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Panacea, placebo or prudence: Perspectives and constraints for corporate dialogue

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Abstract

Public relations has long been preoccupied with the notion of dialogue, and the advent of social media ushered in new enthusiasm. Still, despite the technology on offer and the fact that dialogue has become a value that "everyone" embraces, most research concludes that little actual dialogue takes place between corporations and their stakeholders. Scholars have pointed to a host of different factors to explain this, ranging from practitioners' lack of time to their lack of understanding of what dialogue is. This paper discusses perspectives on corporate dialogue with a focus on the constraints identified in the literature, before presenting the main argument that not enough attention has been paid to the macro limits at the systemic level. The paper issues a call to locate dialogue attempts within a system where a limited economic rationality reigns, which, in turn, constrains what individual practitioners can achieve.

Dialogue and stakeholder engagement are prominent themes in public relations, often discussed in connection with communication technology (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Macnamara, 2015; McAllister-Spooner, 2009; Pearson, 1989; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). Still, a host of scholars conclude that the dialogue ideal remains just that—an ideal, not a panacea (Heath et al., 2006). For instance, a slate of studies document that corporations do not tap technology's dialogic potential (Etter, 2013; Kent, Saffer, & Pop, 2013; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Waters & Williams, 2011). Dialogue is often poorly defined and sometimes presented as functional interactivity and feedback loops (Kelleher, 2009). Dialogic opportunities are described as taking the "form of email lines, live chat opportunities, and links to others with similar interests" (Stephens & Malone, 2012, p. 391). Furthermore, while scholars have argued that the web's interactive features fit well with public relations' focus on relationship building (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 2002), marketing and e-commerce frameworks seem to trump relationship management in the dominant use of social media (Kent et al., 2013).

More fundamentally, there are studies questioning whether dialogue *can* take place in organizational settings, or whether or not so-called dialogic activities are merely a placebo for dialogue. What is labeled dialogue is often simply two-way communication constrained by organizational power and objectives (Kent & Theunissen, 2016; Lane, 2014; Lane & Bartlett, 2016; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). Thus, what practitioners and scholars call dialogue often falls short of the normative ideals found in dialogue theory. Dialogue does involve two-way communication like commonsense understandings would imply, but dialogue theorists argue that dialogue involves, for instance, inclusivity, respect, and empathy (e.g., Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2003b; Buber, 1999). In other words, it is much more fundamental than a two-way exchange or a conversation. Generally speaking, the issue of power and systemic or ideological obstacles are skirted (Heath et al., 2006).

The above illustrates in short that there seems to be a gap between some strands of public relations literature and dialogue theory, as well as between theory and practice. We argued that this tension is most clearly expressed in the corporate context, given the economic rationality that undergirds the corporate institution. This paper thus focuses on the tension and constraints for corporate dialogue. The paper's main contribution is to introduce an aspect missing in most of the literature, namely *macro systemic constraints* stemming from the context in which practitioners and their corporations are situated. We discuss how dialogue theory's normative ideals fare in the corporate context of economic rationality and what possibilities practitioners have for action within such a system. This discussion is rooted in a bourdieusian perspective on the relationship between agent and structure. We build on the approach by Ihlen (2009) who demonstrated how the three concepts of habitus, field, and capital (Bourdieu, 1977) offer a useful compass to understand challenges and opportunities for public relations. In the context of this paper, the challenges and opportunities relate to corporations and practitioners trying to embody a dialogic orientation.

Applying a bourdieusian lens means steering research away from functionalist depictions of organizations' thin, mostly monologic use of, for instance, social media techniques and practices. Uncoupling dialogic *scholarship* from *practice* could break research free from dialogue as normative techniques (e.g., best practices) and invite an exploration of dialogue as the intellectual domain and phenomenon of interest. Such an exploration could include more critical, discursive, rhetorical, and postmodernist conceptualizations of dialogic orientation and process that would highlight the study of dialogue's dark side, as called for in recent dialogue research (Kent & Theunissen, 2016). For this shift to happen, the practice must be understood within its social context (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012).

The paper considers these constraints from the inside out – first looking at internal

micro constraints such as issues of lack of time. It then considers the boundary-spanning

basic constraints of supply and demand. It then pulls back to consider the underlying

philosophical constraints concerning, for instance, how dialogue is an orientation. Building

on the philosophical, *macro systemic constraints* and the bourdieusian perspective are then

explored in more detail. The final section summarizes our views and implications for theory

and practice.

Micro-Constraints of Time, Deadlines, and Planning

Lane and Bartlett (2016) relied on dialogical principles (mutuality, propinquity,

empathy, risk, commitment) as laid out by Kent and Taylor (2002) and found them to be

"unrealistic in practice" (Lane & Bartlett, 2016, p. 4088). Many micro-constraints in the

organization setting and culture can erode the principle of ideal dialogue. For example,

Macnamara (2013) discussed the importance of constructing an "architecture of listening"

defined as "a framework with appropriate policies, structures, resources and facilities that

enable voice to matter by gaining attention, recognition, consideration and response" (p.

168). One obvious constraint for constructing such a framework for listening comes from a

lack of resources devoted to the task. A listening architecture requires considerable

investment, including an investment of time. In their paper on "why dialogic principles don't

make it in practice," Lane and Bartlett (2016) pointed to mundane constraints such as lack of

time and simple logistic challenges of finding space in the calendars for all those involved.

Many of the practitioners interviewed by Lane and Bartlett (2016) pointed to factors beyond

their direct control, tied to time, logistics and so forth. Time constraints make it tempting for

corporations to set deadlines for dialogue efforts in order to move business along.

As such, time management creates another point of tension between the dialogue ideal

and practical reality. According to dialogue theorists, dialogue "exists in moments rather than

extended states, […and…] it cannot be planned precisely or made to happen" (Anderson,

Baxter, & Cissna, 2003a, p. 15). Dialogue's unfixed nature poses a practical challenge for public relations. The field has often been criticized for relying on modernist planning principles, while building on prescriptive and linear understandings of strategy (Raupp & Hoffjann, 2012).

Thus, while organizational communicators can plan to use social media to spur interactivity, actual dialogue cannot be planned as such. If an organization's deadline or timing has not been agreed upon by dialogue participants (i.e., stakeholders), it violates procedural demands of the dialogue ideal (Rowell, 2002). And if dialogue is instrumentalized as a tool for pre-defined organizational goals, it also falls short of that ideal.

Furthermore, instead of establishing dialogue with stakeholders, organizations typically implement a *broadcasting* strategy built around one-way communication and/or they do not dedicate enough time or resources to allow for real-time interaction with online stakeholders (e.g., Larsson, 2013). Scholars like Michael Kent argue that social media should be used as "interpersonal and group communication tools" to "build relationships, solve problems, and enact socially responsible goals" (Kent, 2013, p. 341). In that vein, dialogue in social media should focus on relationship building at the interpersonal and group level (Kent, 2013). This view calls for a whole new apparatus on a different level than a public relations department focusing on legacy media and broadcasting in social media.

Basic Constraints of Supply and Demand

Dialogue is a "god term," seen as opposed to monologue. In Burkian language: A god term is a label that is used for an all-encompassing value; something that subordinates other values and undergirds thought systems or beliefs (Burke, 1950/1969). Dialogue can benefit organizations in terms of coping with public pressure, social change and complexity (Burchell & Cook, 2008; Gergen, Gerne, & Barrett, 2004). Still, corporations stand on unequal playing fields related to drawing stakeholders into dialogue (Lane, 2014). Large,

resource-rich companies like Walt Disney, Yahoo, Google and Sony top the list of beloved

brands, according to the APCO Worldwide's survey of 70 000 consumers across 15 global

markets (Heine, 2013, October 10). Those popular brands can leverage their reputations and

resources to attract *fans* and engage them in conversation online or offline. In contrast, other

organizations may have limited opportunities to engage online or offline – either due to

limited resources or the nature of the organization's work. For example, some corporations

do not work with end users and only operate in a business-to-business environment. They

may have limited opportunities to engage the ultimate end users of their products, yet these

stakeholders' perceptions and satisfaction levels are ultimately key to their organization's

success or failure. Organizations hoping to engage may be met by skepticism or indifference.

Some argue that to improve corporations' desirability as dialogue partners, they

should adopt a conversational voice or dialogic voice in order to build positive relationships

with stakeholders and better understand stakeholders' expectations and preferences (Kelleher,

2009; McAllister-Spooner, 2009). Still, industry reports have shown that the public's appetite

for social media communication from organizations is not as big as practitioners might

believe (Zerfass, Ihlen, & Geelmuyden, 2014). When asked, "Which of the following types

of content and conversation, if any, do you expect a company/organization to share using its

own social media?" only 37% of asked Scandinavians (N=523) pointed to "Information on

events or crises (e.g. weather, recalls, etc.) that affect customers." In comparison, 77% of

Scandinavian practitioners (N=379) rated this content type highly. The latter report also

showed how both groups, the population and the public relations professionals in

Scandinavia, expected companies to use social media to interact with consumers and others.

Still, the public demand for this type of communication lagged behind what practitioners

emphasized by 31 percentage points (59% versus 90%, N=523 and 379).

Of course, self-reported measures should be treated with care as actual practice can

differ from declared intentions. Furthermore, certain situations, like a crisis or merger, may function as key events for focused and frequent communication between a corporation and its stakeholders. In addition, it is possible that the public's limited interest in corporate social media communication is due to the fact that few organizations are tapping the potential for technology-mediated dialogue. Still, while a seemingly ever-increasing number of people use social media, they do not necessarily see organizations as natural dialogue partners the way they see friends and family. Ultimately, participants have the power to decide how willing they are to be organizations' dialogue partners (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). Thus, it seems likely that most corporations will experience a mismatch between public demand for and practitioners' enthusiasm for dialogue. Even when public relations practitioners seek to use social media's interactivity to build relationships at the individual and group levels, they may find limited interest from their desired dialogue "partners." Philosophical constraints further highlight this potential mismatches between dialogic supply and demand.

Philosophical Constraints of Risk and Orientation

In their study, Lane and Bartlett (2016) highlighted how practitioners understood dialogue differently than what dialogue theory implies. Even when a practitioner may genuinely desire and seek dialogue, PR communicators' version of "dialogue" may differ significantly from theoretical understandings of the term and more closely resemble two-way communication. In the interviews they conducted, the primary explanation for the gap between perceiving and performing dialogue was that practitioners could not control all participants' attitudes and behaviors – including their motivations for dialogue (Lane & Bartlett, 2016).

Further, more philosophically oriented constraints stem from how dialogue theorists see *risk* as a fundamental trait of dialogue as it sets judgments and assumptions in play (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 2002). When engaging in dialogue, the practitioner has to be willing to

interact with stakeholders on stakeholders' terms and fundamentally question their own perspectives, ideas and meanings (Golob & Podnar, 2011). The organization cannot predetermine the nature of the problem or its solution.

Many scholars have noted, however, that this inherent risk and lack of control runs counter to corporations' preoccupation with power and control, and their inclination to avoid ambiguity, uncertainty and vulnerability (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008; Kent & Theunissen, 2016). As argued, given that dialogue has transferred into a "god term," organizations are, however, likely to engage in "dialogue" – far from the dialogue ideal. Critics claim that this minimized "dialogue" is often used by organizations that seek to defuse criticism, to privatize the debate, and also co-opt critical stakeholder groups (Deetz & Simpson, 2003). Such an approach runs counter to principles of authenticity, which dialogue theorists would argue are crucial to the practice (Stewart, Zediker, & Black, 2003).

It has been stated that social media can aid aspects that may improve a corporation's dialogic orientation such as authenticity, transparency, and openness (Gilpin, Henderson, Palazzolo, & Brody, 2010). However, this "lifting of the corporate veil brings both complexity and uncertainty" to practicing public relations (Duhé, 2007, p. 58). Using complexity-based approaches could help identify whether the veil is really being lifted, merely offering a veneer of openness, or a mix of the two (Gilpin et al., 2010). A willingness to change is, however, a dialogue hallmark where "predetermined outcomes [should be] set aside momentarily" (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012, p. 8). In sum, many of the "current planning processes and a focus on achieving specific end results do not support the philosophy of dialogue" (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012, p. 12). It does seem that corporations will shun risk and thus conduct "dialogue" instead.

Dialogue theorists think of dialogue as an *attitude* or an *orientation*, rather than a *technique* (Johannesen, 1971). Disciplines ranging from philosophy to conversation analysis

offer myriad understandings of dialogue (Anderson et al., 2003b). The philosophical

approaches are often seen as "holistic and tensional" and "communicative events are

described as multidimensional rather than as simply products of rationality, as dynamic rather

than static, as emergent rather than defined in advance, as context-dependent, and as

processual" (Stewart et al., 2003, p. 37).

Kent and Taylor (2002) suggested that organizations should implement a dialogic

orientation in their development of interpersonal relationships, mediated relationships, and

procedural dialogue rules developed by Pearson (1989). This means, for instance, that they

should agree on response time rules and be able to suggest or change topics of the dialogue.

The work of dialogue theorists like Buber and public relations scholars (Kent, 2010; Lane,

2014; Pieczka, 2011) thus seem to agree: Dialogue, including in the social media context,

should be viewed as an orientation, not an exchange or technique. Such philosophical

constraints again beget the problems described in the preceding section concerning

practicalities such as a need for planning. Corporations' limited economic rationality may

provide another explanation for the tension between the normative dialogic orientation and

practical reality.

Macro Systemic Constraints of Economic Rationality

Different remedies have been suggested for the limitations for corporate dialogue

mentioned above. Kent and Theunissen (2016) envision that it is possible to "find a way to

create actual communication spaces (which might be possible in social media) and around the

principles of dialogue" (p. 4048). They suggest training and believe that educators can instill

dialogic values in students and colleagues, and that such inculcated knowledge "has the

power to change the world" (Kent & Theunissen, 2016, p. 4051). This optimism is also seen

in the claims that public relations is "dedicated to truth and understanding" and that "dialogue

represents a model with much closer correspondence to the lived reality of public relations"

(Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 389) rather than a propaganda or monologue model. While this statement has normative value, the descriptive power of this sentiment could be questioned. Lane and Bartlett (2016) stated that there were "no examples of pure or normative dialogue in practice" (p. 4087). Furthermore, they pointed out that many of the interviewed practitioners "felt that empowered participants (most often organizations) had undue influence over the form and function of dialogue" (Lane & Bartlett, 2016, p. 4088). Thus, improved skills among practitioners, would not necessarily produce the desired overall results.

Here, however, we introduce another aspect that we argue does not receive enough attention: It could be argued that the 'dialogue ideal rests on a so-called harmony model of society. A competing concept here is the conflict model that sees corporations in general as competing and seeking to position themselves with the help of public relations (Ihlen, 2009). Indeed, conflict might be seen as a productive and welcome element in society (Davidson, 2016). Such a perspective also has consequences for how dialogue is understood, studied and practiced.

We argue in this paper that the problems of dialogue spelled out above are intertwined and linked to the particular *instrumental rationality* that corporations are based on. Similarly, as Dozier and Lauzen (2000) point out, public relations scholarship and practice are tightly coupled, which, in the social media context, may exacerbate the instrumental nature of much of the public relations social media research. Dialogue is difficult to achieve within interpersonal relations. It is even more difficult for corporations. As mentioned, dialogue theorists do not see dialogue as something that can be forced. Dialogue in general "exists in moments" (Anderson et al., 2003a, p. 15). But corporations operate within an economic system where stakeholders become means to achieve organizational goals and not ends in themselves. The *dialogue orientation* described in the theory is similarly and easily reduced to a means. Furthermore, if actions such as dialogue are guided by self-interest, this

philosophical understanding can be juxtaposed with a Kantian view that corporations should

do the right thing without regard for consequences such as loss of profit (Kant, trans. 2002).

Corporations have an extremely limited perspective on everything around them. It is

argued that they cannot really "handle concepts of value beyond instrumentality" (Fisher &

Lovell, 2003, p. 281). Society, people and the environment are valued only to the extent that

these entities can serve a corporate goal. This limitation also means that corporations

inevitably run the danger of instrumentalizing dialogue with stakeholders, thus misaligning

with dialogue's theoretical tenets.

While the previous portrayal of corporations can seem deterministic, we would locate

this analysis within the framework of Pierre Bourdieu and his sociological perspective on

agent, structure, and agency. In his "theory of practice," Bourdieu (1977) grappled with the

classic antagonism between subjectivism and objectivism, between giving primacy to

structure or agency, and he advocated that *relations* should be seen as the dominant factor

instead.

An Excursion: A Bourdieusian Perspective

The focus of the sociology of Bourdieu is the uncovering of how the social world is

structured, constituted, and reproduced through individual and collective struggles to

conserve or transform the social world. With the three concepts of *habitus*, *field*, and *capital*,

he constructed a sociology that he argued made obsolete the opposition between subjectivism

and objectivism.

A habitus is a *structuring mechanism* that generates strategies for actors in the social

world and through which actors relate to the social world. It is a system of durable

dispositions, an internalized mental or cognitive structure that functions both consciously and

unconsciously, and is constraining in its suggestion of what people should and should not do.

A habitus is based on all of the situations through which dispositions are created and that an

individual experiences throughout a lifetime (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In the context of this paper, habitus could be the practitioner's "feel" for how to relate to stakeholders and conduct public relations.

The actors are not *determined*, a habitus can be resisted as a consequence of reflection. Habitus is an *open* system. It is open for modification and "constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. It is durable but not eternal" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 133). While a practitioner could have a preconceived conception of what a dialogue is and how it works, he or she could alter this perspective and thus the strategies for conducting dialogue.

Field is the next important concept, and it has a dialectical relationship with habitus. A *field* is understood as a social space or network of relationships between positions occupied by actors. The different positions are structured and anchored in forms of unequally shared power or *capital*. Conflict and competition characterize the relationships between the actors as they try to accumulate, conserve, or convert different types of capital. The positions are ones of dominance or sub-ordinance according to the types and amounts of capital possessed by an actor, for instance *economic* capital (money, property), *cultural* capital (knowledge, skills, educational qualifications), and *social* capital (connections, membership of a group). At the same time, however, he has argued that all of these forms of capital might also be apprehended as *symbolic* capital (prestige, honor) (Bourdieu, 1986).

The social world is seen as being made up of several fields that are more or less autonomous, but subsumed under the overarching field of power (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). At the organizational level, a corporation will belong to the economic field where economic capital is prioritized. Economic capital has virtually no importance in the academic field. In the latter, scholarly significance and rating by one's peers is usually what counts. On the other hand, being able to point to a long list of academic accomplishments will not be of

much relevance in a business setting. The micro constraints mentioned earlier, for instance, lack of economic resources to conduct dialogue, might be tied to the question of how this will improve the immediate bottomline. The social capital acquired through dialogue will ultimately only be of interest to a business if it can provide some economic benefit. Unless this is the case, corporations are less likely to budget extra time and resources to listening and being oriented to emergent dialogue.

Applying Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice, Ihlen (2009) demonstrated how the three concepts of habitus, field, and capital offer a useful compass to understand organizations' challenges and opportunities for embodying a dialogic orientation (Ihlen, 2009). By employing this theoretical framework, it is possible to understand the forces that see corporations being driven by their goal rationality, while at the same time being able to modify this rationality. In other words, it helps to explain why dialogue, or corporate social responsibility (CSR) for that matter, does not *necessarily* have to be conducted from a singular profit motive. Practitioners have *some* flexibility for ethical behavior and dialogic efforts beyond self-interest. There are, however, some limitations to such actions rooted in the goal-driven rationality of corporations that are important to understand. The economic field appreciates economic capital above everything else and the position corporations strive for is premised in its amount of economic capital. This then means that dialogue will be subsumed as a tool for amassing capital and position the corporation in the economic field.

Again, according to Bourdieu (1977), habitus is durable, but it can be modified. We argue that a crucial way of modifying the habitus would be to adapt a perspective that acknowledges both the good and the bad of public relations and its use of dialogue (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012). As stated by Fawkes (2014), public relations practitioners and scholars must come to grips with the shadow side of the practice and accept the internal dualities. This, then, would also tie in with theories like Buber's (1999) that emphasizes the dual

orientation of humans toward their surroundings. We treat others as persons, but also as objects.

Conclusion: Beyond Panacea and Placebo

In this paper we have pointed to some constraints for the dialogue ideal focusing on the role of modernist perspectives that "requires" meticulous planning to control and shun risk, all with an instrumental purpose of serving the corporation and its profit motive. Still, it could be argued that corporations that operate on the basis of *enlightened self-interest* would realize that organizations that fail to engage in dialogue that may bring alternative, even critical stakeholder views, risk reinforcing existing perspectives hurting the possibilities for long-term benefits for the organization, its stakeholders, or society. Thus, it could be maintained that ethical, dialogic principles and practices must be part of everyday organizational activities and reinforced in a bottom-up and top-down capacity in order to cultivate a dialogic culture. We would argue that the theory of practice of Bourdieu (1977) helps in understanding the possibilities and barriers for such corporate behavior.

In the discussion above, we acknowledge the trade-offs and reality that practitioners typically face. A crucial question remains in this regard: Is "dialogue" a slipping sliding continuum? For example, certain times such as the immediate aftermath of a crisis may necessitate that organizations transmit one-way, direct messages (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2010). Importantly, dialogue theorists do not suggest that dialogue is "the only valid model for communication, […but…] it is a crucial one" (Anderson et al., 2003a, pp. 15-16). With few exceptions, corporations have the potential to foster more engagement. Still, it is unrealistic to say that all voices will be equally engaged or heard in the dialogue.

Still, the use of dialogue as orientation and phenomenon of interest, not dialogue as normative ideal and best practices for technical exchange, is constrained by systemic limitations that are poorly understood in public relations theory in general. This paper

proposes a middle way on the continuum between treating organizational social media as a public relations dialogic *panacea* or *placebo*. The paper offers evidence that tensions indeed exist between the dialogue ideal offered as a dialogic panacea and the system in which corporations are situated. We have argued that the dialogue ideal is problematic for public relations. At the same time, organizational social media can sometimes go beyond dialogic "placebo" where two-way communication may appear and sound like dialogue but not manifest all of dialogue's characteristics.

Falling on the continuum between dialogic panacea and placebo, corporations' social media may still provide moments and forms of dialogue by embodying a dialogue orientation (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012) and facilitating dialogic engagement (e.g., Taylor & Kent, 2014). Theunissen and Wan Noordin (2012) argue that "an organization may create an environment where dialogic moments can be nurtured, but the success of these moments will depend on the extent to which organizations embrace its [sic] underlying philosophy and whether they afford appropriate resources to creating such an environment" (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012, p. 11).

Others point out that dialogue can only be fruitful if the company accepts that it is now only one voice among many others (Fieseler, Fleck, & Meckel, 2010). Accepting an organization's role in a multivocal landscape challenges organization-centric research and practice. Moving in such a direction would improve the organization's information and subsequent decision-making, while also avoiding doing "violence to those 'others' whose positions are often already institutionally and culturally marginalized" (Deetz & Simpson, 2003, p. 157). Dialogue thus provides corporations with pragmatic and ethical benefits, and social media should play a central part in communication policies and communication strategies in this regard.

This paper uses a social media context to critically *dialogue* with and *engage* with the

concept of dialogue and its underlying meanings and implications for public relations research and practice. Specifically, the paper has proposed new directions and articulated challenges for taking on such an orientation – particularly within a social media context where dialogue has most often been referenced in extant public relations research.

While social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter may be the most likely platforms that corporate communicators would use to interact online with stakeholders, certainly a multitude of such platforms and channels exist. And dialogic differences may exist based on how users perceive each platform. For example, stakeholders may see CEO and company figures on Facebook as more authentic but look to Twitter for more news and information from a company related to its truthfulness and social responsibility (Lee, Zuniga, Coleman, & Johnson, 2014). While dialogue could technically take place on either platform, Lee et al. (2014) demonstrate that dialogic conditions may vary by platform.

Future research can also examine our conclusions in order to better understand the dialogic continuum between those who would argue dialogic communication via social media is the cure-all for public relations and those who would argue it is merely an empty, false substitute for dialogue. A deeper ethical discussion of dialogue could also build on these conclusions.

Given the fast-changing world of social media, McCorkindale and DiStaso (2014) correctly pointed out that the lagtime between data collection and publication means that many empirical studies of social media should be seen as benchmarks of a particular use and time, rather than be seen as providing an accurate picture of the present situation (McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2014). Research is needed then that also looks at long-lasting functions and uses of social media beyond the tactical ones depicted in research on organizational social media use. For example, Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) argued that organizations use social media mostly on an ad-hoc and experimental basis, rather than a

strategic one.

In addition to offering provocations for research directions, the conclusions above may spur thinking among practitioners who could use the offered arguments to bolster a case for deeper engagement with stakeholders and for a dialogic culture for internal and external communication. Because, despite all the tensions, dialogic potential exists. Partially rooted in the perspective of enlightened self-interest, such understandings can propel dialogue further, but there is also a need to develop a professional ethic that looks beyond the limited goal rationality of corporations. Corporations cannot have "true and pure" ethical motives in the Kantian sense, but should obviously be encouraged to do "the right thing." This research and practice transition would involve cultivating a dialogue orientation and culture. It would involve the use of both digital and non-digital media for this purpose. And it would also mean that the limits to dialogue, digital or not, in the corporate setting are recognized and studied. Such a perspective would, we argue, involve more prudence and less panacea or placebo-thinking.

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