

## DIALOGUE AS A JOURNALISTIC IDEAL

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Discussions and practices related to participatory and interactive journalism emphasize the dialogical aspects of journalism. However, throughout history, the idea of dialogue in journalism has taken a variety of forms. This paper puts dialogue as a journalistic ideal under scrutiny. Our aim is twofold: First, we map out the development and different functions of the ideal in some decisive eras in the history of journalism and in the current context of digital journalism. Second, we will present a model of how to best capture and understand the significance of dialogue to contemporary journalism. The model is based on an exploration of philosophical preconditions for dialogue as an ideal in journalism. We will also look at the significance of dialogue in different genres and in interactive dimensions of journalism.

KEYWORDS Dialogue; Digital journalism; Media Argumentation; Philosophy of Journalism

### Introduction

When the interview was introduced as a journalistic genre in the American penny press in the 1830's, journalism made a significant move from monological to dialogical communication. Benjamin Day, the 1833 founder of the *New York Sun* gave up the customary public function of the editor and instead made a livelihood by selling news "told in the main in graphic dialogue form" (Hughes, 1981, s. 8). The novel, dialogical approach to journalism was what made newspapers popular. Since the days of the penny press this discovery has been crucial to the development of journalism. The dialogical approach to journalism was paramount to the creation of the yellow press and the later tabloidization of the press. It was a crucial principle underpinning the creation of many broadcast journalism formats (like talk shows, debate programs, etc.), and it is a core ideal to the new forms, practices and productions of journalism that has emerged in recent decades due to processes of digitalization.

We will argue that dialogue not only has been a crucial ideal to the development of journalism since the 1830's, but that this ideal has become increasingly important in recent years. The rise of participatory journalism; the presumed blurring of borders between producers and consumers of news and between public and private spheres; and the increasing separation of news production from traditional journalistic newsrooms described by new concepts like the "news ecosystem" (Anderson, 2010), "networked journalism" (Beckett & Mansell, 2008) and "ambient journalism" (Hermida, 2010), make dialogue as a journalistic ideal not only more important, but also more complex. By emphasising dialogue as a key ideal to journalism we aim at achieving a better understanding of the complex versatility that marks the different kinds of communication journalism and journalists are involved in today. We believe there is a need to move journalism

studies beyond the understanding of journalism found in classical models of mass communication as well as those found in new models of participatory communication.

We begin with a brief overview of different modes of dialogue in different phases of the history of journalism before we move on to discuss different philosophical notions of dialogue. The paper ends with a classification of different types of dialogue related to the journalistic production process and to journalistic genres.

## Modes of Journalistic Dialogue

The Greek word for dialogue is composed of *dia* (“through”, “inter”, “between”) and *logos* (“speech”, “word” or “discourse”). Dialogue signifies an interaction, a dynamic process that takes place in and through language. When we talk of dialogue as an ideal in this paper we do not only mean the different types of interactions journalists engage in with colleagues, sources and audiences. Our understanding of dialogue as an ideal in journalism is also related to professional ideology, i.e. the norms, ideals and values journalists adhere to. Journalists engage in different kinds of dialogue when story ideas are shaped, when stories are researched, edited, published and distributed, and increasingly also in how journalistic stories are interpreted and reacted upon. Furthermore, journalistic genres establish different kinds of dialogical relationships between the journalist, sources, text and audiences.

However, the significance of dialogue as an ideal to journalism has varied through out the history of journalism. Roughly speaking we can distinguish between four important eras in which dialogue has played different roles as an ideal to journalism: The pre-objectivity era, the objectivity era, the new journalism era, and the digital era.

### *Dialogue in the Pre-Objectivity Era*

The rise of the interview as both a journalistic method and genre in the 1830s gave prominence to dialogue as an ideal in journalism. James Gordon Bennett, the founder of the *New York Herald*, published what is known as the first newspaper interview in April 1836, after reporting on the murder of a prostitute named Helen Jewett. Upon entering the scene of the murder, Bennett wrote:

I knocked at the door. A Police Officer opened it, stealthily. I told him who I was. “Mr B., you can enter,” said he with great politeness. The crowds rushed from behind seeking also an entrance. “No more comes in,” said the Police Officer. “Why do you let that man in?” asked one of the crowd. “He is an editor—he is on public duty.” (Cited in Hughes, 1981, s. 11)

Through the use of a first person narrator Bennett positions himself as a point of identification for the reader, thereby making the text highly dialogical in the sense that it communicates directly with the reader in an “I-thou” relationship. Hughes argues that by writing in such a style, Bennett “abandoned the role of a responsible editor for that of a chattering gossip. He was just the person his readers would have loved to have a long talk with.” (1981, s. 11).

This kind of dialogical journalism was found in European newspapers during the 1800s as well. It was dialogical in at least three ways: First, the journalists used dialogue when doing the reporting on the scene. Second, they displayed dialogue when writing their stories. Third, they positioned themselves as subjective characters in their stories, characters that established a highly dialogical relationship with the readers. In other words, for these journalists of the 1800s dialogue was important in all the stages of journalism as a discursive practice.

However, the idea of interviewing did not become institutionalized as a journalistic method and genre until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the US and 20 years or so later in Europe (Schudson, 2001, s. 157). Therefore, these examples of early, highly dialogical, journalism were the exception

rather than the rule. They are nevertheless interesting because they represent a kind of dialogical journalism that would be more rarely found once objectivity became the dominant ideal in news reporting.

#### *Dialogue in the Objectivity Era*

The rise of objectivity as an ideal in journalism somewhat obstructed the ideal of dialogue, at least in American journalism. Countering common beliefs that objectivity rose to prominence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the US, Schudson (1978, 2001) argues that objectivity did not gain force until after the First World War. The partisan press had a longer life in Europe, and the ideal of objectivity reached different levels of penetration at different times in European journalism (Donsbach, 1995; Schudson, 2001). So what we here label the “objective era” is not one distinct period in time, but rather different periods with different implications in different journalistic cultures.

Objectivity as an ideal implied that journalists detached themselves from the stories they wrote. Reporting facts became the core activity and journalists should no longer be visible in their stories. The “I-thou” dialogical relationship with readers which became common in the pre-objectivity era, disappeared since the first person narrator did not comply with objective reporting. Ideally, all readers in the objectivity era should receive the exact same and fixed message, which was seen as an object that passed from the transmitter to the receiver. Consequently, objectivity as an ideal promoted a monological kind of discourse, which “negated the possibility of a dialogical relationship both between journalists and readers and between readers and text”, argues Soffer (2009, s. 478).

However, dialogue thrived in journalistic practice during the objectivity era. As mentioned above, the interview became institutionalised as a method in many journalistic cultures as objectivity came to be the dominant ideal, and journalists hence engaged in a much more dialogical relationship with sources. If the pre-objectivity era was marked by dialogical relationships between text and reader on the one hand and journalist and reader on the other, the objectivity era was marked by a dialogical relationship between sources and journalists.

#### *Dialogue in the New Journalism Era*

Bennett and the other pre-objectivity journalists used what we today recognise as techniques of feature writing and scene construction to produce a highly dialogical kind of journalism. Such techniques became popular once again with the rise of New Journalism in the 1960s in the US (Wolfe, 1975). New Journalism arose partly as a protest movement to the hegemonic position objectivity had gained in American journalism, and it implied a more subjective, colourful and narrative kind of writing, in which the new journalists were deeply engaged with what they reported and how they reported it. Parts of New Journalism, produced by those labelled by Eason (1990) as the “modernist new journalists,” were also marked by a post-modern epistemological position implying that truth and facts were not seen as something objective and absolute, but rather as something subjective and highly depended upon a dialogical relationship established between the journalist, the text and readers. This kind of dialogical literary journalism resembles the European tradition of literary reportage, which has run parallel with the objectivity era and been a steady tradition also in modern times (Hartsock, 2011).

The new journalism era combines the dialogical relationships established in earlier periods. The interview is well established as a method in this era, and this kind of journalism therefore establishes dialogical relationships between journalist and sources, journalist and text, text and reader and journalist and reader.

#### *Dialogue in the Digital Era*

The digitalisation of journalism in recent decades has paved new ways for the ideal of dialogue. New media and new technology have decreased the importance of previously established demarcations

between producers and consumers of news, between private and public spheres, and between professional and non-professional journalists. Journalists are increasingly no longer newsroom staffers but freelancers with less loyalty to journalistic institutions (Deuze, 2007). They no longer have hegemonic control over news flows and information gates, but are part of a network of news production (Beckett & Mansell, 2008), or a news ecosystem (Anderson, 2010), in which citizens and new, social media play an increasingly significant role. They can no longer ignore audience feedback, but must relate to it in for instance comments to their stories and their texts must increasingly relate to other texts in a dialogical relationship via hyperlinks.

Furthermore, audiences and sources have, in our digital age, the ability to interact directly with each other, thereby establishing a new arena for public sphere dialogue in which journalism might play a minor and a major role. Add to this the new roles journalists have taken in other media and on other platforms than their native journalistic institutions, like the role many of them keenly adopt as communicators in social media like Facebook and Twitter, and we understand that the ideal of dialogue has taken a multitude of meanings for journalists in the digital age.

The digital era has open up a Pandora's Box of dialogical opportunities, while all the dialogical relationships established in previous periods are still present. Journalism in the digital age is marked by dialogical relationships between journalist and sources, text and sources, text and other texts, text and audiences, journalist and audiences, sources and audiences, and between audiences.

## **Theorizing Dialogue**

Given the increased significance and complexity of dialogue as an ideal in contemporary digital journalism, there is a need for a better understanding of the potential roles and functions of this ideal. How does dialogue as an ideal shape the different social functions of contemporary journalism? To begin answering such a question, we must take a quick diversion to philosophical and theoretical perspectives on dialogue. In doing so, we identify three normative positions that conceptualize the goals and functions of dialogue somewhat differently: 1. Dialogue as a road to acknowledging a truth; 2. Dialogue as an approach to a plurality of truths; and 3. Dialogue as a decision process towards democratic agreement.

### *Dialogue as a road to acknowledging a truth*

In the Greek philosopher Plato's dialogues, in which his teacher Socrates is the one who is leading the conversation, Socrates uses questions to probe into his dialogue partners' position on some problem or issue. He helps them benevolently to start reasoning, and the one who is questioned develops those notions that the questioner wants to elicit in him. In this way, Socrates may be conceived of as a "spiritual midwife" who is to help the person questioned to give birth to the thoughts by himself.

The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer formulates a related conception of dialogue as a road to acknowledgement in the 20th century. In order to reach a deeper truth through an exchange of questions and answers, the parties' individual language and understanding has to be modified through the course of the dialogue.. An understanding is not reached through self-promotion or by forcing through own standpoints, but by a dialogical transformation into something mutual and shared. According to Gadamer, the dialogue leads to a qualitative transformation of understanding that alters the participants' horizons.

Both Plato and Gadamer have a strong belief in dialogue as a road to truth and acknowledgement. Such a perception of dialogue fits well with ideas of journalism as the fourth estate, which were established during the objectivity era. However, as Engdahl (1992) has pointed out, a problem with the Socratic dialogue as an ideal is its potential drive towards leading the

conversation and its lack of openness for new thoughts. Plato's dialogues are about reaching one truth that Socrates already has acknowledged: By using rhetorical devices, Socrates is able to change the orientation of the dialogue toward the one truth that he himself possesses. So such a perception of dialogue does not fit equally well with the participatory ideals found in contemporary journalism, where producers and consumers, journalists and audiences, increasingly take part in discursive practice of news making on an equal footing.

#### *Dialogue as an Approach to a Plurality of Truths*

To understand dialogical practices in journalism, valuable input comes from what Engdahl has described as the renaissance dialogues (1992: 232-233). According to the renaissance humanists' ideal for dialogue, it is not a goal to reach one undisputed truth when an issue is discussed. The ambition is rather to illuminate it from as many sides as possible. Totally different, and even opposed, viewpoints are seen as equal and equally justified. Everything that contributes to nuancing an issue is seen as valid in the renaissance dialogue. The different positions and opinions do not necessarily exclude each other, but mutually condition each other. The dialogue is to bring one towards a greater understanding, or a contradictory understanding, of the subject of the discussion. Rather than uncovering one truth, the dialogue participants shall approach truths in the plural.

A similar conception of dialogue is also found in political and democratic theory. Ideals of the renaissance dialogue resonate somewhat in the agonistic view of democracy, which emphasizes conflicts and antagonisms as constitutive features of the social (e.g. Mouffe 2000, 2005). Mouffe conceives of democratic dialogue as a real confrontation: "Adversaries do fight - even fiercely but according to a shared set of rules, and their positions, despite being ultimately irreconcilable, are accepted as legitimate positions" (2005:52).

#### *Dialogue as a Decision Process Towards Democratic Agreement*

Deliberative theories, on their hand, examine the conditions for reaching an agreement through deliberation among participants. As a normative ideal "deliberative democracy" refers to a democratic system where decisions are made by discussion among citizens. All those who will be affected by a decision participate in decision-making, so that decisions become legitimate and binding. Participation is by means of arguments offered by and to citizens who are committed to the values of freedom, impartiality and rationality (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012).

The deliberative model is most closely identified with Jürgen Habermas. In his theory of communicative action (1984), human rationality is seen as the ability to offer reasons in support of claims and to handle reasons that are advanced by other dialogue partners. A concept of "communicative rationality" is explained in terms of a theory of argumentation. This consists of a linguistic activity in which participants construct arguments to justify or criticize claims that some statement is true or appropriate and right. In Habermas' model of deliberative democracy dialogue participants engage in argumentative communication in order to justify a contested claim. In principle, moral-practical issues can be settled through argumentation. The procedure requires that all participants in communication adopt an impartial point of view so that their own interests and needs do not count more than those of others do. In such conditions agreement is motivated by the force of the better argument.

## **Classification of Dialogue Types**

The three different normative positions briefly discussed above contribute with valuable insights to our understanding of the social function of dialogue in various eras of journalism. However, they do not provide us with an encompassing model from which we can analyse the versatile and complex nature of dialogue in contemporary, digital journalism. In order to formulate such a model we find Douglas Walton's more descriptive and pragmatic classification of dialogue types applicable (2006,

2007). Building on speech act theory and dialectic theory originating from the Greek philosophers Walton constructs a dialectal framework based on the view that argumentation takes the form of a dialogue with a critical function. In Walton's view, six basic types of dialogue have been recognized that are important to analyzing common arguments, although not all of them involve argumentation to the same extent. These six types are persuasion, inquiry, negotiation, information-seeking, deliberation and eristic. Furthermore, he classifies these six types of dialogue according to the goals of the dialogue, the goals of the participants and the situation when the dialogue is initiated.

In our proposed model (see Table 1) we adapt Walton's matrix to the dialogical characteristics of contemporary journalism. There is a collective goal for each type of argument, as a framework governing the participants and their moves. However, each participant also has his own goal.

[Insert table 1 here]

For example in persuasion dialogue, the collective goal is to resolve the disagreement between the participants, but each party is also promoting their own opinion as well as attacking the other as strongly as they can. In Walton's view, an argument is reasonable in a dialogue framework if it contributes to the collective goal of the dialogue. Nevertheless, within this cooperative framework there is room for each participant to seek his own goal (Walton 2007, Fairclough & Fairclough 2012: 56).

Table 1 displays different types of dialogues actualized by and in distinct activities of the journalistic process, as well as the main participants involved in the dialogical processes of these activities. The ordering of the journalistic process (left vertical column) is based on the stages of journalistic production used by Domingo et al. (2008) in their analysis of participatory journalism in online newspapers. The table reflects how dialogues with audiences may be decisive in most activities of a journalistic process. The exception is the selection/filtering phase, which traditionally has been seen as a closed newsroom activity (although it may involve sources), and it is also perceived that way in online newspapers, as Domingo et. al's (2008) study of 16 major online newspapers suggests. The different compositions of participant types involved in the dialogues at the different stages indicate how the parties involved in dialogues of most stages involve "real participants". But in some of the stages dialogues may be between real persons on the one hand and a conception or representation of persons on the other. Some dialogues are furthermore limited to being carried out between representations of parties.

Dialogues that include representations of participants are not least typical of the text editing part of the processing/presentation phase. Dialogues between (real) journalists and editors are here part of the decision-making process in the editing of the story, and this involves their anticipations of the audience's reaction, and their conceptions of a model reader. In this way they enter into a dialogue with an imaginary reader. In the presentation phase, dialogues ultimately appear as something participants are involved in as represented actors in a journalistic story, typically as representations of sources and the journalist, or as an implied audience.

## **Dialogue and Genres**

The editing process described above and the types of participants and dialogues involved in it may be illustrated more distinctively by categorizing them according to some different journalistic genres.

Although different types of dialogues may be actualized in different journalistic genres, particular types dominate in particular genres and may be a distinguishing mark of the genre in accordance with its main function.

The purpose of the *news report* is normally considered to be one of conveying information from journalists who have the information to readers who do not (Waugh 1995). We find that the dialogue type of information-seeking is the most characteristic one in the news report-genre. In the genre of the *investigative news story*, the purpose is conventionally considered to be to uncover or to “discover the truth and identify lapses from it in whatever media may be available” (de Burgh 2008: 10). This is attempted through a work process of weighing evidence, fitting facts and proving or disproving one’s hypothesis. The processes of the inquiry dialogue are a part of the preparation stage of different types and genres of journalism (see Table 1), but in the presentation stage such inquiry processes are most typically components of the narratives of investigative news stories, in which inquiry dialogues involving representations of journalists and sources are recurring components.

In the opinion-bearing genre of *commentary journalism*, we find that different types of dialogue may dominate (persuasion, deliberation, and eristic) partly depending on type of commentary (e.g. editorial, op-ed, journalist’s commentary) and the contexts they appear in (e.g. print newspaper commentary columns, or commentaries through audience participation following online news stories). For example, whereas deliberation or persuasion are dominant types of dialogue in a print op-ed by a politician arguing for a standpoint or a best course of action, eristic dialogues tend to be more characteristic of commentaries in online threads of discussion following a news or commentary article.

The *interview* involving a journalist as interviewer on the one hand, and an interviewee – whether an expert source, a politician, or someone else – on the other, is the genre that on the surface most closely resembles the Socratic dialogue as described above. However, rather than conceiving of the dialogue in journalism as a road to acknowledging *one* truth, we find that the information-seeking type of dialogue in which the participants give information (interviewees) and seek information (journalists, implied audience) – or exchange information – is most characteristic of this genre. The result for the involved participants, including the audience, is more likely to be a glimpse of a plurality of truths in accordance with the described ambition of the renaissance dialogues.

The goal of the dominant inquiry dialogue in investigative news stories fits better with the Socratic dialogue’s goal of reaching and acknowledging one truth. As for the commentary, it appears that this is the genre in which a deliberative dialogue of the kind envisioned by Habermas is most realizable.

## The Complexity of Dialogue in the Live blog Genre

Live blogging is an example of an emerging, dialogical mode of news communication found in online newspapers, and it may therefore serve as an example to illustrate the increased complexity of dialogue as an ideal in contemporary, digital journalism.

Live blogs are written and published in a reversed chronological order and are used to cover breaking news and unfolding events in an increasing number of online newspapers. Audience and source feedback may also be incorporated in Live blogs, and they are consumed both live as they are published and updated and in hindsight as a historical account of how an event unfolded (Thurman & Walters, 2013, s. 83).

Live blogs illustrate the increased complexity of dialogue in digital journalism in several ways:

- They target different audiences simultaneously (elites and masses, participants and non-participants) and may therefore be described as a choir of dialogues.
- They are a mixture of opinion and fact and therefore play on different genres with different types of dialogue.
- They are a mixture of curated source material and journalistic reporting and are therefore the result of an on-going dialogue between journalist, sources and audiences.
- They must function both as live coverage of an event and as an historical account of the same event, and may therefore cater to different dialogical goals depending on different initial situations.

Live blogs therefore display at least three types of dialogue: Information-seeking, persuasion and maybe even eristic in the sense that audience participants may hit out at one another or at the journalist or sources. Furthermore, journalists who live blog tend to cater to their audiences much in line with the “chatty” journalism of the pre-objectivity era in which the “I-thou” relationship between journalists and members of the audience is crucial (Steensen, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

We have argued that the historically crucial ideal of dialogue in journalism has become increasingly important in the digital age. Dialogical relationships in contemporary journalism exist between journalists and sources, texts and sources, texts and audiences, journalists and audiences, between texts and between audiences. Our understanding of the uses and functions of dialogue in today’s journalism is aided by exploring different philosophical perspectives on dialogue as articulated by such philosophers as Plato, Gadamer and Habermas, as well as within a renaissance ideal of dialogue. We have found Douglas Walton’s pragmatic classification of dialogue types to be particularly applicable in order to formulate models to analyze and interpret the complex nature and functions of dialogue in contemporary, digital journalism.

Our analysis has displayed how different types of dialogue, with different compositions of participants and diverse goals, are characteristic of different stages of a journalistic production process, as well as of distinct journalistic genres. Accordingly, when studying and evaluating different types and genres of contemporary journalism, it is important to take into consideration the vastly different functions and complex interrelationships of the diverse journalistic forms and the processes that shape them. But although different philosophical ideals of dialogue – such as dialogue as a road to acknowledging one truth and dialogue as a deliberative discussion and argumentation process – are articulated and actualized more or less forcefully within particular genres, we believe that the end result for the involved participants in the dominant information-seeking type of dialogue in journalism is most likely to be a glimpse of a plurality of truths.

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Table 1: Types of dialogue related to activities in the journalistic production process. In all stages, the first participant type listed is the one we consider to be the main initiator of the dialogue in that particular stage.

Activities in the journalistic process	Types of participants	Types of dialogue	Initial situation	Participant's goal	Goal of dialogue
Preparation	Finding story ideas	Information-seeking	Need information	Acquire or give information	Exchange information
	Information gathering	Information-seeking Inquiry	Need information Need to have proof	Acquire or give information Find and verify evidence	Exchange information Prove (disprove) hypothesis
Selection / Filtering	Information assessment	Negotiation	Conflict of interests	Get what you most want	Reasonable settlement that both can live with
	Initial editing	Negotiation	Conflict of interests	Get what you most want	Reasonable settlement that both can live with
Processing / Presentation	Text editing	Information-seeking Inquiry Persuasion Deliberation	Need information Need to have proof Conflict of opinions Dilemma or practical choice	Acquire or information Find and verify evidence Persuade other party Coordinate goals and actions	Exchange information Prove (disprove) hypothesis Resolve or clarify issue Decide best action course
	Publishing	Information-seeking	Need information	Acquire or give information	Exchange information
	Distribution	Information-seeking	Need information	Acquire or give information	Exchange information
Interpretation/ Reaction	Text interpretation	Information-seeking Inquiry	Need information Need to have proof	Acquire or give information Find and verify evidence	Exchange information Prove (disprove) hypothesis
	Publicized response	Persuasion Eristic Deliberation Inquiry	Conflict of opinions Personal Conflict Dilemma or practical choice Need to have proof	Persuade other party Verbally hit out at opponent Coordinate goals and actions Find and verify evidence	Resolve or clarify issue Reveal basis of conflict Decide best action course Prove (disprove) hypothesis