

Combining dialogue and technology: Digital media and organization-public dialogue from the perspective of multinationals in Spain and Latin America

Conjugando diálogo y tecnología. Los medios digitales y el diálogo
organizaciones-públicos desde la perspectiva de las
multinacionales en España y Latinoamérica

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This article analyzes how multinational corporations in Spain and Latin America perceive the impact of digital technologies on the dialogue with their publics and if they think that communication consultants can help bridge the gap between academic normativity and professional practices in this field. **Methodology:** Since this is a relatively unexplored research perspective, in which creating specific analytical categories is still necessary, 22 in-depth interviews were conducted with senior executives of multinational corporations in 9 countries in the Ibero-American ambit. **Results:** These companies perceive the impact of digital technologies on the organization-publics dialogue in a predominantly positive way, despite the fact that most of the recent academic studies

imply an “unfulfilled dialogic promise” of the new media. This research also reveals the coexistence of two dialogue definitions and three roles assigned to the consulting firms regarding this topic. **Discussions and conclusions:** This research revealed “pragmatic dissonance” in organizations; on the one hand, dialogue is presented as a search for mutual understanding, but in practice any communicative exchange is deemed as dialogical. In addition, this research offers analytical categories for future studies about this topic.

KEYWORDS: dialogue; digital media; social networks; public relations; communications consulting.

RESUMEN

Introducción: El artículo analiza cómo perciben las empresas multinacionales de España y Latinoamérica el impacto de las tecnologías digitales en el diálogo con sus públicos y si consideran que los consultores de comunicación pueden ayudar a reducir la brecha entre normatividad académica y práctica profesional en este campo. **Metodología:** Tratándose de una perspectiva de investigación poco explorada, donde aún resulta necesario construir categorías analíticas específicas, se realizaron 22 entrevistas en profundidad a altos ejecutivos de empresas multinacionales en 9 países del ámbito iberoamericano. **Resultados:** Las compañías perciben de manera predominantemente positiva el impacto de las tecnologías digitales sobre el diálogo organizaciones-públicos, a pesar de que las investigaciones académicas más recientes sugieren un “incumplimiento de la promesa dialógica” de los nuevos medios. El estudio también revela la coexistencia de dos definiciones de diálogo y tres roles asignados a las firmas consultoras en relación a esta temática. **Discusión y conclusiones:** La investigación detecta una “disonancia pragmática” en las organizaciones: por un lado, se presenta el diálogo como búsqueda de entendimiento mutuo, pero en la práctica se considera como dialógico cualquier intercambio comunicativo. Además, la investigación ofrece categorías analíticas para futuros estudios sobre el tema.

PALABRAS CLAVE: diálogo; medios digitales; redes sociales; relaciones públicas; consultoría de comunicación.

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Translation by **Carlos Javier Rivas Quintero** (University of the Andes, Mérida, Venezuela)

1. Introduction: the dialogue between organizations and publics in the digital era

The expansion experienced by digital communication technologies during the last 30 years has been accompanied by an expectation of greater dialogue between organizations and publics. This can be observed with particular clarity in the “dialogic theory of public relations” (Botan, 1997; Capizzo, 2018; Kent; Taylor, 1998; 2002; McAllister-Spooner, 2009; Pearson, 1989; Taylor; Kent, 2014b; Theunissen; Wan-Noordin, 2012).

The academic papers that developed this theoretical approach set the challenge of collecting dialogue principles grounded in ethics, philosophy, psychology and communication to explore the possibilities of implementing them into the construction of relations between organizations and publics.

Furthermore, they sought to differentiate this perspective from the “two-way symmetrical model” by Grunig and Grunig (1992), arguing that it emphasized too much over procedural matters to implement strategies, while dialogue should be understood essentially as a communication based on ethical attitudes and principles. Dialogue, from this point of view, is a quality of relations and has as essential requirement the “orientation towards the other” grounded in values such as reciprocity and empathy (Kent and Taylor, 2002). As highlighted by Theunissen and Wan-Noordin (2012), this ethical nature of dialogue differentiates it from other forms of interaction.

With the emergence of the *World Wide Web* during the last years of the 20th century -and the subsequent development of *web 2.0* and *social media*- the authors of the dialogical theory spotted an important opportunity to implement those principles. The new communicative mediation structure seemed to be leaving behind a vertical world of a few addressers and millions of recipients to give rise to a more horizontal and participative environment. This potentiality perceived in the new media, which we will label as “the dialogical promise” of digital technology, has promoted a large number of researches about the dialogue between organizations and their different publics on web sites, blogs and social networks. A study of Wirtz and Zimbres (2018) reviews the researches of this nature systematically.

Although the “dialogical promise” was very powerful during the transition into the new century, a certain sense of disappointment began to appear. An examination of the empirical investigations accumulated in the first decade of the 21st century about this topic concluded that the Internet was “very poorly used” as a dialogue tool (McAllister Spooner, 2009, p. 321). More recently, other researchers have also concluded that organizations “fail to fully realize” the dialogical potential of digital media (Sommerfeldt and Yang, 2018, p. 62).

An additional problem is that there is no consensus between the researchers regarding the concept of dialogue. As we have already mentioned, the authors of the “dialogical theory” define it as an ethical orientation towards mutual understanding (Kent and Taylor, 2002), but many empirical studies accept any “two-way communication exchange” as if it were dialogue, in other words, they “treat the presence of any interactive features or functions on organizations’ websites and social media accounts as evidence of a dialogic approach” (Sommerfeldt and Yang, 2018, p. 61). A third perspective, which we could consider intermediate, understands dialogue as the equivalent of conversation (e.g. Kelleher, 2009), in which the presence of a “personal tone” is the main characteristic in communication. Meaning that, from this perspective, any isolated or formal interaction can be neither deemed as dialogical, nor is ethical commitment towards the search of mutual understanding an indispensable requirement.

Even considering these conceptual differences, the non-compliance of the “dialogical promise” of the new media has appeared as a recurring observation over the past years. In fact, there are growing concerns about the unidirectional, reductionist and even manipulative uses of digital technology in public relations (Anderson, Swenson and Gilkerson, 2016; Avidar, Ariel, Malka and Levy, 2015; Kent, 2013, 2017; Kent, Sommerfeldt and Saffer, 2016; Macnamara, 2010; Moreno, Navarro, Tench and Zerfass, 2015; Miranda, Young and Yetgin, 2016; Robson and Sutherland, 2012; Smith, Smith y Knighton, 2018; Taylor and Kent, 2014a; Valentini, 2015).

Kent (2013), one of the important figures in the development of the dialogical theory in this field, describes the situation in the these terms: “because of social media technology, public relations professionals have regressed from our role as organization–public relationship builders and counselors, to marketers, advertisers, and strategic communicators” (p. 341). Additionally, in most of the current research works about social networks, the central interest lies in how to modify the perceptions of the public through the networks, without the need of considering practices associated

with dialogue (e.g., Dijkmans, Kerkhof, Buyukcan Tetik and Beukeboom, 2015; Etter, Ravasi and Colleoni, 2019; Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher and Miller, 2006; Rim and Song, 2016; Tsai and Men, 2017). Therefore, it should not be surprising the fact of critical views against public relations multiplying, stating that this activity only favors the most powerful ones (Jansen, 2017) and it is an abettor of a “commercial democracy” (Cronin, 2018).

2. A view of Spain and Latin America

Bearing in mind that studies about this topic have been focused on Spain or Latin America as separated fields, we were interested in studying both spaces, allowing both the overall view and the comparison between them. The socio-cultural space including both Spain and Latin America is known as the Ibero-American Community: a set of 22 countries that share cultural features and historical ties, and whose governments have established some official corporation mechanisms (SEGIB, 2019). The region can also be seen as an economic and corporate sphere where different private organizations with international scope operate (FIE, 2019). In the field of communication, various studies focus their analyses on Ibero-America, but none of them is committed to investigating the organization-public dialogue (e.g. Beltrán Salmón, 2009; Jones, 1999; Krohling Kunsch, 2013; Oller Alonso and Tornay Márquez, 2016; Salas Forero, 2011; Sierra Caballero and Moreno Domínguez, 2008; Ugarte, 2012).

On another note, it is important to mention that the relation between “organizations and publics” is a prominent theoretical category in the discipline of public relations, but both “organizations” and “publics” are abstractions: they refer to complex collectives entities and allow a diversity of cases. When studying them empirically, some delimitation of reality becomes essential. In Spain, for example, a research conducted by Aced Toledano and Lalueza (2018) was focused on the IBEX 35 companies. The important role of these 35 companies in the Spanish social and economic life is undeniable; therefore, their communication practices with the environment are a matter worthy of attention. Then, the fact that the communication of these companies on blogs, Facebook and Twitter has been essentially classified as a “monologue” is remarkable (Aced Toledano and Lalueza, 2018, p. 1.270).

The fact that social networks are being used in a “monologue” manner by organizations to disseminate their messages has become a recurring observation in Spain. This observation has been made, for example, in 120 museums in the country (Capriotti and Pardo Kuklinski, 2012), non-governmental organizations (Marfil Carmona, 2014), autonomous parliaments (Pineda Martinez and Casteñada, 2014), specific and sensitive industries such as nuclear energy (Cobos, 2017), etc. By interviewing communication managers in highly reputable Spanish companies, a study concluded that the dialogue with stakeholders continues to be a central challenge for these executives (Medina Aguerrebere and Buil Gazol, 2016). Moreover, when collecting the perceptions of professionals in interactive agencies in Spain, it has been observed that the organizations are driven by different interests and approaches in their interactions with users, among which dialogue is simply deemed as a tactic among others (Ponti y Domingo, 2014).

The studies about the same topic in Latin America, although they address the issue from multiple angles, tend to present similar conclusions. In addition, these studies use various strategies to undertake the topic in a wide and diverse region; for example, Capriotti, Zeler and Oliveira (2019) opted to select a sample of 157 companies leading the rankings of corporate reputation in Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, Chile and Peru. After analyzing the communication of these companies on Facebook, they conclude that they “maintain a unidirectional and not a dialogical approach” (p. 1.094).

The studies have not been focused exclusively on private companies. A research about parliaments on social media, for example, shows that these institutions limit themselves to using networks to disseminate information and that there are “few advancements in the creation of deliberative and participatory spaces on social platforms” (Giraldo Luque, Villegas Simón and Carniel Bugs, 2017). On another note, strategies implemented on social media by local governments of MERCOSUR have not achieved a significant response in the arising of citizens’ opinions, which “highlights the one-way nature” of communication (Gálvez Rodríguez, Sáez Martín, García Tabuyo and Caba Pérez, 2018).

Surveying professionals in public relations has been another methodological way chosen by researchers. The main project that follows this approach is the *Latin American Communication Monitor* (Navarro, Moreno and Zerfass, 2018), which in its most recent version surveyed 803 professionals from 18 countries in the region. They were asked, among other things, about how successful they consider the use of social networks for organizational purposes has been. As a result, the professionals showed a “cautious optimism” (p. 12). If we delve into what variables this optimism bases on, we notice that the best rated aspect by these professionals is “interaction”, understood as “answering questions” and “providing services”, that is: behaviors much more rudimentary than the dialogue ethically oriented and with attitudinal basis introduced by the dialogical theory in public relations. In fact, the very study perceives a “lack of appropriate structures, cultures and strategies for participatory ways of communications on social networks” (p. 12).

In sum, organizations and publics interact through social networks, blogs, websites, apps and other digital communication technologies; but this interaction does not have the characteristics of the “dialogue” foreseen in the theory of the last years of the 20th century and the first ones of the 21st century. During that time, when the Internet expansion was going through its earliest stages, the dialogical prospect intended using the new media, with their broad range of possibilities for bi-directionality and horizontality, to facilitate empathy and other ethical precepts linked to a normative conception of dialogue; expectation that has not been materialized. In the public relations academic discipline, the ideal image of organizations and publics taking advantage of digital transformation to understand themselves better on issues of common interest still remains as a *desideratum*, while the registered empirical evidences do not show important advancements in this direction yet.

3. Research questions

The studies mentioned in the previous section coincide with one point: the “dialogical promise” of the new media has not been fulfilled. But this observation, more and more frequent in recent years, emerges from the academic realm and it usually bases on the examination of the functionalities and interactions generated by companies on social networks. The surveys conducted among professionals have not investigated directly if organizations perceive the same thing. This is the central interest of our research: In what ways do they think digital technologies have an impact on the dialogue with their target publics? What arguments are they currently using to either positively or negatively assess the impact that digital technology has on dialogue? And finally, what do organizations understand by dialogue?

In a complementary manner, we will address a research gap regarding public relations consulting companies (also known as “communication consultant agencies”). The firms committed to this activity are advisers and agents of large organizations in their engagement with their stakeholders. Although consulting firms have been studied from different perspectives (Buil Gazol and Rodríguez Salcedo, 2017; Casals and Lalueza, 2014; Gutiérrez García and Rodríguez Salcedo, 2009; Lalueza,

2010; Miquel, López and Gil, 2018), the role of these companies regarding dialogue is still an unexplored topic.

Our interest lies in knowing if consultants -due to their external position in regards to the organization and their reputation as experts- are entitled to bridge the gap between the academic normativity and the professional practice. As we have already mentioned, there is advocacy of an ethical concept of dialogue from this normativity (based on the “orientation towards the other” and the search for understanding), while in practice, the tendency has been deeming any communicative interaction as dialogue. The fact that consultants can contribute to the reconciliation of both stances will depend, among other things, on organizations assigning them that mediating role between theory and practice. Therefore, we wonder: What role should public relations consultant agencies comply, according to organizations, to improve the dialogue with stakeholders?

4. Methodology

We conducted 22 in-depth interviews to multinational Ibero-American companies listed in the corporate reputation ranking elaborated by the Corporate Reputation Business Monitor (ES: MERCO, 2019). This methodological decision was established due to the phase in which the study of the topic is: there are no previous researches focused on the relation between dialogue and digital technology in the field of multinational companies in the region, which makes the examination of analytical categories and the construction of a first panorama on the matter necessary.

Previous works in the field of communication show that Ibero America can be deemed as an ambit with common socio-cultural characteristics relevant to this research (see section 2). On another note, the multinational companies’ category has been selected because it gathers a set of actors with high economic and social impact, connected to the globalization processes and to the digitalization of communications. The recognition that the *MERCO* ranking companies have (MERCOC, 2019) as highly reputable companies implies the establishment of systematic communication processes and channels with their stakeholders.

A purposive sampling was implemented (Koerber and McMichael, 2008) based on two substantive representation criteria: diversity of economic sectors and countries of operation. With these criteria the resulting sample was composed of companies from 12 sectors and it encompassed all the countries of the Ibero-American Community. It is important to mention that the sample included both the companies that provide products and services to the final customer and other companies as well. Taking into consideration the difference -both cultural and the economic incomes- between Europe and Latin America, half of the interviews were conducted in Spain and the other half in Latin America to notice possible contrasts between both fields (table 1).

Table 1: *Composition of the sample*

1. Number of companies for each economic sector:

Great consumption	3	Technology	2
Oil and gas	3	Transport	2
Banks	2	Automotive	1
Energy	2	Cement	1
Infrastructure	2	Chemical industry	1
Insurance	2	Telecommunication	1

2. Number of companies in the sample which are present in each country of Ibero-America

Colombia	20	Costa Rica	11
Mexico	20	El Salvador	11
Brazil	18	Uruguay	11
Spain	18	Venezuela	11
Chile	17	Bolivia	8
Peru	17	Guatemala	8
Argentina	16	Nicaragua	8
Panama	16	Andorra	6
Portugal	15	Paraguay	6
Dominican Republic	14	Honduras	4
Ecuador	12	Cuba	3

3. Places where the interviews were conducted:

Spain	11
Latin America (Panama: 3; Argentina: 2; Colombia: 2; Bolivia: 1; Mexico: 1; Peru: 1; Ecuador: 1)	11

Source: authors' own creation with data collected from MERCOSUR (2019) for the classification by sectors and from the websites of the companies to quantify the countries of operation.

All the interviews were conducted with the leading manager in charge of the institutional relations of the company or with an executive (with equal or higher rank) designated by the organization as the most suitable person for the interview. For us to have access to this management level in these multinational companies, we had the support of two organizations that contributed by contacting and engaging companies: The Ibero-American Business Foundation (FIE | ES: *Fundación Iberoamericana Empresarial*) and the KREAB communication consultant agency.

Basing on the four research questions, we developed a semi-structured questionnaire. For the research question “*What do organizations understand by dialogue?*” three fundamental possibilities were identified using the bibliography presented in the introductory section of this article. We have elaborated answer options to reflect each of them (table 2). The questionnaire was reviewed by 9 public relations specialists, one from each country where the interviews were conducted. All the reviewers have at least 10 years of experience in communication analysis and consultancy for multinational companies. Taking their suggestions into consideration, we constructed the final questionnaire. These very specialists received training for the use of the questionnaire and formed the team of interviewers.

The surveys transcription was analyzed through the combination of two strategies. On the one hand, we followed the stages of the Grounded Theory as Charmaz (2006) introduced them: an initial coding (we compared the pieces of information with each other to discover analytical categories) and a focused coding (we implemented the most significant and common categories in an extensive way to the whole corpus). On the other hand, for the closed questions case, we conducted a quantitative analysis to detect possible trends. The result of both coding and analysis procedures was approved by inter-rater reliability among the 9 interviewers to ensure concordant reliability (Gaitán and Piñuel, 2010, p. 112).

Table 2: *Dialogue definitions and theoretical bases that gave rise to the three answer options in the questionnaire.*

Answer Options	A. "Any exchange of specific messages (for example, a complaint or a question that receives an answer)."	B. "Any kind of conversation."	C. "Communication oriented towards mutual understanding."
Theoretical Foundation	It is the broadest conception of this term and it does not take into consideration attitudinal elements in subjects (beyond the predisposition of saying something and replaying]. A concept that Sommerfeldt and Yang (2008) criticize as "Any two-way communication exchange" (p. 61)	By including the word "conversation", we add a level a familiarity between the parties and the continuance of the interactions as defining elements (Kelleher and Miller, 2006).	In this definition of dialogue the "orientation towards the other" is taken for granted (Kent and Taylor, 2002), it is grounded in normative precepts such as respect and empathy. Its ultimate goal is the agreement between parties for the strengthening of relations.
Types of Definition	"Operational" definitions of dialogue		"Ethical" definition of dialogue

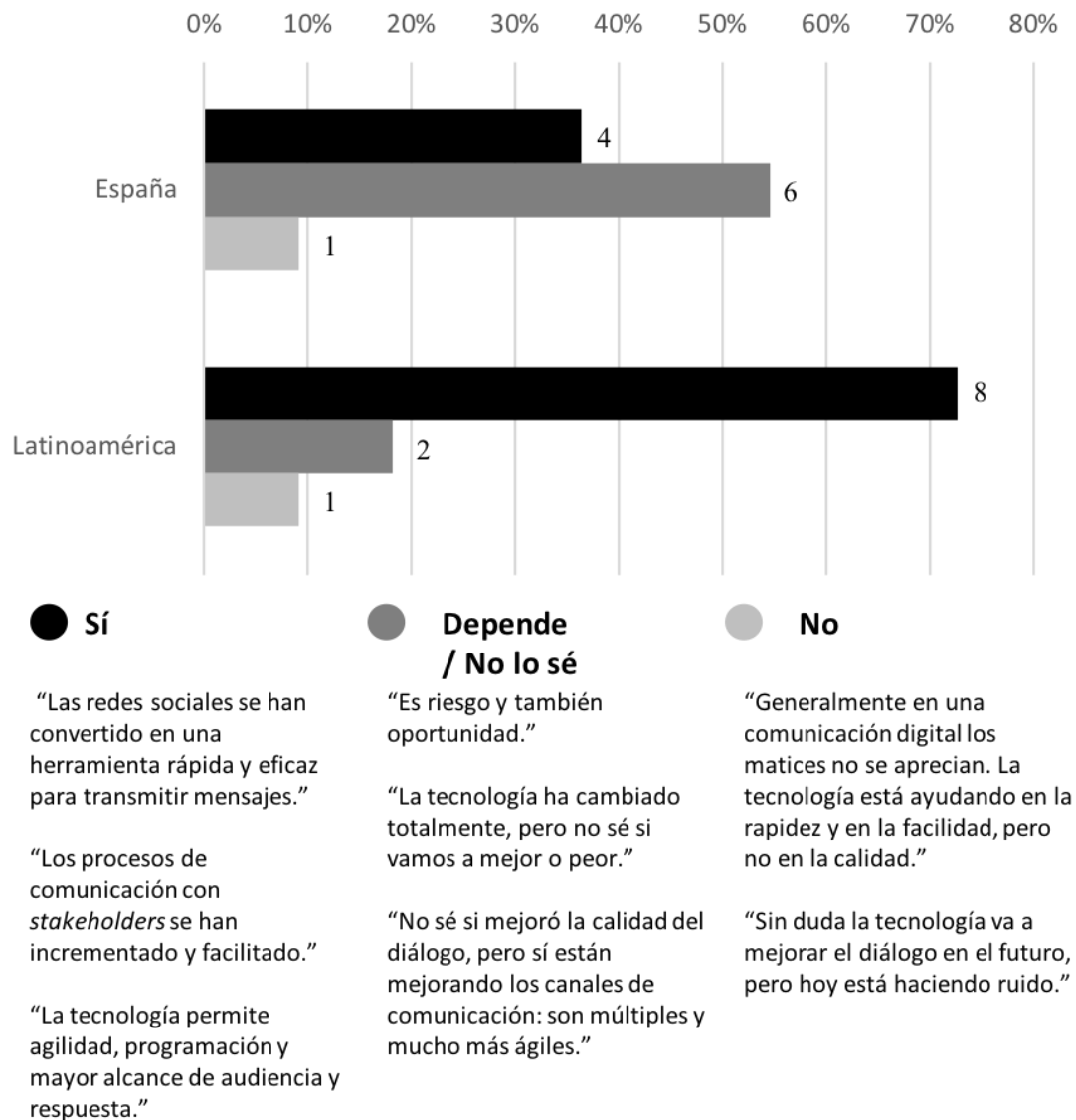
Source: Authors' own creation.

5. Results

5.1. Impact of digital transformation on dialogue between organizations and publics

It is striking that 55% of those who were interviewed perceived as positive the impact of digital technology on the quality of dialogue, while only 9% perceived it negatively. Although the sample of companies does not represent the universe of organizations probabilistically, and the purposes of this study are exploratory, the breadth of this gap implies an interesting topic for future research. The gap is greater in Latin America (73% positive vs. 9% negative) than in Spain (36% positive vs. 9% negative). In addition to presenting these data, graphic 1 shows the number of people surveyed who answered "It depends" or "I do not know" and also includes some quotes that illustrate each of the answers.

This predominantly positive perception differs from the researches mentioned in the bibliographical review. Although these studies are grounded in a positive premise about the dialogical potential of the new media, they conclude that this potential has not been materialized in practice. Instead, for organizations the "dialogical promise" of the new media still remains: most of the executives perceive that technology is, actually "helping improve the quality of dialogue".



Graphic 1: Is technology helping dialogue improve? Why?

Perceptions about the impact of digital technology on the quality of dialogue between organizations and publics

Source: Authors' own creation.

5.2. Lines of arguments around the impact of technology on dialogue

The ones who perceived the impact of digital technology on the organizational dialogue positively underpinned their stances by giving different arguments. The content analysis process explained in the methodology (see section 4), led us to observe the formation of 9 important categories that allow classifying these arguments:

- Immediacy:** Exponential time reduction in communicative interaction.
- Bi-directionality:** Each person and group being part of the organizational environment can truly be an addresser and interact communicatively with the organization.
- New channels:** Multiple simultaneous communication channels allow choosing those more appropriate depending on the circumstances, needs and preferences.

- d) New actors: The number of actors participating in the communication flows with the organization is growing.
- e) Monitoring: The possibility of identifying, systematizing and reporting the communicative interaction with stakeholders through IT means.
- f) Effectiveness: Systems to transmit and monitor the interactions facilitate the arrival of the message to the recipient to produce the desired effect by the sender.
- g) 24 hours: Reduction in the restrictions of days and schedules to establish the interactions between organizations and publics.
- h) Transparency: Vital information that was traditionally “guarded” by the organization can now go public easily. Therefore, the organization is driven to maintain a more ethical behavior and to build more open relations with their stakeholders.
- i) Programming: The organization can establish IT guidelines to decide in advance when, how and who to send messages in an automated way.

Following the same methodology, the arguments of the interviewees who answered neither positively nor negatively were grouped into two categories, meaning those who offered conditional responses (such as “it depends”) or claimed not knowing the answer.

- a) Ambivalence: Communication digital technologies have “two sides”: these can either facilitate or hinder dialogue; they produce both opportunities and risks. In other words, these are used in a positive and a negative way and neither of these ways currently prevails over the other.
- b) Uncertainty: The speed and magnitude of technological changes do not allow distinguishing the direction in which this transformation is channeled. The following answer from an interviewee serves as an example: “technology has changed completely, but I don’t know if it is for better or for worse.”

Finally, the minority who answered in negative terms regarding the impact of technology on dialogue, based on arguments that can be classified in two thematic areas.

- a) Impersonality: In digitally mediated communication, the possibility of perceiving a wide set of communicative nuances that comprise the quality of the dialogical relation is reduced. With this premise, for example, one of the interviewees said: “Technology is promoting speed and ease, but not the quality of dialogue.”
- b) Misinformation: Dialogue processes are negatively influenced by the ease with which “poorly informed” individuals and groups on a topic can express and share data and opinions quickly, informally and with great reach.

5.3. Dialogue concepts

In the previous sections we described how most of the interviewees considered that digital media development has a positive influence on the dialogue between organizations and publics. When we explored what underpins this belief, we have noticed that patterns such as immediacy, bi-directionality of new media and the multiplication of channels are perceived as “improvements” in dialogue. However, for the minority who did not share this vision, dialogue neither improves with the speed of communications nor with the interactive possibilities of the media. Clearly, these people base on a different conception of dialogue: they have other expectations associated with this word.

Anticipating the possibility of there being different conceptions among the executives, we asked them what they understood by dialogue. To this end, we offered the three options explained in the methodological section (table 2). When being faced with this closed question (choosing between three dialogue concepts), 8 out of 10 interviewees chose the third option: “Dialogue is the

communication aimed at mutual understanding”. This preference may be surprising if we compare it with the previous results (see sections 5.1 and 5.2). There, the predominant tendency of the interviewees was to implicitly identify any type of communicative interaction as dialogue, without seeking understanding being a requirement. In fact, when being faced with open questions that revolved around technology, the interviewees simply identified as an improvement in dialogue the immediacy of communications or the multiplicity of channels. But, when they faced a closed question, when the researcher offered three conceptual alternatives for dialogue, the same people preferred to lean towards the most ethical and attitudinal alternative: “seeking mutual understanding”. Although this tendency is clear in both Latin American and Spanish companies, it is stronger in the former group.

In addition to choosing one definition, the interviewees had the possibility of expanding or justifying their choice. The analysis of these justifications shows that the concept of dialogue contains a tension between normative and descriptive elements. We selected three phrases from the executives that illustrate this fact:

- *“Although dialogue should be oriented to understanding, it is true that many times it is just a conversation”.*
- *“The concept of dialogue is more aspirational [sic] than effective. I think that when the word dialogue is used, it is more than ‘speaking and listening’; it is a little more finalist. It is not just any interaction. I think the word aspires to more”.*
- *“Dialogue as orientation towards understanding is the objective in this area [Institutional relations]. In other areas of the company, for example in Customer Service, there are conversations that are just that: conversations”.*

5.4. Role of public relations consultancy

The objective of collecting organizational perceptions about the role of consultants is to explore if consultancy companies could bridge the gap between academic normativity and professional practice, seeking to reconcile different perspectives on dialogue. This will depend on, among other things, the fact that organizations (customers) perceive consultancy companies with that expectation. That is why we asked the interviewees: what role should public relations consultancy companies play to improve the dialogue between organizations and their publics?

The qualitative analysis of the responses shows the predominance of three basic expectations that we have labeled as follows: “to be radars”, “to be companions” and “to be intermediaries”. In none of the answers given by the interviewees there was the expectation of consultants achieving a bridging between normativity and practice. The executives neither show an explicit interest in the ethical-normative conception of dialogue that prevails in the academic world nor see consultants as potential allies to connect that conception with professional practice.

Hereunder, we expand each one of the three roles assigned to consultancy companies and illustrate them with some quotes from the interviewees. It is important to mention that there were no differences about this topic between the interviews conducted in Spain and those in Latin America: the three roles emerged in both segments of the sample with the same frequency.

(a) To be “radars”

It is expected that, taking advantage of their external role to the organization and their knowledge of multiple customers and sectors, consultants can detect new trends, topics and actors in the organizational environment, identifying opportunities and threats to dialogue through stakeholders:

“A consultancy company has the virtue of being a bit alien, uncontaminated by what happens daily in the company and has the experience from other clients who can enrich their own work”.

“Their role is to detect opportunities for open and fluid dialogue; help maintain that market reading that we do not have sometimes because we are within the company”.

For this role, there is an expectation of consultancy companies establishing reference frameworks that combine practices and patterns from multiple organizations:

“They have to become a reference framework for good practices. Through meetings and benchmarking, to create a current that helps companies become aware of new issues; to be benchmarks; to help, to leverage, to try to generate a movement”.

“We are linked to a sector, but a series of problems arise when we step outside. Consultancy companies give you the capacity to anticipate and widen your view”.

(b) To be companions

This role consists in working together with the organization during the different stages that compose the strategic communication cycle: from the diagnosis and the elaboration of plans to the implementation and evaluation of the results.

“Advising in terms of messages, channels, frequency, natural and potential allies, etc.; strategic communication consultancy agencies must provide continuous and close support”.

“...To facilitate the strategic communication of messages, elaborating an appropriate narrative to this end, along with tools and platforms that help achieve the established goals”.

(c) To be intermediaries

In addition to detecting patterns and supporting the communication plans, it is expected that consultancy companies be the ones implementing the communication processes in some cases, operating as intermediaries between the organization and some publics.

“They have a pivot role between the public and private world”.

“To me, agencies are professional intermediaries to interact and communicate properly in a very open world”.

“I think that their role is to build road maps for the private sector to reach society and vice versa. To help both sides find common spaces for this dialogue”.

6. Discussions and Conclusions

The analysis of 22 in-depth interviews conducted with senior executives of multinational companies in Spain and Latin America allowed us to have an initial understanding of a relatively unexplored topic: the point of view organizations have about the “dialogical promise” of digital media. It also provided analysis categories for more extensive future researches on the topic.

An important finding is that the reliance on that promise is still relevant. A large majority of those interviewees consider that digital media (social networks, blogs, websites, mobile apps, and others) are helping improve the dialogue between organizations and publics. As aforementioned in the

review of the literature, the academic studies are demonstrating that the interactions on these media bear no resemblance to the constituent components of dialogue. Therefore, there is a clear contrast between those studies and the discourse of the big organizations we have studied; a discourse in which the idea that “technology promotes dialogue” continues to be a vigorous concept.

Naturally, determining if the new media contribute to dialogue will depend a lot on what is deemed as dialogue. For this reason, we delved into what the definition the interviewees use to underpin their opinions is. As a result, we have noticed the coexistence of two levels in the conceptualization of dialogue: an implicit and an explicit one. The implicit level was revealed through the questions in which we did not ask interviewees for a definition of dialogue directly. For example, when the executives were talking about the influence of technology, we noticed that “immediacy” and “channels multiplication” were perceived as dialogical improvements themselves. As we have seen, “programming” is even presented as an IT virtue in favor of dialogue; a stance that ignores the subjectivity and the personal bond that have been traditionally deemed as constituent elements of dialogue. All in all, at this implicit level, almost any exchange of messages can be considered to be dialogical: for example, a customer who asks for a piece of information and receives a standardized response from an organization.

However, when the interviewees were asked directly what they understood by dialogue, and they had the possibility of choosing their concept from a set of options, then they tended to choose a much more strict definition, linked to ethical precepts. Therefore, dialogue emerged as a “communication aimed at understanding”. Furthermore, by given them the opportunity of expanding their responses, the executives tended to reveal the tensions between the normative and descriptive aspects that the notion of dialogue entails.

The “pragmatic dissonance” concept, coined by Núñez Ladevéze and Pérez Ornia (2003) to refer to the mismatch between normative representations and effective behaviors, may be useful to understand this phenomenon. Explicitly, those who were interviewed identified as dialogical those communications in which both sides seek mutual understanding; but they implicitly deem as dialogical almost any online interaction that their organizations carry out with their stakeholders.

It is in this context in which we have wondered about communication consultants. The question was if they, in their role of experts and as external agents to organizations, were entitled to play a role in bridging the gap between normativity and practice. Although there may be several necessary conditions for it, we understand that a basic requirement is organizations assigning them that role. Investigating if this could be the case, we have perceived that they do not have such expectations, but they do expect consultancy companies to be “radars”, “companions” and “intermediaries” for organizations in their relation with strategic publics. Therefore, any attempt to bridge the gap between normativity and practice through the consulting activity would be enhanced if it were carried out through these three fundamental roles. Future researches could also examine other conditions necessary for the exercise of this role in consultancy.

Finally, the study suggests possible differences and similarities between the Spanish and the Latin American fields worthy of greater attention. Optimism regarding the influence of digital technology on the dialogue processes was significantly higher in the Latin American interviews than in the Spanish ones. On another note, the tendency to explicitly define dialogue in ethical terms was also higher in Latin America. Therefore, a greater degree of “pragmatic dissonance” can be assumed for the organizations in that region. Regarding similarities, the strong resemblance between the Spanish and the Latin American companies when expressing their expectations about the role of consultancy companies stood out.

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