THE DIALOGICAL ATTITUDE. THE PRIVILEGE OF DIALOGUE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract: *The present paper aims to present some of the contradictions regarding the possibility of dialogue in the digital era. Communication ethics from a dialogic perspective emphasizes commitment to difference and alterity as key aspects of identity building, learning and critical thinking. A dialogical attitude is considered to be the foundation of any authentic communication, as being opposed to the monological arrogance, and as a first precondition of self-development. Despite the skepticism, internet communication can present dialogic characteristics. Social presence and media richness are two of the indicators of a dialogic digital interaction. Although some difficulties may occur, as the absent presence or the multitasking, researchers claim that difference will remain the fuel for the dialogic call of the 21th century communication, whether we will be ready to dialogically answer it or not.*

Keywords: dialogic ethics, dialogical attitude, social presence, media richness, dialogic digital communication

1. The dialogical attitude in communication

In the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, a *dialogical turn* in moral and political philosophy has emerged, placing the concept of *dialogue* at the center of ethical and moral justification. Communication ethics from a dialogic perspective is an continuous negotiating of rival social goods, a competition for the communicative enactment of these values. Dialogic ethics begins with the willingness to cooperate; it engages difference and promotes learning as a consequence of understanding and negotiating differences.

The *dialogue* is the specific form of all authentic philosophical communication. The dialogical art brings the interlocutors together, and transforms them from an

attitudinal, behavioral point of view, outcome in which resides the purpose of knowledge in Socrates's view: the possession of wisdom. Thus, dialogue, marks the birth of any learning, or education [1]. The Platonic view focuses on dialogue as an inquiry into truth: the truth can only be found through the exchange of arguments and counter-arguments, slowly moving towards the ultimate, absolute truth. Aristotle's understanding of the rhetorical discourse is dialogic. Aristotle's notion of *enthymeme*, the state of judgment, means the co-creation of meaning between rhetor and audience.

Dialogic communication ethics emphasizes difference and alterity. Dialogue theorists—Martin Buber, Hans Gadamer, Jurgen Habermas, Mikhail Bakhtin, Emmanuel Levinas, Walter Fisher, Paulo Freire, Hannah Arendt—understood ethical

encounters as communicative commitments to difference and alterity.

Martin Buber (1970) is the first of the philosophers who placed the concept of dialogue at the heart of his view of existence itself. In his *I and Thou* philosophical masterpiece he analyses the two significant primary human relationships or attitudes: *I-Thou* the relationship with the significant other, and *I-It*, the relationship that treats the other as object, and establishes the first as the fundamental fact of human existence. Martin Buber's *Monologue –Dialogue Continuum* shows that the essential moment in any dialogue is turning toward, reaching for the other, and experiencing the other's point of view. A human being becomes a person, rather than a self-centered individual, due to the dialogic relationship, the relationship with the *Other*.

Gadamer (1976) places the *bias* at the center of human understanding, seen as the fundamental prejudice by which one enters a dialogue. He frames dialogue as "a meeting of respectful difference", a meeting of horizons, in which the bias of a person meets that of another person. Habermas (1972), assumes that participants in dialogue have an 'emancipatory interest' and that they will mutually adhere to the rules of an 'ideal speech situation' in order to find the best outcome for society. His assumption is that there are no neutral views of communication, all theories pointing to presuppositions or interests for a given view of the good that will be projected and promoted.

The relation between identity and otherness is a constant focus in Bakhtin's writings from the 1920s through to the 1970s. He brings in discussion the inevitability of dialogue, as the self is always connected with the other, affected by the other, whether he wants it or not, whether he is aware of it or not. According to Levinas, ethics itself originates in the call of the Other, the acknowledgment of the Other" being the most primordial precondition of

ethical communication. Otherness is the center of life and human connection, it is a "place" in which the Self can enter into a relationship that is disinterested, but not indifferent, with the Other. What is more, he assesses The Self's infinite responsibility for The Other: *I owe the Other everything, the Other owes me nothing*.

Just like Buber's *Thou*, *The Other* holds the shadow of God, he comes from above and makes us ethically responsible. In the absence of his *Voice*, communication is deprived of the *dialogic privilege*, the privilege of encountering the other as significant partner in conversation, any attempt to self-disclosure counting as an attempt of monologic (or lesser) importance.

Dialogue means more than a specific method, technique or way of expressing things. We can speak of an *attitude of dialogue* that is at the core of any successful communication. Thus, the dialogic communication is considered to be authentic, inclusive, confirming, facilitative, nondirective, participative, existential, self-disclosing, supportive, caring, constructive, identity building. The monological communication, is, on the contrary, self-centered, defensive, moreover manipulative, directive, and inauthentic.

The good communicator must thus adopt a *dialogical attitude*, characterized by prudence, disinterest, objectivity, moderation, rationality, placing the interlocutor on the privileged place, giving him the role of a more-than-equal partner, a friend, a superior, while the base communicator will embrace a monological attitude, inclined towards domination, possession, selfishness, superiority, manipulation, exploitation, domination, moreover giving the other the role of the victim, inferior, object, etc.

Dialogue is not just a set of behaviors and attitudes but is considered a place characterized by certain boundaries of expectation and preparation, something

that cannot be taught, only cultivated. Identity has always been dialogical: *"Thus, discovering my own identity doesn't mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal with others. That is why the development of an ideal of inwardly generated identity gives a new importance to recognition. My own identity crucially depends on my dialogue relationships with others"* [2].

Dialogue is at the beginning of critical thinking. It is first resented as a form of "recalcitrance" (Burke, 1984), as the natural response to the dialogical confrontation of the voices of Others:

The appearance of the Other to the self, in language, is experienced as a form of recalcitrance. Similarly, and by extension, irony is thereby understood as the groundwork of a dramatistic theory of ethics in which the recalcitrant voices of Others generate a dialogue of competing motives [3].

The final consensus comes as the result of an interindividual negotiation, assumed as a stepping stone in the continuity of the discursive relationship and advancement of knowledge [4].

The characteristics of the dialogue can be abused or used irresponsibly, by humiliating the other in order to satisfy our own ego and sense of importance.

Buber believes that all role-oriented relationships, such as student-teacher, doctor-patient, etc can only be authentically and ethically conducted with dialogic attitudes between participants. Thus, he encourages a *practice of the responsibility of dialogue*.

This desirability of a dialogical ethical approach is promoted in the practices of all organizations, describing how ethical public relations should embody attitudes of dialogue rather than monologue in their communications. One rule is that any communication should reflect truthful, honest, dialogical attitude towards the public and avoid monological arrogance.

Thus, the dialogic attitude can be considered as the primary condition for self-development, by creating a confidence environment, eliminating negative presumptions, developing empathy and positive attitudes, enhancing self-esteem, establishing healthy connections, reaching a sensible common ground, facilitating learning, creating mature partnerships/coalitions.

2. The dialogic vs. the digital

Public relations scholars started treating the subject of dialogue around the early 1990s (Pearson, 1989b), but the development of a formal theory took place around the early 2000s (Kent & Taylor, 2002). The concept of dialogue that emphasizes the relational orientation of communicative activities is based on the set of underlying theories derived from the paradigm of the two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Kent and Taylor (2002) contended that genuine dialogue between organizations and publics must follow the features of *mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment*. *Mutuality* means that organizations and publics should collaborate and maintain mutual equality; *propinquity* addresses the rhetorical process of dialogic exchanges, and assesses that organizations and publics should consult each other before decision making; *empathy* refers to the atmosphere of support and trust required for successful dialogic communication between organizations and publics; *risk* denotes the unpredictability of dialogic communication and the vulnerability of organizations and publics as dialogic entities; *commitment* refers to organizations' and publics' commitment to their relationship [5].

Along with the conceptual development, in another article, Kent and Taylor (1998) drafted five *digital dialogic principles* that could help online relationship building between organizations and publics. What

gives online communication a dialogic aspect are:

(a) the *dialogic loops*, which refer to the use of communication channels through which organizations ask for opinions, solicit feedback, and address questions from their publics;

(b) *useful information*, which requires organizations to provide valuable information that is wanted by their publics;

(c) *return visit generation*, which refer to communication strategies that encourage repeated visits

(d) *visitor conservation*, or keeping visitors on-site for a longer time;

(e) *ease of interface*, which taps into the technical aspect of dialogic communication and suggests that websites should be easy to navigate and user-friendly [6].

There are however some contradictions related to the possibility of dialogue in the online media. Even with the development of communication technologies, some voices still sustain that *dialogic* and *digital* are two incompatible terms. One important aspect that researchers draw attention to is that dialogue was initially modeled for face-to-face practice, not theorized for computer mediated communication, and to adapt the concept for the digital age, we might need new theoretical frameworks. The incompatibility of dialogic communication with digital media first of all derives from the fact that dialogue is a concept deeply rooted in interpersonal communication (Buber, 1970; Pearson, 1989a), implies human presence and cannot be used for machine communication. But this is old thinking. The *Ease of interface* principle might also fit well with the Web 1.0 era, a time when online medium was not always user-friendly. But in recent years websites have been designed to near perfection so that dysfunctions are much less likely to happen, though, certainly, different platforms offer different quality user experiences. Facebook, for instance, is

considered to be a a better social media platform to fulfill the *Dialogic loop* principle than Twitter, and there is accumulating evidence showing that the new educational platforms offer better facilities for online communication (such as face to face video facilities), than those created just a few years ago. (Auger, 2013). In the last years, virtual work and telecommuting (working from home at least half time) has increased and for certain it will constitute an alternative modality of working in the future. What makes teleworking effective is, first of all, efficient communication:

The internet, phone and audio and videoconferencing have created a diverse set of tools that can be used to facilitate communication and collaboration across distances ranging from thousands of miles to a few metres [7].

The use of these tools however depends on a number of factors. Two of the most important ones, discussed by Karen S. Lojeski, Richard R. Reilly in their book *The Power of Virtual Distance* is *social presence* and *media richness*.

Social presence is defined as the extent to which a communication medium can provide a feeling of real presence and participation of the people online and a sense that those involved are jointly interacting.

Media Richness is a characteristic of the media that meets certain criteria of effectiveness. Media are considered rich when they provide the following:

- the ability to use natural language;
- paralinguistic and kinezcic cues (tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures);
- the ability to personalize information;
- rapid feed-back.

Both social presence and media richness are indicators of the degree of an efficiency of a communication, having at the lower end the written messages with the slowest feedback and at the higher end *the face to face dialogue*. We draw from here an important conclusion, that messaging and e-mail, though widely used, are rather low in presence and low in richness; not even video-conferencing is not as efficient, or dialogic, as *face-to face* communication.

We may conclude from here that teleconferencing could be closer to the aim of dialogic communication, thus more efficient. Nevertheless, as most employees complain, it often fails in creating a relaxed meeting environment, moreover making the sessions dry and boring, which indeed impacts efficient communication. One major problem that may occur is the *absent presence*, the fact that, although connected online, a person may not be psychologically present, or dialogue friendly. Finally, *multitasking* can become a problem when the participants are working at the same time on other projects while participating to an online event, or even leaving the room during the session, so the participants may not even know if a person is really present online and open to dialogue or not.

Therefore, dialogue, the somewhat abstract concept rooted in moral philosophy, interpersonal communication, and rhetoric

literature (e.g, Buber, 1970; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Stewart, 1978), is an orientation and should be considered an ideal that guides ethical public relations practice, although it might be difficult or even impossible to achieve the ideal in the real world (Botan, 1997; Ciszek, 2020; Lane & Bartlett, 2016; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012).

As Sommerfeldt and Yang (2018) state, dialogue is a promise, while dialogic communication is the procedural steps and communicative conduct that fulfills and precedes that promise (Taylor & Kent, 2014).

Therefore we may consider that dialogue is a privileged place, a place where difference makes room for enactment of values and beliefs, an identity building opportunity and at the same time an opportunity to learn from and to establish a common ground with the significant other.

3. Conclusions

Despite the difficulties and contradictions related to the possibility of authentic dialogue through social media, researchers tend to agree upon one thing: difference is what fuels the dialogic call of the 21th century. If we consider that everything is communication (including virtual participation/activity, number of members/friends/subscriptions/views, etc), the exchange of text-video-voice messages

might be the essence of the future modern dialogue. However, some difficulties do remain. Though videoconferencing is more *media rich* and allows more *social presence* than mere audio or text messaging - adding the characteristics of visibility-teleconferences tend to be task focused rather than dialogue friendly, not allowing the kind of exchange in which real, enduring relationships and collaborations can be developed. Consequently, it is up to us to decide if we will consider computer mediated dialogue, a dialogue in all its rights. We should all agree though that computer mediated communication is a modern tool for learning in schools, and dialogue, whether face to face or digitally mediated is at the core of the learning processes:

This era, which some call the crumbling of foundations and others as a time for foundations in contention, provides, ironically, one major foundation for this work: learning. Dialogue opens the door to

learning. Dialogue opens the door to other persons and ideas [8].

Public relations practice, by building mutual understanding and promoting computer-mediated communication between organizations and their publics, can create and encourage dialogue as a product that contributes to the beneficial relationships and social capitals that are desirable for publics, organizations, and the general society. Nevertheless we should be aware of the dangers of technology as a replacement for human interaction in an era that Michael Hyde (2004) calls *the posthuman age*. Therefore, in the digital age, dialogue, the abstract concept rooted in moral philosophy, should be considered more than a means, but an end, an ideal. Authentic dialogic attitude should guide all ethical communication practices, even if, in some circumstances *dialogue* as face-to-face communication might be difficult to achieve.

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