

**Louise Phillips:**  
***The Promise of Dialogue. The Dialogic Turn in the Production  
and Communication of Knowledge.***  
**Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 2011.**

**Anders Horsbøl**

MedieKultur 2013, 55, 92-95

Published by SMID | Society of Media researchers In Denmark | [www.smid.dk](http://www.smid.dk)

The online version of this text can be found open access at [www.mediekultur.dk](http://www.mediekultur.dk)

Dialogue is a good thing. But dialogue is also viewed as a good thing to such an extent that it has become a buzzword. Across different research disciplines and fields of practice in general, the notion of dialogue implies “a normative promise to further human-coexistence across differences” (p. 1). ‘Dialogue’ carries with it normative conceptions of communication where co-production of knowledge among participants from different backgrounds is pivotal, in contrast to monologic transmission. Due to the proliferation of dialogue as a taken-for-granted positive term in a range of contexts, we may even speak of a ‘dialogic turn’ (yet another turn) in communication studies. It sounds good, but what are we to make of it?

Such is the starting point of Louise Phillips’ book *The Promise of Dialogue: The Dialogic Turn in the Production and Communication of Knowledge*. Phillips takes a double stance on the dialogic turn. On the one hand, she aligns herself with it, sharing the normative principles of dialogism. On the other hand, she takes a critical stance, based in poststructuralism and informed particularly by Michel Foucault and Chantal Mouffe. This includes a critique of the ways in which the promise of dialogue is realized, i.e. of how dialogue is actually practiced and how other strategies are at work behind the label of ‘dialogue’. Moreover, it includes principled reflections on the limits of what can be promised by dialogue, as expressed in the following quote:

Book review: *The Promise of Dialogue*

The ideal of dominance-free communication through dialogue, implied in many approaches to dialogic communication theory and practice and action research is not only an impossible ideal but also a dangerous one: by creating an illusion of a dominance-free space, it can work to mask power relations and diverging knowledge interests. (p. 53-54)

However, as indicated above, the poststructuralist critique does not lead Phillips to abandon the notion of dialogue or to renounce its normative potential but, rather, to engage in “critical, reflexive consideration of the specific ways in which dialogue is enacted in producing and communicating knowledge [in order to] refine those practices” (p. 14). This combination of poststructuralist critique and alignment with dialogism is not easy to achieve, and it makes the book highly interesting. *The Promise of Dialogue* could have been a celebration of dialogue, of the power-free zones that real dialogue can establish, of its democratic or creative potential. Or it could have been an annihilating critique of the power effects of the discourse of dialogue, of its exclusionary mechanisms in the name of inclusion, of its naiveté *vis-à-vis* the inescapabilities of power. It is one of the key strengths of the book that it is neither.

In setting up a conceptual space for her reflexive approach, Phillips outlines and draws on three theoretical traditions in which the notion of dialogue is important: dialogic communication theories developed in communication studies (especially those inspired by Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin), science and technology studies (especially research on public engagement with science and technology), and action research (especially studies of participatory action research). As the thinking concerning dialogue within each of these three traditions has developed in relative isolation from the others, it is a key ambition of the book to connect them by “carving out two-lane paths” between the individual traditions (p. 16). This is realized in different ways throughout the book, by pointing to central commonalities between and differences across the traditions, by formulating an overarching theoretical framework, and by applying the framework to empirical case studies. Phillips is well aware that other relevant traditions could have been included in the interdisciplinary dialogue on dialogue, such as studies within linguistics and social psychology or within political science and sociology. That might also have taken the concept of dialogue beyond the “discourse of dialogue, participation and empowerment” (p. 2), where it is situated throughout the book. That said, *The Promise of Dialogue* provides a good starting point for further path construction or boundary work.

On the basis of these traditions, Phillips builds her own theoretical framework with the idiomatic title “Integrated Framework for Analyzing Dialogic Knowledge Production and Communication (IFADIA)” (p. 52). The three traditions are co-articulated and combined with a Foucauldian perspective on power/knowledge and discourse. The framework is developed around a number of basic tensions in the conception and pursuit of dialogue, extracted from the three theoretical traditions. From Bakhtin is taken the tension between centrifugal and centripetal tendencies in the interplay of multiple voices, from Buber the tension between standing one’s own ground and being open to the other,

from action research the tension between dialogue as an instrument for innovation and economic growth and a dialogue as participation and empowerment, and from STS the tension between the top-down management of consultation processes and the bottom-up opportunities for citizens' own knowledge forms. This enables Phillips to ask how these tensions "are manifested in the enactment of 'dialogue' through the articulation of the discourse of dialogue, participation and empowerment" (p. 55). For the latter case studies, this is operationalized using three main analytical questions concerning 1) which voices are articulated, 2) to what extent the interactions are open to discourses that construct plural forms of knowledge, and 3) to what extent and how a singular 'we' and a singular form of knowledge are constructed during the interactions (p. 56).

It is pivotal for Phillips that the reflexive approach is based on "empirical analyses of situated enactments of 'dialogue'" (p. 52). Accordingly, the framework is put to work empirically in studies of three recent cases from different fields of practice (Chapters 3-5). First, a study of dialogue-based approaches to health communication planning and campaign communication, centering on a Danish health communication initiative in which 'intoxicants guides' approach pupils in school to discuss alcohol and drugs consumption. Second, a study of public engagement with science and technology, which focuses on the so-called 'World Wide Views on Global Warming', the citizen consultation on climate change organized by the Danish Board of Technology in advance of the COP 15 summit in Copenhagen in 2009. And third, a study of dialogic communication in collaborative research involving university researchers (including Phillips herself) and a range of different practitioners on a project entitled 'Sense making strategies on user driven innovation in virtual worlds'.

The case studies all offer rich empirical material, mostly in the form of transcribed dialogue, which allows the reader to both follow the analyses and form his or her own opinions. Furthermore, each empirical chapter provides a rather extensive introduction to the social practices at stake and the specific methodological approaches undertaken and as such can be read individually, depending on the particular interests of the reader. For this reader, the case study on 'World Wide Views on Global Warming' lucidly demonstrates the point that "the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion at work in the articulation of deliberative principle in practice are [...] inevitable" (p. 115) by pointing out the tensions between bottom-up and top-down strategies in what may at first glance appear to be an unquestionable pursuit of a good cause (pro-citizen voices *and* anti-climate change is hard to beat).

In the empirical analyses, Phillips generally draws heavily on Bakhtin in the focus on voice(s), and the inspiration from the other traditions in IFADIA seems less pronounced. The analytical approach works well, but in comparison with the book's theoretical scope, it seems that a framework with multiple theoretical 'voices' is narrowed down centripetally to a set empirical questions that mainly reflect one of these. For instance, questions of media and technology or mediational means in general as well as questions of the material setting, translations, or recontextualizations could have been given more prominence and taken the analysis in other directions.

Book review: *The Promise of Dialogue*

The book concludes with a chapter on 'Further Reflections' in which "epistemological, methodological and ethical conundrums" (p. 159) are discussed, among these the role of reflexivity and the ways of dealing with tensions between opening up to a plurality of voices and producing a satisfying outcome for all relevant parties. These are important and generous discussions that engage a large field of literature. However, there is a tendency – one that runs throughout the book – to underplay the centripetal portion of the latter tension. Traditions that center on how to resolve conflicts or reach common ways of articulating and dealing with 'wicked' social problems – such as Habermasian and/or deliberative traditions – are mainly dealt with as an adversary positions, which are criticized (and criticized well) at a rather general level. But the tensional perspective of the book could have profited from a more specific dialogue with such 'centripetal' traditions on ways of achieving dialogical closure. Obviously, these traditions are not in line with the poststructuralist perspective, but then, neither is Buber, whose phenomenological thinking is partly reframed poststructurally within the IFADIA framework. Maybe a similar reframing of the deliberative tradition could lead to interesting results?

Louise Phillips has written an important book in the recent academic discourse on dialogue and dialogical practices. *The Promise of Dialogue* makes an accessible and stimulating contribution to a reflexive approach to the study of dialogue, covering fundamental theoretical discussions as well as empirical analyses. It deserves to inform many future dialogues.

Anders Horsbøl  
Associate Professor, PhD  
Department of Communication and Psychology  
Aalborg University, Denmark  
Horsboel@hum.aau.dk