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Argumentation in Complex Communication

Managing Disagreement in a Polylogue

Marcin Lewiński

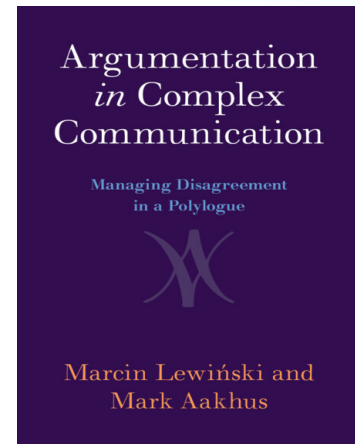
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A pervasive aspect of human communication and sociality is argumentation: the practice of making and criticizing reasons in the context of doubt and disagreement. Argumentation underpins and shapes the decision-making, problem-solving, and conflict management which are fundamental to human relationships. However, argumentation is predominantly conceptualized as two parties arguing pro and con positions with each other in one place. This dyadic bias undermines the capacity to engage argumentation in complex communication in contemporary, digital society. This book offers an ambitious alternative course of inquiry for the analysis, evaluation, and design of argumentation as polylogue: various players arguing over many positions across multiple places. Taking up key aspects of the twentieth-century revival of argumentation as a communicative, situated practice, the polylogue framework engages a wider range of discourses, messages, interactions, technologies, and institutions necessary for adequately engaging the contemporary entanglement of argumentation and complex communication in human activities.

Part I. Seeking, Seeing, and Embracing Polylogue: 1. Seeking polylogue; 2. The Dyadic reduction; 3. Seeing polylogue; 4. Embracing polylogue. Part II. Analyzing, Evaluating, and Designing Polylogue. 5. Descriptive analysis of polylogues; 6. Normative evaluation of polylogues; 7. Prescriptive design of polylogues. 8. Conclusion.



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'Lewiński and Aakhus provide a detailed and in many ways compelling argument for viewing polylogues involving multiple parties (not monologues or dialogues) as the more fundamental type of communication. Their thesis has important consequences for how we understand argumentative discourses and should command serious attention from scholars and students in a number of related fields.'

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ARGUMENTATION IN COMPLEX COMMUNICATION

A pervasive aspect of human communication and sociality is argumentation: the practice of making and criticizing reasons in the context of doubt and disagreement. Argumentation underpins and shapes the decision-making, problem-solving, and conflict management which are fundamental to human relationships. However, argumentation is predominantly conceptualized as two parties arguing pro and con positions with each other in one place. This dyadic bias undermines the capacity to engage argumentation in complex communication in contemporary, digital society. This book offers an ambitious alternative course of inquiry for the analysis, evaluation, and design of argumentation as polylogue: various players arguing over many positions across multiple places. Taking up key aspects of the twentieth-century revival of argumentation as a communicative, situated practice, the polylogue framework engages a wider range of discourses, messages, interactions, technologies, and institutions necessary for adequately engaging the contemporary entanglement of argumentation and complex communication in human activities.

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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> vi
<i>Preface</i>	vii
PART I SEEKING, SEEING, AND EMBRACING POLYLOGUE	
1 Seeking Polylogue	3
2 The Dyadic Reduction	33
3 Seeing Polylogue	58
4 Embracing Polylogue	89
PART II ANALYZING, EVALUATING, AND DESIGNING POLYLOGUE	
5 Descriptive Analysis of Polylogues	119
6 Normative Evaluation of Polylogues	161
7 Prescriptive Design of Polylogues	198
8 Conclusion	233
<i>References</i>	238
<i>Index</i>	261

Figures

5.1	Players in the exploding train polylogue	<i>page</i> 138
5.2	Positions in the exploding train polylogue	141
5.3	Places in the exploding train polylogue	143
6.1	False dilemma as a fallacious disjunctive syllogism	180
6.2	False dilemma as a fallacious (simple) constructive dilemma	181

Preface

Argumentative communication – making and criticizing reasons to manage differences and disagreements that emerge in human conduct – is a ubiquitous human experience. It is indeed a go-to solution to manage differences so that these do not escalate into serious conflicts that forestall mutual understanding and collaboration. As such, it is a precious resource to coordinate human activity and run one’s daily life. Being a ubiquitous and precious feature of the social world, argumentation has for centuries been an object of scholarly attention and scrutiny.

But something weird happened with argumentation when the massive spread of new media in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries took place. The dominant conceptual model of argumentation as a simple one-to-one exchange of pros and cons between two opponents, alongside its prototypical examples – Socratic dialogues, legal disputes, presidential debates – seems to have been rapidly superseded by an open, unruly, hard-to-control, many-to-many online conversation. Something entirely new was apparently happening to the way people argue.

In this book we offer an account of many-to-many argumentative conversations that the new media laid bare. Both of us have been independently driven by this novelty, trying to grasp the change such complex mediated conversations bring about to the practice and theory of argumentation. Two key characteristics were particularly exceptional. First, multiparty conversations of all kinds powered by the fast-evolving information and communication technologies are amenable to “design interventions,” which make it possible to shape some of the affordances and constraints of the conversation and thus alter its conduct (Aakhus, 2001, 2007; Jackson & Aakhus, 2005). Second, online conversations exhibited patterns of discussion, and especially of argumentative discussion, that were far more complex and thus puzzling when compared to standard dyadic conversational encounters; they were *polylogues* (Lewiński, 2010,

2013). However, when we started working together, these initial results proved correct only to a limited extent. We realized that, in fact, the change is only apparent. *Polylogue*, a complex form of argumentative discussion where multiple positions are debated by various players across a number of places, is the norm not just for some crazy online discussions but, indeed, for any argumentative discourse at all. On scrutiny, Socratic dialogues, legal disputes, political deliberations, etc., reveal a similar pattern of highly complex, designable argumentative practice. Indeed, at the heart of the most pressing contemporary matters – environment, energy, health, technology, governance – lies the basic fact that when differences and disagreement emerge, there is often more than one party involved with many issues and a variety of positions at stake. Moreover, these differences are often pursued across several occasions or different venues. Polylogue has always been there. This is the key idea we defend in this book.

The argument for this simple idea is itself complex; we have written a whole book about it, so you can see for yourself. At the core of our argument lies the idea that argumentation amounts to reasoning-in-interaction. This idea can be developed in two basic ways. Traditionally, the dyadic nature of reasoning, probing whether something is true or false, valid or invalid, takes precedence. As a result, interaction too is seen as dyadic, revolving between two roles (questioner–answerer, proponent–opponent). The obvious empirical fact that interaction is instead often polyadic is addressed via various maneuvers of what we call *dyadic reduction* (which we describe in Chapter 2). Our approach reverses that order of precedence and takes communicative interaction as the primary factor here (which we articulate in Chapter 3 and then develop throughout). Whatever reasoning is, it's refracted through the “technology” of interaction. Socratic dialogues and legal disputes are rather antique technologies, while Twitterstorms and online classes are relatively new. But, as we extensively argue, in all such cases, interaction is so often undeniably polyadic. Having established this, we bite the bullet and claim that reasoning itself is polyadic, too. Rather than being reduced to simple binary values, much of our reasoning, instead, amounts to an exercise of comparing and contrasting possible alternatives for thought or action, with the best of the class being selected in the case of normatively strong reason. Of course, lurking in all this is interaction itself and what its conduct, its technology, makes more or less possible for making and criticizing reasons.

Our basic strategy thus consists of four steps: First, we reinforce and reimagine the communicative concept of argument taken over from the twentieth-century argumentation theory. Second, we produce empirical

evidence that argumentative communication in its most natural sense is polyadic. Third, we draw a consequence from these two steps to the effect that reasoning, too, is polyadic – something that contrastivism about reason exposes and theorizes. Fourth, polyadic communication organizes and reorganizes in ways consequential for what reasoning-in-interaction accomplishes – a consequence we draw that design exposes and theorizes.

Walking these four steps lets us engage a number of important issues that we take up in each chapter of the book and in the progression of the chapters. Here we preview the two parts of the book and the chapters in each.

Part I: Seeking, Seeing, and Embracing Polylogue. The first four chapters of this book motivate the intellectual and practical needs for a polylogue framework while also building the framework and extending it.

Chapter 1: Seeking Polylogue. In this chapter, we formulate the basic problem we address in this book: How to understand the complexity of argumentation, that is, how argument and communication are entangled in human activity. We introduce *polylogue* as a simple yet perspicuous term for renewing and advancing an inquiry of argumentation in complex communication. We expose how the fact that polylogue cannot be dismissed is evident in examples of managing disagreement under polylogical conditions, both contemporary (e.g., social media platforms) and historical (e.g., establishing congressional representation for the newly formed US republic). Recognized in practice, polylogue, as we argue, is theoretically dismissed by an analytic strategy of dyadic reduction prominent in the study of argumentation and communication. While amenable to polylogue, even the remarkable theoretical and methodological contributions of the twentieth-century revival of the study of argumentation as a communicative, situated practice do not yet make a polylogical turn for understanding argumentation due to lingering commitments to a paradigmatic norm of dyadic interaction.

Chapter 2: The Dyadic Reduction. In this chapter, we expose the received dyadic model of communication and then critically analyze the presumptions of the model. This reductive model, which views communication as evolving from a basic unit of face-to-face dialogue between two people, has dominated the understanding of communication from ancient dialectic to today's speech act theory, conversation analysis, and argumentation theory – the disciplines we discuss. We argue that while dyadic reduction has a long, important history in theorizing argumentation and communication – a history we briefly recount, going back to the dialectical roots of argumentation theory – the principle of reduction becomes unjustified

reductionism that bypasses polylogical realities of argumentation and communication.

Chapter 3: Seeing Polylogue. In this chapter, we develop the crucial starting points for an inquiry into argumentation that foregrounds interaction to see argumentation as polylogue. We argue for the necessity of recognizing polylogue as the natural state of affairs for argumentation. What follows from that is a profoundly social view of argumentation, where various *players* pursue their contrasting *positions* across multiple *places*. The view also grounds a fundamental shift of descriptive, normative, and prescriptive attention to how contexts for argumentation are made via interaction and how argument is implicated in broader chains of social action and cognition. The polylogue framework thus scaffolds the discovery and analysis of argumentative structures and functions of a much wider range of discourses, messages, interactions, technologies, and institutions.

Chapter 4: Embracing Polylogue. In this chapter, we investigate how other scholars challenged dyadic reductions and embraced polylogue – often simply called “multiparty conversation” – as an alternative ontology for communication. The chapter is divided into two basic parts. First, we briefly present the varied understandings of polylogue produced in the literature. This review enables us to reveal the key limitations of the extant literature on polylogues and to clarify terminological confusions. Second, we provide a nonexhaustive but compelling list of (paradigmatic) problems and challenges that a dyadic approach faces. By demonstrating what is actually reduced in dyadic reduction, we also reveal the key polylogical facts instrumental in understanding what is at stake when people engage in polylogues.

Part II: Analyzing, Evaluating, and Designing Polylogue. The next three chapters elaborate the aspects of a polylogue framework by pursuing the key implications of polylogue for a significant contemporary concept about argumentation: disagreement expansion. In so doing, each chapter illustrates how polylogue informs the primary practices of analysis, evaluation, and design for understanding and engaging argumentation in complex communication.

Chapter 5: Descriptive Analysis of Polylogues. In this chapter, we present three illustrative analyses of three different texts tackling the issue of energy production and environmental protection. We first show the key analytic costs born from the practice of making dyadic reductions when reconstructing and analyzing argumentation. We then move forward to the reconstruction and analysis of disagreement management inspired by the

polylogue framework. One analysis creates a macroscopic representation from a news story of argumentative relations among players, positions, and places in an emerging argumentative polylogue. The other analysis articulates the strategy of a newspaper editorial to manage the polylogical circumstance of its production while offering a novel interpretation of the argument made. The upshot is that polylogical reconstruction and analysis shows the innovative ways in which the *place* for argumentation figures in strategies for managing disagreement.

Chapter 6: Normative Evaluation of Polylogues. In this chapter, we propose one simple yet crucial principle of rationality – the contextually adequate contrast of reasons – as an important path for the normative evaluation of polylogue. This principle is consistent with the basic polylogical idea that arguing for a position is always arguing against other incompatible positions. The key normative obligation of any arguer is, thus, that of defending the contrastive bestness of the position advanced. Our point is that the basic principle of contrastive reason can be contextually determined relative to the constraints and affordances of place for argumentation. We further translate the principle into a normative condition from which to evaluate argumentation in complex communication: make a relevant expansion of a disagreement space. We demonstrate how this approach explains the false dilemma as a polylogical fallacy that neither logical nor dialectical approaches can adequately handle. We also illustrate this approach for evaluating the role of place in the management of disagreement in polylogue.

Chapter 7: Prescriptive Design of Polylogues. The fact that any polylogue can be described with some adequacy and its quality evaluated with some effectiveness also means that it is possible to understand how any polylogue could have been otherwise. This raises the prospect that there can be design for argumentative polylogue that is more deliberate than the routine inventiveness evident in ordinary communication. In this chapter, we recast prescription in terms of design. Prescription has, of course, been of long-standing interest in logic, rhetoric, and dialectic. However, here we reflectively engage the practical design theorizing in constructing argumentative polylogue and what such design work presupposes about the designability, and the contestability, of polylogical interaction for argumentative conduct. We explain such design as an architectonic productive art for producing argumentative discourse that experiments with what is possible, probable, plausible, and preferable for disagreement management.

Chapter 8: Conclusion. We offer a brief conclusion that highlights the key achievements of the book as we see it.

Our hope is that this book will inspire further and deeper inquiry into argumentation in complex communication.

This book is a collaborative project conceived to develop our earlier joint work on argumentative polylogues (Aakhus & Lewiński, 2017; Lewiński & Aakhus, 2014). Chapters 1, 3, and 5 were written together. While Chapters 1 and 3 are entirely new, Chapter 5 updates and extends Aakhus and Lewiński (2017), “Advancing polylogical analysis of large-scale argumentation: Disagreement management in the fracking controversy.” *Argumentation*, 31(1), 179–207. It is published here with the permission of Springer Nature and the editors of *Argumentation* journal where the original article first appeared. In the context of the framework developed in the book, it now demonstrates even better the benefits of polylogical analysis of complex argumentation. We are also independent researchers with different disciplinary backgrounds and interests that contribute to the project. Marcin wrote Chapters 2 and 6 and predominantly Chapter 4, although Mark has contributed Sections 4.2.7, 4.2.8, 4.2.10, and 4.2.11 to Chapter 4 and was a coauthor of the earlier analysis of the Volkswagen case published in Oliveras-Moreno, Aakhus, and Lewiński (2018), used as part of Section 6.5. In turn, Mark wrote Chapter 7. Even so, these contributions were made in light of the jointly developed aims of the project and our ongoing discussions about the book.

Throughout the development of the book, we have greatly benefited from thoughtful suggestions, comments, and criticisms of our colleagues from the vibrant international community of argumentation scholars, meeting regularly at the conferences of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation, the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation, the European Conference on Argumentation, and the National Communication Association/American Forensic Association’s Alta Summer Conferences. There are too many to mention here one by one – yet, thank you! Marianne Doury, Karen Tracy, Jean Wagemans, Fabio Paglieri, and David Godden provided written comments on a very early draft of the book. The anonymous reviewers for the Cambridge University Press were very helpful in making our ideas clearer as the early project gradually grew into a book. And so was Hilary Gaskin, the CUP’s commissioning editor in philosophy, who provided impeccable assistance to the project throughout its various stages.

We have also been fortunate to develop our ideas in an intellectually stimulating and financially supportive institutional environment. Marcin’s colleagues at the Reasoning and Argumentation Lab, part of the NOVA Institute of Philosophy, NOVA University Lisbon, Portugal, have

Preface

xiii

provided a rich context of discovery and discussion. Likewise, Mark benefited from the continuing support of the Rutgers University's School of Communication and Information, Rutgers Global, and a fellowship from Rutgers University's Center for Cultural Analysis. Via various mutual visits at the NOVA and Rutgers, we could steadily consolidate our work into a complete book. In addition to the support of our home institutions, this work profited immensely from European funding via COST Action project CA17132: "European Network for Argumentation and Public Policy Analysis (APPLY)." Marcin has been the Main Proposer and Chair of the project, while Mark its Senior Scientific Advisor. Two short-term scientific missions carried out by Marcin at the Rutgers University in the winters of 2019 and 2020 have been instrumental in pushing the book project forward. And so were the project's other research meetings, workshops, and conferences where both of us could actively participate and discuss our ideas within a wide network of international colleagues.

Yet, beyond the complex institutional poly-logues, there are also many private di-logues that made the completion of this book possible, especially during the extended COVID-related lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. Marcin would like to thank his partner Guya Accornero for a precious mixture of insight, motivation, rigor, and sheer fun that let him firmly go on with the project. Mark thanks his wife Teresa for her unwavering support and, with great appreciation, for her helpful conversations and suggestions.

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PART I

Seeking, Seeing, and Embracing Polylogue

CHAPTER I

Seeking Polylogue

Start talking with almost anyone and you will discover some differences for which they will have their reasons. Carry on the conversation and it is likely that what at first seems to be ordinary communication between two people managing their differences is actually quite complex. It is this complexity that we examine in this book.

Consider two neighbors who happen to see each other at a local café, when one discovers that the other has some property available. A half-joking offer is made and met only with a nod. Two days later, a realtor contacts the property owner about acquiring the property on behalf of a potential buyer whose friend had overheard the conversation at the café. The property owner consults with her three siblings about selling the property that they co-own from a recent inheritance, and then each individually investigates values for comparable property online, as well as the inquiring realtor's credibility. They cannot agree among each other about a sale price for the property, so they contract with their own realtor to help determine a price and to engage the buyer's realtor. After a few exchanges of counteroffers, the seller and buyer agree on a purchase price. Before the sale can be completed, the buyer and the bank financing the purchase require an inspection of the property for defects and compliance with safety and environmental regulations set by government agencies. In addition, before the property exchange is finalized, the government requires certification of the property boundaries and clearing of any debts against it. The inspectors and certifiers involved each produce a document to be signed and attached to the sales contract as proof validating key facts necessary for the buyer's offer and the seller's acceptance.

From the café encounter to the completion of the property transaction, the opening scenario is an instance of something quite recognizable about everyday life: humans are immersed in complex communication. The café encounter between two neighbors is overheard by another, the realtor speaks to the property owner on behalf of an interested party, the owner

4 Seeking, Seeing, and Embracing Polylogue

is actually a group of family members, and the owner and eventual buyer interact through a variety of other parties with their particular, possibly divergent or incomplete, perspectives about the property and the circumstances. The complexity does not simply reside in the important but obvious fact that many different people are engaging each other in the many different events that develop from the café encounter. Complexity resides in the fact that taking any action relative to others, including saying something, can have consequences, even unknown ones, for any of the parties directly or indirectly involved. Moreover, the parties expect that each other, as individuals or collectives, may have reasons for their actions and can be held accountable for having reasons. The acceptability of any action depends, at least partly, on reasons justifying it. Herein lie the risks and opportunities of communication in human activity: when reasons are made explicit and open to criticism, the conduct and outcomes of interaction, as well as the individual and shared perspectives about the circumstances, are given shape, and often in unexpected ways. In our scenario, these events range in formality from casual conversations and online search to consultations and negotiations to transactions requiring signed, official documents. The events are linked together (or unlinked) by how communication's risks and opportunities are managed by those who become involved and by the degree to which one event is consequential for the conduct and outcomes of other events. After all, the property transaction did not have to follow from the café encounter. Differences and disagreements are not per se bugs or failures of communication, but rather natural, even essential, features of communication. How the differences and disagreements are handled within and across these events through argumentation – the making and criticizing of reasons in the context of doubt and disagreement – matters for what develops or not and for the intelligence of the interaction.¹

The scenario lets us formulate the basic problem we address in this book: how to understand the complexity of argumentation, that is, how argument and communication are entangled in human activity. This problem opens up new possibilities for theory and practice in describing,

¹ “Argumentation,” so understood, is clearly a communicative *activity*. Less obviously, it can also denote a communicative *act*, for example, when we speak of pro-argumentation. “Argument,” similarly, can refer to an *object*, an *act*, or an *activity*. These ambiguities, while being a feature of ordinary English, have led to lively conceptual debates in the field of argumentation studies. It's not our intention to explicitly enter into these debates here. Wherever necessary, we clearly disambiguate between these various senses. Whenever context makes it clear that we refer to an activity, we may use the term “argumentation” and “argument” interchangeably.

evaluating, and prescribing argumentation. The complexity to be examined, however, is occluded by a received view of argumentation that depends on a particular characterization of argumentation as a form of communication that happens just between two parties trading reasons and criticisms on “both sides” of an issue in one place at one time for the purpose of two parties to resolve their disagreement, in particular by means of one party convincing another. While the received view has merits that we hope to preserve, its base characterization is a limiting factor for seeing the complexity of argumentation, let alone engaging that complexity.

For instance, the opening scenario could be understood as two parties (i.e., a buyer and a seller) in a one-to-one exchange of a pro and a con position (i.e., accepting or rejecting a purchase price) that happens in one place (i.e., realtor’s office) – but obviously that scenario suggests that there is much more going on argumentatively within and across communicative events. A realtor might, for example, insinuate that the neighborhood is not appropriate for potential buyers from a particular ethnic or religious minority by stating they would feel “more comfortable” someplace else; and when criticized for a bigoted insinuation, she can sneakily respond she merely meant an age group.² Or, instead, the realtor might respond by apologetically pointing out the sad reality of what kind of offers get accepted around here, thus unveiling deeper institutional conditions privileging what is arguable, such as when specific stipulations are written into deeds disallowing property transfers to buyers from a particular race.³ Any such intervention opens new lines of (counter-)argumentation and affects the kind of practical conclusion that can be reached in the event. All the same, an all too common simplification of argumentation – what we call a *dyadic reduction* – dismisses such complexities and the often subtle dynamics that open up and close off argumentative opportunities: what could be said, what would count as a relevant argument, who could become involved, what differences could lead to, and where interaction could take place. The dyadic reduction of the received view is pervasive in technical, professional, media, and lay understandings of argumentation such as when: purchasing is seen as only a buyer and seller exchanging some good, finding a companion is seen as if it was only the two people who fell in love made it happen, health decision-making is seen as only the doctor and the patient selecting one treatment over another, electing

² This example is taken from Camp’s (2018) analysis of the mechanisms of insinuation and denial in everyday conversation.

³ As documented by the Mapping Prejudice Project (www.mappingprejudice.org/).

6 Seeking, Seeing, and Embracing Polylogue

leaders is treated as a choice between only left or right, handling a novel viral pandemic is treated as a choice only between saving the economy or saving public health, and policy controversy is treated as siding with either climate change acceptors or deniers. This list just names a few.

The dyadic reduction in technical, professional, and everyday efforts to describe, evaluate, and prescribe practices of argumentation is not only pervasive but also fundamentally problematic. The received view's limiting factors are particularly poignant with respect to understanding contemporary controversies and decision-making but also consequential for what knowledge from other fields is taken to be relevant for understanding argumentation and for the recovery of important insights from the history of argumentation theory and practice. In contrast to the received view, we seek to articulate an alternative path of inquiry that is more deeply engaged with the entanglement of argumentation and complex communication in human activity.

Our opening scenario begins the turn from the dyadic reduction by building on our basic observation that communicative situations have always been replete with "third parties": some ready to ameliorate or exploit differences and the making and criticizing of reasons, and others affected by the way differences are handled. More official, classical argumentative situations include judges, lawyers, juries, mediators, arbitrators, or audiences in all their well-known forms and capacities (assembly members, crowds, viewers). Less official, everyday situations, involve unaddressed bystanders, overhearers, and eavesdroppers in addition to directly addressed participants. And now, in the increasingly digitalized environments, this basic fact is exacerbated as highly complex networks of participants take up a variety of roles relative to the making and criticizing of reasons. These include addressees, readers, lurkers, trolls, moderators, service providers, conveners, AI-bots, advertisers, etc., all of whom tap into the affordances of devices, apps, platforms, and algorithms that underpin both formal and informal everyday interactions of people as they participate in social, civic, and economic life. Giving attention to third parties, especially in the evolving digital environment, disrupts some of the most basic ways argumentation is delineated such as interpersonal (micro) in contrast to mass public (macro) or as institutional (procedural, fact-based) in contrast to noninstitutional (free-wheeling, value-based). Yet surprisingly, third parties, and the many-to-many communication their roles reveal, are typically neglected in argumentation analysis, evaluation, and prescription.

This basic observation, moreover, brings new focus to the fact that the conduct of argumentation matters. Yet, while philosophers from Socrates to Habermas have argued that the quality of argumentative exchanges is the best check on human rationality, the correspondence between the individual human capacity and willingness to make and criticize reasons and the intelligence of the way this capacity is collectively organized remains an elusive theoretical problem and a persistent practical issue. In complex communication, the quality of interaction is an achievement that goes beyond the individual rationality of each supposed participant. For instance, the fact that self-interested parties to legal proceedings (e.g., plaintiff and defendant) are characteristically incapable or unwilling to yield to the force of the better argument of the other party does not render these proceedings flawed or useless. Over and above these two parties, it is a collective achievement of judges, attorneys, witnesses, expert assessors, jury members, and other courts of appeal to safeguard the reasonableness of the procedure and its final outcome. On the other hand, two dozen intelligent and critically minded people do not necessarily generate critical and intelligent exchanges on their Facebook pages. Moreover, the way in which complex communication, as in the opening scenario, becomes organized involves many choices, reflective or not, about the who, what, and where that is included in or excluded from the system of transactions and the consequences of those choices. One of our chief arguments throughout this book is that simplifications that ignore, downplay, hide, or dismiss such important realities of complex communication are detrimental to understanding and improving argumentation and thus to seeking intelligent interaction.

Our main task in this book is to highlight and reimagine the concern with the rationality of many-to-many communication that is blocked by the received view's dyadic preoccupations about argumentation and its valorization of one-to-one and one-to-many communication. We give the concern about many-to-many communication a particular twist with the term *polylogue* to recognize that in complex communication many parties (*players*) pursue many distinct standpoints and rationales (*positions*) across multiple situations (*places*). The crucial point in recognizing polylogue is the obligation it creates to understand how argumentation and complex communication are entangled in human activity – that is, to explain how positions, players, and places are organized through argumentation and the consequences of their systemic interdependencies. The received dyadic view hinders this important task. So in making the case that it is imperative to see *polylogue*, we also make a case for embracing the descriptive,

8 Seeking, Seeing, and Embracing Polylogue

normative, and prescriptive implications of polylogue for argumentation theory and practice.

We chose *polylogue* as a simple yet perspicuous term for renewing and advancing inquiry of argumentation in complex communication. For the basic understanding of the concept, it suffices to unpack its Greek etymology – *poly-logos* signifies discourse (λόγος: *logos*) between many (πολύ: *poly*).⁴ In this sense, it can easily be added to the common vocabulary of other words of Greek origin frequently used in the same semantic field, such as *monologue* or *dialogue*. Especially *mono-logos*, discourse of a single person, is a direct equivalent here. Dialogue, by contrast, might be a confusing term. Etymologically, *dia-logos* means “through” discourse; but this is all too easily mistaken for a *di-logos*, discourse between “two.” This slight difference in the original Greek prefixes arguably contributes to the dyadic reduction mentioned above. Indeed, both ordinary and academic vocabulary fall prey to the deeply entrenched practice of limiting a dialogue to a di-logue: dialogue becomes basically an interaction between *two* speakers, and argumentative dialogue is characteristically theorized as an exchange of reasons and criticisms between only *two* arguers (proponent–opponent, protagonist–antagonist, arguer–critic, questioner–answerer). We aim to critically analyze this practice and its consequences.⁵

To further set the stage for our investigation of polylogues, we introduce three chief motivations for addressing polylogue in the first place. The first of them is the undeniable empirical reality of polylogue. As in our opening scenario, much of people’s daily argumentation happens in complex communicative situations. That this fact cannot be simply dismissed has been reflected in an ongoing practical concern with the conduct and rationality of many-to-many communication and its mediation (Section 1.1). In this context, second, it is necessary and quite thrilling to trace and understand the origins of the theoretical dismissal of this reality via its reduction to dyadic interaction (Section 1.2). Finally, it’s equally necessary

⁴ Although we are reminded by our Greek friends that in modern usage a *polylogos* can also signify a person who produces a lot of discourse, that is, a loquacious talker, we do not intend to use this notion in this sense.

⁵ One last etymological clarification before we move on. Given the capacious, and very central, meaning of the notion of *logos* in ancient Greece – which may refer to a “word,” “discourse,” “opinion,” “thought,” “account,” “reason,” “argument,” “rule,” “ground,” etc. – it is common to follow Aristotle and understand “logos” with a normative edge as “reasoned discourse.” This paves the way for conceiving of polylogues as reasoned (based on reason-giving and reason-criticizing) and thus, at least ideally, also reasonable or intelligent interactions between many. As will become clear from our discussion throughout the book, this etymologically natural sense will be important for studying specifically argumentative polylogues.

to acknowledge various developments in contemporary argumentation theory – most importantly, scrutiny of the context dependence of reasoning – that show there is more to see, to evaluate, and to manage in argumentation than the schematic simplifications of the dyadic reduction project (Section 1.3). Yet, these developments also reveal some unfinished business in reversing the dyadic reduction and embracing the complexity of argumentation. Our study of polylogue – this book – explores precisely the curious theory-reality gap, occasionally noticed but overall inadequately or incompletely treated. While we hope scholarly business of any sort can never be quite finished, we at least argue the steps we take here advance the study of argumentation in complex communication.

1.1 Managing Disagreement under Polylogical Conditions

The polylogical challenge to the received imaginary of argumentation is ever more obvious in light of the radical transformations in communication media and the increasing digitalization of social and institutional life. Consider the circumstances of the prominent platform-based companies coming to terms with the consequences of creating a place for large-scale, many-to-many, and, ostensibly, reasonable communication. One of Twitter's founders, Evan Williams, highlighted an empirical and normative naïveté all too prominent in the social media era when he said in a May 2017 *New York Times* interview, "I thought once everybody could speak freely and exchange information and ideas, the world is automatically going to be a better place." And, significantly, he added: "I was wrong about that." It was as though the platform was simply enabling a series of unfettered encounters, like face-to-face, one-on-one conversations, where people freely and reasonably engage. This widely held presumption crashed into another communicative reality when many social platforms were exposed for participating in systematic, often hidden, distortions and manipulations of participation and content that in some cases were conducted by "rogue" commercial or state agents exploiting affordances of the platform.

Disagreement, it turned out, was a many-splendored opportunity for interested third parties, including the platform companies, whose actions were facilitated by the design of social media platforms to cultivate data by curating interactions. Indeed, the European Union's 2018 General Data Protection Regulation requirements exposed just how many hidden commercial organizations act as third parties to the personalized interactions people have with each other and with various online services. In light of

this, it was a telling moment when, in an interview during Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg's spring 2018 tour defending Facebook's societal role, he claimed that Facebook, with its more than two billion members, is more like a government than a business (Zuckerberg on Kleinberg show, March 2018). Indeed, it remains empirically and normatively naïve to expect that free, critical, and reasonable communicative exchanges can naturally happen at scale. And when exploiting disagreement at scale becomes part of the business model, it is necessary to admit that there are serious governance issues in generating trustworthy content and legitimate many-to-many communication. And now, all the platform companies have come in for at least some critical reassessment of their pervasive impact on the most basic interactions where people work out social and civic relations, economic exchange, political choice, and knowledge development. The contemporary struggle with platform companies reveals an age-old problem with a new media wrinkle – that is, admitting the puzzles of polylogue is not the same as understanding it.

What was (is) apparently lost on social media and other platform entrepreneurs about many-to-many communication was a front-and-center consideration for the authors of the United States Constitution when in 1788 they had to decide on “the number [of members in the House of Representatives] most convenient for a representative legislature” (Madison, 1788/2003, p. 269). Should the citizens of the new republic be represented by a few dozen or a few hundred delegates? According to James Madison, the number needed to be substantial in order to “secure the benefits of free consultation and discussion” and yet significantly limited so as not to let passion “wrest the sceptre from reason” (Madison, 1788/2003, p. 270). Sixty-five representatives, as stipulated by Art. 1, sect. 2, of the Constitution (pending the first national census), was a reasonable choice, given the historical circumstances of the nascent country, argued Madison. And he added a defensive punchline to those who would only be satisfied with a much larger assembly: “Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob” (Madison, 1788/2003, p. 270). Madison and other framers of the Constitution thus clearly recognized the practical issue that the capacity and willingness of individuals to argue does not guarantee intelligent interaction. They feared that the human capacities to make and criticize reasons would yield to the passions, unfounded arguments, and other behaviors characteristic of a mob. They also had ideas about the potential for disagreement to be managed in a normatively justifiable and yet workable manner that can

Seeking Polylogue

11

realize what is actually possible for knowing and acting in less-than-ideal circumstances.

As Madison's words show, the framers turned to the dialectically inspired Socratic ideal for guidance to define an assembly that could tame complex communication's risks while exploiting its opportunities in devising prudent courses of action. Was he really wrong in drawing upon the Socratic ideal for this design? Here, it is important to stress again that a reasoned dialogue between two speakers who exchange arguments and counterarguments – traditionally called “dialectic” and epitomized in the ideal Socratic dialogue – has long shaped understanding of what intelligent interaction is and what it should be. Perhaps Madison understood the problem of reasonable communication being swamped in the intricate passions and dynamics of an uncontrollable mob so well, that – by limiting numbers to better match their idealization of reasoned dialogue – he had already found a solution that would prevent surprise and harm, unlike the Facebook and other platform CEOs.

The framers and the platform CEOs share a concern with the uses of argument in complex communication for translating pluralistic perspectives, opinions, tastes, and preferences of the many into courses of action. While they may differ about the role of deliberation, administration, and markets in shaping courses of action, their choices highlight a practical awareness of communication as an architectonic art about configuring the interaction of positions, players, and places to realize a particular conduct and quality of argumentation. The framers devised a novel approach for a governance platform built around managing differences of opinion to construct policies. The platform found its legitimacy in its capacity for collective self-determination and adaptive development grounded in human rights rather than a monarchy, theocracy, or despotism. However, there was more and less to the framers' practical theorizing about scaling up from dyadic Socratic interaction, with its emphasis on individual skills and virtues, to “polylogical” interactions where various collective dynamics enter the stage. The more involved their choices about who had the individual skills and virtues to participate in representative deliberations. Most notably, these choices included privileging propertied, white men as legitimate participants in public deliberation while other people were not considered legitimate public participants – women, those defined as property without any human rights whatsoever (the enslaved Africans, African-Americans, and conquered indigenous peoples), and others as objects of conquest (indigenous peoples still free at the time). The less involved the