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Full Length Article

# Dialogue, strategic communication, and ethical public relations: Lessons from Martin Buber's political activism

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## ABSTRACT

Dialogue and persuasive strategic communication are often perceived by public relations scholars as two distinct approaches to the practice. After revisiting and reassessing debates surrounding the two approaches, this article introduces accounts of the use of dialogue and strategic communication in the political life of Martin Buber, whose philosophy has inspired PR scholarship on dialogue. It traces Buber's writings and activities as communicator in the service of the early Zionist movement and, in his later life, as campaigner against the establishment of the State of Israel, and as promoter of dialogue between Zionists and Arab Palestinians. Based on archival research the article uncovers Buber's political and PR work to provide insights into his philosophy in the context of his political and life experiences. Inspired by Buber's work the article argues that dialogue and strategic communication both have the potential to be deployed ethically, and for prosocial causes, or to be deployed in a self-serving and unethical way. In this, it supports other scholars' argument that public relations should reconcile with the fact that both are legitimate tools and it further argues that both might be used either ethically or unethically. It concludes that ethical PR practice depends less on the form of communication, and more on transparency, honesty, openness, and respect in the way dialogue or strategic communication are conducted.

## 1. Introduction

Many in public relations (Heath, 2001; Heath et al., 2006; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Macnamara, 2012; Paquette et al., 2015; Pearson, 1989; Pieczka, 2011, 2013, 2016; Stewart & Zediker, 2000; Taylor & Kent, 2014) have championed dialogue as a major practical tool for building trustworthy and ethical relationships between organizations and stakeholders. Other scholars doubted the feasibility of dialogic PR practice (Lane, 2014a, 2014b) or its superior value over persuasive communication (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). However, as Lane (2014a) put it “the dominant perspective that has emerged [in public relations literature] is one in which dialogue in public relations is discussed as a normative, aspirational construct” (p. ii).

Examining Buber's own expression of dialogue in his political activism, this article finds contradictions and challenges in his writings and activities at different times. Drawing from archive documents, some translated for the first time from German and from Hebrew, as well as recently published books in Hebrew, the article examines Buber's journey from early propaganda and PR for the young Zionist movement, through his work as publicist and editor of the official weekly Zionist magazine *Die Welt*, to his campaign against the establishment of the State of Israel without Arab's approval, and his work within groups who advocated for dialogue with Palestine's Arabs. By revealing Buber's work in the capacity of public relations and advocacy, this article also contributes to public relations scholarship on the profession's historical roots.

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Stewart and Zediker (2000) linked Buber's life experiences and his philosophy to position his writing on dialogue as *prescriptive* (p. 227) in contrast to Bakhtin's *descriptive* dialogism (p. 225):

As the son of divorced parents, a political activist in the Zionist movement, a European Jew forced by the Nazis to emigrate to Israel, and an active participant in early struggle between Palestinians and Israelis, Buber experienced more than a typical lifetime of almost incomprehensible monologic relating. As a result, his life-work focused on attempting to restore some semblance of balance by enhancing the occurrence of I-Thou contacts in education, politics, therapy, community life, and interpersonal relationships. (p. 227)

This article further investigates Buber's experiences and political doctrine as well as his work as official publicist and communicator to add a different, but relevant, perspective on his significance to PR. Buber's political speeches, articles, and testimonials (retrieved from the Central Zionist Archive in Jerusalem and the National Library of Israel and translated for the first time from German and Hebrew), along with recent Israeli books on Buber (Gordon, 2008; Katriel, 2004; Maor, 2016; Ram, 2015; Sharir, 2011), add insights to debates around strategic communication and dialogue as PR tools from an ethical perspective.

This article approaches Buber's theory as intertwined with, and maybe emerging from, his practice to enable better understanding of dialogue and strategic communication. Buber's contradictions exemplify the challenges faced by professional communicators who speak on behalf of organizations. Buber the philosopher certainly advocated for open genuine dialogue without any set outcomes. However, according to this article's evidence his actual political dialogue did not follow the model of genuine exchanges advocated in his philosophical writings. Buber the politician spoke and acted as a strategic communicator promoting his organization's cause. His political communication highlights the complexity of the debate around PR's association with strategic communication and dialogue and their ethical significance.

## 2. Literature review

Kent and Lane (2017) rightly argue that "there are too many articles on dialogic public relations to review them in any single essay" (p. 4). The same might be said about strategic communication. This review focuses on publications that represent specific understandings of strategic communication and dialogue in the context of professional ethics. It will first present Buber's philosophy of dialogue and then focus on the two different approaches: strategic communication and dialogue to demonstrate mixed feeling about each approach in PR scholarship.

### 2.1. Martin Buber, dialogue, and PR

Scholars in public relations and other disciplines often identify Martin Buber (1878–1965), a German Jewish philosopher, with the roots of the concept of dialogue. Kent and Taylor (2002) said that he was "considered by most to be the father of the modern concept of dialogue" (p. 22). Commenting on his book *I and Thou*, which was published in 1923 in German, Pieczka (2011) noted that the "publication of Buber's (1958) Buber's (1958) [second English translation] *I and Thou* is often referred to as the starting point in the story of modern dialogue because of the profound influence of the ideas it contained" (p. 112).

Buber's thinking can help distinguish between what PR literature identifies as organization-centred persuasive strategic communication and dialogue. The former is assumed to deploy unethical manipulation to achieve self-serving organizational objectives and uses one way communication with its publics (*I-It*). The latter sees the organization as an equal partner in a network of relationships (*I-Thou*), when *I and thou* refer to the world and human life experience in relations to an Other. The "I" does not objectify any "It" but rather acknowledges a living relationship. Buber characterised *I-Thou* relations as "dialogical" and *I-It* relations as "monological." To perceive the other as an *It* is to take them as a categorized and hence predictable and manipulable object that exists only as a part of one's own experiences. Organizations that use strategic communication with a self-serving goal might be considered as conducting monological relationships. In contrast, in an *I-Thou* relationship, both participants exist as polarities of relation, whose centre lies in the *between*.

In a forum on the process of dialogue, Heath (Heath et al., 2006) identified the concept of the *between* as a key element of dialogue relevant to PR as it "boils down to a mutuality of regard and interest" (p. 346). It is about the space between the dialogue participants, the nature of the encounter between them and their connection. Arnett (2004) describes how Buber "returns to the metaphor of the *between* and the possibility of emergent reciprocity. He wages battle in the existential moment against individualism and collectivism – looking for emergent answers between extremes that invite reciprocal concern" (p. 79). In an interpretation of Buber's writing, Kent and Lane (2017) state that "What matters are the spaces between interactions, the presentness of encounters, and relations that exists in the betweenness of actual experience" (p. 569).

This emphasis on reciprocity and mutual relations between people makes dialogue a particularly engaging form of communication relevant to public relations. When PR practitioners facilitate a dialogue between organizations and stakeholders they function somewhere between them. The use of values of mutuality and respect to all participants in this space helps determine genuine and ethical dialogue.

Buber makes a further distinction between two models of dialogue that Kaufmann (1970) describes as the "genuine" dialogue of the *I-Thou* relations, which is the deepening of mutual presence, and technical dialogue, which aims at objective understanding only (p. 58). Stewart and Zediker (2000) describe Buber's treatment of dialogue as prescriptive (p. 227) with the goal of understanding dialogue:

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