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Reimagining dialogue in public relations: Bakhtin and open dialogue in the public sphere

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ABSTRACT

Over the past several decades, public relations scholarship has added significant richness to its understanding of dialogue. Such research has followed a theoretical trajectory centered on the “I and Thou” philosophy of Martin Buber. Drawing from Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Dialogic Imagination*, this essay puts public relations dialogic scholarship into conversation with the concept of dialogue in a broader societal context. Bakhtin’s work provides additional understanding of public relations’ roles in dialogue, particularly in regards to facilitating public conversations. Bakhtin’s emphasis on contextual and individually generated meanings illuminates the nature and structure of public conversations and the potential for public relations practitioners to play a more active and positive role in the enactment of open dialogue.

1. Introduction

Public relations scholarship has experienced an “infatuation with dialogue” (Stoker & Tusinski, 2006, p. 173), beginning with the work of Pearson (1989), Kent and Taylor’s 1998 and 2002 articles connecting public relations and dialogue, and including its later integration with social media (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Dialogue is an accessible and appealing concept for practitioners and scholars to support, particularly when using a broad, colloquial, and arguably superficial, definition of the concept (cf. Pieczka, 2011; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). However, dialogue also has narrow and theoretically nuanced definitions that position it as an ethical, interpersonal communication process that recognizes the intrinsic value of others in its orientation (e.g., Botan, 1997; Kent & Lane, 2017; Pearson, 1989; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). Dialogue is prized because it “serves to mitigate power relationships, values individual dignity and self worth, and tries to involve participants in decision-making” (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 388).

While existing treatments of dialogue provide a rich grounding for research and practice in public relations dialogue, these definitions also focus their theoretical scope to specific organization-public relationships. Yet, dialogue may also have a role in the interplay of communication and relationships among multiple organizations and publics. Dialogic theory should help organizations look beyond dyadic organization-public relationships to more holistic understandings of their relationships with multiple others (Heath, 2013). As such, in addition to the work of theologian Martin Buber (1958), psychologist Carl Rogers (Cissna & Anderson, 1990; Rogers, 1957) and other interpersonal approaches to dialogue, scholarship should also seek to answer calls to examine dialogue at multiple levels and using a wider base of literature (Kent & Theunissen, 2016; Taylor & Kent, 2014).

Dialogues can happen among communities, among organizations, and among publics, as well as between each of these groups. One author who shared this broader understanding of dialogue was Russian literary critic, semiotician, and linguistic philosopher Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin. While writing from the perspective of literary criticism rather than organizational communication or

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public relations, Bakhtin nonetheless outlined a framework for the symbolic interaction of language in the public sphere. Using the linguistic structure of the novel, and envisioning the act of the novelist as a contribution to a larger public conversation, Bakhtin's (1981; 1986) work underscores the multi-layered, interwoven fabric of meaning creation (*heteroglossia*)—positing that language and meaning cannot be removed from their cultural context. He also emphasizes the primacy of a meaning-sized group of signs (*the utterance*) rather than individual words or signs, and the lack of meaning control that authors (individuals or organizations) have over messages once they are put out into the world. Several public relations scholars have touched on Bakhtin's work (e.g., Lane, 2014a,b; Pieczka, 2011; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012), and this article moves his approach to the center of its analysis.

This article makes the case for a conception of dialogue built on Bakhtin's "cultural knowing" approach (Cissna & Anderson, 1994, p. 13). The term "dialogue" may be the same as in public relations scholarship built on Buberian approaches, but the approach outlined herein provides a complementary method to enrich discussion. It follows Taylor and Kent's (2014) call for research at multiple levels of dialogic communication, focusing on societal structures (Grunig, 2008), and Kent and Theunissen's (2016) request for integration of new concepts into dialogic scholarship. Through the lens of Bakhtin's dialogue, public relations can be seen as *cultural interpretation*, *stewardship of meaning*, and *organizational listening*. In this way, a complementary understanding of dialogue can help public relations scholars examine relationships beyond the dyadic: dialogues between or among multiple organizations and publics, and *open dialogue* among these varied entities in the public sphere (Heath, 2000).

This essay will review the literature on dialogue in public relations, including its challenges in practice and under-recognized importance in the public sphere, before examining Bakhtin's *Dialogic Imagination* and the relevance of key concepts to public relations. Finally, it will conclude by integrating Bakhtin's ideas into the concept of *open dialogue* (Heath, 2000; Pieczka, 2011) and defining key roles or functions of public relations based on this approach.

2. Literature review

2.1. Dialogue in public relations

The integration of dialogue into public relations scholarship began with Pearson's (1989) examination of the ethical basis for a symmetrical approach to organization-public relationships (Kent & Theunissen, 2016). Pearson (1989) positioned dialogue as not simply an act, but as a pre-condition or set of rules for ethical communication. His work was continued by scholars who would utilize Martin Buber's (1958) *I and Thou*, which emphasized the recognition, validation, and equality of the *other* in communication (e.g., Botan, 1997; Kent, 2013; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). Rogers, who acknowledged Buber's deep influence on his own psychological work (Cissna & Anderson, 1990), describes an "empathetic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference" cultivated through a face-to-face relationship (Rogers, 1957, p. 96). Buber and Rogers saw dialogue as an interpersonal communication concept rather than a public concept (Kent & Theunissen, 2016; Taylor & Kent, 2014). Heath et al. (2006) suggested Buber's most essential contribution to dialogue was his "mutuality of regard and interest" between participants (p. 346). For organizations, this means engaging with external publics in ways that reduce structural power differences (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Pearson, 1989), and view stakeholders as "active and aware participants, not simply as 'targeted audiences' for the organization's messages or campaigns" (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012, p. 11).

Dialogue is an authentic interaction, created through openness to change, collaboration, and propinquity (Penman & Turnbull, 2012). It is a "communicative orientation" rather than a process or list of rules (Kent & Taylor, 2011, p. 25). Taylor and Kent (2014) were careful to separate *dialogic* from *dialogue*, noting that there is often confusion between the procedural steps (*dialogic*) necessary to lay the groundwork for ethical communication and the orientation toward that communication (*dialogue*). In this way, we can see that "dialogue is product rather than process" (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 323) and that Buber's understanding of dialogue can never be achieved in practice by simply checking a set of boxes, or following certain rules. For these reasons, true dialogue can be difficult to pinpoint, and is often seen as "more a commitment to a set of values than a coherent set of concrete practices" (Heath et al., 2006, p. 365). Dialogue will always require an openness and presentness in conversation that are based on perspective and intention.

Kent and Taylor (2002) proposed five features of dialogue: *mutuality*, *propinquity*, *empathy*, *risk*, and *commitment*. *Mutuality* refers to the awareness that organizations and publics are "inextricably linked" and an orientation of collaboration and inclusion (p. 25). *Propinquity* stresses the immediacy of presence and engagement in a dialogic relationship. *Empathy* is characterized by supportiveness and the conscious construction of a climate conducive to mutual engagement. Within this framework, *risk* in dialogue is presented as an orientation in which control is given up, leading to vulnerability and unanticipated consequences (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). Finally, *commitment* reflects the dedication to honesty, transparency, and genuine effort to understand the symbolic worldviews of all participants (Heath, 2000; Kent & Taylor, 2002).

Scholarship and practice of dialogue has been touted as beneficial to many aspects of public relations. An interpersonally based definition of dialogue offered by Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) has been used to support the framework of dyadic organization-public relationships (e.g., Bruning, Dials, & Shirka, 2008; Heath, 2013; Ledingham, 2003). Additionally, dialogue is considered "one of the most ethical forms of communication because it serves to mitigate power relationships, values individual dignity and self worth, and tries to involve participants in conversation and decision-making" (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 388). Organizations embracing dialogic approaches open the door for improving understanding of those outside their boundaries.

Despite some criticism for failing to meet the standards of genuine dialogue (Kent & Theunissen, 2016; Taylor & Kent, 2014), several experimental studies have attempted to better understand the dialogic properties of blogs and social media (e.g., Bruning et al., 2008; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Ward & Sweetser, 2014). These works demonstrate the continued appetite for additional understandings of dialogic communication as well as the ways in which organizations are seeking—if not always finding or fully

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