

# Constructive Dialogs

## Systemic Interdependencies of Associating and Disassociating Communication

**Philipp BELCREDI**

Systemic Management and Organizational Consultant  
1030 Vienna, Austria

**Tilia STINGL DE VASCONCELOS GUEDES**

Management Consultant  
2340 Mödling, Austria

### ABSTRACT

If you have ever tried to follow a discussion on a controversial topic on any social media platform such as Facebook or Twitter, you may have noticed that even the smallest deviation from the majority opinion can lead to the exclusion of the person from the ongoing discussion.

Terms like cancel culture, online bashing, Twitter storm, etc., also describe this kind of disassociating communication. However, every ostracism decreases the size of the remaining in-group, to the point where society could end up fragmented into multitudes of small social systems.

On one hand, a democratic society in which a dialog is only possible in smaller units tends to be far more complex and thus far less capable of acting than a society that favors a broader discourse. On the other hand, social interaction that allows and incorporates many different opinions, views, propositions, and conclusions seems to require a large effort. For an open-minded discourse to succeed, our communication shall transcend both the content dialog (first-order) and the meta-dialog (second-order) so as to set the dialog in relation to its context.

In this paper we spotlight the differences between associating and disassociating communication. We also use the viewpoint of social systems theory to explore not only answers to questions about the consequences of avoiding responsibility for the quality of our dialogs, but also the solutions a distinction-based approach offers to communication challenges.

**Keywords:** Contextualization, second-order dialog, social interaction, social systems theory, distinction-based approach

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The social theorist Niklas Luhmann defines a dialog as a “social model of establishing the truth.”[1] While this definition does not necessarily claim that “the truth” actually exists, it does view dialog as an essential tool for

mutual understanding in and between social systems. This definition allows a broad use of the term. A dialog is not simply to be understood in the sense of positively judged mutual understanding. It can also be challenging, embarrassing, or even painful for the communication partners involved. It embraces discussions, chats, talks, reading, and/or debates—every kind of communication that proposes to establish a social truth or understanding.

With the triumphal advance of communication technologies, the possibility of instant worldwide connections and interactions, as well as the access of a large part of the world’s population to social media, dialogs can take place in a single broad platform, but the dialog participants may live in very different realities. No wonder that “establishing a social truth” under these conditions can be challenging.

“Lies are more engaging online than truth,” says Yaël Eisenstat, former CIA analyst and Facebook employee on her TED-Talk. [2] However, alleged lies are not engaging because they are lies but rather because of the nature of dialogs, where establishing a social truth is the goal. So, both sides—the one telling lies (or pretended truths) and the one fighting against them—will remain engaged in a dialog around a lie. Whereas when both sides agree on a “truth,” the tendency is that communication develops into a fragmented speech—with much less engagement.

Nevertheless, many of the challenges society faces nowadays must be addressed globally instead of locally. Different parts of the world may substantially influence each other—for instance, in environmental, technological, or economic issues—in ways that render it impossible to ignore the actions and beliefs of other nations or people. In this context, worldwide communication platforms become essential and powerful tools for dialog for both: mutual understanding and hostility.

Therefore, individual action within a dialog becomes tremendously important. Remarkably, especially in a globalized discussion, it becomes crucial to know more about ourselves and about our individual impact on the community. This includes being able to properly

differentiate ourselves from others and to be more conscious of our place in a dialog. The historian Yuval Noah Harari alerts us to the dangers of believing that we are better than members of another group. “The enemies of liberal democracy hack our feelings of fear and hate and vanity, and then use these feelings to polarize and destroy,” Harari warns. In his TED-Talk, Harari goes further. He stresses that “[i]t is the responsibility of all of us to get to know our weaknesses and make sure they don't become weapons.” [3]

With regard to the above elaborated thoughts, we want to address from a system-theory point of view the following questions in this paper:

1. What are the consequences of not taking responsibility for the quality of our dialogs?
2. What differences can we observe between associating and disassociating communication and what can we learn from them?
3. What can distinction-based methods offer to solve issues linked to the disassociating communication that society is currently facing?

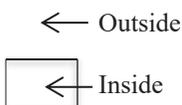
En route to the answers to these questions, we will start by outlining the framework of social systems theory and distinction-based theories and methods. Next, we explain the differences between associating and disassociating communication styles grounded on our distinction-based work in the context of systemic organizational development and personal development work contexts. Finally, we have a glance at how distinction-based methods can enable constructive dialogs.

## 2. BUILDING SOCIAL SYSTEMS: SETTING DIFFERENCES

George Spencer-Brown’s book “Laws of Form” (LoF) proposes a topological notation based on one symbol, *the Mark* (also called *the Cross*):



This symbol is considered to represent a distinction between its inside and its outside:



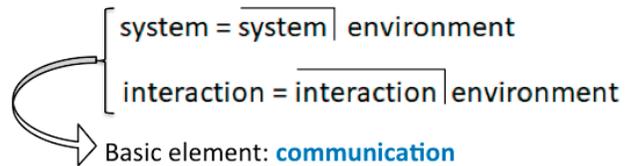
*The Mark* is therefore to be regarded “as shorthand for a rectangle drawn in the plane and dividing the plane into the regions inside and outside the rectangle.” [4]

The notation has been also used to examine particular forms of communication in comparison to the context in which the communication is being performed. Dirk Baecker, in particular, has done continuative and profound work in this field. Contemplating circumstances with the LoF’s notation gives us the opportunity to clarify some hidden perspectives and to summarize important aspects of a situation.

Luhmann also uses the concepts presented in LoF to define social systems. Accordingly, social systems can be defined by the differences between the system and its environment. The same happens to interactions: they are the difference between them and everything else (the “environment,” see Figure 1). Because this difference is so elementary—“the environment” is *everything* outside a system—we do not need to stress it all the time. In addition, we talk only about “the system.” However, the system only exists or can be formed in contrast, by being distinguished from something or someone else.

For instance, we can only talk about “an American culture” because we intrinsically set this culture in contrast to other cultures. We then talk about the differences that we can figure out between Americans and other nations. It would make less sense to describe a culture by stressing that these people breathe or close their eyes when they are sleeping.

Therefore, even if two systems operate or are formed by the same elements, they can be distinguished in contrast to their contexts (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1**  
*Social systems and interactions have “communications” as their basic element*

To differentiate social systems we have to look at their operations; for them to differentiate each other, they have to examine their “codes” and/or “programs.” Doing so they both create *and* (try to) reduce complexity. For instance, while one of the codes of the economic system is payment/nonpayment and its program could be prices, the codes of the legal system would be legal/illegal and its program the law.

Interaction systems could instantly connect to one of the afore-mentioned functional systems—economic and/or legal—but it could also instantly change the topic, use

other codes, or simply interact without connecting to any functional system.

### 3. SHAPING SOCIAL SYSTEMS

Considering in what way the social systems theory defines how functional systems and interactions differentiate from each other, we can profit from an additional approach to describe how language, culture, faith, and symbols contribute to build the notion of groups, nations, teams, and communities.

A fictional example on how to define a group of cats shall elucidate the way one can use the terms of LoF to describe social realities:

Let's assume that there are a certain number of cats in a house. At the beginning every cat is considered healthy. However, unexpectedly one cat gets sick. As observers we can figure out the difference:

sick cats | healthy cats

But then, let us further assume that the observers decide to agree on considering every disease, mole or spot, itchiness, and hiccup that any cat in the house could ever experience. When it gets to the point that every cat is considered sick, there may be a need for another code to differentiate the cats, for instance:

infectious disease | not infectious disease

Consequently, the one side of the "code" only exists if the other side is also observable. We need categories to communicate our observations and reduce complexity. Thus, categories carry the potential to expand but also to exclude communication in social systems.

### 4. DISASSOCIATING COMMUNICATION

Humans are primarily social beings. "Social cooperation is our key to survival and reproduction." [5] Being able to work together as a large number of individuals gives us many advantages compared to other species. The more of us who believe in the same story, the more we are able to cooperate, and the greater the probability that we can reach our goals. But this old social mechanism can also cause inconveniences: Groups with different ideas tend to confront or even fight each other for who has the "better" idea.

Meanwhile, ostracism decreases the size of the remaining in-group, to the point where society could end up fragmented into a multitude of small social systems. The process of social fragmentation may happen by chance with no purpose or intention behind it. In the current ideological discourse, one may observe the code ...

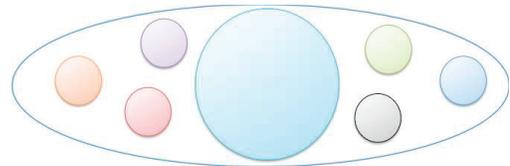
ignorant | enlightened

... being used to describe the difference between one side and the other. However, if both sides are using the same code (words, validations), just in opposite ways, they now have in common that they each regard the other group as ignorant. They become alike in their attitudes. Differences in the content of the original argumentation between the two groups begin to fade.

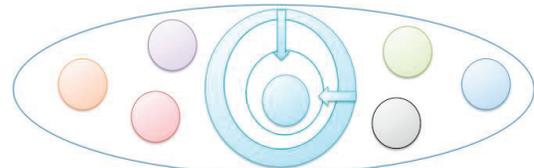
Hence, to establish new differences, communication will find new codes again. The two sides may continue to interact in order to establish further clarity about authority or different ideologies or distinctive language.

Social systems also tend to agree on a common sense of what communication is allowable for a broader discourse. As an extreme example, in the Middle Ages, speaking against the ideologies of the Church could cost one their life. There were very specific codes on how to interact so that a discourse would be acceptable. Similar principles remain to this day, though mostly with less drastic punishments.

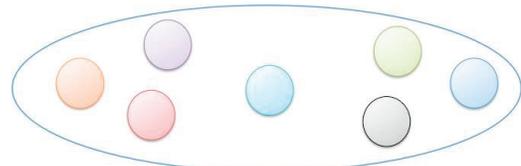
I.



II.



III.



**Figure 2**

*The process of ostracism*

But a democratic society that only allows very specific or coordinated dialogs at the center of a societal discourse can also create negative consequences for itself. The communication outside of this supposed center grows, and consequently this center no longer is a weighted average of opinions, but splits apart into various smaller groups of differing and extreme opinions (cf. **Figure 2** which illustrates this process).

This assumed center of a social discourse as a platform

for broader communication will gradually disappear under the circumstances of excluded communications. Social restrictions that aim to reduce complexity often lead to even greater complexity. [6]

So, by reducing the variety of communications that are accepted in a society, the danger grows of ending up divided in unrelated extremes. This also means that by excluding other opinions one's own peer group may lose impact in the long run.

The term "disassociating communication" is used here to describe different rhetoric and social practices, which collaborate to restrict or exclude certain communications. Some examples of disassociating communication can be found in contemporary practices such as online bashing, cancel culture, Twitter storm, etc. Individual attitudes on communication culture of a group can be recognized as examples of disassociating communication. This may be the case when it becomes common to reply to undesirable ideas with ad hominem arguments, or responding to tone, or judging instead of describing, or generalizing, or even devaluating other people's opinions.

### 5. DISASSOCIATING VERSUS ASSOCIATING COMMUNICATION

Our prior statement regarding disassociating communication could suggest that there is a clear definition on what it really is, which is not actually the case. On the contrary, there is no such thing as a clear disassociating communication. Even the most insulting words or gestures could be supportive of a better relationship, as, for example, in a humorous context. Depending on the situation, communicative actions provoke different reactions. It is always a "trial and error game" when one wants to find out how to affect others in which way.

According to Gregory Bateson, the perception of a "difference that makes a difference" is key to a learning process. Conforming to Steve de Shazer, M. Varga v Kibeth, Insa Sparrer, and to our work with organizations and individuals, relevant differences lead us to more fundamental insights than content knowledge—the latter always needs an agreed-upon definition to make it helpful in the communication process, or, in other words, to make it useful in finding a solution. Therefore, we propose the table below (see **Figure 3**). The table explains the relevant differences between the terms on the left and right sides and does so in relation to the other term instead of trying to argue what is right or wrong, or what is properly understood or not. We call this approach distinction-based or comparative systemic. From this point of view, no definition of anything should be accepted as absolutely accurate in every situation—since the context can potentially change meanings and outputs.

Thus, if we want some guidance on how to communicate, we will find it in comparisons rather than absolute definitions. A particular way of communicating can be illustrated more clearly if we can see it in contrast to the other ways. **Figure 3** shines a light on what could be considered communication that rather tends to disassociate as opposed to communication that rather tends to associate. Thus, we should keep in mind that these descriptions are no absolute definitions. They can serve as guides that help us navigate social systems more consciously, but they are not supposed to be definitions of so-called *good* or *bad* communication.

...rather...	
Disassociating Communication	Associating Communication
Simplicity ←	→ Complexity
Fear ←	→ Courage
Judging ←	→ Describing
Absolute ←	→ Relative (in relation to)
Generalizing ←	→ Specific, concrete
Own interest first, narcissism ←	→ Community's interest in first place
Revolving around oneself ←	→ Perceiving the other
Interrogation ←	→ Asking (open questions)
Excluding ←	→ Including
Closed ←	→ Open
Control ←	→ Respect
Avoidance ←	→ Attention / Care
Absolute rules ←	→ Context-dependent

**Figure 3**  
*Disassociating versus associating communication*

### 6. DIALOG LEVELS

"Every social interaction constitutes a situation with double contingency, which is [sic] recognized as such by both sides: both know that both know that one could also act differently." [7] Double contingency is one aspect of the communication process that shows its high level of complexity. When we communicate we can never be sure that our intended content will be understood. Luhmann even claims that "communication is improbable." According to him, there are three improbabilities of communication: [8]

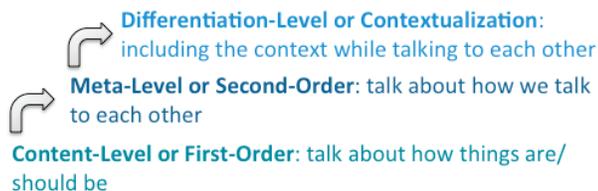
- Understanding: it is unlikely that one person understands what the other means. Consciousness and memory are the means to building the context for understanding.
- Reachability: it is unlikely that the communication reaches beyond the participants of that same communication. An interaction between two or more people does not extend easily over time and undetermined space, because the actors' attention in any given communication is limited.
- Success: it is unlikely that one person will accept the information that another is trying to communicate. Success in communication occurs when the

information transmitted is used as a premise for the next actions.

In the course of time, humans have managed to overcome these improbabilities by developing tools and technologies that facilitate communication. The ability of writing or printing, the inventions that made telecommunication possible, but also to establish rules for authority (hierarchies) and the improvement of rhetorical performance, are tools that support communication to stay possible and useful.

Another way to optimize communication is to observe the communication process itself and communicate at different levels, as shown in **Figure 4**: first-, second-, and third-order levels. If one aims to develop a constructive dialog—meaning conversation that promotes connectivity and mutual understanding—he or she will profit from observing and utilizing the opportunities arising from the differences between these three levels of communication.

Communication can be focused on first-order observation, having as its primary contents the description or definition of things as they “are” or should be. But people can also communicate about how they communicate, how things are presented, what the messages are between the lines (meta-communication, second order). A third possibility is to include the context as additional information that builds relevant correlations and thus significantly helps to differentiate and color the messages being communicated (cf. **Figure 4**).



**Figure 4**  
*Different levels of communication*

Contextualizing the information is helpful to better understand how the message shall be understood within the meaning intended by the sender.

In order to use contextualization as a solution for disassociating polarization, i.e., contextualizing in a way that makes possible the inclusion of more and diverse communications, it can be helpful to be less engaged in the details of the contents and more empathic to the meaning or context of the communication partner’s opinion.

A participant actively contributes *a difference that makes*

*a difference* to the quality of the communication when he is genuinely interested in finding out about the concrete motivation of the other side of the story instead of interpreting what the possible reasons for his argumentation may be. It is also useful to remain open and curious for surprises and unexpected events, contents, or combinations of both.

To maintain a questioning and interested attitude and to ask questions about the context in which someone experienced what led him to his opinion or assumption will support coming to a mutual understanding within the communication process. This attitude offers an alternative to generalizations, judgments, and interpretations about motivations.

## 7. ATTITUDE: INTEREST IN EXPERIENCES OF OTHERS

In the practice of distinction-based systemic work with organizations, there are several specific attitudes that can be seen as their fundament. Attitudes make a big difference in the communication process and may hugely influence the outcome and success of an interaction.

Showing authentic, genuine interest in the perspective and in the person (the communication partner) is the key attitude that makes the difference in order to achieve associating communication, respect, and understanding.

Inspired by the ideas of Gregory Bateson, Virginia Satir, Steve de Shazer, Insoo Kim Berg, Carl Rogers, et al., systemic and solution-focused consultancies have adopted attitudes reflecting the most positive influences on communication. [10] An associative communication style reveals itself to be most effective in finding what profits clients most.

To have and live an associating attitude, hiding behind unauthentic opinions, fake behaviors, fake roles, and empty phrases is not helpful. To the contrary: Useful behaviors are becoming emotionally involved and entering into direct and genuine person-to-person relationships.

Here are some questions that aim to generate understanding for the needs of the communication partner:

- In which situation (context) have you experienced what you just told me?
- What have you observed that makes you come to this conclusion?
- What is important to you that I should understand (*so that your issue is well represented here/that I can take with me*)?

And here are suggestions on how to approach the successful adoption of associating attitudes:

- An open, differentiated perception of the communication partner is the basis for an associative attitude.
- The questions asked should be useful for the communication partner and serve him to discover new ideas. (At the opposite end of the spectrum, interrogation usually rather serves the questioner to find out what he wants.)
- If one has the courage to reveal his inner, authentic self, one builds the opportunity for a genuine encounter.

## 8. CONCLUSION

In the statements, thoughts, and suggestions made above, we showed that:

- A democratic society in which a dialog is only possible in small units tends to become even more complex to manage than a society in which a weighted average of opinions is accepted.
- Social interactions that allow and incorporate many different opinions, views, and propositions can be achieved if we are interested in the context more than the content.
- For an open-minded discourse to succeed, our communication shall transcend both the content dialog (first-order) and the meta-dialog (second-order) so as to set the dialog in relation to its context.
- Contextualization is key to building bridges of understanding between very different opinions and emotions.
- Contextualization can be seen as the most elaborate level of differentiation in communications.

We depend on each other for life-sustaining cooperation and vital social interaction. In the course of evolution, we developed various tools and methods for communicating and getting along with each other. However, the speedy progress of communication technologies and economic globalization has confronted us with new challenges that are still looking for solutions. What remains for us is the responsibility to find ways to preserve and improve freedom, solidarity, and equal rights among all societies. The idea of including the relevant contexts in our thoughts and communications may contribute to overcome this challenge.

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