

From the dialogic to the contemplative: a conceptual and empirical rethinking of online communication outcomes as verbing micro-practices

David J. Schaefer · Brenda Dervin

© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2009

Abstract Traditional approaches to studying communication in public spheres draw upon a product or outcome orientation that has prevented researchers from theorizing more specifically about how communication behaviors either inhibit or facilitate dialogic processes. Additionally, researchers typically emphasize consensus as a preferred outcome. Drawing upon a methodology explicitly developed to study communicating using a verb-oriented framework, we analyzed 1,360 postings from online pedagogical discussions. Our analysis focused on *verbing micro-practices*, the dynamic communicative actions through which participants make and unmake public spheres. Two questions guided our analysis: (1) How do grounded communicative micro-moment practices relate to consensusing and dissensusing within public spheres? and (2) What are the theoretical implications of these relationships for the quality of dialogue among participants who are discussing controversial topics? Our findings indicate that, contrary to recent

theorizing, consensus-building and maintaining behaviors may actually inhibit the communicative processes necessary for the creation of effective public sphere dialogue.

Keywords Electronic public spheres · Dialogue · Sense-making methodology · Habermas · Consensus · Dissensus · Verbing · Micro-practices

Introduction

Within the past several decades, theoretical work in the philosophic tradition focusing on the nature of public spheres—environments facilitating publicly oriented discussions—has markedly increased. Scholars have long argued that the emergence of such spheres is central to the development of modern democracies. Theorists typically assert that public spheres are valid only if they are free of systemic constraints. Usually cited as the foremost theorist in both theoretical and empirical work focusing on democracy and the public sphere, Habermas (1989/1962) proposed that effective communication involves privileging only the “power of the better argument” (p. 54). The purpose or *telos* of such spheres, he argues, is to create environments where participants can raise competing truth claims, which can then be vigorously debated until a consensus is freely reached among all affected parties. Once consensus has been reached, participants then transform social structures through consensus-guided action like “legislative decisions and political programs, rulings or verdicts, administrative measures and decrees, guidelines, and policies” (Habermas 2006, p. 415).

Communication researchers have increasingly drawn upon Habermas’ theories over the past two decades to examine discourse within online, Internet-based environments: blogs

The study reported here is drawn from and involves reanalysis of the senior author’s doctoral dissertation; the junior author served as dissertation advisor. A previous, refereed version of this paper was presented at the International Communication Association annual meeting, San Diego, CA, May 23–27, 2003

D. J. Schaefer (✉)
Department of Communication Arts, Franciscan University
of Steubenville, Steubenville, OH 43952, USA
e-mail: dschaefer@franciscan.edu
URL: <http://www2.franciscan.edu/commarts/dschaefer/>

B. Dervin
School of Communication, The Ohio State University,
3020 Derby Hall, 154 North Oval Mall, Columbus,
OH 43210-1339, USA
e-mail: dervin.1@osu.edu
URL: <http://www.comm.ohio-state.edu/People/Faculty/BrendaDervin.aspx>