Two twentieth-century philosophers and theorists had a profound impact on thinking about discourse in the twentieth century. John Dewey in the United States and Jürgen Habermas in Europe conceptualized publics and discourse in ways that have reshaped the concepts and practices of strategic communication at the opening of the twenty-first century.

Among the most persistent concerns for scholars and practitioners has been the role of discourse in the public sphere. Grunig (1989) said that early twentieth-century one-way, asymmetrical models of discourse focused on selling ideas to publics. “They (have) presupposed that the organization knows best . . . that the public would benefit by cooperating . . . that if dissident publics had ‘the big picture’ or understood the organization these publics would willingly ‘cooperate’ with the organization” (p. 32).

Grunig suggested a two-way symmetrical model of discourse with situated publics would better produce excellence (Grunig, 1997). He suggested more effective emphasis on long-term outcomes had begun to replace the older manipulative model of discourse. He argued such a new approach would facilitate understanding and the interdependence of the organization and its publics. He acknowledged John Dewey’s influence on the concept of situated publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 143; Grunig & White, 1992).

Meanwhile in Germany, Jürgen Habermas developed a formal discursive approach. It emphasized structured face-to-face argumentation within the public sphere reflecting the lifeworld of lived experience. Peters (1993) credited Habermas with reinvigorating the role of publics in public dialog:

Habermas has done a great service by reconstructing the largely forgotten concept that still lies, officially, at the foundation of constitutional government: the idea of a sovereign, reasonable public, nourished by the critical reporting of the press and engaged in the mutually enlightening clash of arguments.

p. 544

More recently, Kent and Taylor (2002) suggested that a broader concept of dialogue should be incorporated into public relations practices. They traced the roots of dialogue to multiple philosophical positions and defined the basic tenets of dialogue. They suggested dialogue “predates symmetrical communication by decades” and facilitates a shift in public relations from managing communication toward building and maintaining relationships (p. 23; see also Taylor, 2011, and Kent, 2011). They pointed out that dialogue is not just about achieving consensus, but facilitates debate and advocacy
in public policy formation. They outlined five assumptions, tenets, or features that expand the complexity of dialogue beyond two-way symmetry: mutuality (collaboration), propinquity (authentic engagement), empathy, risk, and commitment (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 24).

Pearson (1989) traced changing concepts of dialog through competing “sets of epistemological assumptions”: objectivism, relativism, and intersubjectivism. Rhetoric from the “objectivist” point of view assumed that managers acted toward publics in socially responsibly ways assuming that corporate actions would produce social goods. “Relativistic approaches” revealed the failure of social responsibility and a collapse of universal moral principles producing a “passive quietude” and “cynical (and self-centered) activism” in managers and publics alike. “Intersubjectivism” thrust discourse back to the center of strategic communication. Pearson said it produced organizational theory that emphasizes “the symbolic dimension of interorganizational relationships . . . dialogic or dialectical . . . that never remain static and in which seeming oppositions or contradictions are transcended in favor of more complex relationships of mutual dependency” (p. 121). Such discourse is grounded on a “genuine class of attitudes, equal control for participants, and risks for all parties to the dialogue” (p. 125).

Some dialogic scholars have adapted the ideas of classical rhetorical thinking to dialogic communication (Marsh, 2001 & 2003; Skerlep, 2001; Ihlen, 2011; Taylor, 2011; Troup, 2009). Others have adapted approaches such as the structural sociological framework of Bourdieu (Benson, 2008; Edwards, 2012), Foucault (Motion, 2005), and political economy (Motion & Weaver, 2005). Some have even denounced the “infatuation with dialogue,” calling dissemination and reconciliation “more ethical” than symmetry (Stoker & Berg, 2006, pp. 7 & 17).

Thus, strategic communication as the theory, research and practice of discourse has been grounded in broad sets of assumptions: on the one hand, organizational communication was said to be an appropriately strategic and goal-oriented activity that managed discourse to accomplish organizationally defined goals and outcomes; on the other hand, organizational communication was said to be dialogic, devoted to building relationships, understanding, and authentic debate through discourse or dialog in the public sphere. The emphasis on dialog stands in contrast to the emphasis on instrumental strategies to manipulate public opinion and modify public behavior by reinforcing strategic messages (Bybee, 1999). The dialogic approaches emphasize equal participation by publics, authenticity in discourse, and shared understanding (Grunig, 1989; Pearson, 1989; Kent and Taylor, 2002). These authors assumed that meaning is built and problems are solved through dialog and discourse with identifiable publics.

The emphasis upon building relationships through dialog has led, at the opening of the twenty first century, under the influence of postmodern thought, to an emphasis on “emergent approaches” to the role of dialog and communication (Ströh, 2007, p 203). These include theorizing dialog as networks (Castells, 2000, 2007), complexity (Stacey, 2003; Stacey & Griffin, 2006), activism (Holzhausen, 2007, 2012), chaos (McNair, 2006) and even liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000). These authors have argued that communication is dialectic, aimed not at consensus but at accepting, embracing, and even celebrating difference and diversity as the foundation for acting and problem solving.

Differences in understanding the nature of discourse have become more urgent as digital media technologies and social media have restructured options for dialogue with publics (Castells, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2007; McNair, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Shirky, 2008; Curtis et al., 2009) and growing numbers of organizations have embraced social media.

**Roots**

The concepts about the nature of communication, publics, and purpose are grounded in philosophical traditions that competed for adoption as the new science of communication developed in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century (Delia, 1987; Self, 2009; Self, 2013; Gerbner, 1983; E. M. Rogers, 1994; Hardt, 1979).
The competing views can be traced to Greek disagreements about rhetoric (Marsh, 2003). However, much of the recent emphasis on discourse has been derived from the work of Dewey and Habermas. Both traced many of their assumptions to the German Idealists, particularly the ideal dialectic of G. W. F. Hegel. They shared symmetrical, dialectical assumptions and perspectives. They diverged, however, in critical ways that have much to say about the current debates over the role of symmetrical, relational, and dialectic discourse in the age of digital media and social networks.

These differences center on the nature of publics and the relationships of social institutions to publics, the nature of discourse and how it is undertaken, and the purpose of discourse and the goals appropriate to its use.

Habermas is perhaps best understood today because he is still writing, but Dewey’s work has influenced a great deal of thought about discourse and publics and has been reengaged with in recent years. Both of these philosophers addressed publics and discourse, but they did so in quite different ways.

Both saw publics as complex. Both suggested that the importance of discourse and deliberation begins with Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, and the other German Idealists. Both embraced the pragmatic assumptions that emerged from the work of Charles Peirce, William James, George Herbert Mead and other American Pragmatists in the United States. However, Habermas called his “formal,” rules-based approach to discourse “universal pragmatics” (Habermas, 1998, pp. 21–103) or “quasi-transcendental,” (Aboulafia, 2002, pp. 4 & 5) whereas Dewey clearly embraced an aggressively anti-foundational (Dewey, 1929a, especially pp. 3–25), even atheoretical and experimental, vision of discourse (Dewey, 1925/1929b, pp. 166–207) closer to postmodern, network, and complex theory approaches.

The American Pragmatists embraced Hegel’s dialectic, contingent approach to dealing with problem resolution (Shook & Good, 2010; Hegel, 1977). That approach became the foundation for Dewey’s naturalized, experimental empiricism and the discourse influence model of conflict resolution. It forms the basis for acts of pragmatic problem solving whose results are constantly measured and reevaluated in terms of their consequences. It is the foundation of Dewey’s education theory, his theory of logic and scientific inquiry, and his dynamic conception of democracy (Shook, 2010, pp. 44–55; Good, 2010, pp. 73–89).

The pragmatic vision also shaped Habermas’s critical, dialogical answer to Max Weber’s instrumental rationality. Habermas has acknowledged defending “a kind of Kantian pragmatism,” appropriating “Peirce’s pragmatist conception of knowledge” (Habermas, 2002, pp. 223–224; see also Antonio & Kellner, 1992). Furthermore, he has described his perception that the pragmatists share his links to Hegel: “From the outset, I viewed American pragmatism as the third productive reply to Hegel, after Marx and Kierkegaard, as the radical-democratic branch of Young Hegelianism, so to speak,” (as quoted in Aboulafia, 2002, p. 2).

This arc of discourse became stronger over the course of the twentieth century with the development of speech act theory (Searle, 1983), structural semiotics (Cobley, 2010), and Richard Rorty’s neo-pragmatic emphasis on “language games” (Rorty, 1989/2007, pp. 1–22, esp. 5, 74–75). It can be found more recently in emerging forms of network semiotics (Self, 2013) and, arguably, in several forms of postmodernism, including Derrida’s textual notions of deconstruction and “democracy-to-come” (Derrida, 2003, p. 9).

This article will examine Habermas’s public sphere and communication for understanding and Dewey’s radical pluralism and fallibilistic indeterminacy as versions of discourse essential to the emerging theories of strategic communication appropriate to the changing digital media systems and network semiotic strategies of the early twenty-first century.

Their differences define the core tension about discourse and strategic communication today. Those differences center on interpretations of the three central assumptions about discourse: the notion of public, the nature of discourse, and the purpose of public discourse.
Jürgen Habermas

Jürgen Habermas is generally acknowledged as one of the most important European philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century. Thomas McCarthy called him “the last great rationalist,” whose goal is nothing short of a critique of rationalism (McCarthy, 1984, p. vi). Habermas himself has suggested the three-fold goal of his theory of communicative action is

1. to explore an integrated concept of rationality,
2. to construct a “two-level concept of society to connect the ‘lifeworld’ of communities with the ‘system’ paradigms” of mass societies, and
3. to develop a theory of modernity that explains modernity’s social pathologies and paradoxes (Habermas, 1981/1984, p. x).

These tasks are founded on a lifetime of critical theory, scholarship, and engagement with a surprisingly eclectic range of philosophers, critical thinkers, and political analysts.

“Habermas moves brilliantly among these discourses to vindicate a ‘postmetaphysical’ reason, which ‘detranscendentalizes’ as it retains the ‘idealizing force of context-transcending’ forms” (Bookman, 2002, p. 65). He drew on Kant, Hegel, Marx, the Frankfurt School, the developmental approaches of Piaget and Kohlberg, the German linguistic turn, the speech-act theorists Austin and Searle, and the American Pragmatists, especially Peirce and Mead.

This work produced Habermas’s concept of the public sphere, now widely embraced in the sociology of media and communication studies (Benson, 2009) though it has been surprisingly under-studied in the professional literature (Jensen, 2001). Discourse lay at the heart of Habermas’s project. His work focused on communication, discourse, and argumentation. The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (Habermas, 1989/1991) was a critical examination of a social space for un-coerced discourse. The two-volume The Theory of Communicative Action (Habermas, 1981/1984) detailed the framework for discourse in this public sphere. It expanded his critical theory of modernity and provided the foundation of the communicative rationality of the lifeworld of everyday experience. Communicative rationality was contrasted with the strategic rationality of modern instrumental systems destructive to intersubjective understanding and action within the public sphere (Habermas, 1981/1984, Vol. 1, pp. 10 & 168–185; see also Habermas, 1974/2005, particularly pp. 54–55).

Habermas revitalizes intersubjective understanding through discourse in the modern lifeworld. He is anti-foundational. He moves away from transcendental visions of ontology and establishes in their place a quasi-transcendental ontology based in rules of discourse.

While it appears that Habermas has put a greater distance between himself and the transcendental a priori over the years— for example by emphasizing the fallibilistic nature of even the presuppositions of argumentation—he cannot yield to what he views as relativism and irrationality (in pragmatism).

Aboulafia, 2002, p. 5

As a result, he has developed a formalized account of discourse that clings to structural linguistic rules of argumentation and validity that govern intersubjective understanding and deliberative democracy. This sets him apart from Dewey and from postmodernism.

His critique of modernity is that modernism became burdened with a rationalism that separated and subordinated human psychological processes to communication strategies. Those strategies manipulated human behavior by manipulating communicative interactions. These interactions undermined both intersubjective understanding and social processes. They subjected human beings
Charles C. Self

to manipulative practices of power and domination based on instrumental communication discourses and strategic rationality.

His account of the decline of community discourse and argumentation in the public sphere described the expansion of the instrumental rationalization of communication processes, “manufactured publicity,” and “non-public opinion” (Habermas, 1991, pp. 211–222) and the way they undermined the essential elements of discourse.

His approach was more formal, more narrowly focused, than that of Dewey and the American Pragmatists. Although it shared Dewey’s anti-foundational and fallibilistic posture, it emphasizes intersubjective understanding and consensus through discourse. In place of Dewey’s emphasis on shared experience, transactional discourse, experimentation projects, and assessment of consequences, Habermas constructed an understanding of discourse grounded in a priori structures of argumentation derived from Austin and Searle’s speech act theory (Habermas, 1970).

Habermas’s concept of public emerges from his account of the transformation of the public sphere. That account defined public by who is admitted to participate in the realm of the public. He distinguished public from private. Public spaces allow private individuals to assemble for discourse and disputation about their common good (see Habermas, 1991, pp. 1–26). The public sphere is that space where private individuals assemble and make up the public.

Habermas’s concept of discourse is defined by the nature of the interaction in the public sphere. In the Structural Transformation, discourse changes from manipulation by representation in the Middle Ages to deliberation among equals in the Enlightenment and back to manipulation by strategic rationalization in the modern era. In The Theory of Communicative Action, he divided discourse into the two types: strategic rationalization and communicative understanding. Strategic rationalization is instrumental, goal oriented, and manipulative, aimed at selling already defined objectives to the public. Communicative understanding is un-coerced argumentative speech that follows the rules of speech acts and validity claims (Habermas, 1981/1984, pp. 24–27) within the “contexts of action” of “a few social arenas or ‘fields’” (p 31).

Habermas’s concept of purpose for discourse is communicative understanding and consensus for further interaction. He wrote:

What makes communicative reason possible is the linguistic medium through which interactions are woven. This rationality is inscribed in the linguistic telos of mutual understanding. . . . In seeking to reach an understanding, natural-language users must assume, among other things, that the participants pursue their illocutionary goals without reservations, that they tie their agreement to the intersubjective recognition of criticizable validity claims, and that they are ready to take on the obligations resulting from consensus and relevant for further interaction.

Habermas, 1996, pp. 3–4

As Haas (2004) put it:

Habermas argued that a genuinely democratic public sphere comes into being when the interactions are focused on issues of common concern to citizens, equally accessible to all those potentially affected by those issues, based on rational-critical deliberation and subject to normative standards of evaluation.

p. 180

Habermas argued mediated forms of communication are crucial for democracy. Burkart (2007) said, “a central effort of Habermas’ thinking is to reconstruct universal conditions of understanding within the human communication process” (p. 249).

Habermas’s The Theory of Communicative Action emphasizes the dual forms of rational discourse, manipulative strategic rationality, aimed at accomplishing strategic objectives, and argumentation
Dewey and the Public Sphere

aimed at consensus, intersubjective understanding, and common goals. He suggested both are at work in modern societies, but strategic rationality dominates community systems undermining the lifeworld. On the other hand, discourse for understanding feeds the lifeworld. This dual structure of strategic and communicative, system and lifeworld, encapsulates Habermas’s attempt to address individual freedom and community norms (for a detailed discussion of this issue see Joas, 1991, Rosenthal, 2002, and Ingram, 2002, particularly pp. 83–86).

Habermas embraced a universal pragmatics of communication grounded in assumptions that human beings use deliberation and argumentation to achieve intersubjective understanding of common needs to enable conjoint action (Habermas, 1998, pp. 21–103).

Thus, Habermas made three crucial assumptions: First, he assumed publics are communities of individuals grouped by their discourse in a lifeworld of stable connections. Second, he assumed discourse consists of structured arguments grounded in rules of argumentation and language. Third, he assumed the appropriate goal of discourse is to achieve communicative understanding and consensus.

John Dewey

John Dewey has been recognized as probably the most important American philosopher of the first half of the twentieth century (Jackson, 2006, p 54; see also McDermott, 1973a & 1973b). He is considered one of “the principle pragmatists” (Margolis, 2006, p. 2) crucial to founding American Pragmatism (Fott, 1991, p. 29). He was one of the most important educational theorists of the twentieth century and has had an impact on scholarship in both psychology and the political sciences.

Margolis argues that the key components of Dewey’s account of Pragmatism include:

1) A Darwinian and Hegelian reading of naturalism, 2) A Peircean and Jamesian reading of meaning and truth, and 3) a rejection of final goals or values in moral and community life . . . he features as his principle organizing intuition what he calls ‘an indeterminate situation’ (LW 12:108–9) . . . (which) yield(s) constructive and provisional forms of realism (without fixity or privilege), and which, rightly grasped, are themselves finally grounded in a pragmatist rendering of reflexive experience suggestively close to the governing conception of Hegel’s Phenomenology (never explicitly drawn upon, however).

Dewey advocated an anti-elitist and anti-foundational vision of democratic decision-making (Rogers, 2010). That vision was articulated in The Public and its Problems (Dewey, 1927/1954) among many other publications (see Westbrook, 1991). The book was Dewey’s answer to Walter Lippmann’s critique The Phantom Public (Lippmann, 1925), which Dewey called “perhaps the most effective indictment of democracy as currently conceived ever penned” (Bybee, 1999; Carey, 1989/1992, pp. 74–82; Self, 2010; Schudson, 2008).

Dewey argued that actions form publics and that the “soul of democracy” is “wider and fuller” than political machinery—“universal suffrage, recurring elections, political accountability, trial by peers and so on.” Democratic public action has two parts: “One is normative: the basis in a community’s laws, customs, and institutions. A second is epistemic: the collaborative process of inquiry with which a democracy can identify, prioritize, and solve problems (through) ‘conjoint communicated experience’ (MW 9:93)” (Hildebrand, 2011, p. 591; Hildebrand, 2008).

Public

Dewey’s public emerged from problem solving as acts of discourse, not from essences or membership. He said that individual and group action embodies public. Public emerges, submerges, and
reemerges as joint acts create consequences, as they affect people and are affected by others. “The line between private and public is to be drawn on the basis of the extent and scope of the consequences of acts which are so important as to need control, whether by inhibition or by promotion” (Dewey, 1927/1954, p. 15).

Appeal to a gregarious instinct to account for social arrangements is the outstanding example of the lazy fallacy . . . We must . . . start from acts which are performed, not from hypothetical causes for those acts, and consider their consequences. We must also introduce intelligence, or the observation of consequences as consequences, that is, in connection with the acts from which they proceed.

*Dewey, 1927/1954, pp. 10–12*

For Dewey, action was grounded in “three key themes: the relationship between the individual and society, the legitimacy of majoritarianism, and the significance and meaning of political deliberation” (Rogers, 2010, p. 69). The idea of deliberation was central to his thought about the relationships between businesses and publics.

He argued that publics are (networks or) relationships of action assembled to solve problems. Public relationships evaporate as problems are solved, although they sometimes leave behind social structures created to solve the problem and that are sometimes mistaken to define public. Dewey argues that public is “conjoined action,” not membership or structure (Dewey, 1939a, p. 10).

Carey (1997) critiqued the sustainability of this idea of public. He suggested the expansion of strategic instrumental interests had overwhelmed the ability of emergent publics to cope:

Dewey argued that a public interest arises whenever there are indirect consequences of individual private transactions. Therefore, the public and a public interest came into existence whenever externalities were created. But while externalities had steadily expanded, the domain and competence of the public had steadily shrunk. The interdependencies created by industry and commerce were nowhere matched by the interdependencies of public life.

*pp. 71–72*

However, Dewey’s vision was that publics emerge, and will always emerge, to the extent that experience with problems demands that publics form and act.

**Discourse**

Dewey (1929a) saw *discourse* as symbolic action, or what he called *transactions* “of connective relations or ‘capacities’” with human beings and non-human experience (Dewey and Bentley, 1949/1960/1975, pp. 270–271; see also Ryan, 1997). “Participation in activities and sharing in results are additive concerns. They demand communication as a prerequisite. Only when there exist *signs* or *symbols* of activities and of their outcome can the flux be viewed” (Dewey, 1927/1954, p. 152). Discourse, he said, allows action to be “preserved as meanings.” Those meanings allow conjoint experience to be considered, transmitted and converted into “what, metaphorically, may be termed a general will or social consciousness: desire and choice . . . communicable and shared by all concerned” (p. 153).

He argued transient acts of discourse emerge from experience to solve problems then dissolve back into private concerns. Private individuals experience problems, share their experiences through discourse, join together to plan solutions, advocate experimental approaches to solve problems, and assess the outcomes of those approaches through discourse. This discourse sometimes leaves behind traces in the social structures of political machinery, but that machinery does not comprise
democratic action nor ensure discourse. Democratic action and discourse remain perpetually fallible, indeterminate, and contingent. They constantly change. He wrote:

The constructive office of thought is empirical—that is, experimental. ‘Thought’ is not a property of something termed intellect or reason apart from nature. It is a mode of directed overt action. . . . Ideas and idealism are in themselves hypotheses not finalities. Being connected with operations to be performed, they are tested by the consequences of these operations, not by what exists prior to them. . . . Action is at the heart of ideas. The experimental practice of knowing . . . discloses that knowing is itself a kind of action, the only one which progressively and securely clothes natural existence with realized meanings.

pp. 166–167

Shared experience and deliberation about solutions are the heart of Dewey’s idea of joint action (Eldridge, 1996). He thought language was the center of democracy as shared ideas in place of democracy as political machinery. Eldridge (1996) explained Dewey’s distinction in this regard this way:

He valued the processes of open, informed communication so much that he thought they should characterize the many ways in which we interact with one another and not be limited to the narrowly and formally ‘political’ . . . To be a democrat was to commit oneself to participation in the intelligent give and take of our common life.

p. 11

For Dewey (1927/1954), discourse was the relationships of experience shared in signs and symbols to enable projects (or experiments) to be planned to solve problems:

To learn to be human is to develop thought, the give-and-take of communication, an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community . . . who contributes to a further conversion of organic powers into human resources and values. But this translation is never finished.

p. 154

Public opinion for Dewey is the network of discourse relationships. He wrote:

Opinions and beliefs . . . presuppose effective and organized inquiry. Unless there are methods for detecting the energies which are at work and tracing them through an intricate network of interactions to their consequences, what passes as public opinion will be ‘opinion’ in its derogatory sense rather than truly public, no matter how widespread the opinion is. . . . Opinion casually formed and formed under the direction of those who have something at stake . . . can be public opinion only in name.

pp. 177–178

Purpose

Dewey’s (1927/1954) purpose of public acts or discourse is problem solving: sharing experience, identifying problems, developing possible solutions to problems, and assessing results of those solutions. Such discourse is always fallible and can only happen within complex and perpetually indeterminate circumstances. Dewey emphasizes that success or failure can only be assessed through continuing discourse about the experiences of their consequences.
Tools can be evolved and perfected only in operation; in application to observing, reporting and organizing actual subject-matter; and this application cannot occur save through free and systematic communication . . . Record and communication are indispensable to knowledge. Knowledge cooped up in a private consciousness is a myth, and knowledge of social phenomena is particularly dependent upon dissemination, for only by distribution can such knowledge be either obtained or tested.

pp. 167, 176–177

Dewey’s act of problem solving is experience shared, experiment planned and results assessed. He denounced “final causes” and “final solutions” for problems found in causal theories (Dewey 1929a, pp. 3–25; 1925/1929b, pp. 40–77; 1938, pp. 60–80). He held that all solutions were contingent, fallible, and always indeterminate. He rejected fixed essences, whether they were theological, metaphysical, or natural. He believed that problems were defined in the play of relationships of experience shared (inquiry) and projects planned (discovery) through discourse. This play was complex and indeterminate. It was created in connections made through thought and discourse, not in universal essences waiting to be discovered.

There is one common character of all such scientific operations which it is necessary to note: They are such as to disclose relationships

Dewey, 1929a, p. 125

Real things may be as transitory as you please or lasting in time as you please; these are specific differences like that between a flash of lightening and the history of a mountain range. In any use they are for knowledge ‘events’ not substances. What knowledge is interested in is the correlation among these changes or events

p. 128

It is a declaration that this is the effective way to think things; the effective mode in which to frame ideas of them to formulate their meanings

p. 134

The authority of thought depends upon what it leads us to through directing the performance of operations.

p. 137

Dewey argued solutions to problems were built through discourse (discovery). Those solutions had to be evaluated in discourse about the consequences of those solutions in social experience. He suggested that systematic thinking involved inquiry (shared experience) and discovery (constructed solutions) to create experimental judgment about possible consequences, followed by assessment of outcomes that always remained contingent and open to revision (Dewey, 1938; Dewey, 1891).

Dewey’s idea of problem solving was what he called the “experimental” method of directed overt action. His idea of empiricism was based in naturalized experience, or the actual lived experience of individuals jointly developing solutions to problems (Dewey, 1927/1954, p. 202; McDermott, 1973a, pp. xxiii–xxix; Dewey, 1906/1973a; Dewey, 1939/1973b).

Dewey believed judgments were always contingent and subject to revision. Ideas were instruments for testing solutions in a constantly shifting universe of contingencies. He called this kind of thought “methods of action” as opposed to abstract reflection (Dewey, 1929a, p. 36). And he believed that
all publics involve such democratic acts of inquiry and discovery. Anything else was domination in one of its many forms.

Democracy is belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness. Every other form of moral and social faith rests upon the idea that experience must be subjected at some point or other to some form of external control; to some ‘authority’ alleged to exist outside the processes of experience. . . . If one asks what is meant by experience in this connection my reply is that it is the free interaction of individual human beings with surrounding conditions, especially the human surroundings, which develops and satisfies need and desire by increasing knowledge of things as they are. Knowledge of conditions as they are is the only solid ground for communication and sharing; all other communication means the subjection of some persons to the personal opinion of other persons. Need and desire—out of which grow purpose and direction of energy—go beyond what exists, and hence beyond knowledge, beyond science. They continually open the way into the unexplored and unattained future.

_Dewey, 1939b, pp. 16–17_

Where Habermas saw members comprising publics, Dewey saw acts of discourse. Where Habermas saw the discourse in rules of argumentation, Dewey saw symbols embodying relationships of experience. Where Habermas saw understanding and consensus, Dewey saw perpetually fallible problem solving that required constant reassessment.

**Richard Rorty, Postmodernism, and Semiotic Networks**

Margolis (2006) argued Dewey’s 1925 account in _The Development of Pragmatism_ established “classic pragmatism” (p. 4). It drew together the work of Peirce and James revitalizing pragmatism at a crucial moment of its development (Margolis, 2006; Leary, 2009; Dewey, 1925/1929b). This revitalization laid the foundation for scholars such as Habermas in Europe and Putnam and Rorty in the United States to expand and reinterpret Pragmatism and its relationship with the critical, structural and postmodern accounts of globalized society.

Hickman (2007) opened his book _Pragmatism as Post-postmodernism_ this way: “I take as my point of departure the now famous remark by Richard Rorty, that when certain of the postmodernists reach the end of the road they are traveling they will find Dewey there waiting for them” (p. 13). He went on to quote Ermarth on the two key assumptions of postmodernism:

First, the assumption that there is no common denominator—in ‘nature’ or ‘God’ or ‘the future’—that guarantees either the one-ness of the world or the possibility of neutral or objective thought. Second, the assumption that all human systems operate like language, being self-reflexive rather than referential systems—systems of deferential function which are powerful but finite, and which construct and maintain meaning and value.

_p. 15, quoting Ermarth, 1998_

These postmodern assumptions undermined what Ermarth called the “one-world hypothesis,” a unified view of the world that formed the foundation of modern thought. (Ermarth, 2001, p. 202).

Hickman (2007) argued John Dewey’s “classical pragmatism” long ago embraced both of those key assumptions. “For those who are interested in coming to grips with the problems and prospects of our increasingly technological culture, classical Pragmatism appears to offer significant advantages over some currently popular versions of ‘neo-pragmatism’” (p. 48).
Morris (1999) suggested Dewey is claimed for postmodernism but is better called postpositivist.

It is no coincidence that Dewey was reviled as a positivist ‘anti-philosopher’ in his day and claimed for postmodernism in our own. His thinking does proceed along two distinct axes, naturalist and speculative, the point of the latter being to give expression to precisely those parts of experience which elude naturalist categories.

Among the most eloquent expressions of neo-pragmatism is Rorty’s version. Rorty has re-engaged the American Pragmatic tradition (and particularly Dewey) from a postmodern perspective and has engaged in intense debates with other arguably postmodern thinkers including Derrida (Mouffe, 1996). He has suggested Foucault and Derrida share with Nietzsche “suspicions about the tradition of Western philosophy—suspicions which they share with the American pragmatists” (Rorty, 1996, p. 13). He argues,

Derrida seems to me as good a humanist as Mill or Dewey. When Derrida talks about deconstruction as prophetic of ‘the democracy that is to come,’ he seems to me to be expressing the same utopian social hope as was felt by these earlier dreamers.

Rorty is called a “neo-pragmatist” (Hickman, 2007, p. 48; see also Mounce, 1997). Like Dewey, he rejected ideas as transcendental truths and replaced them with ideas of consequences. He, too, viewed knowledge as fallible and subject to revision. He, too, emphasized the role of discourse or language games (see, also, Lyotard, 1979/1984, pp. 9–10) in asserting the grounds for human understanding. He, too, argued contingency and the fallibility of knowledge replace metaphysical ontology. He, too, suggested language is the foundation for the intersubjective solidarity essential to community. He, too, argued contingency and the fallibility of knowledge replace metaphysical ontology. He, too, suggested language is the foundation for the intersubjective solidarity essential to community. He, too, argued “our experience in (and of) the world is an active affair to which we contribute in different ways—we act, depending on the contextual settings, in a specific way. And, what is more, we are bound to the way we construct and use the languages, i.e., the talk on what we experience—what we experience” (Ljunggren, 2003, p. 364). He argued the “ironist” (Rorty, 1989/2007, p. 73) must embrace contingency precisely because knowledge is grounded in the interplay of contingent language.

Unlike Habermas and Dewey, Rorty (1989/2007) argued the relationship between community obligation and individual freedom divides into private freedom and the public irony (or contingency). He argued unguarded individuals are often immersed in a “final vocabulary” that “they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives” (p. 73). However, in public, the “final vocabularies” (p. 73) of different individuals clash—come into conflict—leading to conflicting views of the situation and possible outcomes of action. This conflict produces an “ironic attitude” (p. 74) that recognizes the contingency of their language, their moral deliberation, their conscience, and their community.

Rorty (1989/2007) separated himself (and Dewey) from Habermas. He argued that Habermas’s universal pragmatics is still the search for a means of validating a final version of truth.

Habermas thinks it essential to a democratic society that its self-image embody the universalism, and some form of rationalism, of the Enlightenment. He thinks of his account of ‘communicative reason’ as a way of updating rationalism. I want not to update either universalism or rationalism but to dissolve both and replace them with something else. I see Habermas’s substitution of ‘communicative reason’ for ‘subject centered reason’ as just a misleading way of making the
same point I have been urging: a liberal society is one which is content to call ‘true’ (or ‘right’ or ‘just’) whatever the outcome of undistorted communication happens to be, whatever view wins in a free and open encounter.

He suggests that contingency, what Dewey has called the indeterminacy of a “precarious and perilous” world (1925/1929b, p. 42), undermines Habermas’s project:

It is precisely this claim of universal validity which what I have called the ‘contingency of language’ makes implausible, and which the poeticized culture of my liberal utopia would no longer make. Such a culture would instead agree with Dewey that ‘imagination is the chief instrument of the good’

Rorty, 1989/2007, p. 69

It is this fallibility within the indeterminacy of decision-making in planning and problem solving that the postmodernists celebrate. It is what connects them with Dewey’s vision of discourse founded on shifting networks of social, material, and verbal relationships upon which to project experiments of future consequences for action. And it connects them with what Bernstein calls their “primary task”:

Rorty’s deepest affinities are with what he calls ‘literary culture.’ The narrative that he unfolds is one where representatives of literature culture such as Bloom, Foucault, and Derrida replace professional philosophers as the dominant voice in the present conversation of mankind. Dewey is one of Rorty’s heroes. . . . Rorty, too, is an apologist for those very democratic virtues that were so central for Dewey and which he sought to make concrete. There is an important difference of emphasis here between Rorty and Habermas—one which also reveals the common ground they share. . . . the practical tasks for achieving what Dewey once delineated as the primary task of democracy—‘the creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute.’

Bernstein, 1982, pp. 352–353

Derrida, too, celebrated the centrality of this “undecidability” and the humane goals of decision-making. He argued:

The necessity for thinking to traverse interminably the experience of undecidability can, I think be quite coolly demonstrated in an analysis of the ethical or political decision. . . . we would find that undecidability is irreducible within them. If one does not take rigorous account of undecidability, it will not only be the case that one cannot act, decide or assume responsibility, but one will not even be able to think the concepts of decision and responsibility.

Derrida, 1996, p. 86

An emerging, network semiotics (Self, 2013), is powerfully exhibited in digital mediated communication, particularly in online social networks. Network theory sets about representing a “pattern of connections in a given system” (Newman, 2011, p. 20). Social network theory represents “a set of actors or nodes along with a set of ties of a specified type (such as friendship) that link them” (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011, p. 1169; see also Monge and Contractor, 2003; Scott, 2000). Semiotics examines how meaning is generated within the systems of relationships represented in such networks. As Ferdinand de Saussure said, language “is a storehouse filled by the members of a given community through their active use of speaking . . . For language is not complete in any speaker; it exists perfectly only within a collectivity” (Saussure, 1996, p. 43). Semiotics in all its forms examines how connected acts of representation generate meaning (Cobley, 2010, pp. 3–12).
Thus, collections of relationships represented in networks generate meaning. Kull (2010), following Uexküll, suggested that the Umwelt, or the self-constructed world of relationships for even non-human organisms, generates meaning (p. 43). Brunor Latour (1991/1993) suggested that collections of human and non-human “hybrids” generate meaning. And Matthew Fuller (2005) referring to a collection of media objects asserted that “materialism also requires that the capacities of activity, thought, sensation, and affect possible to each composition whether organic or not are shaped by what it is, what it connects to, and the dimensions of relationality around it” (p. 174).

Collections of human and nonhuman relationships illustrate patterns of perpetually shifting undecidability, meaning and identity (Castells, 2000, 2003; McNair, 2006; Hassan, 2003). From Foucault (1994) to Lyotard (1979/1984) to Baudrillard (1995) to Derrida (1998), the postmodernists have reminded us that knowledge is no unified grand narrative but a situated narrative grounded in the time and the relationships of human and non-human experience. This is the fallibility and undecidability described as experience, nature and art by Dewey (1925/1929b, pp. 354–393). It is the lived experience of changing environments produced within the complex relationships of “transactions” (Dewey and Bentley, 1949/1960/1975, pp. 67–69). Dewey argued that existence is changeable and rendered stable only when we hold it stable in our verbal constructions of it (Dewey, 1925/1929b, pp. 40–77).

A great deal has been written about the potential of digital technologies to enable powerful, but transient patterns of social action to be built through discourse around events (Shirky, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Sunstein, 2006). These emerging networks of mediated discourse and unstable relationships have been described as combinations of social and material ecologies (Fuller, 2005). Bauman suggested the connections that emerge are fluid and impermanent but full of economic and social consequences (Bauman, 2000).

Strategic Communication

At the opening of the twenty-first century, the arc of discourse has returned to Dewey (Hickman, Heubert, & Reich, 2009; Perry, 2001). His influence waxed and waned across the twentieth century, influencing thinking about discourse in strategic communication from start to finish. Carey (1989/1992) has discussed his impact on theories of social influence. Grunig has acknowledged his impact on his development of the situational theory of publics and his symmetrical theories (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Rorty (1996) and Hickman (2007) have suggested Dewey waits at the terminus of postmodern thought. And social network theory has been linked through Kurt Lewin’s field theory and typological psychology and Festinger’s balance theory (Scott, 2000) with the American Pragmatists and Dewey (Joas, 1993).

Habermas and Dewey described the power of discourse in this postmodern digital age of networks and their insights have been rediscovered in the fluid patterns of dialog that have emerged in the virtual, global public sphere of the twenty-first century digital media (Dahlgren, 2005; Hytten, 2009; Neubert, 2010; Papacharissi, 2002; Downey & Fenton, 2010) and culture of remote connectivity (Papacharissi, 2010).

At the opening of the twenty-first century, strategic communication scholarship and practice is concerned with dialog and with publics. Kent (2011) has suggested that this demands “long-term thinking and planning . . . that requires some friends” (p. 552). Taylor (2011) suggested that competing discourses construct competing images of the world and that public relations can extend organizational discourse into the “wrangle” of public discourse creating social capital and empowering enlightened choice (Taylor, 2011, esp. p. 442).

However, too often publics still are defined by membership instead of acts, and discourse still is defined as information management (Ströh, 2007, pp. 199–203; Holtzhausen, 2007, pp. 359–362).
Ströh (2007) suggested that such approaches have been replaced by a new emphasis on “constant interaction, participation, change and self-organizing growth” (p. 205). She said social institutions are organic systems of actions created by the constantly changing relationships that make up the whole system. They are complex systems of constant change better approached through engagement and facilitation (even of conflict) than management, control, and consensus (p. 215). She emphasized embracing an inherent uncertainty of outcomes always present in social organizations.

Holtzhausen called for communicators to be activists. She suggested that public relations professionals should place less emphasis on idealizing cooperation and harmony and more on conflict and resistance (p. 365). She suggested that public relations professionals should help identify “tensors” or points of conflict within complex systems and serve as “boundary spanners” to promote dialectical exchange around conflict (pp. 367–368; see also Holtzhausen, 2012, esp. pp. 25–35).

Murphy (2007), following Stacey (1996), explained the futility of prediction and control in complex systems. “If a system may be accurately and completely described by reducing it to its component parts, then it is merely complicated; but if a system is truly complex, it is more than the sum of its parts,” she writes (p. 129). Stacey and Griffin (2006) pointed out that complex organizations encompass the continuous interplay of self-organizing and emergent interactions among individuals and groups that constantly evolve in predictable and unpredictable ways as those interactions merge and diverge over time. Thus, what an organization becomes as a whole follows no blueprint and often produces surprising outcomes (pp. 7–9).

Peters (1993, pp. 561–562) argued that strategic communication and information management have undermined the public sphere by representing or showing off the manipulative decisions taken unilaterally by organizations even if they have consulted the public.

In his 2006 lecture at the 56th Annual International Communication Association Conference, Habermas (2006) described the problems of connecting the lifeworld of everyday experience with the systems paradigms in mass societies. He suggested the goal should be to reintegrate rationality through the rule-governed discourse of argumentation to recreate intersubjective understanding. He described the “indicators of contingent constraints” on “the normative requirements of deliberative politics” (Habermas, 2006, p. 420) and suggested that mediated discourse has to be independent of interference and responsive to citizens’ voices about problems and proposed solutions (pp. 420–421).

Overlapping themes emerge from twenty-first century examinations of discourse: the fallibility of knowledge, the complexity and shifting boundaries of institutions as social networks, the indeterminacy of outcomes, the requirement for continuing collaboration with acting publics, the commitment to risk-taking in mutual engagement with constituencies. Holtzhausen (2012) has suggested that the twenty-first century communication practitioner operates in a “state of awareness” for the multiple identities manifest in public acts and public discourse (pp. 221–225).

In the early twentieth century, Dewey articulated many of these twenty-first century themes. He suggested sustained discourse about the relationships that make up experience, about problem-solving experiments, and about continuous assessment in complex, indeterminate environments. He suggested viewing organizations as communities of engaged interaction among shifting patterns of relationships rather than as static entities.

Mobility may in the end supply the means by which the spoils of remote and indirect interaction and interdependence flow back into local life, keeping it flexible, preventing the stagnancy which has attended stability in the past, and furnishing it with the elements of a variegated and many-hued experience. Organization may cease to be taken as an end in itself. . . . Organization as a means to an end would reinforce individuality and enable it to be securely itself by enduing it with resources beyond its unaided reach. (Dewey, 1927/1954, p. 216)
Dewey’s vision presented organizations as shifting networks of discourse, engaging acting publics, sharing diverse experiences of social and material life, defining problems individuals encounter, debating conflicting ideas about how to solve those problems, and constantly assessing the success of solutions by sharing the experiences of individuals with those solutions.

Such discourse is not focused on consensus. It is focused on individual experience and individual needs. The constant interplay of the discourse, the dialectic of lived experience, generates, not consensus, but an encompassing and always indeterminate synthesis that is the complex network we call the organization, including its acting publics. Any attempt to freeze those shifting relationships into a fixed essence inevitably creates a false sense of certainty (Dewey, 1929a, pp. 26–48). For Dewey publics are networks of acts. They emerge in discourse. Their purpose is sharing experience, solving problems and assessing the consequences. Communicators who facilitate that ongoing process, linking participants across networks as publics, and promoting their discourse across the organization, also facilitate the continuous inquiry into problems, the discovery of solutions, and the shared assessment of outcomes.

In recent scholarship, public relations practitioners have been urged to play precisely this role within their organizations. Digital media and social networks make it possible for institutions to rebuild sustained flexible discourse partnerships of shared experience among individuals and groups. As problems (and publics) arise, those discourse partnerships make joint inquiry possible. They enable collaborative discovery and problem solving (experiments) to develop conjointly within transient public acts among an organization’s networks of constituencies. Discourse partnerships empower continuing joint assessments of consequences. They offer the means for further joint action to produce conjoint solutions and assessments of solutions. As problems are solved, they offer the means that lead back to sustained shared experience of individuals and institutions.

Habermas and Dewey suggested a renewed vision of discourse in communication at the opening of the twenty-first century that would depart from the strategic management of communication that dominated the twentieth century. They offered innovation at the moment new forms of mediated communication demand innovative discourse. These emerging views of classic and neo-pragmatism are echoed in the literature on networks, relationships, complexity, and postmodernism and offer a comprehensive rationale for approaches that hold the promise of sustained public engagement and conjoined problem solving within the fluid virtual communities of the twenty-first century.

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Dewey and the Public Sphere


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