

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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Managing Disagreement in a Polylogue

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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its prototypical examples – Socratic dialogues, legal disputes, presidential debates – seems to have been rapidly superseded by an open, unruly, hard-to-control, many-to-many online conversation.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

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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

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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

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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.