity as demonstrated through contributions).

Lants et al.'s (2025) study shows how actors use rhetoric to frame the zoonotic disease threat posed by mink during the COVID-19 pandemic in Denmark. These rhetorical configurations shaped collective identities by defining who was responsible, what values were at stake, and how humans and nonhuman actors (i.e., mink as disease vectors) were positioned in the mists of the grand challenge. The identity of the collective evolved as actors framed the problem and responses in new ways over time. The study shows how rhetoric creates and reshapes collective identities in response to grand challenges, using anticipatory action as a mechanism for collective action. For instance, framing the issue in terms of urgency and future risk may have shifted identities to those of protectors or preventers, while later phases emphasized being "overtaken by reality," signaling a loss of agency and an adjustment in collective self-perception. The phases represent different ways of aligning identity with action. As rhetorical configurations narrowed the space for possible trajectories, collective identity shifted from one of control and intervention to one constrained by unfolding events. This suggests that changes in collective identity—prompted by rhetoric—serve as mechanisms to direct and justify shifts in collective action. Interestingly, the study emphasizes the role of nonhuman actors, like mink, in shaping collective identity. By rhetorically construing mink as disease vectors, the collective action framed humans as managers of ecological and health risks, reinforcing an anthropocentric identity that later evolved to confront its limitations.

Rhetoric's ability to frame identity influences how groups assert their power and advocate for change. Spaneth and Urbano (2025) report that a significant change in identity has emerged from reframing strategies, where the social enterprise has positioned waste workers as environmental protectors. Public campaigns and media representations have recast informal waste workers from "untouchable" waste collectors to "environmental heroes" and essential members of society. This new identity, communicated through storytelling and clean-up events, has led to changes in community behavior, with people treating workers respectfully and even inviting them into their homes. This identity shift represents a profound transformation in how waste workers are viewed by society, contributing to the workers' sense of pride, self-worth, and belonging.

Change in Legitimacy

Rhetoric also plays a key role in establishing legitimacy or illegitimacy. By using different rhetorical strategies, actors can legitimate, delegitimate, or re-legitimate specific phenomena. This can involve more traditional logos-, ethos-, or pathos-related strategies but also other ways of using language, such as constructing specific organizations or practices as exemplary or deviant, or creating a sense of inevitability for change. Legitimacy as an outcome is a central topic across several papers in the special issue.

Hassan and Prasad's (2025) study of land grabbing identifies and elaborates four rhetorical legitimation strategies that are used to construct land as an economic commodity available for exchange: rhetorical axiomatization, commensuration, impersonation, and dystopianization. Interestingly, while strategies aim to confront and resolve issues of social inequality, they ironically exacerbate them, thus impeding collective action against land grabbing. Lee and Sitruk's (2025) study of the sharing economy, as discussed above, highlights the use of exemplars as rhetorical devices used in legitimation.

Lants et al.'s (2005) study directly addresses changes in legitimacy by illustrating how rhetorical configurations shape the collective perception of appropriate and credible actions during a grand challenge. The study demonstrates how the rhetorical construction of time influences legitimacy. By framing the zoonotic threat and responses differently in each phase, the actors redefined what was seen as a legitimate course of action, showing that legitimacy is fluid and contingent on temporal perspectives shaped through rhetoric. For example, initial urgency may have legitimized drastic measures like culling mink, while later phases revealed the constraints of those actions as they were "overtaken by reality." The inclusion of nonhuman actors like mink in the rhetorical framing broadens traditional notions of legitimacy beyond human-centric considerations. This shift could pave the way for a more inclusive understanding of what constitutes legitimate action, moving away from solely anthropocentric frameworks.

Spaneth and Urbano's (2025) paper on the legitimation of marginalized groups in Nepal adopts yet another perspective and introduces three rhetorical strategies: reconditioning, reframing, and representing. The study highlights how rhetoric not only

builds legitimacy but also reshapes other social evaluations, such as stigma. When marginalized groups redefine and communicate the societal value of their work, they enhance both internal and external legitimacy. For instance, through reconditioning strategies, waste workers develop skills in health, safety, and financial management, which help them feeling more profession when perform their roles. Such initiatives and the new skills boost waste workers' confidence and helped them participate in ordinary activities such as banking, which were previously inaccessible to them due to societal stigma.

Change in Our Understanding of Time and Nature

Finally, rhetoric reshapes our cognitive understanding of time and nature, which can drive long-term societal transformation. The discourse around climate change has introduced new temporal categories, such as "climate urgency" and "intergenerational responsibility." By altering our perception of time, rhetoric compels us to think in terms of future consequences rather than immediate gratification. This shift reconfigures how society engages with natural resources, development, and sustainability, prompting changes in policy, economic models, and lifestyles. The rhetorical framing of nature as fragile and finite, rather than an endless resource, has reframed human–nature relationships, influencing both individual behaviors and institutional regulations.

For example, in their paper on the culling of millions of minks during the COVID-19 pandemic, Lants et al. (2025) revealed that the human population's health and economic issues dominated the discussion. Given the concern in Denmark that the COVID-19 virus, which was rapidly spreading among the minks, would be transmitted to humans, the Danish government attempted to control the spread of the virus by inferring the temporality of the virus in humans and the nonhuman animals (i.e., the mink population). To that aim, it used the statistics and models provided by formal institutions to study the infection dynamics in these populations in order to better understand the relationships between humans and nonhuman animals, and to handle the spread of COVID-19. However, the mink, as living animals with rights and interests, did not have a spokesperson. Human decision-makers took the relationship between humans and nonhuman animals for granted, leading to a false sense of security by killing millions of animals as a preventative measure, while there was no scientific evidence that linked the virus in mink populations to the human virus. Lants et al. (2025) argue that to address grand challenges, decision-makers should not simply privilege human interests, but also recognize that the need to protect humanitarian interests is intimately connected to the need to protect the natural world upon which the prospects of humanity rest. When misunderstandings about the pandemic (in this case in relation to transmission) become unproductive, trajectories, such as relationships between humans and nonhuman animals, must be reconsidered. The authors suggest that a more-than-human approach should involve *both* mapping human and nonhuman actors involved *and* defining spokespersons for nonhuman actors to allow decision-makers to better understand social-ecological system dynamics.

A different, more historical approach to exploring how rhetoric can change our understanding of time and nature is offered by Lee and Sitruk's (2025) study of the role of examples in facilitating social change. This study deepens our understanding of the role of historical rhetoric (Suddaby, Foster & Quinn-Trank, 2010) in processes of institutional change. By analyzing the sharing economy's trajectory from its inception to its decline, the study reveals how historical shifts in the use of examples and exemplars—particularly their reinterpretation by different actors—shape the temporality of a category's relevance and impact. The interplay between social movements and the press demonstrates how rhetorical devices link past meanings to present and future expectations, allowing categories to serve as vehicles for collective action and societal transformation. This temporal dynamism highlights the ways in which rhetorical practices are not static but deeply embedded in historical contexts, continually reconfiguring categories to respond to emerging challenges and opportunities. Such insights underscore the role of rhetoric in orchestrating enduring social change by strategically engaging with history and temporality to redefine categories in ways that align with evolving societal needs.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Rhetoric is a powerful agent in reshaping cognition, and thus fosters collective shifts in attitudes, behaviors, and systems, ultimately generating profound and lasting societal change. Together, the papers of this special issue contribute to the debate on the role of rhetoric for collective action in the context of grand challenges in two ways. First, they identify and disentangle a variety of newly emerging mechanisms by which the skillful use of language

produces changes in human cognition and collective action. Second, our papers generate useful insights on how rhetoric reconfigures the lenses through which society views and interacts with the world, through its influence on a set of outcomes, namely categories, norms and values, identities, legitimacy, and our understanding of time and nature.

The future of research on the role of rhetoric in mobilizing stakeholder commitment to foster collective solutions for societal grand challenges lies in deepening our understanding of how language, narratives, framing, and discursive strategies shape collective action. As grand challenges like climate change, global health disparities, and social inequities require diverse coalitions, rhetoric becomes a key tool for enrolling stakeholders with varying priorities, worldviews, and resources. A long history of research on narratives and social movements has shown the power of embedding rhetoric in stories of change as a means of motivating cooperation in social movements (Davis, 2002). Emerging research shows how narratives function not just as persuasive tools but as frameworks that align the values and goals of varied stakeholders with different motivations and interests, fostering a shared vision of action (Suddaby, Israelsen, Mitchell & Lim, 2023). For example, narratives that frame climate change as a justice issue can galvanize communities that prioritize equity, while those emphasizing technological innovation may appeal to businesses and policymakers. This dual capacity of narratives to unify diverse constituencies and maintain their engagement underlines their centrality to stakeholder mobilization, but future research is needed to understand how different narratives can be effectively integrated to be appealing to diverse stakeholders and eventually foster their collective action for grand challenges.

Legitimacy, authenticity, and other social value judgments play a pivotal role in the rhetorical strategies used to address grand challenges. Prior research in the corporate sector shows that stakeholders with different motives and interests are more likely to commit when they perceive initiatives as legitimate—grounded in credible expertise and supported by moral authority (Erkama & Vaara, 2010; Vaara, Aranda & Etchanchu, 2024). Authenticity, too, is critical, as stakeholders often scrutinize whether the motives and actions of leaders align with their stated values. Future research could investigate how rhetorical appeals build or erode these judgments over time, particularly in the face of challenges like greenwashing or performative activism. Understanding how to maintain stakeholder trust while navigating these tensions could inform more resilient strategies for sustaining engagement in grand challenges.

Additionally, rhetoric's capacity to bridge conflicting interests and mediate tensions among stakeholders warrants greater scholarly attention. Grand challenges often require reconciling economic imperatives with ethical obligations (Bowen & Heath, 2005), or local needs with global goals (Potz, 2024). Rhetorical strategies that emphasize co-creation, where stakeholders actively contribute to defining problems and solutions, may enhance commitment by fostering a sense of ownership and shared responsibility. Future research might examine how participatory rhetoric, such as deliberative forums or storytelling practices, facilitates this process, and whether it can scale effectively in complex, multistakeholder contexts.

Rhetoric also holds immense potential for reconciling ideological differences, particularly by creatively finding common ground between contrasting or conflicting political positions (McGee, 1975). Grand challenges often expose deep divides, such as those between free-market advocates and proponents of regulatory interventions, or between localism and globalism. For example, research in the U.S. bipartisan political context shows that—even if there is agreement about the problem at hand, such as the existence of manmade climate change—ideological differences can create aversions to suggested solutions, when these solutions are perceived as being grounded in the opposite ideological position (Campbell & Kay, 2014). Effective rhetoric can transcend these divides by identifying shared values or goals that resonate across ideological boundaries. For instance, framing renewable energy transitions as opportunities for economic growth and job creation can appeal to both progressive environmentalists and market-driven stakeholders of the conservative spectrum. Similarly, presenting public health initiatives as investments in national security might unite progressive and conservative audiences. Future research could explore how rhetorical strategies can create these bridging narratives, transforming sources of conflict into platforms for collaboration. By focusing on the intersection of interests and emphasizing the mutual benefits of collective action, rhetoric can foster a pragmatic and inclusive discourse, making progress on grand challenges possible even amid ideological polarization.

Lastly, the emotional and imaginative dimensions of rhetoric offer promising avenues for future inquiry. Grand challenges are not only technical problems but also deeply human ones, invoking feelings of urgency, hope, and moral obligation. Scholars

could explore how rhetorical appeals harness these emotions to inspire action, as well as how they leverage imaginative language to envision alternative futures. By combining insights from linguistics, organizational theory, and social psychology, research on the rhetoric of grand challenges could offer transformative strategies for mobilizing collective commitment and navigating the complexities of global problem-solving.

IN MEMORIAM ISRAEL DRORI

We dedicate this special issue to the late Israel Drori, who initiated our collective journey leading to this publication and without whom it would have been impossible to achieve. Our journey started in 2021, when Israel Drori introduced the idea of studying the role of rhetoric for collective action in the context of grand challenges. He formed our team with the aim of developing a proposal for a special issue of *Academy of Management Perspectives*, and was also the mastermind behind several of our research initiatives that preceded our special issue to foster the engagement of scholars with this topic, such as the Paper Development Workshop at the Academy of Management annual meeting of 2022 and the dedicated track at European Group on Organization Studies annual conference of 2023 (which will be succeeded by a follow up track at EGOS 2025).

Being a trained anthropologist and sociologist (PhD from University of California, Los Angeles), Israel Drori was a leading expert on organizational processes and change, studying rhetoric, identity, trust, legitimacy, authenticity, and entrepreneurship. He published more than 100 articles and several books, using mainly ethnographic and narrative perspectives to cover topics such as transnational entrepreneurship, start-up imprinting and acceleration, microfinance, and the emergence of innovation ecosystems. For many years he served as a professor at Tel Aviv University and the College of Management Academic Studies, held visiting positions at various institutions, including Simon Fraser University, University of Michigan, and Tsinghua University. He was also a successful entrepreneur. From 2017, Israel Drori was a professor of organizational ethnography and head of the Department of Organization Sciences at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, until becoming an emeritus in 2022.

Besides being an excellent researcher and teacher, he will be remembered as a true friend. He was always committed to colleagues, serving others, and having fun, while having a strong sense of family at work. For many, he was a great mentor and academic father, who offered support and built confidence. It was a pleasure working with him and an honor getting to know him.

On March 3, 2024, Israel Drori passed away at his home in Ramat HaSharon, Israel, after a long battle with cancer. He left behind his wife Nili, his children Tali and Iddo, and five grandchildren. He was 76 years old. We miss him.

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