
Richard Holt’s *Dialogue on the Internet* is an effort to provide a new way of thinking about and analyzing materials found on the Internet, and it takes as its examples e-mail discussion messages (EDMs) and political websites, particularly where these have applications for civic discourse. Holt’s endorsement of his brand of reading utterances (the dual reading) has as one of its major benefits a shifting of analytical attention back to humans from the more recent focus on technology, since humans are, after all, responsible for creating civic discourse and making sense of it (p. 210).

The argument combines a Bakhtinan conception of ‘utterance’ (one that is specific yet complex, and belonging to a subject) with an understanding of the Internet as a potentially fruitful site of civic engagement. The comparison and contrast of monologic and dialogic methods of reading to form the discursive practice of dual reading identifies a way for researchers to understand Internet utterance but also explores some of the possibilities that exist for civic interaction in different kinds of Internet communication (EDM, political websites, activist websites). The dual reading method is composed of three activities, undertaken more or less at once: the standard (monologic) reading; the utterance (dialogic) reading; and a comparison between the two.

Holt explains his approach to discourse on the Internet as built around two ideas: “monologism (as an adjective, monological, as a mode of communication, monologue), which in discourse and thought suggests order and predictability; and dialogism (as an adjective, dialogical, as a mode of communication, dialogue), which suggests uniqueness and unpredictability” (p. 21). The two are not as far apart as is sometimes maintained in that they refer to different areas of the same world, and Holt’s goal is to show that the two may be productively combined into the dual reading (which plays on the fuzziness of their ‘boundaries’): “A key aspect of dialogism . . . is that dialogic utterances are securely bound to what goes on in the world, whereas the monologic perspective encourages utterances that are disjunct from the ‘messy’ reality of the world” (p. 189). He identifies as well some obstacles that may be bypassed by employing the dual reading. Among these, Holt cites the fact that nearly all of conventional communication theory is based on monological perspectives. He also notes that studies of Internet communication do not have the long history that some other media do and thus are still in their infancy.

The book itself is well laid out, following the format of an introduction to the theoretical framework, its application in several case studies, followed by a conclusion that acknowledges potential and very real limitations, including less than universal access to the knowledge and materials required to participate in and/or create utterances on the Internet. The introduction of the theory has as its primary strength clarity of definitions and the ways in which they fit together. This section is straightforward and does not pay unnecessary attention to the theoretical origins of the terms and concepts employed. A more comprehensive discussion of Bhaktin’s notion of ‘utterance’ would be useful, however, especially since it is a key concept in Holt’s argument. A substantial portion of the first chapter is dedicated to defining, in particular, the technical terms used in the book (Internet, Web page, and so on). Holt makes constant reference, in the introduction, to the case studies contained in the book, and, in the case studies, to the theoretical framework laid out in the introduction, as well as to differences between the case studies themselves. This approach has the effect of integrating the different sections of the book to form a highly coherent argument.

According to Holt, he offers a method that encourages the analyst to keep in mind both the predictable and the unpredictable features of language. This method is ideal for examining Internet communica-
tion, particularly in the context of civic society. While the Internet, as a channel of communication, is sometimes dismissed as ordinary or mundane, depth exploration of the social worlds informing this discourse, through the lenses of monologism and dialogism, reveals its complexity as a vehicle for representing empirical experience in ways that affect civic discourse and culture. (p. 25)

The book is not, however, limited in applicability to analysts or experts in the field. It is a highly readable piece, one that may be useful to students and faculty alike. The case studies are thorough and straightforward, and demonstrate how dual reading can work and what it reveals that one or the other of monologic or dialogic readings, as well as the researcher themselves, might have missed: “As dialogically inclined thinkers remind us, neither life nor the processes by which we look at it can be neatly categorised, but rather involve a dynamic, ongoing shifting back and forth between modes of thought, with each ‘pass’ across data resulting not merely in a change in how data is [sic] conceived, but in the consciousness of the researcher” (p. 209, emphasis in original). The theory upon which the practice rests provides much food for thought, particularly for those looking for a way to go beyond the conventional, and somewhat inadequate, ways of reading material on the Internet. Holt is a professor of communications in the graduate faculty at Northern Illinois University, and his background in computer-mediated communication and discourse/conversation analysis is evident in Dialogue on the Internet. It is truly an interdisciplinary work and will appeal to non-specialists as well as scholars in many different disciplines, from communications studies to sociology to philosophy.

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