Introduction to the Special Issue on Dialogue 2.0: New Perspectives, Enduring Challenges, and Promising Directions

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Abstract
The current state of polarization evidenced in communication around race, politics, criminal justice, immigration, health care, and other critical social issues highlights the challenges of talking about our most enduring, “wicked” problems. This increased polarization has been shown to result in self-monitoring of media consumption (both traditional and social) such that people are more likely to engage with sources that support existing beliefs rather than seek information that crosses views and values. The motivation for this special issue came from an interdisciplinary symposium hosted by North Carolina State University’s Communication, Rhetoric and Digital Media (CRDM) doctoral program that took place from 28 March to 30 March 2019 and included participants from across the United States. The symposium was titled “Dialog 2.0: Social Movements, Online Communication and Transformation.” The seven articles that comprise this special issue include symposium participants along with the voices of other scholars around the world who are thinking about and investigating social media and dialogic communication. While the authors in this special issue offer different conceptions of dialogue, it is broadly conceived as communication that is inclusive of multiple voices (especially those that have been marginalized) and aimed at improving understanding rather than persuading or “winning.”

Keywords
dialogue, power, marginalization, activism

The current state of polarization evidenced in communication around race, politics, criminal justice, immigration, health care, and other critical social issues highlights the challenges of talking about our most enduring, “wicked” problems. This increased polarization has been shown to result in self-monitoring of media consumption (both traditional and social) such that people are more likely to engage with sources that support existing beliefs rather than seek information that crosses views and values (Wolleback et al., 2019). This special issue was inspired by the question of how social media might be used to promote dialogue, broadly conceived as communication that is inclusive of multiple voices (especially those that have been marginalized) and aimed at improving understanding rather than persuading or “winning.”

The motivation for this special issue also came from an interdisciplinary symposium hosted by North Carolina State University’s Communication, Rhetoric and Digital Media (CRDM) doctoral program that took place from 28 March to 30 March 2019. The symposium was titled “Dialog 2.0: Social Movements, Online Communication and Transformation,” and included approximately 50 participants from across the United States. At the symposium, we explored how conversations in online, offline, and hybrid spaces can promote dialogic communication that overcomes tribalism, echo chambers, and polarization. In examining the intersections of social movements, online communication, and transformation, we included contexts ranging from interpersonal conversations to public protests to online activism. The range of speakers, workshops, and participants reflected the interdisciplinarity of the CRDM program and included varying perspectives on “dialogue” and “dialog” and the role of technology in relationships, culture, and politics.

One of the goals of the symposium was to create sustainable conversations and collaborations, and we are...
pleased to guest edit this special issue of *Social Media + Society* to continue those conversations and focus more specifically on social media dialogue. The authors in this special issue include symposium participants along with the voices of other scholars around the world who are thinking about and investigating social media and dialogic communication. Although dialogue is the central theme of the issue, articles range from deep explorations of how to construct mediated spaces to promote dialogue (Kent & Taylor, 2020) to the study of two-way communication that promotes marginalized voices but may not always rise to the traditional definition of dialogue (Saxton Coleman, 2020). Articles also focus on related concepts, such as digital media literacy (Damasčeno, 2020) and perspectives on justice (Madden & Alt, 2020), that are integral to understanding online dialogue.

**The Good and the Bad of Online Discussions**

The first two articles in this special issue study specific applications or examples of online dialogue—or at least online discussions with the potential for dialogue. The first, authored by Ron et al. (2020) offers a hopeful example of online dialogue through an examination of a Facebook group called Women Wage Peace, created by Jewish and Arab women with a goal of promoting understanding and peace between the groups. While their case study demonstrates communication is not always dialogic, their examination of a sample of posts and responses in the Facebook group represents the potential for dialogue when groups come together with dialogic intentions. However, Gallacher et al. (2020) studied social media interaction in which members from opposing political protest groups engaged on each other’s Facebook events pages, resulting in harmful, rather than helpful, communication. In fact, their study demonstrated that interaction on social media predicted violence in offline encounters—such as when the protest events took place. This study empirically demonstrates that the negative impact of increased polarization has more than philosophical or ideological impacts on society and reinforces the need for improved social media interaction.

**Power, Identity, and Justice**

The next three articles in the issue look at social media dialogue within and among marginalized groups. Place and Ciszek (2020) highlight social and institutional barriers to online dialogue encountered by marginalized groups and the need for scholarship that focuses on these issues and experiences. In their present study, they used a critical approach to examine how minority women activist voices are suppressed and co-opted in digital spaces and how these activists exert agency and challenge power imbalances. This article provides important insights for gaining influence through a supportive digital community that empowers women to take their conversation from digital spaces to face-to-face interaction at protests or legislative hearings. The authors also provide implications for allies who want to advocate on behalf of marginalized groups.

Saxton Coleman (2020) further examines how a particular marginalized community used social media for activism and social connection. In her cultural analysis of the online discourse of #DCNativesDay, she found Black natives of Washington, DC used social media to share their connection to place, express and construct their identities, and counter the dominant narrative of what a DC native looks like. Saxton Coleman describes processes of exclusion and gentrification that deprioritized and displaced Black natives in areas of Washington, DC. Through her analysis of tweets using the hashtag #DCNativesDay, she demonstrates how members of this community were able to use an online space—Twitter—to share their common identity and counter the dominant narrative. It is debatable whether this type of communication reaches the level of dialogue, as we do not know from this analysis whether the participants actually engage in two-way interaction with each other or those outside their community. Yet, we see this as an important medium for bringing marginalized voices to the public sphere, which is a necessary precondition for authentic dialogue.

The Place and Ciszek (2020) and Saxton Coleman (2020) papers provide a glimpse into the potential for social media as a place where those who have been suppressed can connect with others to gain power and disrupt dominant narratives by having a voice in the public sphere. Both articles point out that dialogue is not possible when one group is silenced, and provide examples of using social media to bring unheard voices to the table to create the possibility for dialogue.

A third paper that complements this perspective adopts the concept of open dialogue in the public sphere and applies it to the opportunity for personal disclosures through social media. Madden and Alt (2020) introduce the concept of Victim-Centered Public Dialogue (VCPD) as a form of innovative justice in which sexual assault survivors process their emotions and have the potential for personal growth and healing through sharing their experiences and having them “witnessed” by observers. The authors use the case study of Chanel Miller’s Instagram page to conduct a qualitative analysis of her posts about her experience as the victim of sexual assault at Stanford University in 2015 and responses from followers, many of whom have shared experiences. While not all authors in this special issue would agree that interaction on this Instagram page reaches the standard of dialogue, the authors support the argument that social media provides a medium for voices that are often silenced to be heard and validated, and this can both model and create healing, providing a potential mechanism for innovative justice.
Opportunities and Best Practices for Facilitating Dialogue

The special issue ends with two articles that provide guidance for working toward dialogic engagement on social media. Damasceno (2020) used a multiliteracy framework for improving digital media and information literacy and developing competencies necessary to evaluate information sources in an ever-changing media landscape and ethically engage in online dialogue. She contends that informed citizens and shared experiences help facilitate civic engagement and productive dialogue. However, Damasceno (2020) acknowledges that media and information literacy alone will not solve issues surrounding misinformation and polarization. Social media platforms themselves must be evaluated if they are to serve as dialogic spaces. Kent and Taylor (2020) address this directly by introducing a new architecture for social media and proposing elements that would be necessary to better facilitate social media dialogue for social change. They argue that social media are important spaces for discussions surrounding social issues but do not support true dialogic engagement as currently designed and used. Specific opportunities for reimagining include having known and transparent rules for engagement, building features for structured argumentation, providing curated content with conversation-relevant data, and creating new funding mechanisms so user data are no longer a commodity.

Looking Forward

The articles in this special issue reinforce common knowledge that when individuals with diverse views and values engage on social media the outcomes range from negative and harmful (Gallacher et al., 2020) to positive and hopeful (Ron et al., 2020). Which of these outcomes results depends on a combination of the intent of social media participants, the level of reflection and self-awareness users consider as they post and respond, and the design of social media platforms themselves. The current literature suggests that persistent barriers such as inequity (Place & Ciszek, 2020), misinformation and disinformation campaigns (Damasceno, 2020), and social media algorithms that create individualized echo chambers (Grevet et al., 2014; Kent & Taylor, 2020), have promoted polarization and hate (Harel et al., 2020) that prevents progress toward (and interest in) truly dialogic spaces on social media. With issues surrounding race, health, the environment, and the economy at the center of highly contentious public discourse, finding ways to engage in online communication that includes marginalized voices, increases understanding, and bridges rather than divides groups and communities is critical to civic participation, developing solutions to “wicked problems,” and promoting social progress. The articles in this issue continue a tradition of research on dialogue and push us to recognize the gaps in social media research and to consider potential new directions for both scholarship and practice.

Acknowledgements

The guest editors wish to thank the members of the Dialog 2.0 Learning Community and additional reviewers for their assistance with reviewing the articles in this special issue.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The authors wish to acknowledge a lightning rod grant from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at North Carolina State University which helped support the Dialog 2.0 event and made this special issue possible.

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