

# ONGOING COMMUNICATION AS KNOWLEDGE IN PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL MEDIA - DEMOCRACY IN TEACHING AND WORKING

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores interactions on professional social media like Slack and Teams and their consequences of use in educational and professional settings and further how they shape designers' understanding of the concept of knowledge and in extension democratic processes. The main object of this study is how communication functions, rather than its content. We emphasise how such communication functioning informs service design practices. To investigate these mechanisms, we use theories from communication in sports, play, and games, as well as conversation- and systems theory. The effects of the conversations on professional media are discussed in relation to knowing and democratic mechanisms and change. Finally, we suggest aspects to consider when planning, facilitating, and analysing communication in design processes in relation to democracy.

*Keywords: Democracy, professional social media, Slack, communication, conversation theory*

## 1 RESEARCH DESIGN

Our interest in the theory of interaction systems and communication in sports, play, and games, as well as communication and systems theory, grounds our perspective of understanding communications elicited on professional social media platforms such as Slack and Teams, typically used in agile processes in service design cooperation processes. The research is oriented about the method of conversation theory [1, 2]. We have utilised the method as means of learning by discussing different contexts of functioning between communication in *professional social media* and team sports, in relation to theory on communication. The effects of these conversations are discussed in relation to democracy theory [3]. By conversation theory thus we consider interaction and knowing as an interrelated dual function of each other, in ongoing communication in team sports and social media programs.

### 1.1 Conversation theory as a method to study communication dynamics

Conversation theory, as described by Pask (1978) involves a situation that sets the “stage for shared language” based on “interactions that may build ... [sufficiently] shared understanding ... that may lead to ... action or (trans)action—a coordinated interaction in domains other than language” (Pangaro, 2017). Reactions, in this view, refer to a priori knowledge, while communication that builds on other communication refers to relations that create a continuing whole. Conversation theory grew out of the early development of cybernetics. Gordon Pask, a pioneer in the field, described in the mid 1970's the Conversation theory, which is referred to by Paul Pangaro (2017), with the words of Pask: “Conversations are the things we study”, and such they facilitate “learning to learn. (Pask in: Pangaro, 2017) In a conversation a student or teacher or others, build on or utilise communication to create the subsequent communication. Counter to what typically happens social media, where people react to a shared uttering, conversations thus build on communication to create new meanings and knowledge (Pangaro, 2017; Pask, 1978; Scott, 2015; Sweeting, 2015, 2019).

More simply, conversations can be described by the example of how an individual utters a thought, the next person builds on this thought by adding something to it, taking it into a new direction or paradigm. The uttering of the second individual is thus externally initiated by the first. The third individual builds on the argumentation of the second with the first in mind. That is as the utterings build on each other

the conversation will respectively and gradually distance the discussion from prior thinking by the partaking individuals and create new thinking. That is

“...for conversation to have occurred, something must have changed for one or more of the participants – understandings, concepts, intent, values. That is, something has evolved. Otherwise, it is merely the exchange of messages (Pask (1981) in: Pangaro, 2017)

The concept of conversation is not far from how Schön (1995) later described how practitioners reflects in their work processes and how for example a change in a conversation performed drawing in design changes the conversation, which in turn changes the drawing, a process that subsequently has a direct influence on the properties of something other than the conversation, such as a service or product. Conversation theory then expands the complexity of a situation, by individuals studying the effect of change, being forced to take the standpoint of- or build on arguments that might conflict with personal thoughts or values and allows for the remaining in uncertainty by the certainty of the frame or rules for the activity. We use conversation theory to discuss communication dynamics in the unlike contexts of professional social media and team sports in relation to functions of democracy.

## 1.2 Typologies of Democracy

Margolin (2012) recognises the convergence between democracy and design in four respects: *design of democracy* which is about improving democratic processes and the institutions on which democracy is built. It addresses the structural elements that function as frames and regulators of human action in a democratic system. Areas of improving is typically within institutions, such as branches of government, agencies, bureaus, courts, and offices, and procedures, such as laws, regulations, rules and protocols. *Design for democracy* seeks to enable more people to participate in the democratic process, especially by technology. By such it increases the opportunities for citizens to participate in deliberate processes. It focuses on transparency (which enables citizens to be aware of on-going processes of governance) and deliberative methods, which can be understood as the opportunity to be involved in decision-making processes. *Design in democracy* builds access, openness, and transparency into institutions in ways that assure equality and justice. It refers to all design initiatives that are particularly responsive to the goals of democracy. It may deal with the provision of human rights and fundamental freedoms (such as access to food, shelter, healthcare, and education) and, more in general, with the transition towards a more resilient, fair, and sustainable society. *Design as democracy* (added by Manzini) is the practice of participatory design, which constitutes the possibility for diverse actors to shape our present and future worlds in fair and inclusive ways. It sets a stage on which diverse actors can come together and democratically collaborate in shaping their present and future worlds. It engages diverse people and publics in co-designing and co-producing processes concerning different aspects of their everyday life. The different forms of democracy can roughly be sorted into four main groups: representative, direct, deliberate (participation and dialogue), liquid (a combination of direct and representative democracy).

## 2 COMMUNICATIONS IN LEARNING AND WORKING ENVIRONMENTS

Ongoing communication in service design development contexts has changed with the embracing of new tools. Agile- and scrum cooperation structures has changed development processes from linear- to a circular to ensure a lean, flexible, and iterative design processes that produce less costs and errors. Work environment has therefore been restructured towards autonomous teams that are continuously changed in relation to demands for development. Professional social media applications have been taken into use in this working environment to make the communication within the group efficient and perhaps to prevent isolation between the teams. Similarly design students are introduced to the same tools to prepare for future practice. These social media applications have changed ongoing communication and further how developers and students learn and thus their *knowing*. We state that the communication on professional social media applications has become the product of the application, each becoming input to others and that the communication itself is utilised as knowledge. This function “indicates that the entire structure is self-making and organisationally closed” [2], and that the learning is limited to the relations between the communications within the platform discussions and thus overlooking recognised knowledge.

### **3 COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION**

It is interesting to consider the difference between communication and information in relation to what influences an actor (designer or player). An interview, a focus group, a report, or a statement- entities often used in a design process do not necessarily inform or influence practitioners or students. According to Bateson, information can be understood as communication that makes a difference [4]. That is, if communication makes someone think or act, it makes a difference. One could say that when communication is selected upon it informs.

#### **3.1 Communication**

Systems theory does not regard only verbal and written expressions as communication. Rather, it suggests that not communicating is impossible [5], or rather, that not communicating is also communication- mimicry, movements, and general behaviour also function as communication. Furthermore, communication is not considered a linear process. The earlier understanding of communication as something received from a sender is far from sufficient for understanding complex interaction systems. Instead, communication is understood as relational characterised by cyclic functioning [6, 7]. Such cyclic functioning can be described as balancing or reinforcing, for example, when politician A makes a statement in a discussion that makes politician B angry, which in turn makes politician A angry, and so on. A balancing element in such a dialogue would be for either politician A or B to communicate in a way that calms the other. Such cyclic functioning is called feedback loops. The study of communication thus involves observing what is communicated as well as examining how communication functions as a feedback loop that, in turn, influences or produces new communication.

#### **3.2 Real-time Communication**

In football, the main basis for players' thinking and acting is real-time communication created by the frame of the activity, which is reductionist in nature, a fact reinforced by time constraints. During a football match, real-time communication consists of the position of the ball and other players on the court, their speed, height, and direction. This means that everyone communicates with everyone simultaneously, creating a situation of continuous simultaneous communication. Observing such relationships gives an understanding of obstacles and opportunities in the game.

Communication on professional social media functions similarly to a football game. Participation in a discussion depends on using real-time information which in this context can be considered intelligent behaviour, otherwise you will not be read or be part of the game. The real-time nature of social media communication influences thus the content, making ongoing simultaneous communication appear as knowledge. Therefore, more recognised sources are often overlooked. On professional social media the communication processes are similar. Partakers share their processes, and this communication makes the basis for new sharing.

Social media shapes communication in society through key functions: real-time communication as a foundation for further interaction and the emotional recording of this communication to evaluate its content. On social media, communication happens in real-time. A fitting analogy for this can be found in team sports, such as a football. In a football match, the position of the ball and other players on the court, their speed, height, and direction of movement constitute the core of communication. This means that everyone communicates with everyone simultaneously. In such continuous simultaneous communication, selected communication is directly used as information, leading to further actions that, in turn, function as communication.

Additionally, relationships between different communications inform beyond direct simultaneous communication. These relationships can, for example, manifest when a player's movement is noticed by both teammates and opponents, prompting them to follow that movement. Such collective movements or actions reduce the possibility of passing the ball to a covered player while simultaneously signalling open space for others to run into. Observing these relationships between communications provides an understanding of obstacles and opportunities in the game. This kind of observation of communication can be described as: "I see - that you see - that I see," and so on. The relationships between communications, therefore, generate communication in themselves.

#### **3.3 Feelings as quality in real-time Communication**

A similar function can be observed on professional social media, where emotional reactions are documented, stored, or linked to statements. Arguments and opinions are assessed based on the emotions

they evoke using emotional symbols (emojis) such as likes or hearts. Emojis thus form the basis for understanding the perceived quality of an argument. Liked arguments create the foundation for further communication, while disliked statements fade away. This influences the discourse. Even more importantly, emotional reactions function as meta-communication, establishing a relationship between statements. The relationship between one communication and another, through emojis, amplifies the experience of the content and serves as communication itself. A statement can gain status as the most liked, most read, or most emotionally engaging. What is most liked, hearted, etc., becomes the basis for further communication and is liked again. Accumulated emotional reactions thus establish the foundation for a self-reinforcing, cyclical communication pattern- independent of its truthfulness.

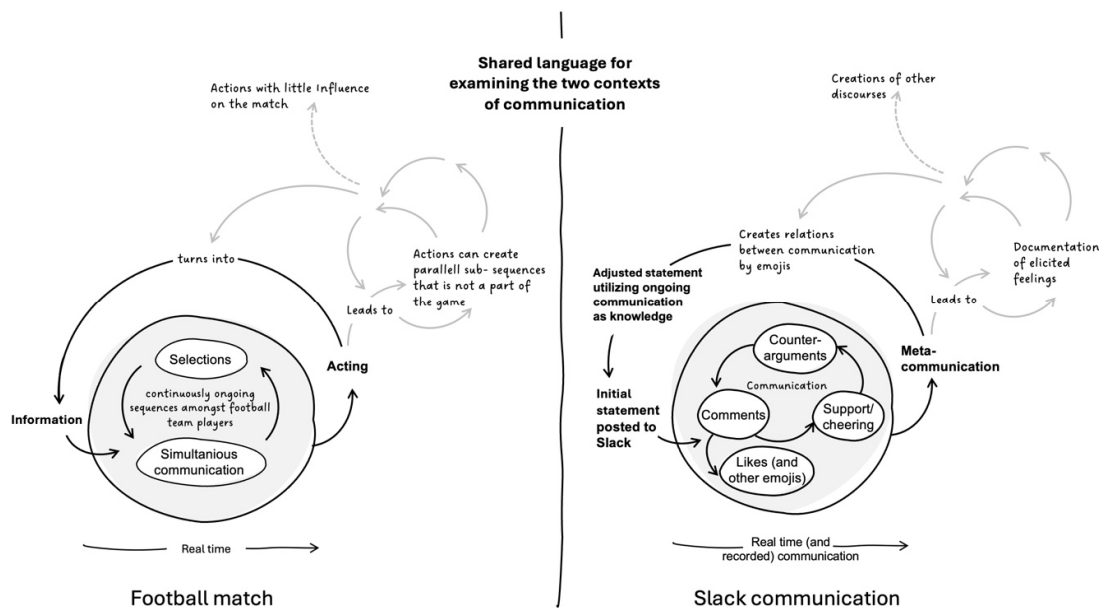


Figure 1. Illustration of the processes of communication in football matches and professional social media depicting how real time communication serves as the major input for information in a football match. On professional social media the communication process is similar, however, in this context the communication is influenced by metacommunication that exists of accumulated emotional reactions connected to the communication

#### 4 HOW PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL MEDIA SHAPES COMMUNICATION IN PRACTICE AND EDUCATION

In football, from a systemic perspective, it is intelligent behaviour to use simultaneous communication as information and thus as a basis for thinking, acting, or knowledge. The knowledge created in the game is used, selected upon, that in turn produces further cycles of communication. In an ongoing football game, one does not construct a complete whole, like a symphony composed of various elements or a car that can only function when all its parts work together. Instead, a real-time direction of communication emerges- a conversation or discourse.

Similarly, a real-time direction of communication or different streams of thoughts emerge on professional social media, based on emotional relationships. In such chains of argumentation, thoughts are not evaluated against a complex, holistic perspective. Instead, arguments liked or disliked by others and oneself are stacked into a sequence (similar to discourse in a football game or playlists on Spotify) [8]. This serves to reinforce the argument rather than to challenge it. Thoughts and ideas are no longer discussed they are collected and thus so called *shared*.

Participation in a discussion on social media demands on using real-time information as knowledge, which, in this context, can be considered intelligent behaviour. This because if one fails to do so, one becomes irrelevant in the discourse. Of course, it is possible to reference established knowledge on social media, and this does happen. However, time constraints, text length limitations, and reading habits shaped by the platform's structure make it difficult to engage with longer, well-thought-out texts and

critical thinking. Additionally, if one pauses to reflect and respond in a conversation, to think critically about one's own critical thinking, other statements that have already followed the real-time communication will often be perceived as more relevant, timely, and understandable.

Thus, trust in knowledge on social media is controlled by accumulated emotional reactions and their relationships, based on real-time communication. This mechanism has become habitual and has strengthened an acceptance of that it is natural to *feel* and believe whether knowledge or research is correct. The way communication takes place on social media, therefore, influences its content and contributes to the perception that simultaneous communication itself constitutes knowledge.

## **5 IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN AND LOCAL DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES**

The above discussion reveals that the communication and the relationships between different communications produced by accumulated feelings connected to utterings that arise within the framework of professional social media- will primarily be influenced by the ongoing simultaneous communication itself, in a self-producing closed environment. With origin in this understanding, we have listed up some points that can be of interest when considering communication platforms for students and service designers in relation to quality in general and democracy processes in particular:

- a) Density problem in liquid democracy: social media creates communication in which everyone communicates with everyone simultaneously. This is a democratic function; however, the density of such communication makes the communication less available and critically considered.
- b) Feelings as quality criteria: Discussions on professional social media as well as in a football match is partly directed by the emotional relations between utterings. The metacommunication by accumulated emojis connected to an uttering is thus regarded a quality that may be of more importance than the content of the communication.
- c) Just like in a football match, one must communicate, "I am part of the game," to participate on social media. Such metacommunication, which cultivates a sense of community, reduces variation and ensures that the activity can continue. The medium thus generates a reductionist function.
- d) To participate in ongoing communication on social media, within the time constraints this framework creates, it is practical to use the ongoing communication, what others think, as knowledge. This excludes most recognised knowledge.
- e) The ongoing communication used as knowledge thus influences the framework for the discourse. Furthermore, the ability to collect arguments on social media, in the same way one collects songs on Spotify, reduces the understanding of long-term and holistic perspectives as well as alternative viewpoints. That is, just listening to songs within a self-curated whole- effect how one understands an individual song, the ability to pick arguments and stack them in a conversation on professional social media reduces understanding of the whole.
- f) The framework of social media thus reduces critical thinking about one's own critical thinking and thus ability to learning to learn. The way communication happens influences what people mean and may ultimately encourage individuals to express opinions they do not actually hold.
- g) Generally, it may be the case that the framework for discussions as well as the communication, information, and metacommunication it generates- influences how people think in service design environments. Furthermore, studies of social dynamics can be enriched by recognising that, for instance, a design principal may care more about the metacommunication a statement generates than about the direct meaning of the statement itself.
- h) It is therefore important to study how *the manner of communication and its functioning can influence the content of communication.*
- i) These factors affect people's immediate and long-term thinking and actions, and consequently, liquid democratic function in education and service design teams.

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