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Understanding Dialogue and Engagement Through Communication Experts' Use of Interactive Writing to Build Relationships

Betsy Anderson

University of Minnesota - Twin Cities

Rebecca Swenson

University of Minnesota - Twin Cities

Nathan Gilkerson

Marquette University, nathan.gilkerson@marquette.edu

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BETSY D. ANDERSON
REBECCA SWENSON
University of Minnesota, USA

NATHAN D. GILKERSON
Marquette University, USA

Dialogic communication is an important public relations theory, yet scholarship has found few organizations using it to its full potential. Meanwhile, multiple overlapping definitions exist for related terms like *engagement*, *interactivity*, and *responsiveness*, causing potential confusion for researchers and professionals. This research reports the results of in-depth interviews with top digital public relations professionals regarding how they use interactive writing, a form of social media engagement, to build relationships. Through their own unprompted words, the research also describes how professionals use terms such as *dialogue*, *engagement*, *interactivity*, and *responsiveness*, and corresponding definitions, to refer to their daily work. Our model clarifies relationships between similar concepts and recommends areas of future research to advance theory informed by practice.

Keywords: dialogic communication, engagement, interactivity, public relations, responsiveness, social media

Dialogue has become part of the bedrock of public relations scholarship (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002). However, scholars have found that overall, dialogic communication has been underused by professionals in today's digital environment. For example, McAllister-Spooner (2009) conducted a 10-year review of academic literature and concluded that organizations were doing a poor job of using interactive tools on their websites for two-way dialogic communication.

Betsy D. Anderson: andbets@umn.edu
Rebecca Swenson boli0028@umn.edu
Nathan D. Gilkerson nathan.gilkerson@marquette.edu
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Despite their relationship-building potential, organizations continue to use social and digital tools to share information in one direction and miss opportunities to effectively leverage interactive tools to build relationships (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Waters & Jamal, 2011). According to Men and Tsai (2012), companies initiate discussion by asking questions and including interactive features—like online games and polls—on websites and social media networks, yet few organizations complete the dialogical loop by consistently responding to questions and concerns posted online.

Such findings may come as a surprise to public relations professionals, who consider creating dialogue, engagement, and two-way communication to be foundational goals toward which they work daily. For example, a recent article in *Ragan's PR Daily* listed "reputation management, engagement, dialogue and relationship management" (Bruce, 2014, para. 5) as the fundamental principles of public relations. A regular part of day-to-day public relations work now includes using tools such as Hootsuite and Spredfast for the express purpose of monitoring and responding to publics. Agencies train clients to communicate directly with publics through tools like Weber Shandwick's firebell crisis simulator (Weber Shandwick, 2010). Industry publications describe public relations work in detail using these terms in both campaign objectives and story headlines, such as: *Taco Bell's New Recipe For Social Media Engagement: Look, Listen And Whip Up Some Dialogue With Fans* (PR News, 2013).

This discrepancy between readily available professional descriptions of daily dialogic communication work versus academic findings that dialogic communication is underused in practice may stem from a need to more carefully define and use closely related terms. In particular, dialogue is often confused with responsiveness, interactivity, and engagement (Avidar, 2013; Paquette, Sommerfeldt, & Kent, 2015; Pieczka, 2011).

Literature Review

Responsiveness

Responsiveness has been studied in terms of an organization's willingness to respond to referrals by individual public members and can have either positive or negative consequences, depending on the degree responses are perceived to be timely, relevant, and so on (Avidar, 2013). It also has been defined in terms of audience response, occurring "when the receiver takes on the role of the sender and replies in some way to the original message source" (Stromer-Galley, 2000, p. 117). As we will discuss further, many industry measures of engagement, such as social media "likes" or "shares," would be more accurately categorized as responsiveness rather than engagement (Macnamara, 2014).

According to Avidar, "All messages sent as a reaction to a previous message are *responsive*" (p. 443), but they may represent different levels of responsiveness: *noninteractive response* (a response that does not refer to the request), *reactive response* (a response that refers to the request), or *interactive response* (a response that refers to the request and initiates one or more additional turns). While Avidar does include interactive response as a type of responsiveness, this study would categorize this third level under interactivity rather than responsiveness, given that Avidar's description fits well with definitions of

interactivity, and also to better clarify differences between these terms.

This study conceptualizes responsiveness as a onetime exchange between parties (see Table 1 in the Findings section).

Interactivity

Interactivity can be defined in three ways: as a perception-related variable (participants' self-reports of the degree they experience a level of interactivity), as a medium characteristic (the technological features available to facilitate interaction), or as a process-related variable (how parties transfer information). This study focuses on public relations professionals' process of responding, interacting, engaging, and dialoguing, although all three aspects are important dimensions of interactivity.

In a detailed concept explication, Kiouisis (2002) defined interactivity as:

the degree to which a communication technology can create a mediated environment in which participants can communicate (one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many), both synchronously and asynchronously, and participate in reciprocal message exchanges (third-order dependency). With regard to human users, it additionally refers to their ability to *perceive* the experience as a simulation of interpersonal communication and increase their awareness of telepresence. (p. 372)

Third-order dependency refers to messages between participants that are related to one another. According to Rafaeli (1988), interactivity increases when the third (or later) messages exchanged between parties refer back to their previous messages. Telepresence occurs when users experience a sense of "place," or degree of "realness" when communicating in a mediated environment (Steuer, 1992).

This study conceptualizes interactivity as including third-order dependency, consisting of at least three related exchanges between parties (see Table 2 in the Findings section).

Engagement

The concept of engagement has been described as involving some level of passion, commitment, and investment of discretionary effort (Erickson, 2008). According to the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC), engagement refers to occupying or attracting someone's interest or attention and involves conversation or discussion (AMEC, 2012).

Kang (2014) conceptualizes engagement as "an affective motivational mediator that leads individuals' trust and satisfaction (key antecedents) to be displayed in supportive behavioral intentions for an organization (loyalty and positive WOM [word of mouth])" (p. 401). In a study of theater patrons, Kang found that trust and satisfaction with the theater led to increased organizational engagement, which in turn led to supportive behavioral intentions. According to the structural equation modeling method, engagement was an important mediator; for example, trust did not lead directly to increased supportive

behavioral intentions. Instead, engagement was an important middle step between trust and patrons' increased loyalty and positive word of mouth.

Kang (2014) operationalized engagement by creating a scale to measure its three dimensions: *affective commitment* (e.g., emotional bonding with an organization), *positive affectivity* (e.g., attention, interest, enthusiasm), and *empowerment* (e.g., self-efficacy and ability to collaborate and impact an organization). Other scholars have further suggested that empowerment is achieved through participation (e.g., Macey & Schneider, 2008; Meyer & Smith, 2000).

Macnamara (2014) criticized the advertising, marketing, and public relations industries as conceptualizing engagement in terms of "clickthroughs, Web page visits, views, 'likes' on Facebook, 'follows' on Twitter, retweets, 'shares' and downloads" (p. 17). As an example, the Coalition for Public Relations Research Standards formed a Social Media Measurement Standards Conclave that defined engagement as "some action beyond exposure and implies an interaction between two or more parties. Social media engagement is an action that typically occurs in response to content [on an] owned channel—i.e., when [someone] engages *with you*" (2014, para. 6). Examples of engagement under this definition include "likes, comments, shares, votes, +1s, links, retweets, video views, content embeds, etc." In this study, we recognize the usefulness of these types of easily accessible measures but would categorize them as measures of responsiveness if they are onetime audience reactions.

Recently, Taylor and Kent (2014) argued that engagement is related to dialogue theory. They consider engagement to be a *part* of dialogue that can be used to make decisions that create social capital. According to Taylor and Kent (2014), "Engagement is both an orientation that influences interactions and the approach that guides the process of interactions among groups" (p. 384).

This study conceptualizes engagement as a motivation to participate in a series of ongoing exchanges (see Table 3 in the Findings section). It differentiates between engagement and dialogue in terms of its intended purpose or outcome: relationship building (engagement) or problem solving (dialogue). Relationship building can be a component of dialogue, but it can also be a separate goal or outcome in and of itself (see Figure 1).

Dialogue

The broader concept of dialogue can be defined as, "an orientation that value[s] sharing and mutual understanding between interactants" (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 388). Engagement, specifically, fits into dialogic communication as an aspect of "propinquity," one of Kent and Taylor's (2002) five underlying principles of dialogue (which are mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment). Propinquity occurs when organizations consult publics who may be affected by their actions, and in turn, publics communicate their views or demands to an organization. Engagement is the willingness of both parties to commit entirely to encounters, and it requires "accessibility, presentness, and a willingness to interact" (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 387).

Pieczka (2011) and Wierzbicka (2006) also conceive of dialogue as a general orientation. According to Wierzbicka, dialogue "requires a particular set of assumptions, motivations, attitudes (to the subject matter and to one's interlocutors), and a particular modus operandi (including a willingness to accept an extended time frame)" (p. 700). Summarizing Wierzbicka's (2006) work, Pieczka (2011) emphasizes that dialogue:

- is an ongoing process that occurs in separate episodes,
- is an activity that usually takes place between two groups,
- requires a difference in viewpoints,
- goes beyond exchanging ideas and knowing what the other thinks; both groups come to truly understand one another's views,
- uses open mindedness to find common ground, but doesn't require a complete resolution of all differences or fully achieving a common way of thinking,
- requires respectful attitudes,
- refrains from attacks, and
- is viewed as valuable and productive in itself, and may result in areas where groups find they can think similarly, leading to a possible change of thinking on some points.

Above all, "'dialogue' requires an effort to make ourselves understood, as well as try to understand, and here, the 'right' attitudes, motivations, as so on, will not suffice" (Wierzbicka, 2006, p. 700).

Summary Comparing and Contrasting Concepts

Following Rafaeli (1988), this research differentiates between responsiveness and interactivity in the following way. Responsiveness only requires two actions—an initial message from a sender followed by an action from a receiver. Interactivity requires a third interaction (there is a sent message, a response, and at least a third message that relates back to the previous exchanges). The public relations industry's current standard for measuring engagement (Coalition for Public Relations Research Standards: Social Media Measurement Standards Conclave, 2014) fits best under the scholarly definition of responsiveness rather than engagement, because a "like" or "share" only requires two interactions: a message post followed by one user reaction to that message. This could signal one reason for confusion between scholarly and industry terminology, as well as indicate the importance of scholarship to continue to work on feasible ways for professionals to measure engagement and dialogue.

A Model Comparing Engagement and Dialogue

The purpose of this study is to: (a) help both public relations professionals and academics distinguish between two similar terms, (b) propose a model that uniquely suggests that while both basic responsiveness and more advanced interactivity are necessary conditions for dialogue, dialogic communication may not always be the end goal or outcome; this research will start to identify boundary conditions under which engagement may be the most appropriate choice, and (c) compare how public

relations professionals talk about online interactions with publics to our proposed model in order to begin to refine and further test the model directly in future studies.

One promising avenue for reconciling confusion between similar terms may be the idea that there are different stages—or levels—in achieving dialogue. Avidar (2013) suggested a hierarchy among concepts, in that responsiveness and interactivity are basic requirements for either two-way communication or dialogue to occur. Thummes and Malik (2015) also depicted concepts assembled in a hierarchy, by bringing together Szyszka's (1996) continuum of communication types (monolog, front stage dialog, practice type of dialog and ideal dialog) and Burkart's (2007) stages of communication (moving from information to discussion and discourse in order to define the situation). According to Thummes and Malik (2015), *front stage dialog* (partial or restricted interactions about topics such as everyday life, entertainment, and product promotion that do not reach the argumentation level) and the *practice type of dialog* (when publics raise a challenge and organizations to provide sound arguments to support their position) are forms of dialogic interaction, but they are less demanding than *ideal dialog* (a mutual exchange of arguments motivated, not by an organization's strategic objectives, but rather by the open outcome of dialog). Front stage and practice dialog advance interaction, but at a lesser degree than ideal dialog.

A second avenue for reconciling confusion between similar terms is the acknowledgment that dialogue may not be the ultimate objective in all situations. The emphasis on dialogic communication as a particularly ethical approach makes it perhaps seem more desirable than forms of communication that only reach the responsiveness, interactivity, or engagement levels. Dialogue's favored position is captured in the premise of this journal article title: "Reconsidering public relations' infatuation with dialogue: Why engagement and reconciliation can be more ethical than symmetry and reciprocity" (Stoker & Tusinski, 2006). Ideal dialogue may not be appropriate under conditions when there is a clear predetermined strategy that public relations is trying to achieve, as opposed to the more "open" nature of fully dialogic communication (Thummes & Malik, 2015).

In order to tie the interview findings back to theory, we drew on existing literature to propose a cocreational model (see Figure 1). The purpose of the model is to begin to further clarify the use of similar terms that may cause confusion as to whether public relations professionals build relationships through dialogue, engagement, or more foundational levels of interactivity or responsiveness. Our model shows that relationship initiation, responsiveness, and interactivity are necessary building blocks for either regular engagement or dialogue to occur.

To our knowledge, this is the first model that conceptualizes engagement and dialogue as two potentially separate outcomes that build on shared foundations of responsiveness and two-way interaction. While, per Taylor and Kent (2014), engagement is a part of dialogue, we propose that engagement can also be an end in itself, without including dialogue. This follows Thummes and Malik's (2015) suggestion that dialogue may not be appropriate for all public relations situations.

Our model also includes an aspect that has remained largely unexplored in the literature: relationship initiation. Taking into account this first level in engagement or dialogue emphasizes that,

while responsiveness is often assumed to be the role of the organization after being contacted by a public, organizations are just as likely to initiate engagement (or dialogue) with publics.

According to Van De Ven (2007), building good theory includes explicitly stating its boundaries and the conditions that restrict application to any specific type of organization or context. Our model, therefore, suggests preliminary boundary conditions when engagement or dialogic approach may be most applicable. For example, it may be that a dialogic approach is more useful for industries prone to conflicting opinions and for information such as public affairs, politics, and health care. In Wierzbicka's (2006) concept explication of dialogue, "There can be no 'dialogue' between people with the same, or very similar, views" (p. 690). Dialogic topics hold great importance to both sides and tend to be emotionally charged (Wierzbicka, 2006). An engagement approach, on the other hand, may be more useful for organizations that face little disagreement among stakeholders. Engagement is often desired to build supportive behaviors toward an organization (Kang, 2014). There is a need for future research efforts to take note of the situational variables that may enhance decision making when choosing a communication approach.

The in-depth qualitative interviews conducted for this study were analyzed with our model in mind, in order for its further development to be informed by conversations with communication professionals.

A Call to Study the Creation of Dialogue and Engagement

Little research exists on how engagement is created, and more work is needed to fully extend this concept into public relations practice (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Paquette and colleagues (2015) issued a similar call to extend dialogue from theory to practice, emphasizing that "for dialogue to flourish and grow as a theoretical as well as practical construct, communicators need to actually use it" (p. 37). Kent and Taylor (2002) suggested that training in dialogue may include skill building in the following areas:

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. (p. 31)

All professionals must be trained in dialogic communication and engagement, but this applies especially to practitioners who are early in their career, as these "digital natives" often have early leadership opportunities due to familiarity with emerging digital platforms (Burke, 2015; Clemons, 2014; Lee, Sha, Dozier, & Sargent, 2015). According to firm owner Anna Ruth Williams (2014):

The younger team members at my firm today use social media in a way that blows even my young mind. For this reason, agency leadership should co-mentor with younger team members. I encourage older generations to learn and absorb the practices of these digital natives and empower them to lead the agency in these respective functions (para. 23).

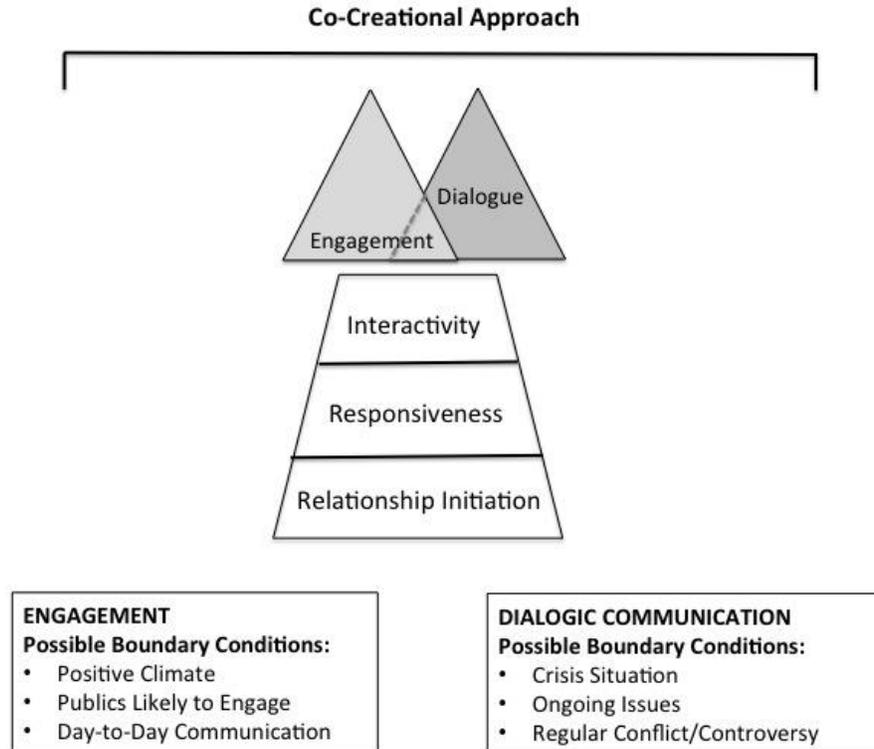


Figure 1. A cocreational model for engagement and dialogue.

Through social media technologies, the scope of public relations has grown to include more opportunities for direct interaction with stakeholders on a very public stage. A primary way organizations are initiating relationships is responding and interacting is through interactive forms of writing, as opposed to more monologic writing forms.

The traditional public relations (PR) university curriculum has not yet fully integrated ways to prepare students for dialogic, interactive forms of communication. As one example, most PR writing textbooks focus primarily on one-way communication vehicles such as news releases, brochures, speeches, and so on. Although many texts now include a chapter on social media writing, the content generally discusses organizationally created or writing, such as developing blog posts and Web copy, without focusing on how to develop skills that take into account the role of the audience in actively reacting and contributing to conversations. Future courses and training need to focus on how to develop the types of interactive, real-time writing skills that public relations professionals are likely to perform in the formative stage of their career.

This research investigates the seeming disconnect between the academic vision of dialogic communication and engagement, and the reality of the public relations practice by: (a) talking with top social media professionals at international firms at the forefront of training staff and clients (the “digital evangelists”) about how engagement and dialogue are created, (b) comparing their descriptions of online communication to the terms responsiveness, interactivity, engagement, and dialogue, as carefully defined in this study, and (c) exploring how PR professionals recommend preparing a new generation of graduates to engage with audiences using two-way communication.

Method

Research Questions

This research examines how PR practitioners communicate with publics online and what skill building is needed in engagement and dialogue. It focuses on *real-time writing*, a term we use to describe two-way written exchange between an organization and publics via social media channels and where some degree of feedback is involved. Ideally, the message sender and receiver should both have the ability to contribute to a conversation where the messages exchanged relate to one another (as opposed to each party simply broadcasting information without listening or directly responding to one another). The definition follows Kioussis (2002) and Rafaeli’s (1988) explications of interactivity.

This study is most interested in the process public relations professionals use, rather than in the technological features themselves. We wanted determine to what degree professionals used terms like *engagement*, *interactivity*, and *dialogue* in descriptions of their work when they were not primed in advance to use these terms.

Our research posed the following questions:

- RQ1a: Have the type of writing skills needed changed for a digital, social media world? Are they different from writing skills needed to write more traditional pieces?*
- RQ1b: (How) do professionals need to be trained to write in a real-time style? What are some methods that can be used to teach digital writing skills?*
- RQ2a: Are professionals in the early stages of their careers responsible for higher stakes communication with the public than in the past, due to social media responsibilities?*
- RQ2b: If so, what recommendations do professionals have for how to prepare for these higher stakes responsibilities?*

Participants

We used rankings information to create a list of top PR firms that were then approached to participate in this study, including the five largest publicly held; five largest independently owned; and five largest “local” PR agencies (local shops were based in a large midwestern PR market in the United States).

Our final list included 15 agencies, ranging from local to worldwide firms (e.g., Burson Marsteller, Fleishman Hillard, Ruder Finn, Waggener Edstrom Worldwide, Weber Shandwick).

Using a LinkedIn search, we identified mid- to senior-level practitioners specializing in social media and/or digital roles, with titles such as *senior vice president of digital*. For the purposes of this study, we used the terms *social media* and *digital media* interchangeably. *Social media* can be considered as the more specialized term, as it refers to communication that takes place specifically on social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter. *Digital media* often is used as a broader, more inclusive term. We included both terms in our search, as public relations professionals with either "digital" or "social media" titles are most typically those in charge of two-way communication efforts with publics using the latest computer-mediated technologies.

We contacted two professionals from each firm, with a general goal of interviewing one expert from each agency. Our final sample included 16 professionals representing 13 of the 15 agencies (we interviewed two professionals from three of the agencies on the list). The participants' responses generated 54 single-spaced pages of data.

Analysis

We first organized the data using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) open coding procedure to group responses into categories of themes that emerged from the data. Then we examined relationships between categories and subcategories using axial coding "to form more precise and complete explanations about phenomena" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124).

Next, we reported the basic responses to the research questions, which were valuable because they offered recommendations for building skills. And finally, we compared the responses to our model to analyze to what degree public relations professionals use responsiveness, interactivity, engagement, and dialogue levels of online communication. For the analysis, we further defined the nondialogic path of engagement in our model as communication beyond basic interactive exchanges that creates ongoing conversation, community, involvement, and brand ambassadors, with a goal of creating positive supportive behaviors, while promoting mutual respect between organizations and publics.

Findings

Writing Skills Needed for Digital-Eliciting Responses

The first research question asked whether writing skills have changed, or are different, for a digital environment (RQ1a). Approximately two-thirds of respondents quickly answered, "yes," or "absolutely" when asked whether writing skills have changed as a result of digital and social media technologies. The other one-third said, "yes and no," explaining that traditional writing skills are still extremely important but the needed skill set has expanded to include additional competencies.

All professionals interviewed agreed that writing for interactive, real-time environments, specifically, differs from traditional PR writing, although one participant qualified this response by noting that even interactive writing is not all the same; instead, it differs based on factors such as industry, social media channel, and level of formality.

As expected, professionals highlighted the need to be conversational and succinct. Other aspects of writing, however, seem to have been enhanced as a result of direct interaction with the public, given their limited attention spans, compared to more traditional stakeholders such as employees, investors, or media, who arguably have more of a vested interest in communicating with organizations. While it has always been important to consider the audience, for example, the degree to which providing relevant content that adds real value has been heightened. Similarly, while creativity has been valued in the past, much social media writing is shifting toward an advertising copywriting orientation, as described by one participant (*interviewee quotes are italicized below*):

One could argue that the skills taught to write an annual report and press release are easily scaled to writing tweets and blog posts, but my experience is that copywriters trained in writing copy are the most adaptable and best choice for both short- and long-form writing.

Additionally, several aspects of the writing process are unique to social media. Today's PR professionals must consider using keywords that will enhance search engine optimization (SEO). The majority of interview participants talked extensively about the role brand voice plays in social media writing. The two-way nature of social media is reflected in the concern for writing in a way that will engage audiences and elicit the desired response, as measured by analytics: *"My firm recently hired an e-mail writer, who has improved the response rate of our email marketing campaigns."*

Finally, respondents emphasized the importance of understanding how every tweet and post fits as a part of the overall strategic whole. Similarly, in digital writing, text is now just one part of a larger visual and creative process. When telling online stories, students and early career professionals need a basic understanding of multimedia content production:

I think anybody coming into social and digital media needs to really understand what the currency of social and digital media is and that's content, and you've got to be able to at least have the sense of how this stuff gets put together. You have to have a sense of how to work with designers, developers, producers. Social media is visual media; it's not really about text-based content anymore.

In reflecting on the types of writing skills public relations professionals need to develop in a transforming online communication environment (RQ1a), most of the participants focused on the organizational creation of content that will elicit a response from audiences (with potential for higher levels of interactivity, engagement, and/or dialogue after attracting an initial response).

Developing Interactive Writing Skills—Engagement and Dialogue-Level Thinking

Interview participants offered several suggestions in response to the research question asking about developing real-time writing skills (RQ1b), including observing the masters who manage online communities well, completing tone of voice exercises that make it easier to respond quickly, observing reactions to different messages and responses via analytics or peer groups, and creating simulations and scenarios that provide practice under pressure.

Several interview participants indicated that they are extremely careful in the hiring process because good judgment and a high level of trust are even more important when early career professionals are given social media responsibility. Further, some of our interviewees expressed the need for better real-time training in writing after college, indicating that the results of this study are applicable both to professors and practitioners:

I don't think this [real-time writing training] is probably happening enough right now for any of us. I think it's kind of media training for real-time social media interaction. I think that we've got to make sure that people are being media trained, who are going to be speaking on behalf of an organization, are media trained for the social environment as well. Because when you're having that real-time dialogue, you don't have the ability to sit with it for a little while or think about your answer. When you're in the middle of that Twitter chat, you don't have that luxury.

When articulating how to develop real-time writing skills (RQ1b), interview participants used examples that suggested the need for ongoing communication (managing online communities) and more dialogic and engagement-level thinking (emphasizing good judgment and trust).

High-Stakes Communication Responsibilities—Less Dialogic Openness

The second research question asked whether early career social media professionals have higher stakes communication responsibilities today than in the past (RQ2a). Half of respondents agreed that early career professionals are responsible for higher stakes communication than in the past due to social media, and another quarter stated that they are but shouldn't be. To that end, one respondent explained that this was true when social media was in its early stages, but as it becomes more mainstream, this is changing. Two others stated that it depends on the company; for example, early career professionals at smaller companies are often given high levels of social media responsibility, but there is generally more senior-level oversight and social media mentorship at larger companies. None of the professionals interviewed completely disagreed that at least some professionals are given a high level of social media responsibility very early in their careers—for better or for worse.

Several interview participants shared that early career professionals do have more opportunity to communicate very publicly and directly with publics than ever before, which can seem like a chance to shine, but these experts also emphasized the high risks to both individuals and brands that can occur

without consulting a senior team: *"Being in charge of something so public and 'out there' may seem like a great opportunity, but I can promise you, it's really a recipe for disaster."*

Interestingly, some participants pointed out that the biggest problems often occur when PR professionals are engaged in more spontaneous posts or responses to comments, rather than in sending out carefully planned and preapproved content, or even in dealing with a crisis, as senior PR leaders are generally highly involved in crisis situations: *"What I have observed is that fewer mistakes are made on the crisis side in real time response, and more are made in the planned editorial calendar, when the unintended consequences arise from an insensitive or careless post."*

Asking participants directly about high-stakes communication (RQ2a) turned the conversation to an emphasis on risk reduction and caution about spontaneous communication, reflecting a less dialogic approach.

Building High-Stakes Communication Skills—Careful Responses

In response to how to prepare high-stakes writing responsibilities (RQ2b), experts recommended that early career professionals build skills in responding appropriately to potentially problematic comments. Ideas included developing a "response matrix" in advance to help PR specialists know how to handle routine types of comments or requests, preparing junior PR team members to identify when an online conversation may be beginning to escalate and at what point to ask for a supervisor's help, and asking mentors or senior team members to evaluate drafts of responses before sending. One participant said, for example:

I'm going to try to equip them with what their tone of voice should be, how they should engage, what, if they don't know the answer, how they can find that out, if somebody's challenging something, how we can partner together on responding to that individual efficiently and correctly so that that person doesn't feel like they're getting drawn into a back and forth or they're being put out there to answer something they don't feel confident doing.

Talking specifically about high-stakes communication training (RQ2b) similarly led to recommendations that favored communication at the level of carefully controlled responsiveness rather than in ongoing exchanges.

The following tables summarize how this study conceptualizes responsiveness, interactivity, engagement, and dialogue, as informed by academic literature. It suggests how to begin to operationalize these terms to differentiate among them and to identify which level of communication is occurring. It connects to the study findings by including an additional interview participant quote that is representative of each level of communication found in the cocreational model.

Table 1. Responsiveness—From Definition to Practice.

Academic Definition	Study Conceptualization	Study Operationalization	Representative Findings
Responsiveness			
Responsiveness is an organization's willingness and ability to respond to referrals by individual public members, and can have either positive or negative consequences depending on the degree to which the responses are perceived to be timely and relevant. (Avidar, 2013, p. 442)	A first-time response sent in reaction to an initial message.	<p>Audience \longleftrightarrow Organization</p>	"When writing for social media, the goal is to spark an immediate reaction. Whether that's a like, comment, share, retweet, click-through, etc. The writer needs to truly understand the audience and write content that they'll react to."

Table 2. Interactivity—From Definition to Practice.

Academic Definition	Study Conceptualization	Study Operationalization	Representative Findings
Interactivity			
"Interactivity can be defined as the degree to which a communication technology can create a mediated environment in which participants can communicate (one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many), both synchronously and asynchronously, and participate in reciprocal message exchanges (third-order dependency)" (Kioussis, 2002, p. 372).	Three or more messages sent between parties that are related to one another	<p>A response that initiates at least one additional turn:</p> <p>Audience \longleftrightarrow Organization</p> <p>or</p> <p>Organization \longleftrightarrow Audience</p>	"I think people seek out brands and organizations on social media because they want answers to real questions, they want to interact with real people, so you need to have that real conversations with them, be transparent and authentic and conversational. I think as soon as you start layering in more of that press release language, you lose them a little bit."

Table 3. Engagement—From Definition to Practice.

Academic Definition	Study Conceptualization	Study Operationalization	Representative Findings
Engagement			
<p>Engagement is “an affective motivational mediator that leads individuals’ trust and satisfaction (key antecedents) to be displayed in supportive behavioral intentions for an organization (loyalty and positive WOM)” (Kang, 2014, p. 401).</p>	<p>A motivation for both parties to participate in a series of ongoing communication actions that takes place in an environment that has relationship-building potential.</p>		<p>“[Critical skills include] influencer identification and engagement—how to identify meaningful influencers who are relevant to the category and how to engage with them in a way that is mutually beneficial.”</p>

Table 4. Dialogue—From Definition to Practice.

Academic Definition	Study Conceptualization	Study Operationalization	Representative Findings
Dialogue			
<p>Dialogue is a product of ongoing communication and ethical relationships (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002). Understanding and openness to new possibilities are the main goals (Kent & Taylor, 2014, p. 389).</p>	<p>A series of ongoing communication events for the purpose of solving a problem or issue between parties who are both open to listen and change.</p>		<p>“I think we’ve seen no shortage of campaigns, especially from companies that have a fair amount of activism around them . . . energy companies or pharmaceutical companies or whoever . . . where the activists quickly kind of come in to these social environments and take it over. I think for every company, you’ve got to be very in tune and in touch with your audience, with your detractors and you’ve got to think about how your presence within a social environment might be taken.”</p>

Discussion

Writing Skills Needed for Digital Communication

The skills professionals recommended developing for digital writing skills (RQ1a) mostly represent a focus on the *responsiveness* level. One example is the objective for online content to elicit the *desired response*, which does not reflect a dialogic orientation in that it favors the objectives of the organization more than those of the public. Many writing skills the participants discussed reflected an interest in gaining attention in hopes of getting audiences to respond, such as the need to be *succinct*, to use *creativity*, and to ensure that publics see messages in the first place through the use of SEO keywords. It is interesting that one participant did directly refer to engagement in terms of writing in a way that would engage audiences, but the example used, of hiring an email writer to increase email marketing response rates, indicated operationalization at the responsiveness level of communication.

The importance participants placed on developing brand voice showed a potential for relationship building at the engagement level, in that it begins to address how individuals form relationships with brands or organizations. The reference to conversational writing also holds potential for creating engagement.

Although many participants' descriptions reflected primarily building-block stages rather than fully dialogic communication, the focus on developing relevant content that adds real value to publics reflects Kent and Taylor's (2002) tenets of mutuality, empathy, risk, and commitment by recognizing the importance of the goals and interests of the publics, and not just of the organization.

Developing Interactive Writing Skills

The ability to develop genuine trust is a key element of dialogic communication, as well as an antecedent to engagement, so it is perhaps not surprising that social media leaders consider trust to be essential in both hiring and assigning social media management responsibilities to early career professionals.

The digital communicators in our study also confirmed that real-time interactive writing requires practice. The real-time and/or rapid response time that stakeholders expect requires an ability to think clearly and quickly, which careful preparation can facilitate. This illustrates a focus on the responsiveness level of exchange.

Input from seasoned communicators appears to be an important part of training the next generation. Experience can aid judgment and decision making, so training could incorporate a team or mentorship approach.

The interviewees also mentioned monitoring analytics and adjusting responses accordingly. Again, this could be viewed as either attempting to asymmetrically manipulate publics or to symmetrically

listen and make adjustments, likely depending on the motivation for use as opposed to being an inherent property of analytics tools themselves. Future research could focus on this iterative, two-way communication process.

Preparing for Higher Stakes Communication

Asking social media PR experts about high-stakes online communication had the potential to reveal a dialogic orientation in which public relations representatives were more comfortable with less controlled communication environments and where organizations and publics were willing to take more risks. While the findings from the first research question in this study indicate that organizations go to great lengths to initiate relationships with—or at least responses from—publics, findings from this second research question suggest that when it comes to higher stakes—or more risky—communication topics, organizations want to limit potential missteps.

Despite the fact that high-profile communication introduces a clear potential of risk to organizations, agency digital media strategists appear to be willing to entertain some risk, given the potential benefit of engaging more directly with publics than was previously possible. However, participant responses hint at the likelihood that organizations are comfortable with interactions that may lead to the type of engagement used to build supportive behaviors toward an organization (Kang, 2014), but not with emotionally charged dialogic topics (Wierzbicka, 2006).

Dialogic communication theory has long acknowledged the necessity of taking some risk in order to communicate with publics on their terms (Kent & Taylor, 2002). This current research highlights something new as well. Not only is there risk to an institution in engaging in dialogue to establish organization–public relationships, but there is increased risk to the individuals representing the organizations. Not only can one tweet damage an organization, it can seriously damage one’s personal brand and individual career. This suggests an opportunity to connect dialogic and crisis communication literature more explicitly.

Top digital PR experts agree overall that early career professionals are increasingly communicating directly with publics. Professionals emphasized the very public arena where these conversations take place. Dialogic communication literature has questioned whether dialogue can, or should, take place in public, with Taylor and Kent (2014) saying, “Posting comments on a social media site is no substitute for calling someone on the telephone, or meeting others, to discuss an issue” (p. 393). However, this preference for face-to-face or voice communication can be generational, with millennials preferring computer-mediated exchanges (Bisceglia, 2014; Crosby, 2014; Rood, 2014; Shapira, 2010).

Nevertheless, it appears that most interview participants did not hold a dialogic view of communication in a public arena, instead favoring a strategy of responses that limit risk when possible. While communication practices for social media crises do suggest “taking conversations [with upset publics] offline,” they often recommend continuing the conversation on private mediated channels as opposed to face-to-face means. Organizational communicators often publically encourage an angry online

commenter to “direct-message” the person who is responding on behalf of the organization, publicly demonstrating its responsiveness while continuing the potentially heated exchange privately.

Building High-Stakes Communication Skills

When training early career professionals for high-stakes real-time writing situations, digital media experts spoke of keeping the exchange at the responsiveness level, rather than moving up to the interactive level, by focusing on “*how we can partner together on responding to that individual efficiently and correctly so that that person doesn't feel like they're getting drawn into a back and forth.*”

The discussion of creating a preplanned response matrix of potential online answers also highlights an interesting tension between spontaneity and planned communication in both the dialogic communication literature and in the findings presented here.

According to Kent and Taylor's (2002) earlier conceptualizations of dialogic theory, dialogic communication is unrehearsed and spontaneous: “Dialogic exchanges are not scripted nor are they predictable. . . . While dialogic interactants all have positions on issues, the urge to manipulate others through scripted exchanges is avoided in an effort to minimize coercion” (p. 28).

Yet, more recent scholarship recalls that:

Pearson recognized that dialogue comes from planned, not spontaneous, communication. Although many scholars talk about social media interaction as *dialogic*, spontaneous conversations in social media are not inherently dialogic. The key difference is planned versus spontaneous interactions. In those interactions that are planned and dialogic, everyone gets to decide if they will participate. Organizations do not simply drop out or stop participating when their goals have been met. (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 392)

Similarly, this study data suggests that there is a level of spontaneity required when responding in a timely manner to people who comment on a blog post, for example, but that the spontaneous responses introduce the most risk. The social media experts in our study recommend training early professionals to successfully engage in dialogue with publics by drilling them in advance on exactly how the organizational voice should sound and what some appropriate responses would be to typical comments and questions (e.g., developing a response matrix). While most descriptions in this study did not reflect dialogue, the fact that digital experts are thinking about planned versus spontaneous exchanges brings up interesting questions about what role each type of exchange may play in dialogue. Does this preplanning represent responsible preparation on the part of organizations to engage in dialogue successfully, or does it represent a more contrived, less authentic form of interaction? Or, does the degree of planning matter less than the overall mutually beneficial motivation for interacting? And, how does one measure motivation? Our research indicates this is still an area for further clarification.

Conclusion

This data begins to explore an important area of theoretical development that Taylor and Kent (2014) emphasized: how engagement is created. We began this task specifically by asking how top social media professionals use interactive writing to communicate directly with publics. Our findings indicated that conversations with professionals do reflect some natural understanding and use of relationship initiation, responsiveness, and interactivity, but less use of engagement and dialogic approaches. One limitation of the study is that in attempting not to influence or direct how social media experts described their work, we did not define for them or ask directly about engagement and dialogue. Future research should reflect on the reasons for using one approach over another. Future research also should further explore professionals' conceptual and operational definitions of engagement and dialogic communication directly. This can help researchers examine how practitioner responses compare with academic literature as they work to more fully explicate and operationalize these concepts.

One purpose of this research was to more carefully define and differentiate similar terms, suggest an initial way to operationalize them, and begin to compare these definitions with professionals' qualitative descriptions of their own online communication with publics. This foundation can be used to quantitatively study the exchanges between organizations and publics to directly categorize these sets of exchanges into the appropriate type of interaction. This is particularly important as both researchers and professionals are asked to measure social media results in a consistent and meaningful way. It also is important for future work to not only further operationalize responsiveness, interactivity, engagement, and dialogue, but to do so in a way that is scalable for real-world organizations.

These findings, combined with additional in-depth studies that involve communication professionals, can lead to rich starting points for further research and discussion, with potential research questions including:

- Can genuine dialogue take place in public online spaces?
- If dialogue is generally restricted to nonpublic settings, does this limit the application of dialogic principles to certain PR practice areas over others?
- Under what boundary conditions does it make sense for engagement, rather than dialogue, to be the end goal?
- To what extent might true dialogue occur in one-to-many interactive settings, given that many PR professionals represent large organizations with millions of stakeholders?
- What are the boundaries of dialogic communication? Is one approach more useful in specific areas of practice (e.g., issues management) than another (e.g., consumer public relations)?
- Is dialogic communication the ultimate goal of all public relations practice, or only more specialized types of organization–public relations?

Additional limitations of this study include its single methodology and relatively small sample size; further research should use a variety of research methods to study how engagement is created. For example, this research used in-depth interviews to study how digital PR professionals engage with publics through interactive writing online. Content analysis of transcripts of online dialogue between organizations

and publics would be a logical next step in studying how organizations engage with publics, with a specific focus on the boundary conditions surrounding the extent to which engagement and/or dialogic approaches are used.

The findings call for further research into whether the view that PR practitioners do not fully use dialogic communication is accurate, and perhaps more important, the reasons for this if it is the case. For example, are public relations practitioners aware of engagement and dialogic principles, and do they define these concepts in the same way? In-depth conversations with social media experts indicate a great deal of investment goes toward attempting to engage publics in online environments, and based on their descriptions of the skills and training early professionals need, there is potential for PR experts to use the five principles of dialogic communication. However, these conversations provide only the starting point for studying specific organization–public online interactions in more depth.

There are several potential reasons why current academic research may not be finding more dialogic communication taking place, which are worthy of study to validate or refute. For example, it may be that past research looked in the wrong places; companies typically do not invest in developing robust interactivity on their owned channels where they would need to create new consumer behavior patterns. Instead, they go where people already are interacting and trying to join the conversation by adding value. It may be that important organization–public interactions are occurring on forums beyond an organization’s own Twitter profile or Facebook page.

Previous work also has largely focused on either the degree to which technological features are present to facilitate interaction, or content analysis of an organization’s use of social media tools from an outside perspective. It would be useful to conduct research with both organizations and publics to learn more about their motivations for engaging in interactions. For example, a study of interactive agency executives in Spain revealed that some participants were interested in dialogue, while others were less interested in dialogue and more interested in encouraging participation for other reasons (Aragón & Domingo, 2014). It could be fruitful to focus specifically on the practices of those organizations most interested and open to dialogic communication.

In summary, these findings highlight the need for more research that compares and contrasts engagement and dialogue and that articulates to what extent social media experts are familiar with these approaches and how to measure them. This clarification can lead to further theory development by identifying the boundary conditions under which dialogic and/or engagement strategies and tactics are most effective and appropriate.

Future research into how the practice is, or should be, preparing professionals for both dialogue and engagement can further enhance the potential for increased interactivity, engagement, and in some cases, dialogue between organizations and publics.

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