Toward a dialogic theory of public relations

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Abstract

This essay clarifies the concept of dialogue in public relations. As public relations theory and research move toward a two-way relational communication model, many scholars and practitioners are increasingly using the terms "dialogic" and "dialogue" to describe ethical and practical approaches to public relations. The concept of dialogue is deeply rooted in philosophy and relational communication theory. Its inclusion in the public relations vocabulary is an important step toward understanding how organizations can build relationships that serve both organizational and public interests. This essay traces the roots of dialogue, identifies several over-arching tenets, and provides three ways that organizations can incorporate dialogue into their communication with publics. © 2002 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

Given the increasing ubiquity of dialogue as a concept in public relations, it is important to have some shared understanding of what the term means. Many scholars have used the term dialogue when discussing effective public relations. Pearson's work on dialogue as a practical public relations strategy is the earliest substantive treatment of the concept. In his 1989 doctoral dissertation on dialogue as a tool of public relations ethics, Pearson wrote: "It is morally right to establish and maintain communication relationships with all publics affected by organizational action and, by implication, morally wrong not to do so."[1] Public relations scholars have referred to dialogue as "dialectic," "discourse," and a "process" with little consistency in its usage.

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it explains the concept of dialogue in order to reduce the ambiguity that surrounds the use of the term. Second, and more important for

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theory development in public relations, this essay seeks to make the concept of dialogue more accessible for scholars and practitioners interested in relationship building. This definitional task is important because as Gordon observed, "definitions play crucial roles both in societal processes and in the minds of those who study and practice public relations."[2] To explicate the concept of dialogue, this article first traces the origins of dialogue through philosophy, psychology, relational communication, and public relations. The second section of the article details some of the specific features and basic tenets that underlie dialogue. The final section of the article explores pragmatic ways that dialogic communication can be incorporated into everyday public relations practices.

1. The roots of dialogue

The concept of dialogue has its roots in a variety of disciplines: philosophy, rhetoric, psychology, and relational communication. Philosophers and rhetoricians have long considered dialogue as one of the most ethical forms of communication and as one of the central means of separating truth from falsehood. Theologian Martin Buber is considered by most to be the father of the modern concept of dialogue.[3] Buber suggested that dialogue involves an effort to recognize the value of the other—to see him/her as an end and not merely as a means to achieving a desired goal. Buber suggested that individuals should view others not as *objects*— the "I You," but as *equals*—the "I Thou."[4] Buber's work is based on reciprocity, mutuality, involvement, and openness.

Dialogue is also present in the tradition of psychology. Carl Rogers' stance on dialogue, outlined in his formulation of client-centered psychology, suggested that any effective therapist–client relationship must be characterized by a stance of "unconditional positive regard for the other."[5] And, as Laing has pointed out, the concept of "confirmation"—or acknowledgment of another's presence—is central to the development of healthy (and stable) personality development.[6] Implicit within the field of psychology is a belief that the orientation that one holds toward others in interactions influences the quality of the communication, and ultimately, influences the development of the relationship.

The field of relational communication also has considered at length the concept of dialogue as a framework for thinking about ethical and fulfilling relationships. Johannesen, drawing on several intellectual traditions, identified five characteristics of dialogue: genuine, accurate empathetic understanding, unconditional positive regard, presentness, spirit of mutual equality, and a supportive psychological climate.[7] Stewart focused on relationship building and argued that it "can lead to a reconceptualization of the phenomenon which is variously labeled relationship."[8]

In public relations, dialogue sometimes is described as communicating about issues with publics. As Grunig and White suggest, public relations might, "for example, set up a dialogue between tobacco companies, smokers, and antismoking groups."[9] However, at other times, dialogue is equated with "debate," or what Heath calls rhetorical dialogue.[10] According to Heath, "dialogue consists of statement and counterstatement."[11] Evident in this conception of dialogue is the advocacy function of organizational communication in the public policy process.

The concept of dialogue as a feature of ethical/moral communication predates the concept of symmetrical communication by decades. However, what exactly is *meant* by dialogue is unclear from much of the scholarship on two-way symmetrical public relations. Because of the recent shift to a relational approach to public relations theory development, it is now necessary to more fully understand the many aspects of dialogue and ensure that we all understand the implicit and explicit assumptions of dialogic communication.

1.1. From public relations symmetry to dialogue

A theoretical shift—from public relations reflecting an emphasis on managing communication[12] to an emphasis on communication as a tool for negotiating relationships[13] has been taking place for some time. Ledingham and Bruning have examined the theoretical evolution of symmetrical communication as the normative model of public relations practice. They argued that Grunig's 1992 concept of public relations as "building relationships with publics that constrain or enhance the ability of the organization to meet its mission" was instrumental in shifting the emphasis in public relations from managing publics and public opinion to a new emphasis on building, nurturing and maintaining relationships.[14] Because of the fragmentation of the mass media precipitated by an increase in the number of media outlets (cable television, Internet, etc.), public relations is shifting to (or perhaps merely rediscovering) interpersonal channels of communication.[15] This is an exciting time in public relations theory development because the shift signals enormous opportunities for further theory development.

The consideration of dialogue as a public relations theory must be attributed to Pearson. His dissertation "*A Theory of Public Relations Ethics*" sought to develop a more ethical framework for public relations theory and practice.[16] According to Pearson, "public relations is best conceptualized as the management of interpersonal dialectic."[17] What is important to the practice of ethical public relations is to have a dialogic "system" rather than monologic "policies." As Pearson explained:

> If what is right and wrong in organization conduct cannot be intuited or arrived at by some monological process, as much postmodern rhetorical theory and postmodern philosophy in general argues, then the focus for an organizational ethicist must shift dramatically. The important question becomes, not what action or policy is more right than another (a question that is usually posed as a monologue), but what kind of communication system maximizes the chances competing interests can discover some shared ground and be transformed or transcended. This question shifts the emphasis from an areas [sic] in which practitioners do not have special expertise—ethical theory—to areas in which they do have expertise—communication theory and practice.[18]

Sadly, Pearson's research agenda synthesizing public relations ethics and dialogue was cut short by his untimely death in 1989. Almost a decade after Pearson's first articles on dialogue appeared, Botan suggested that "dialogue manifests itself more as a stance, orientation, or bearing in communication rather than as a specific method, technique, or format."[19] Kent and Taylor addressed dialogic relationship building on the Internet and argued that "dialogue is product rather than process."[20] They viewed the symmetrical model as a procedural way to listen or solicit feedback. Symmetrical communication is more similar to systems theory, than "dialogue."[21]

Some public relations scholars have described dialogue as more moral than monological, "manipulative," models of communication.[22] As Botan explains, "Traditional approaches to public relations relegate publics to a secondary role, making them instruments for meeting organizational policy or marketing needs; whereas, dialogue elevates publics to the status of communication equal with the organization."[23] What has been missing from the discussion of dialogue in the public relations literature until now has been a coherent discussion of the principles of dialogue themselves and how dialogic approaches might actually be used by public relations practitioners and scholars. This essay fills in this gap by discussing dialogic theory and explaining how some features of dialogue might be applied to organizational contexts. However, at this stage of theory development our taxonomy can only be tentative because very little research actually documents the use of dialogic communication principles.

2. Principles of a dialogic public relations theory

Although a dialogic approach to public relations cannot be easily operationalized, or reduced to a series of steps, dialogue does consist of several coherent assumptions. An extensive literature review of the concept of dialogue in communication, public relations, philosophy, and psychology reveals five overarching tenets of dialogism. These tenets are the first step toward articulating a public relations theory of dialogue.

Before discussing the features of dialogue in detail, it is important to note that dialogue is not a panacea. A dialogic approach cannot force an organization to behave ethically, nor is it even appropriate in some circumstances. As will be clear from the discussion that follows, dialogue can be put to both *moral* and *immoral* ends. Gunson and Collins, for example, point out, that just because an organization and its publics create "dialogic" communication structures, does not mean that they are behaving dialogically.[24] If one partner subverts the dialogic process through manipulation, disconfirmation, or exclusion, then the end result will not be dialogic. Dialogue is not a process or a series of steps. Rather, it is a product of on going communication and relationships.

Since dialogue involves "trust," "risk" and "vulnerability," dialogic participants (and publics) *can be* manipulated by unscrupulous organizations or publics. In such cases, "strategic communication" might be more effective at achieving the interests of the organization or the public in question than would a dialogic approach to communication.[25]

Beyond the possibility of dialogue being used immorally is the fact that not all "interpersonal" relationships require dialogic orientations—although many organization–public relationships would benefit from it. As Leichty noted, "some public relations work is necessarily reactive. The timing of an event may prevent a measured response; . . . Practitioners often lack either sufficient time or freedom to respond with collaborative tactics."[26] What dialogue *does* is change the nature of the organization–public relationship by placing emphasis on the relationship. What dialogue *cannot do* is make an organization behave morally or force organizations to respond to publics. Organizations must willingly make dialogic commitments to publics.

Dialogue as an orientation includes five features: *mutuality*, or the recognition of organization–public relationships; *propinquity*, or the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics; *empathy*, or the supportiveness and confirmation of public goals and interests;

risk, or the willingness to interact with individuals and publics on their own terms; and finally, *commitment*, or the extent to which an organization gives itself over to dialogue, interpretation, and understanding in its interactions with publics. These tenets encompass the implicit and explicit assumptions that underlie the concept of dialogue. In the next section, each dialogic tenet and its value for public relations is expanded upon. Before continuing however, it is important to note that this list is not exhaustive and some overlap naturally occurs between concepts. Since dialogue is a communicative "orientation" and not a set of rules, some overlap is expected.

2.1. Mutuality

Mutuality refers to an acknowledgment that organizations and publics are inextricably tied together. Mutuality is characterized by an "inclusion or collaborative orientation" and a "spirit of mutual equality." Today, with globalization, what happens in one nation may affect organization–public relations in other nations. Thus, organizations must extend the communication perspectives that they take when they plan, conduct and evaluate the effectiveness of their communication efforts. A much broader framework, accounting for culture and ideology, is needed. A collaborative orientation is one of the central features of mutuality.

2.1.1. Collaboration

Unlike bargaining/negotiation, dialogue is not about winning, losing, or compromising. All individuals engaged in a dialogue should have positions of their own, and should advocate for those positions vigorously. Dialogue is premised on intersubjectivity. It seeks to understand the positions of others and how people reached those positions.[27] "Reality" must be accepted by all parties involved as a socially constructed and perspectival process. No single individual or group involved in a dialogic exchange can be said to possess absolute truth. As Gadamer explained, "conversation is a process of two people understanding each other. Thus, is characteristic of every true conversation that each opens himself to the other person, truly accepts his point of view as worthy of consideration."[28] Collaboration is becoming an important area in public relations research. It provides a framework that "will help professionalize public relations, help organizations (including activist groups) serve their self-interest, and help move our democratic societies away from confrontation and divisiveness to more collaborative cultures."[29]

2.1.2. Spirit of mutual equality

Just as participants in dialogic exchanges must strive for humility, so too must dialogic participants work to maintain relationships of "equality."[30] Participants in dialogue should be viewed as persons and not as objects. This is not a new idea in philosophy; Emmanuel Kant spoke to this exact issue with the categorical imperative. In dialogue, the exercise of power or superiority should be avoided. Participants should feel comfortable discussing any topic free of ridicule or contempt. Although the partners in exchanges are often of differing status, discussants should consciously avoid the dynamics and trappings of power to manipulate or otherwise control the flow or direction of conversation.[31] Ethical dialogue necessitates acknowledgment of the other. Indeed, the mutual inter-relatedness of dialogic participants must be part of all exchanges. That is, even when one speaks for one's self, or for one's organization,

the needs, desires, and views of other dialogic partners should not only be acknowledged and recognized, but should also be apparent.[32]

From a public relations standpoint, mutuality is already an accepted practice. The idea of the information subsidy is based on the recognition of mutuality between the media and public relations practitioners.[33] It is also the reasoning behind collaborative marketing, sharing customer/client lists, trade organizations, coalitions, and dialogic engagement with those who oppose an organization's actions. Related to mutuality is the second tenet of dialogue: propinquity.

2.2. Propinquity

At the most basic level, propinquity advocates for a type of rhetorical exchange. It is an orientation to a relationship. For organizations, dialogic propinquity means that publics are consulted in matters that influence them, and for publics, it means that they are willing and able to articulate their demands to organizations. Propinquity is created by three features of dialogic relationships: "immediacy of presence," "temporal flow," and "engagement." These features of dialogue clarify the process of dialogic exchanges.

2.2.1. Immediacy of presence

The feature of immediacy of presence suggests that parties involved are communicating in the *present* about issues, rather than *after* decisions have been made. Immediacy of presence also suggests that parties are communicating in a shared space (or place).[34] Another feature of propinquity is "temporal flow."

2.2.2. Temporal flow

Dialogic communication is relational. It involves an understanding of the past and the present, and has an eye toward future relationships. Dialogue is not rooted only in the present; rather, its focus is on a continued and shared future for all participants. Dialogue is deliberative and seeks to construct a future for participants that is both equitable and acceptable to all involved.[35] The Public Relations Society of America's Code of Ethics embodies this temporal flow in the two articles addressing practitioner's relationships with past, present, and future clients and publics.

2.2.3. Engagement

Engagement is the third feature of dialogic propinquity. Dialogic participants must be willing to give their whole selves to encounters. Dialogue is not something that can take place in one's spare time or in the periphery. Dialogic participants must be accessible. All parties should respect their discussant(s) and risk attachment and fondness rather than maintaining positions of neutrality or observer status.[36] When an organization is fully engaged in its community (local or global) it will have broader contexts and wider perspectives to draw upon in its decision-making. Engagement benefits all parties involved because decisions serve multiple publics.

The implications for public relations are clear. At the very least, successful organizations consider the needs of publics. Day et al. noted that dialogic communication would be helpful

to build organization–community relations, engage in philanthropy, and help organizations understand international and intercultural situations.[37] However, Day et al., warn that contrived dialogic encounters will yield no benefit for organizations and, in the end, deceptive communication will hurt the organization–public relationship. Dialogic propinquity means that publics are consulted and considered on matters that affect them. Propinquity illustrates that there are some very positive outcomes for organizations that embrace dialogic relationships with publics. First, organizations will be able to know in advance of public disagreement on issues. And second, organizations can use the open, two-way relationships with publics to improve organizational effectiveness. A third dialogic principle is the concept of empathy.

2.3. Empathy

Empathy, also called "sympathy" in the literature, refers to the atmosphere of support and trust that must exist if dialogue is to succeed.[38] This feature of dialogue is characterized by "supportiveness," a "communal orientation," and "confirmation or acknowledgment" of others. Empathetic communication is important because practitioners can improve their communication by "walking in the shoes" of their publics.

2.3.1. Supportiveness

Dialogue involves creating a climate in which others are not only encouraged to participate but their participation is facilitated. That is, meetings are open to all interested participants, conversations are held in easily accessible locations, materials are made available to all, and efforts are made to facilitate mutual understanding. Participants demonstrate the "capacity to listen without anticipating, interfering, competing, refuting, or warping meanings into preconceived interpretations."[39] Dialogue is not synonymous with "debate"—which is about the clash of ideas—but rather, dialogue is more akin to a conversation between lovers where each has his or her own desires but seeks the other's good.[40] A second feature of dialogic empathy is the communal orientation whereby organizations and public relations practitioners try to treat individuals and publics as "colleagues" rather than "outsiders."

2.3.2. Communal orientation

Dialogue presupposes a communal orientation between interactants, whether they are individuals, organizations or publics. It is clear with each passing day that the citizens of the world are becoming inextricably linked through new communication technologies. With this globalization comes the recognition that organizations must engage in local as well as international relationships. A communal orientation is not new in public relations theory building. It is based on Kruckeberg and Stark's[41] and Stark and Kruckeberg's[42] continuing development of public relations as a community building function. Stark and Kruckeberg argue that public relations communication can create, rebuild, and change local and global communities.[43]

2.3.3. Confirmation

Laing argues that acknowledgment or confirmation of the value of others is one of the essential features of humanity.[44] The practice of confirmation refers to acknowledging the voice of the other in spite of one's ability to ignore it. Confirmation is a necessary precondition

of dialogue if discussants are to build trust with others.[45] As Laing explains, "confirmation varies in degree from a smile or a handshake to an evocative action."[46] Organizations need to acknowledge that individuals and groups who do not agree with the organization need to be heard. Indeed, Taylor found that publics who feel ignored by an organization are less willing to engage in any further relationship with such an organization.[47] As is well known in public relations, once public trust has been lost it is difficult, sometimes impossible, to regain it.

Empathetic organization–public relationships have characterized the communication practices of many successful organizations for years. The reasoning behind organization-sponsored childcare, partner benefits, and corporate philanthropy, acknowledges the organization's role in local, regional, national, and international communities. A sympathetic orientation to publics may help the organization improve relationships with external groups. However, within any dialogic relationship lies potential risks—finanical, psychological and relational—to the organization and to the public.

2.4. Risk

Leitch and Neilson noted that, "genuine dialogue is a problematic concept for system[s] public relations because it has the potential to produce unpredictable and dangerous outcomes."[48] Although parties who engage in dialogue take relational risks, dialogic participants also risk great rewards. Implicit in all organizational and interpersonal relationships is some risk. The assumption of risk is characterized by three features in dialogic exchanges: "vulnerability," "emergent unanticipated consequences," and a "recognition of 'strange otherness.'"

2.4.1. Vulnerability

As critical theory suggests, information is power. Dialogue, by necessity, involves the sharing of information, individual beliefs, and desires, with others. Because dialogue involves risk, it also, necessarily, makes participants vulnerable to manipulation or ridicule by other parties involved. Vulnerability in dialogue, however, should not be viewed pejoratively. It is through self-disclosure and risk that relationships are built and the possibility for change on the part of participants exists. Dialogic participants have to be willing to emerge from exchanges as new, changed, and reborn. Each encounter offers the possibility of growth.[49]

2.4.2. Unanticipated consequences

Dialogic communication is unrehearsed and spontaneous. Dialogic exchanges are not scripted nor are they predictable. This spontaneity emerges in the interaction of participants and their individual beliefs, values and attitudes. Indeed, it is the presence of an interpersonal relationship (although not necessarily face-to-face) between participants that facilitates dialogue.[50] While dialogic interactants all have positions on issues, the urge to manipulate others through scripted exchanges is avoided in an effort to minimize coercion.

2.4.3. Recognition of strange otherness

This feature of risk is the unconditional acceptance of the uniqueness and individuality of one's interlocutor. Recognition of strange otherness is not limited to the interaction of strangers or acquaintances but also includes exchanges with those who are well known. Recognition of

strange otherness also includes a consciousness of the fact that the "other" is not the same as oneself—nor should they be. Individuals are accepted as unique and valuable in their own right and *because* of the differences that they bring to dialogic exchanges.[51]

From a public relations standpoint, intentional, or relational, risk is a difficult concept to accept. Indeed, public relations is largely about reducing environmental risks in order to maximize stability, predictability, and profits. And yet, "dialogic risk" offers the reward of stronger organization–public relationships. Thus, "dialogic risk" makes organizational sense; it can create understanding to minimize uncertainty and misunderstandings. And, in cases where uncertainty exists, dialogue offers a means to share information. Taken as a core set of assumptions, the previous four tenets: mutuality, propinquity, empathy and risk create the foundation for the final tenet—commitment.

2.5. Commitment

Commitment is the final principle of dialogue to be discussed. Commitment describes three characteristics of dialogic encounters: "genuineness" and authenticity, "commitment to the conversation," and a "commitment to interpretation."

2.5.1. Genuineness
Dialogue is honest and forthright. It involves revealing one's position—"shooting from the hip" in spite of the possible value that deception or nondisclosure might have. This is not to say that interlocutors are indiscreet, but rather that they endeavor to place the good of the relationship above the good of the self (or the client/organization).[52] Indeed, organizations and publics that deal truthfully with one another are much more able to come to mutually beneficial solutions.

2.5.2. Commitment to conversation
The second feature of commitment is "commitment to the conversation." Conversations are held for the purposes of mutual benefit and understanding and not to defeat the other or to "exploit their weaknesses."[53] This assumption most accurately reflects Heath's long-time call for organizations and publics to communicate in zones of meaning.[54] Indeed, sharing the same meanings or working toward common understandings is crucial to dialogic relationships.

2.5.3. Commitment to interpretation
Since dialogue is intersubjective, it necessitates interpretation and understanding by all parties involved. Dialogue necessitates that all participants are willing to work at dialogue to understand often-diverse positions. As Ellul explains, "Discourse is ambiguous; it is never clear . . . . Meaning is uncertain; therefore I must constantly fine-tune my language and work at reinterpreting the words I hear. I try to understand what the other person says to me."[55] But commitment to interpretation also means that efforts are made to grasp the positions, beliefs, and values of others before their positions can be equitably evaluated.[56]

"Genuine dialogue," involves more than just a commitment to a relationship. Dialogue occurs when individuals (and sometimes groups) agree to set aside their differences long enough to come to an understanding of the others' positions. Dialogue is not equivalent to agreement.

Rather, dialogue is more akin to intersubjectivity where both parties attempt to understand and appreciate the values and interests of the other. Dialogue is both Socratic and Kantian. Dialogue rests on a willingness to "continue the conversation"—not for purposes of swaying the other with the strength of one's erudition, but as a means of understanding the other and reaching mutually satisfying positions.

Dialogic commitment, again, as with the other dialogic principles noted, is not new to public relations. Public relations often has to negotiate relationships with publics holding diverse positions. Indeed, for organizations to build community relations requires commitment to conversations and relationships, genuineness and authenticity—all strengths in ethical public relations.

As the principles illustrate, dialogue is not an easy outcome of communication and relationships. It requires the commitment on the part of individuals and organizations of resources, person hours, training, and evaluation. Having outlined some of the characteristics of what a dialogic approach to public relations must entail, the next section of this essay focuses on the incorporation of dialogue into the day-to-day public relations activities. While it is clear that dialogue is a highly desired product of public relations communication, it also needs to be pragmatic and accessible to the people who practice it. From an organizational perspective, dialogue means a greater commitment of resources on the part of the organization to train its representatives to communicate dialogically. Dialogue involves work and involves risk; however, dialogue can also lead to greater organizational rewards in the form of increased public support, enhanced image/reputation, and decreased governmental interference. For publics, dialogue can mean increased organizational accountability, a greater say in organizational operations, and increased public satisfaction.[57]

3. Incorporating dialogue into public relations practice

Ethical public relations is based on sound communication systems. Pearson explains that "ethical public relations practice is more fundamentally a question of implementing and maintaining inter-organizational communication systems which question, discuss and validate these and other substantive ethical claims.[58] As Anderson, Cissna, and Arnett explain:

> Human dialogue does not just happen . . . neither can dialogue be planned, pronounced, or willed. Where we find dialogue, we find people who are open to it . . . Dialogue is a dimension of communication quality that keeps communicators more focused on mutuality and relationship than on self interest, more concerned with discovering than disclosing, more interested in access than in domination.[59]

For any approach to dialogue to be effective requires an organizational commitment and an acceptance of the value of relationship building. In light of this, there are at least three ways in which dialogue can be incorporated into day-to-day public relations: the interpersonal, the mediated, and the organizational.

3.1. Building interpersonal relationships

Organizational leaders—and eventually all organizational members who communicate with publics—must be comfortable engaging in dialogue. As Pohl and Vandeventer suggest,

"leadership will be defined by the public relations professional's ability to integrate at several levels of business and society and to create more integrated management processes."[60] Just as many organizations offer training in crisis management, conflict management, and public speaking, organizational members must be trained in dialogue.

Skills that are necessary include: listening, empathy, being able to contextualize issues within local, national and international frameworks, being able to identify common ground between parties, thinking about long-term rather than short-term objectives, seeking out groups/individuals with opposing viewpoints, and soliciting a variety of internal and external opinions on policy issues. These interpersonal skills can be extended into public relations contexts. They can ground communication internal to the organization with superiors, subordinates, and peers. Moreover, these skills will also help in building external relationships. Public relations professionals engage in relationships with media, community leaders, and other individuals on a daily basis. A consideration of these factors will no-doubt strengthen the communication relations with external constituencies as well. A second way that an organization might employ dialogue is through its mediated communication channels.

3.2. Building mediated dialogic relationships

Organizations can reinforce their commitment to dialogue and foster more interaction with publics by using mass mediated channels to communicate with publics. That is, organizations that are making a commitment to dialogue must place e-mail, Web addresses, 800 telephone numbers, and organizational addresses prominently in advertisements, on organizational literature and on all correspondence.[61] For these communication channels to facilitate dialogue, they cannot simply connect publics to the Web address for "sales" on the corporate Web site, or provide recorded greetings/announcements to callers. Rather, organizations must create Web site locations, telephone access, and public forums where the public can actually engage other human beings in discussions about organizational issues.

As Newsom, Turk, and Kruckeberg tell future practitioners, "it is virtually impossible to practice effective public relations today without using the Internet."[62] The Internet is one place in particular where dialogue can inform relationship building. Indeed, of all of the mediated communication channels available to the public relations practitioner, the World Wide Web comes closest to the interpersonal ideal.[63] Heath and Coombs discussed how organizations and opponents can use the Internet as a place to come together for debates.[64] Through cyber town meetings organizations can listen to publics.

The Web incorporates text, sound, image, movement, and the potential for real-time interaction all in one package. Books, magazines, and newspapers cannot do this, they have no capacity for sound, movement, or real-time interaction. Similarly, neither radio nor television possess the capacity for real-time interaction. With the possible exception of call-in shows, radio and television are not "interactive," in the sense that face-to-face or Webbed dialogue can be.[65] The Web can be used to communicate directly with publics by offering real time discussions, feedback loops, places to post-comments, sources for organizational information, and postings of organizational member biographies and contact information. Through the commitment of organizational resources and training, the Web can function dialogically rather than monologically.

3.3. A procedural approach to dialogue

As noted earlier, dialogue is not about the "process" used, it is about the products that emerge—trust, satisfaction, sympathy, etc. However, dialogic communication "procedures" are a necessary first step toward ethical communication.[66] Publics should not be thought of by organizations as "others," rather, public relations should be "public centered."[67] The procedural approach to dialogic public relations involves creating organizational mechanisms for facilitating dialogue. Proceedural approaches to dialogic communication have been advanced elsewhere. Pearce and Pearce, for example, facilitated public participation in dealing with controversial and sensitive issues in middle schools and high schools.[68] Pearce and Pearce offered a five phase, 10-step dialogue process to students, parents, teachers, and school administrators and found that dialogue led to creative solutions and mutual understanding of "others" positions.

In public relations, Pearson suggested three procedures useful for facilitating dialogue: that no topic should be excluded *a priori* from discussion, that no type of communication be considered *a priori* as inappropriate or irrational, and that during discourse, communicators have the option of changing "levels of reflexivity."[69] Pearson believed that these three procedures formed the basis of equitable organization–public dialogues. Pearson went on to identify six dimensions of dialogic organizational systems:

(1) An understanding of and agreement on the rules governing the opportunity for beginning, maintaining and ending interactions.
(2) Public understanding of and agreement on the rules governing the length of time separating messages or questions from answers.
(3) Public understanding of and agreement on rules governing opportunities to suggest topics and initialize topic changes.
(4) Public understanding of and agreement on rules for when a response counts as a response.
(5) Public understanding of and agreement on rules for channel selection.
(6) Public understanding of and agreement on the rules for talking about and changing the rules.[70]

Procedural approaches such as Pearson's are already used in a variety of contexts. For example, it is becoming increasingly common when calling private and state organizations for their answering systems to inform callers of how long they can expect to wait before being helped. Many such systems also suggest better times of the day to telephone if callers want to call back, and offer alternative means of getting in touch, such as leaving messages. Such systems are consistent with Pearson's second and fifth dimensions: "Public understanding of and agreement on the rules governing the length of time separating messages or questions from answers," and "understanding of and agreement on rules for channel selection." Of course, such "rules" do not equate with dialogue; however, they are part of creating environments where publics feel validated. To that extent "procedures" are one of the foundational steps for enhancing dialogic relationship building. A final issue worth considering here is what the limits are of a dialogic approach to public relations.

4. Conclusion: the potential and limits of dialogue

The majority of this article has focused on describing dialogue in general, and explaining how dialogue might be incorporated into everyday public relations practice. Not everyone agrees, however, whether dialogic public relations is even possible or practical. Research from public forums such as town meetings[71] and community workshops[72] shows that the process and product of well-intended, theoretically grounded, and highly structured dialogic communication efforts often fall short of participants' aspirations. There is also the criticism that a dialogic approach can be easily exploited by one group or the other. That is, when publics engage in "dialogue" with organizations they run the risk that their disclosures will be used to exploit or manipulate them. A final criticism of dialogue is that dialogue is often called "more ethical" but no "evidence" exists to support such a claim. Dialogue is considered more ethical for the same reason that Americans consider democracy more ethical than dictatorship or monarchy: it gives a voice to all. Dialogue is considered "more ethical" because it is based on principles of honesty, trust, and positive regard for the other rather than simply a conception of the public as means to end.

There are no easy answers to how to implement dialogic systems in organizations. Dialogue is a complex and multifarious process. Before dialogic systems can be implemented on the organizational level, however, a framework for thinking about dialogue is necessary. This article has provided that beginning framework with five dialogic tenets: mutuality, empathy, propinquity, risk, and commitment. Taking the discussion of dialogue from the theoretical to the pragmatic, this article also described three approaches useful for creating dialogic communication systems. In order to bring dialogue to the attention of organizations interested in fostering more effective communication systems, scholars and practitioners must be able to provide concrete structures—not just idealized descriptions of humane communication. If dialogue is to become a viable organizational tool, then the wealth of possibilities must be reduced from dozens of concepts and possibilities to but a few effective alternatives. Future research and commentary should begin to address additional theoretical issues in dialogue. Just as many members of the field have spent the last 25 years defining, refining, and articulating a theory of symmetrical communication, it is now time to use the same rigor and idealism on the next stage of public relations theory development: dialogue. Although "dialogue" cannot *guarantee* ethical public relations outcomes, a dialogic communication orientation does increase the likelihood that publics and organizations will better understand each other and have ground rules for communication.

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