

Doing the Talk: Discussion, Dialogue, and Discourse in Action

Introduction

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Discussion, dialogue, and discourse have long been regarded as important concepts across a range of communication-related disciplines such as public relations, organizational communication, interpersonal communication, and strategic management. These concepts are becoming even more significant with the increasing use of social media and other forms of online communication by organizations and their publics/stakeholders/citizens. This Special Section of the *International Journal of Communication* presents theoretical frameworks and propositions, methodological approaches, and empirical findings that add to the understanding of discussion, dialogue, and discourse.

Keywords: dialogue, discourse, discussion, normative approaches, methods

When talking about discussion, dialogue, and discourse, many questions have been raised: What are the theoretical connections between discussion, dialogue, and discourse? What are the differences between the concepts? And how do they differ across disciplines? How are they being translated to the online environment? Are there differences between the normative and empirical perspectives on discussion, dialogue, and discourse? What sort of data and methodological approaches are most

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appropriate to study discussion, dialogue, and discourse? Is it possible to have genuine dialogue and discourse offline or online? How can technology be used to enhance discussion, dialogue, and discourse?

These questions were addressed at a preconference held at the International Communication Association's annual meeting in 2015, which was the starting point for this Special Section of the *International Journal of Communication*. The preconference brought together international participants from different subfields of communication studies, such as public relations and organizational communication, journalism, and political communication, and participants presented a range of theoretically, methodologically, and practically oriented papers. The attendees at this meeting indicated there was real interest in continuing the consideration of discussion, dialogue, and discourse on a wider stage—specifically, in an international journal that would provide a respected and credible platform to present ideas and arguments. The *International Journal of Communication's* commitment to presenting its readers with diverse perspectives on issues and topics, and its respected position in the arena of academic publication made it the ideal choice for this Special Section.

What Are We Talking About?

Scholars across many academic disciplines have long noted that the terms *discussion*, *dialogue*, and *discourse* mean “many things to many people” (as Johannesen, 1971, p. 373, wrote in relation to the word *dialogue*). From a nonacademic perspective, these words seem to mean more or less the same thing because they describe written and spoken communication/conversation on information, ideas, opinions, and so forth between two or more people. Academic studies have similarly linked—if not actually conflated—the three concepts of discussion, dialogue, and discourse (as noted, for example, in Tannen, 2007, and Theunissen and Wan Noordin, 2012). Other commentators on these concepts have taken a similarly eclectic approach by including responsiveness, interactivity, participation, involvement, and engagement in their work (Avidar, 2013; Paquette, Sommerfeldt, & Kent, 2015; Pieczka, 2011). But for scholars, the fundamental question when studying any or all of the “Three Ds” of dialogue, discussion, and discourse is still “What is it . . . and what is it not . . . ?”

The concepts are often connected to abstract, normative ideals. Dialogue, for example, is seen as being based on trust, trustworthiness, respect, openness, reciprocity, and a problem-solving mind-set, and is central to building mutual understanding and beneficial relationships between participants/interactants/key publics (e.g., Habermas, 1992; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000; Taylor & Kent, 2014). But the reality of dialogue, discussion, and discourse often falls short of these ideals.

The motivation behind the development of this Special Section of the *International Journal of Communication* was to invite contributions that address these issues of definition and operationalization—issues that could hinder the development of robust and useful theory. Articles in this Special Section tackle some of the key questions around dialogue, discussion, and discourse: What are they, and how do we carry them out in practice? Authors from a range of disciplinary backgrounds have developed conceptual papers and carried out empirical research to answer these questions. The varied lenses and perspectives

these authors bring to this Special Section offer new insights to both academics and practitioners in the field of communication.

Articles in This Special Section

Michael L. Kent and Petra Theunissen start the Special Section with a critique of dialogic theory. They examine dialogue as both process and product, using Shiva the Destroyer (or Transformer) as a structuring metaphor for their analysis. They critique the contemporary use of the word *dialogue*, specifically the tendency to define it simply as two-way communication that just spontaneously happens. They conclude that much of what scholars (and practitioners) have called dialogue has in fact been dialogue in name only—for which the authors coin the acronym “D-I-N-O.” Instead they propose that any definition of dialogue should acknowledge the complexity and sophistication of the concept, and its inextricable link to interpersonal relationships. Moving on to consider the implementation of dialogue, Kent and Theunissen focus particularly on the context of the Internet and social media. The authors propose a new perspective that demonstrates how social media can be used as a dialogic tool.

The article by Chiara Valentini, Stefania Romenti, and Dean Kruckeberg is also situated within the context of online communication. The authors adopt a communicative constitution perspective to study social media from a relational approach. They view relationships in social media as networks of communicative interactions that are unfolded through textual, visual, and audio contents. Following this perspective, the authors discuss and highlight the important role language and discourse in online communicative interactions play in shaping perceptions, opinions, and relational meanings among actors and organizations. Valentini et al. suggest that communication is more important in defining relationships in social media than other factors, such as real-world experiences. They conclude that through communicative interactions, social media can develop beyond simple transmission channels to form arenas within which relational meaning is created. As a result, the authors provide a stimulating contribution to the development of new perspectives on relationship management, which has been one of the dominant paradigms in public relations for many years.

Anne B. Lane and Jennifer Bartlett use Kent and Taylor’s (2002) principles of dialogue as the analytical framework for an empirical study of the day-to-day reality of public relations practice. The authors explore the occurrence of the five principles of dialogue—mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment—in the work of Australian public relations professionals. This is one of the first empirical studies to explore the connection between normative dialogic theory and the lived reality of practice. Lane and Bartlett’s research found that although Kent and Taylor’s (2002) principles were evident across the examples of practice, none of the examples demonstrated all five principles together: That is, there were no instances of normative dialogue. Their findings identify situational factors such as the lack of time and participants’ pre-existing (often negative) attitudes that preclude the implementation of pure or normative dialogue in practice. In addition, they find that the public relations practitioners interviewed did not understand what dialogue is, and as a consequence they were misusing the term—similar to Kent and Theunissen’s idea of D-I-N-O. Lane and Bartlett conclude that the concept of dialogue needs to be re-theorized to better reflect and incorporate the day-to-day reality of public relations practice by

distinguishing between normative and pragmatic dialogue. They also suggest public relations practitioners are in need of better education and training in the conduct of dialogue.

This last topic is addressed in more detail in the article by Betsy D. Anderson, Rebecca Swenson, and Nathan D. Gilkerson. The authors explore the discrepancy between the theoretical visions of dialogic communication and engagement and the reality of the public relations practice. Based on a theoretical discussion of the terms *responsiveness*, *interactivity*, *engagement*, and *dialogue*, they propose a “cocreative model for engagement and dialogue” that conceptualizes engagement and dialogue as two potentially separate outcomes of online interactions: relationship building (engagement) or problem solving (dialogue). The authors then undertake in-depth interviews with public relations practitioners from 15 top public relations agencies in the United States, ranging from local to worldwide firms, to compare how practitioners talk about online interactions with publics. They examine how digital public relations professionals communicate directly with publics online, how dialogue and engagement are created, and what writing skills students and early career professionals need to build organization–public relationships. One focus is on the development of real-time writing skills, requiring written exchanges between an organization and its publics via social media, where some degree of feedback is involved. The interviews with digital public relations experts reflected some natural understanding and use of the concepts of relationship initiation, responsiveness, and interactivity, but found engagement and dialogue were less used in practice. In summary, these findings highlight the need for more research that compares and contrasts engagement and dialogue. The authors also call for further research into the extent social media experts are familiar with these approaches and how to measure them.

A similar approach is taken in the article by Helena Stehle and Simone Huck-Sandhu, who study the relevance of dialogue in/for roles enacted by young public relations practitioners and consider how dialogue may be linked to individual or organizational contexts. These practitioner roles are defined as abstractions of day-to-day activities. By specifically focusing on young public relations practitioners, the authors recognize the growing importance of the technician role and dialogue practices in the public relations profession, related to the increasing use of social media and public participation in public relations. Stehle and Huck-Sandhu use the Q-method, a research methodology seldom used in public relations studies, to examine participants’ perspectives. The Q-method allows individuals to be clustered based on similarities of beliefs, attitudes, and opinions. The Q-study identifies four roles of young public relations professionals that are distinguished by differences in their understanding of dialogue.

Like the authors of the previous article, Roland Burkart and Uta Russmann also adopt an unusual methodology: in this instance, to study the quality of discourse. They follow the notion of deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1992), which says political decisions are legitimized when they are based on a discussion that permits the circulation of information, positions, and ideas, because then actors are oriented toward mutual understanding. Burkart and Russmann argue this simply shows there is public discourse, but indicates nothing about the specific quality of that discourse. Building on Habermas’s (1992) work and previous empirical studies on public discourse, the authors define communicative principles of understanding. These principles are statements of reasons for positions taken, proposals for solutions, and expressions of respect for particular positions as well as other people. They also cast doubts on the four validity claims. The principles serve to define quantitative measures of the quality of

understanding of public discourse and are proposed as the foundation of a new measure: an index of the quality of understanding (IQU). The authors empirically test the index by examining political parties' press releases and newspaper coverage of the Austrian national elections, and thereby evaluate the quality of discourse of campaign communication. The findings illustrate that Austrian political parties' publications more closely resemble the notion of an ideal speech situation than do Austrian newspapers. Burkart and Russmann conclude this is because the parties' aim is to influence the media coverage, and press releases are an essential input for the media as they provide them with information. The authors call for further research to examine the broader implications of the communicative principles of understanding on the public, which can be examined on online communication platforms such as online discussion forums and social media.

In conclusion, the theoretical frameworks and propositions, methodological approaches, and empirical findings in the articles of this Special Section make significant contributions to answering the questions what are dialogue, discussion, and discourse, and how do we carry them out in practice? As well as adding to our understanding of these key concepts, these articles also raise new questions and call for further theoretical and empirical research. The authors of this Special Section show that scholars need to study dialogue, discussion, and discourse as powerful tools and sophisticated concepts, and not just as heuristics and placeholders.

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