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Research in brief

Fulfilling the dialogic promise: A ten-year reflective survey on dialogic Internet principles

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	A decade ago, using the dialogic theory of public relations as the theoretical framework, Kent and Taylor [Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M. (1998). Building a dialogic relationship through the World Wide Web. *Public Relations Review*, *24*, 321–340; Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M. (2002). Toward a dialogic theory of public relations. *Public Relations Review*, *28*, 21–37] provided a strategic framework to facilitate relationships with publics though the World Wide Web. Based on a review of research exploring Web-based public relations practices drawing on Kent and Taylor's theoretical framework, this essay offers a ten-year reflective survey on past, current, and future directions of Kent and Taylor's Internet principles, as they relate to the dialogic theory of public relations.

1. Introduction

A decade ago, Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) provided a strategic framework to facilitate dialogic relationships with publics through the World Wide Web. Based on an extensive review of research exploring Web-based public relations practices drawing on Kent and Taylor's theoretical framework, this essay offers a ten-year reflective survey on past, current, and future directions of Kent and Taylor's Internet principles, as they relate to the dialogic theory of public relations. To contextualize the contributions of Kent and Taylor's dialogic Internet principles, the next section will provide a brief explanation of the dialogic theory of public relations and the dialogic Internet principles.

1.1. The dialogic theory of public relations

Deeply rooted in philosophy and relational communication theory, Kent and Taylor extended dialogic theory as an honest and ethical means to guide practitioners and scholars in the creation and maintenance of effective organization–public relationships. As a first step toward articulating a public relations theory of dialogue, the authors developed five overarching tenets that encompass the implicit and explicit assumptions that underlie the concept of dialogue: mutuality, or the recognition of organization–public relationships; propinquity, or the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics; empathy, or the supportiveness and confirmation of public goals and interests; risk, or the willingness to interact with individuals and publics on their own terms; and commitment, or the extent to which an organization gives itself over to dialogue, interpretation, and understanding in its interactions with publics (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

To serve as guidelines for the successful integration of dialogic public relations via the Web, Kent and Taylor offered the following five principles: Useful Information, which suggests that organizations provide information of general value to all

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publics in a logical hierarchical structure; Ease of Interface, which involves the intuitiveness and/or ease of the site's interface; Conservation of Visitors, which maintains that Web sites should offer features and links that value and conserve visit time; Generation of Return Visits, which explores ways to create the foundation for long lasting relationships by offering features that generate return visits; and Dialogic Feedback Loops, which allow publics to query organizations and offers organizations the opportunity to respond to questions (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 327).

The literature examining the impact of the Internet on public relations is large. The next section will provide a summative review of the literature exploring Web-based public relations activities, viewed through the framework provided by Kent and Taylor's dialogic Internet principles.

2. A decade of research exploring the dialogic Internet principles

Kent and Taylor's dialogic Internet principles have extended the breadth and depth of the study, as well as the practice of Web-based public relations. The dialogic principles have been applied to research exploring organization types such as: nonprofit activist organizations (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Reber & Kim, 2006; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001), *Fortune 500* companies (Esrock & Leichty, 1999, 2000; Park & Reber, 2008), colleges and universities (Kang & Norton, 2006; McAllister-Spooner, 2008; McAllister-Spooner & Kent, in press; McAllister-Spooner & Taylor, 2007, in press), congressional Web sites (Taylor & Kent, 2004), and litigation public relations firms (Reber, Gower, & Robinson, 2006).

Resulting from this comprehensive literature review, many themes emerged. For example, while many of the studies examined the utilization of Kent and Taylor's dialogic features in relation to target audiences (Esrock & Leichty, 1999, 2000; Kang & Norton, 2006), other studies expanded Kent and Taylor's dialogic Internet principles to scholarship examining the relationship-building potential of the Internet (McAllister-Spooner & Kent, in press; McAllister-Spooner & Taylor, 2007; Reber & Kim, 2006; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Taylor et al., 2001; Taylor & Kent, 2004). Kent and Taylor's (1998, 2002) dialogic principles also extended research examining the relationship between dialogic feature utilization and actual responsiveness (Kent et al., 2003; McAllister-Spooner and Kent, in press; Reber & Kim, 2006) and crisis management response tactics (Perry, Taylor, & Doerfel, 2003; Taylor & Perry, 2005). User perceptions of the importance of the dialogic principles were explored via usability tests and survey research (McAllister-Spooner, 2008). Interviews and surveys with Web managers and public relations practitioners report perceptions of the importance and utilization of Kent and Taylor's Internet principles, and explore organizational factors that may impact practitioners' ability to take full advantage of the Internet's dialogic capacity (McAllister-Spooner and Taylor, in press; Taylor & Kent, 2004). With a comprehensive ten-year review of research extending Kent and Taylor's Internet (1998, 2002) principles in place, the next section will offer reflections on the Internet principles, as they relate to extending the dialogic theory of public relations.

3. A shift in the paradigm: how organizations can fulfill the dialogic promise

Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) extended the dialogic theory of public relations to guide scholars and practitioners interested in relationship building. In spite of recommendations of scholars to incorporate two-way dialogic channels, the findings of this ten-year literature review suggest that Web sites are very poorly used dialogic tools, and that organizational Web sites are effectively utilized for introductory level of relationship-building functions. They are easy to use, offer useful information, but they do not do the dialogic functions very well. Regardless of type, organizations do not seem to be fully utilizing the interactive potential of the Internet to build and maintain organization–public relationships. The findings also reveal that organizational and departmental factors are inhibiting the practitioners' ability to take full advantage of the interactive capacity of the Internet. The data supports past research showing that there is an inconsistency between what practitioners think is possible through the Internet, and what they are actually doing to facilitate relationship-building.

The next section offers recommendations for future research which can help scholars and practitioners realize the dialogic promise.

3.1. Future directions: the research agenda for the next decade

In essence, the dialogic promise of the Web has not yet been realized. So the question remains, what does an organization need to do in order to fulfill its dialogic promise?

The answer is that the Web site is one of the first steps of the relationship-building function. The steps that follow initial relationship-building functions involve more complex organizational processes, which may be beyond the scope of mediated communication. The results of this ten-year literature review suggest that improvement is needed in Web-based public relations activities via the Internet. Moving forward into the next decade, the researcher recommends expanding Kent and Taylor's dialogic scholarship by exploring the following:

(1) *Media choice and effectiveness*: Dialogue is difficult and time consuming. Although mediated tools offer opportunities to reinforce their commitment to dialogue and foster more interaction with publics, the advanced relationship-building functions may be better suited for face-to-face communications. Further exploration of media choice and effectiveness is needed.

(2) *Internal processes*: Dialogue needs to start from within the organization. Practitioners face many internal obstacles developing and managing Web sites. Future researchers should examine organizational factors and practical limitations that inhibit public relations professionals from taking full advantage of the new capabilities Internet technologies offer.

(3) *User expectations and preferences*: It is well established that scholars and practitioners recognize the importance of dialogic Internet principles. Future scholars need to evaluate the effectiveness of a Web site by analyzing input and feedback from Web users.

(4) *Refine and standardize measurement of dialogic principles*: To date, each of the dialogic constructs measuring Kent and Taylor's principles received equal weight in the calculations. Future researchers may want to consider utilizing weighting procedures. Measurement of the dialogic principles needs to be refined and standardized.

4. Conclusion

The frameworks developed in this literature review suggest specific themes that can be tested in future research. The increasing presence of the Internet in the contemporary society raises important questions about the role it plays in organizational communication and the field of public relations. This study can be seen as a critical step in expanding our understanding of the dialogic theory of public relations, and public relations practices via the Internet.

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