

6 Relevance-Based Knowledge Resistance in Public Conversations

Eliot Michaelson, Jessica Pepp and Rachel Sterken

Introduction

Knowledge resistance, as it is being discussed in this volume, is the tendency to resist available evidence. To get clear on what this means, we need to understand what *evidence* is, what makes it *available*, what it is to *resist* evidence, and whose *tendencies* are under discussion (see Wikforss & Glüer-Pagin in this volume). On the last point – whose tendencies are under discussion – it is natural to assume that it is individual people’s tendencies. Individual people are the resisters of evidence. This is true, but not exclusively so, we think. Indeed, even if individual people are not resistant to the evidence available to them, groups of people and whole societies may be resistant to available evidence. Knowledge resistance can be an epistemic problem not only for individual agents but also for the public sphere.

It might seem odd to suggest that inanimate entities like conversations can resist or have tendencies to resist evidence (or anything, for that matter). However, as we are understanding the notion of resisting, a conversation *can* resist evidence, in something like the way a garment can resist water. A garment does not intend or try to resist water (although its creators may have intended this), nor does a conversation intend to resist evidence. Rather, a conversation, like a garment, can be structured in such a way that it does not take in certain things. This is a kind of systemic resistance, which, while not the same sort of thing as individual people’s resistance to evidence, poses related problems. It is this form of resistance that we aim to illuminate in this chapter.

Let us follow Habermas in taking the public sphere to be a ground-level social phenomenon that can be understood, roughly, as a communicative structure or network that filters and synthesizes information and points of view into collective, public opinions on various matters (See Calhoun, 1992; Habermas, 1989, 1992, 1996; Wessler, 2018). A well-functioning public sphere is generally taken to be a *sine qua non* for participatory democracy and well-functioning societies more generally. The public sphere itself is a structure, network, or social space. What happens in the public sphere is *conversation* – public conversation. A nation’s public conversations on different matters inform citizens and residents, keep officials accountable, and track changes in public desires and opinions. As a

rough starting definition of the kind of knowledge resistance we have in mind, we will say that a *public conversation is resistant to available evidence* if evidence on matters of importance to the conversational participants is kept out of the conversation, even though it is available to become part of the conversation.

Here is a little example to illustrate. Let us take the communicative structure and networks among the parents, teachers, and administrators at a local primary school as a toy model of a public sphere. Suppose that budget cuts at the national level are going to require the school to let go of several teachers, resulting in a marked increase in class size. The administrators suspect that this will greatly upset the parents and teachers, but they believe there is nothing they can do to stop it and would like to prevent too much outcry before the end of the school year. A few parents and teachers have heard about what is going to happen and try to get a discussion going about it on Facebook. The administrators try to counteract this by revealing that two years ago, two teachers were fired for engaging in salacious activities in the break room. As the administrators hoped, prurient fascination with the affair and the opportunity for outrage over its having been kept secret for so long take up so much air space in the school conversation that discussion of the cuts never gets going. Most members of the school community never see anything about the cuts on Facebook or hear anything about it from other members. Those who do hear something about it also get the impression from the rest of the conversation that these cuts must not be a big deal, since no one is really talking about them. The school's public conversation is resistant to the available evidence on a matter of much greater importance than the two-year-old affair, even though its members, individually, may not be.

The resistance to evidence exhibited by the school's public conversation is what we call "relevance-based" resistance to evidence. The resistance is not due to the conversation being dominated by *false* or *inaccurate* claims that the evidence of the cuts and their effects would contradict. (We are imagining that it is true that two teachers were fired for salacious acts.) Rather, the resistance is due to the conversation being dominated by claims that are much less *relevant* for the school community than the evidence that is being crowded out.

To be sure, one major concern is that public conversations become crowded with false or inaccurate information, like fake news. The widespread acceptance, consideration, and even availability of false or inaccurate information makes it harder for new evidence to make its way into the public conversation, or to remain in circulation as a part of that conversation. For genuine evidence will conflict with the misinformation that is accepted by participants in the conversation, considered worthy of consideration, or even just widely available. However, we want to focus on a different kind of evidence resistance, one which stems instead from the non-relevance of information that is prominent in public conversations. This is a different, and much less discussed, concern about the epistemic health of public conversations.

The school example is but one imaginary case that would be rather insignificant in the grand scheme of things, even if it were real. But we take it that there are plenty of real cases of relevance-based resistance to evidence in public

conversations, some of which pose, or have posed, a genuine threat to well-functioning public discourse. This affects the epistemic health and perhaps even the broader functioning of society or groups therein. However, it is not easy to identify clear-cut examples (like the imaginary school case), since doing so requires making difficult evaluations concerning how public conversations are focused at a given time, and which topics are most relevant in them.¹ Indeed, we view the present paper as aimed at providing the beginnings of a framework on which to base such evaluations.

Even if it is difficult to give definitive examples, it is clear enough that with the advent of social media, information can be weaponized in unprecedented ways (see e.g. Wu, 2010, 2018). For example, bots and bad actors have the capacity to “flood” public discourse with false or irrelevant information in order to manipulate the attention of news consumers and the course of public conversations. Trolls and troll armies can be enlisted to “participate in” and “contribute to” public conversations, but expressly for the purpose of derailing them. “Filter bubbles” that social media company algorithms help to create in an attempt to personalize and filter the information fed to users can limit what news a user sees and which public conversations they can participate in. Such bubbles may also have the effect of fragmenting public conversation into groups with like-interests that may not pertain to the issues of importance. The outsourcing of what counts as evidence worth discussing to personalization or other algorithms creates public conversations and groups (to which they pertain) that don’t (adequately) correspond to those that we would normally recognize as servicing the epistemic needs of the public involved. In short, social media makes it easy for individual people’s limited supplies of attention to be captured by matters of little importance to them in their capacity as citizens of a certain nation, or taxpayers in a certain town or region, or other social roles calling for a well-functioning public conversation. In this way, individual inattention to relevant evidence (which may not itself be *resistant* to this evidence) can lead to systemic conversational resistance to relevant evidence.

Our aim in this chapter is to illuminate the nature of relevance-based resistance to evidence and to better understand how this phenomenon can arise in public conversations, large and small. We propose to do this in two steps. First, we present a model of how public conversations are structured and what makes contributions to those conversations relevant. The latter explanation hinges on the thesis that certain bits of evidence are important for members of particular groups to have access to. Second, we outline two different ways for public conversations to develop relevance-based resistance to evidence. The first way involves the sort of “crowding out” of important information by unimportant information which we alluded to above. The second way that public conversations can develop relevance-based evidence resistance stems from the conflation of different public conversations and the groups they concern, which makes it harder to target the right evidence at the right individuals. This phenomenon, we argue, has been greatly exacerbated by the ways in which social media has changed our public conversations.

A Model of (Private) Conversation

We hope to illuminate the structure of public conversations by extending and applying an approach that has been used to illuminate the structure of ordinary, relatively private conversations. We will call this the “communal inquiries approach”. In this section, we start by providing a brief introduction to the communal inquiries approach.

Most of us have a sense of what (relatively) private conversations are: we can imagine ourselves having them with friends, family, colleagues, or strangers we have passing interactions with. Private conversations take place over definite stretches of time and have fairly definite groups of participants (though who is participating may change a bit over the course of a private conversation). For the most part, private conversations are sparked and sustained by the participants’ need to be social with one another because of their co-location (as when strangers in an elevator chat with one another during the ride, or when people mingle at a party) or in order to maintain their relationships to each other (as when family members call each other to “say hi”), or because of the participants’ need to get things done: to share information, to make plans, to give orders, and so on.

The communal inquiries approach takes the primary aim of conversation to be communal inquiry: conversations are aimed at sharing information in order to answer questions of interest to the participants.² We might, for instance, have a conversation about whether to go on a hike today or wait until tomorrow, or about whether it will be possible to plan an in-person conference again next summer.

One might worry that the communal inquiries approach does not cover the great variety of conversations and conversational purposes (e.g. small talk about how much the weather stinks, psychologically abusive tirades, banter, lovers’ sweet talk, etc.). Do the aforementioned strangers filling the silence in the elevator aim to share information in order to answer questions of mutual interest? Do family members who call each other with no news to report, but just because they want to hear each other’s voices have this kind of aim? We share these concerns, but we are setting them aside for now. This is because we are interested in applying the communal inquiries approach to *public* conversations. And, as we will explain in the next section, we think that public conversations do (at least often) aim at sharing information in order to answer questions of mutual interest.

Communal inquiries can be used to model, not only the aims of conversations, but also what is known as the “information structure” or “discourse structure” of conversations.³ Inquiries are structured in terms of the questions that constitute them. For example, consider the following inquiry (I):

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| (I) Q1. What does Lucy like? | |
| Q2. What does Lucy like to eat? | Q6. What does Lucy like to play? |
| Q3. Does Lucy like to eat dog treats? | Q7. Does Lucy like to play fetch? |
| Q4. Does Lucy like to eat dry food? | |
| Q5. Does Lucy like to eat wet food? | |

In the inquiry (I), Q2 and Q6 are sub-questions of Q1; Q3–Q5 are sub-questions of Q2 and Q1, but not Q6; Q7 is a sub-question of Q6 and Q1, but not Q2. Conversely, Q1 is a super-question of Q2 and Q6, which are, in turn, super-questions of Q3–Q5 and Q7, respectively. Being a sub-question or a super-question is a transitive property – so, for example, Q1 is a super-question of Q2–Q7, not just Q2 and Q6.

The inquiry is structured according to the super-question–question–sub-question relations which obtain amongst the questions that constitute that inquiry. The structure of inquiries, then, can be exploited to model the structure of conversation. Roughly, the contributions in a conversation attempt to provide at least partial answers to questions, which are either explicit or implicit, within the conversation. So, for example, a conversation based on inquiry (I), might go as in (C):

- (C) A: What does Lucy like?
 B: She likes to eat dog treats.
 A: What about wet food?
 B: No, she likes dry food.
 A: Does she like to play?
 B: She likes to play.
 A: I bet she likes to play fetch.
 B: Yes, yes, she does.

Notice how the conversation can proceed smoothly, without hiccups or repair, and remains rational and coherent, when it follows a structure that accords with the inquiry (I). Communal inquiries also provide a helpful model for how conversations are structured in terms of topics. The broadest question serves to set the “discourse topic”, the topic of the whole conversation, the “immediate” questions set the topics of the individual contributions, and the relations between the questions set the topic (“information” or “discourse”) structure of the conversation, generally.

The context in which the conversation takes place plays a considerable role in setting up our joint inquiries. The questions who Lucy is, whether Lucy is a dog, or whether the kinds of foods or activities Lucy likes are dog things as opposed to human ones, don’t come up in the course of the conversation. That’s because conversations occur in contexts which supply the needed background. A and B don’t need to settle those questions because A and B have already accepted answers to them and they’re aware that the other has too. In this way, A and B can presuppose that those questions are already answered for the purposes of their conversation. The standard way to put this is that these propositions⁴ – who Lucy is, that Lucy is a dog and that Lucy likes dog things – are part of the *common ground* of the conversation. If A and B already know who “Lucy” refers to, believe that she’s a dog and that dogs like dog stuff, and in addition, A and B both believe that the other believes these things, then these propositions are part of the common ground for their conversation. More generally, following Stalnaker (1978, 2002, 2014), a proposition is in the common ground of the

conversation if all parties to the conversation accept that proposition and presume that all other parties to the conversation also accept it.⁵

It is also important to note that most conversational contributions are proposals to *update* or *alter* the common ground in some fashion. Paradigmatically, if a speaker *A* asserts that p ⁶ and no one objects, the proposition that p is now added to the common ground and is fair game for any other speaker to presuppose going forward. In our example (C), for instance, when *B* asserts that Lucy likes dog treats and *A* doesn't object to this and continues on with the conversation, the proposition that Lucy likes dog treats is added to the common ground. Further, when *A* contributes to the conversation by asking *B* whether Lucy likes wet food, she proposes that *A* and *B* continue the conversation by aiming to add an (partial) answer to that question to the common ground.

Public Conversations

Now we are ready to show how the communal inquiries approach can help illuminate public conversations. Public conversations differ from private conversations in a variety of ways. They last for an indefinite amount of time and, at least in principle, are open to anyone to witness or participate in. Some public conversations will involve debates at a relatively high level of abstraction or idealization, and hence may run along fine without an informed picture of what is going on in the world outside that conversation. A great many public conversations, however, are sustained in no small part by *news*. It is these we will be focused on in what follows.

News is not easy to define, but for present purposes, we can stick with a simple definition according to which news is a description of an important recent event or situation.⁷ What is discussed in an epistemically healthy public sphere are current events of general importance, or relevance, to the public in question: budget cuts at the local primary school, evidence of corruption in the national government, international sanctions being imposed against certain nations, and the like. Public conversations of this kind continue because they receive a continuous supply of news, at least some of which has a bearing on the broad question of how *we*, in our capacities as parents in this district, citizens of this country, or human beings in the world, are going to act.

One important aspect of public conversations is that they are also sustained by particular publics, so what is part one public conversation may not be a part of another. For instance, reports on the school budget cuts in our toy example from the introduction will be (or at least, should be) part of a public conversation for parents in the district. But these cuts are unlikely to be (nor, absent unusual circumstances, should they be) part of the wider public conversation among citizens of the country this school is located in. We take it, therefore, that in the broadest sense, the "public sphere" can host not just one public conversation, but many. Traditionally (prior to the widespread adoption of social media), these conversations were at least partially delineated by the different target audiences of different news providers. A national newspaper's target audience is, typically,

citizens of that nation⁸; it aims to provide news that is important for them. A magazine about the British Royal Family, in contrast, will primarily target fans of the Royal Family; it aims to provide news that is important for them. A school newsletter's target audience is the parents and teachers at the school; it aims to provide news that is important for them, and so on. Each of these streams of news help to sustain a different public conversation, although there will often be some overlap between them. In this pre-social-media scenario, a given public conversation would exhibit relevance-based evidence resistance if it became too focused on news that was less important or relevant for the target audience than other news that was thereby crowded out.

Using the communal inquiries approach, we can elaborate on this rough-and-ready way of distinguishing different public conversations from one another. For we can distinguish them by the questions that structure them. For instance, in the public conversation sustained by journalism focused at the national level in Sweden, one type of super-question–question–sub-question structure might run along the following lines: *What things are happening now in Sweden or in the rest of the world that are important for people in Sweden?* Sub-questions might then include: *What is happening now in the Swedish government? How are Swedish sports teams performing in competition? What are foreign governments doing that affects Sweden?* And sub-questions to these might include: *How did the different parties in the Swedish government perform in the latest opinion measure? How is Maja Stark doing in the US Open?* Structuring questions like these are not usually asked explicitly in public conversations. They are implicit in the context of the conversation, which inquires into a broad question whose answers are ever-evolving, along the lines of: *what is happening that is important for Swedes and how shall we (Swedes) react to it?* At any given point in the conversation, previous contributions have implicitly introduced a wide range of sub-questions.

It is also clear that the notion of *common ground* is important for understanding the structure of public conversations, since, like private conversations, they do not occur in a vacuum. For instance, a news report on Swedish eating habits, published in Sweden, is likely to presuppose what *fika* is, not pausing to explain that it is a coffee and cake break before going on to say that people are doing it more or less often at their workplaces. A news report on the same topic published in the US or UK, on the other hand, would be much less likely to take this information for granted. Why? Because it is common ground in Sweden what *fika* is, but not elsewhere. Moreover, as we will explain in more detail in a later section, contributions to public conversations are understood as proposals to update or alter the common ground.

These comments are enough to suggest that the communal inquiries approach is at least a good starting point for theorizing public conversation. But some amendments are needed. The salient and important questions, at this point, are:

- 1 What kind of communal inquiries are public conversations engaged in – that is, what kind of questions are public conversations aiming to answer?

- 2 What is *public common ground* – that is, what variation on the notion of common ground is suitable for modeling conversations whose participants are as numerous, diverse, and physically dispersed as in public conversations?
- 3 What kinds of conversational contributions are significant and permissible in public conversations?

We'll consider each of these questions in turn (no meta-joking intended!). Once we've elaborated on the structure of public conversations, we will be in a position to separate two different sources of potential relevance-based resistance to evidence in public conversations: one that was a threat to public conversation before social media became a central platform for these conversations, and one that has arrived along with (or has at least been greatly exacerbated by) social media. We will return to this discussion later in later sections.

The Aims of Public Conversations and Questions Under Discussion

Both Stalnaker (1978, 2002, 2014) and Roberts (2004, 2012) have suggested that the broad aim of all inquiry is to answer a certain question. This is the “Big Question” in Roberts’ terminology: what is the way things are? As illustrated above with the Lucy example, typically, conversations are concerned not only, and not even primarily, with the Big Question (BQ), but rather with more specific sub-questions of the BQ that arise because of the practical goals and interests of the conversational participants combined with features of the context of conversation. We also suggested, with the Swedish national journalism example, that public conversations are concerned with quite broad questions, though not as broad as the BQ. They are concerned with what we will call “Journalistic Big Questions”. We use this label to reflect the fact that journalists whose target audiences correspond to the participants in a given public conversation often try to answer these questions, along with their more specific sub-questions. Here is a schematic statement of a Journalistic Big Question (JBQ), which would be filled in differently for different public conversations:

The Journalistic Big Question (Schema)

What is new that is important for Gs, in general and in their capacity as Gs, and how shall we Gs react to that news?

To return to our earlier example, one value for “G” is *Swedish citizens*. One public conversation is structured around the following JBQ: *what is new that is important for Swedish citizens, in general and in their capacity as Swedish citizens, and how shall we, Swedish citizens, react to that news?* Swedish news media at the national level provide (some, partial) answers to the first part of that question and introduce sub-questions (often implicitly) to which they also often provide (some, partial) answers. And Swedish citizens may try to provide (some, partial) answers to the second part of that question, *how shall we react?*

The JBQ schema (and hence, the specific JBQs) has two elements that require further elaboration. One is the idea of an event or situation being *important to members of a certain group, in general and in their capacity as members of that group*. The other is the nature of the question, *how shall we react?*

Let us start with the first element. By “in general”, we mean to express a generalization about the group in question: for instance, an event may be important to Swedish citizens in general, without being important to every Swedish citizen, or to any specific number or proportion of Swedish citizens. By “in their capacity as members of the group”, we mean that the importance of the event/situation for someone is relative to their role as a member of the group. For instance, a report on Sweden’s current prospects for meeting its long-term energy needs may not be very personally important for a certain Swedish citizen who is elderly and unconcerned about a future they will not be a part of. But it may still be important for them in their role as a Swedish citizen, since it can help them understand the current state of their society and make informed decisions about voting and other activities.

Finally, concerning “importance”, we have to rely on the reader’s intuitive understanding of the idea that some events, situations, trends, and changes are more important for various groups than others. As we will discuss in more detail below, spelling out what this means is a critical task for achieving a fuller understanding of relevance-based resistance to evidence in public conversations. Journalists, who contribute news reports to public conversations, often stress the weightiness of deciding what is important. But what importance amounts to is difficult to spell out. The American journalists Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014, especially [Chapter 8](#)) assume that journalists should report on happenings that are *significant* for their audience, without saying much about what makes an event, situation or the like significant for a given audience. The Swedish journalist Fichtelius (2008, [Chapter 2](#)) lists importance (*viktighet*) for the audience as the number one criterion for journalists in choosing what to report on. He suggests that important events and changes are those that fundamentally affect people’s living conditions, and those that have an impact on people’s ability to understand the world around them. Both of these assessments seem intuitively plausible, but each also leaves much unsaid about what importance for a certain group consists in.

Public conversations address the question of what is new that is important for a certain public group, but that is only half of each conversation’s JBQ. The other half is the question of how “we” – the members of the group the conversation concerns – intend to react to such news. Clearly, what happens in the public sphere is not mere reporting of important news, but also reacting to that news, and advocating for different types of response. Given this, it seems reasonable to view part of the JBQ for any given public conversation as a kind of *practical* inquiry: an inquiry into what is to be done.⁹

Contributions to public conversations do not only, and often not even primarily, concern questions as broad as the JBQ. They also address the JBQ by addressing more specific and immediate sub-questions of the JBQ, what we will

call “journalistic questions under discussion” (JQUDs). This is because (partial) answers to JQUDs constitute partial answers to the JBQ. To briefly illustrate, let us return to our example above involving the public conversation sustained by Swedish national news. The JBQ of that conversation is: *What is new that is important for Swedish citizens, in general and in their capacity as Swedish citizens, and how shall we, Swedish citizens, react to that news?* Sub-questions of this JBQ might include the following JQUDs: *How are Swedish sports teams performing in competition? How should we react to the performance of Swedish sports teams?* A public conversation involving Swedes may center on answering these JQUDs and, in so doing, help to answer the JBQ.

Public Common Ground

Above we followed Stalnaker in saying that some bit of information is in the common ground of a conversation if and only if all parties to the conversation accept that information and presume that all other parties to the conversation also accept that information. But in a public conversation, there needn't be a definite collection of all the parties to the conversation, nor need the various parties in general know who the other parties are, where they are, or when they join the conversation. This raises questions about in what sense public conversations have a Stalnakerian common ground.

If we restrict our focus to public conversations before social media, it is not so difficult to envision a public corollary of common ground. When the main way for non-professional journalists to contribute to public conversations was by writing to the “letters to the editor” pages of newspapers and magazines, both professional journalists and members of their target audiences could presume that the others engaging in public conversation with them were readers of a certain publication, or perhaps readers of just a few mainstream publications. They could presume that all of them accepted that the evidence presented in the reports of those publications was available. They might not presume that all of them accepted that the reports were true or the evidence genuine, but at least they could take for granted that the others participating in the conversation knew what had been put forward.

This is still something of an idealization. For it is not clear that any individual, even in this pre-social media era, was in a position to keep track of all of the updates to a given public common ground, even just considering a few mainstream papers. For instance, very few people in the UK read not just the *Mirror*, but also the *Guardian*, the *Times*, the *Mail*, the *Telegraph*, the *Financial Times*, and the *Sun*.¹⁰

Here is a way to reduce the degree of idealization in the notion of public common ground. Let us allow that participants in these kinds of pre-social media public conversations did not mutually accept that each specific bit of evidence had been presented and discussed in the ways it had been. Still, they probably did mutually accept that whatever stories and letters were in fact recorded on the pages of relevant publications (e.g. those aimed at citizens of the UK, or Sweden)

had been put forward and were available to be checked. We can think of those stories, letters, etc., as constituting the public common ground.

We also want to stress that public common ground, as we understand it, can encompass not just propositions, but also evidence for the truth of various propositions. In private conversations, these will typically coincide: according to Stalnaker (1978), if we both witness a goat walking into the room, then it will be common ground thereafter that there is a goat in the room. We do not need to track our *evidence* for there being a goat in the room (namely, that we both saw it come in) separately from our mutual acceptance of the proposition *that there is a goat in the room*. If that's right, then this distinction can be safely elided in trying to understand private conversations. In public conversations, on the other hand, there is more scope for dispute about the value of certain bits of evidence – even when we all accept that we all have access to these bits of evidence. For example, participants in a public conversation may mutually accept that photographs or videos that appear to show police brutality taking place have been publicized, without its being mutually accepted that police brutality in fact took place. So it is important to allow that evidence, not just propositions, can be a part of the public common ground. We will treat evidence as a part of the public common ground so long as it is mutually accepted that the evidence is easily available to members of the relevant group, in the sense of its being accessible without too much effort (e.g. by looking at a widely circulated newspaper, or perhaps by going back into the newspaper archive).

A public common ground, as we understand it, thus includes a JBQ, a set of JQUDs, a set of mutually accepted propositions, and a body of evidence which is mutually accepted to be easily available to members of the relevant group.

Moves in Public Conversations

Having defined the public common ground, we can now offer a simplified model of dynamic public discourse and what it is that different “moves” in public conversations contribute to those conversations. In an ordinary conversation, there are a variety of different ways of contributing to the conversation. For example, a conversational participant can greet someone, compliment them, assert some bit of information, ask a question, make a request, provide a guess, disagree with someone, demand something, etc. This is also true of public conversations: there are a variety of different ways of contributing to them. Importantly, however, what it is to assert something, make a request, etc. in a public conversation is different from what it is to assert something, make a request, etc. in a private conversation.

One claim we made earlier is that public conversations are sustained by journalism, or a steady supply of news, and we are now in a position to make this claim more precise: one of the primary ways of contributing to a public conversation is by publishing (and distributing) a bit of news. Another important way of contributing to public conversation is by reacting to the news, and advocating for different types of responses to it. The public discussion of the news includes

publicizing, scrutinizing, criticizing, verifying, elaborating, and contextualizing putative information about matters that are important to members of various groups. Public conversations are, at least in pre-social media settings, largely sustained by these types of contributions.

PUBLICATION OF NEWS AS CONTRIBUTIONS TO PUBLIC CONVERSATIONS

In the first instance, we propose that news stories serve to update the public common ground by making certain pieces of evidence easily accessible. Such evidence can be made available by means of a news story in a variety of different ways: via reported testimony, direct observation (i.e. testimony by the journalist), the inclusion of pictures and videos, links to scientific or governmental reports, etc. We'll treat all of these as ways of updating the public common ground. Thus, for example, consider a news story written by a journalist for a local newspaper that reports, based on the journalist's eyewitness testimony, that a fire burned down the local cinema. Suppose further that this story is printed in the local newspaper and that the print version of the newspaper has had sufficiently widespread distribution that publicity of the news story has been achieved. In other words, members of the local target audience *G* presume both themselves and the other members of *G* to have easy access to evidence that a fire burned down the local cinema. In this case, the public common ground is updated to include the evidence of a fire having burned down the local cinema.

In publishing the story (via her role at the local newspaper), the journalist offers a partial answer to the question, *what is new that is important to residents of this town, and how shall we, the residents, react to this news?* This is the JBQ of this public conversation. Her contribution itself answers the JQUD or the more specific sub-question of the JBQ: *what happened to the local cinema?* In offering a (partial) answer to the JBQ and the JQUD, the journalist proposes to add the evidence found in the story to the public common ground. Supposing that others don't object, the evidence found in the story is added to the common ground.

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS TO PUBLIC CONVERSATIONS

As with ordinary conversational updates, there can be objections to proposals to update or updates to the public common ground: these can come from other reporters, readers, editors, ombudsmen, etc. And journalists can subsequently retract all or parts of their stories, thereby canceling (or at least attempting to cancel) the proposal or withdrawing evidence from the public common ground.

Another important kind of contribution to public conversations is to propose to set up a new JQUD in the conversation: to propose that the conversational participants aim to (partially) answer that JQUD. Such conversational moves set agendas and new topics for the public conversation to address. They are often coupled with informational updates. For instance, a recent Guardian "exclusive" reports that some EU organizers of international tours for schoolchildren expect

a sharp decline in tours to the UK due to heightened post-Brexit border restrictions.¹¹ Reporting on this was an attempt to update the public common ground with evidence for these tour operators having these concerns. But it is clear that another aim of the report was to bring up a series of questions to be addressed going forward: *Will post-Brexit restrictions stop school tourism from the EU to the UK? Will this have a negative effect on the UK's reputation and influence abroad? What will be the economic impact of this in the UK?* And so on. If these proposals to address new JQUDs are accepted, they help to structure the ongoing conversation and, accordingly, the public common ground.

One type of JQUD that contributions may set up are practical questions about how the group at issue might respond to the information being discussed. For instance, continuing with the example introduced in the previous paragraph, upon probing and learning about the negative economic impact of less school tourism from the EU to the UK, a conversational participant might propose to set up the question: *what are we (the affected UK residents) going to do about this?* This might motivate or incite calls to action of various sorts, which are also parts of the conversation. Other reactions to the news and answers to the question of *how should we react?* won't necessarily be so measured, for it may be that the appropriate way for the group to react is with outrage, sadness, or a host of other collective emotional responses.

There are many other important ways of contributing to public conversations, not least of which are ways distinctive of post-social media public conversations. We return to some discussion of these in the final section.

Relevance-Based Resistance to Evidence: Pre-Social Media Public Conversations

With a rough model of public conversations now on the table, we turn next to the question of what makes contributions to such conversations relevant. In particular, we are interested in what makes them have the kind of relevance whose absence presents an epistemic problem of the kind illustrated in the introduction.

Over the course of this section and the next, we will show that, as difficult as this question is when it concerns the pre-social-media scenario, it is even more difficult now that so much public conversation takes place on social media. Pre-social-media, different public conversations were largely kept organized, coherent, and separate because there were different physical, print, or virtual spaces in which they took place. People could respond to news publicly by writing letters to the editors of newspapers or magazines, by holding public demonstrations outside government buildings, or, in later years, by blogging or by posting to newsgroups or comments sections of online publications. For the most part, one's choice of where and how to speak publicly in response to news would make clear which public conversation one was participating in. For example, a letter to the editor of *Royal Life* clearly contributes to a different conversation than a letter to the editor of *The New York Times*; a demonstration outside a local county office contributes to a different conversation than a demonstration outside the national capitol building.

In contrast, tweets, Facebook posts, and other posts on social media typically do little to clarify which conversation they contribute to.¹² Users' social media feeds may contain all manner of discussion, from local to international, special interest to general. Thus, in today's media environment, there are at least two different sources of relevance-based resistance to evidence. One is a traditional source: journalists, or news reporters, may choose to report less relevant news to their target audience, and audience uptake may make it difficult for more relevant news to gain air space. The other is a problem that is new, or at least greatly exacerbated by the role of social media in public conversations: neither news reporters nor discussants may really know which conversation they are contributing to. This might lead to contributions that are more relevant to one conversation eventually dominating another conversation to which they are less relevant, or even to the distinctness and coherence of conversations breaking down. In the latter case, there may not even be a genuine fact of the matter as to which public conversation one is contributing to, or that one is even contributing to *any* coherent public conversation.

The latter problem will be the subject of the next section. In the remainder of this section, we continue to consider public conversations prior to social media. First, we will develop an account of what makes contributions relevant to such conversations, using the extended communal inquiries model of conversation that we developed above. Then we will use this account to point out different ways in which relevance-based resistance to evidence can arise in public conversations.

Roberts Relevance

A promising way of understanding the relevance of contributions to a given public conversation is in terms of relevance to the JBQ and JQUDs that structure those conversations. According to this understanding, relevance has many important roles. It ensures the conversation remains organized (appropriately structured), "on topic", coherent,¹³ and provides a measure of the rationality and epistemic health of the conversation and conversational contributions.

In Roberts' version of the communal inquiries approach to conversation, relevance is defined for conversational contributions in terms of the *immediate question under discussion*, or what we will call the "question currently under discussion". When a conversational contribution takes place, there is typically a question the participants are currently concerned with answering. According to Roberts, a conversational contribution is relevant to the conversation if it is either a partial or total answer to the question currently under discussion, or is part of a strategy to answer this question.¹⁴ Drawing on our earlier example involving the conversation about Lucy, the contribution to that conversation made by, say, A's asking *what about wet food?* is relevant because it introduces a question that may help to answer the question currently under discussion, namely *what food does Lucy like?* B's subsequent contribution in answering A's question, *No, she likes dry food*, is relevant because it answers the question introduced by A, and hence currently under discussion, namely *what about wet food?*

B's contribution, in saying that Lucy likes dry food, also partially answers the QUD from the moment before, *what food does Lucy like?*

Relevance in this sense plays an important role in ensuring that each conversational contribution adheres to the structure of an inquiry (the inquiry that is thereby undertaken in that conversation), remains on topic, coherent, rational, and epistemically healthy. As long as each conversational contribution is relevant, each contribution will partially answer or help to address QUDs that stand in the appropriate sub- and super-question relations to one another. This feature of Roberts' notion of relevance helps to ensure these good-making features of conversations. It also provides (at least the beginnings of) an account of how conversations themselves can be relevant to one another and connected, in terms of the continuity of the inquiries involved. This is an especially important feature of Roberts' model in considering its application to public conversations, since maintaining such continuity is all the more significant for conversations that are less physically or spatio-temporally continuous.

With these preliminaries in place, we can define a correlate of Roberts' notion of relevance for a contribution to a given public conversation as follows: a contribution to a public conversation with JBQ q is Roberts relevant if and only if it is relevant to the question currently under discussion, where that question is a sub-question of q . A contribution is relevant to the question currently under discussion if it introduces a partial answer to this question or is part of a strategy to answer this question.

What distinguishes the relevance of contributions in public conversations from Roberts' ordinary notion of relevance is that contributions to public conversations must at least partially address a question currently under discussion which is a sub-question of the JBQ of the given public conversation – that is, they must at least partially address a JQUD. Recall that each JBQ is not nearly as broad as Roberts' and Stalnaker's BQ – *what is the way things are?* Further, in order to count as a JQUD (i.e. as a sub-question of the JBQ of a given public conversation), a question must pertain to what's important to the public involved (i.e. to the "Gs" in our formulation of the JBQ schema above). For example, what Lucy likes, though it is a sub-question of the BQ, is not a sub-question of the public conversation whose JBQ is *what is new that is important for Swedish citizens in general and in their capacity as Swedish citizens, and how shall we (Swedish citizens) react to it?*

Which public is involved and what's important to them as a public is doing quite a lot of work in this initial definition of relevance for public conversations (and it will continue to do so in subsequent developments below). These two conditions restrict quite drastically which questions and answers are even candidates for counting as relevant contributions. One way to be irrelevant is to fail to be an answer to or to introduce any JQUD – as would likely be the case for any contribution about Lucy to the Swedish public conversation. However, these conditions aren't doing all the work. Our Roberts-inspired definition allows another way to be irrelevant that is tied more directly to the JQUD. Suppose a particular JQUD – *how did the Swedish government perform in the latest opinion measure?* – has been established in the context of a newscast, when a newscaster

abruptly introduces the question of how Maja Stark is doing at the US Open, or observes that housing prices have been on the rise in Sweden, or says that the government scored poorly in the November 2019 SCB poll. These contributions are of importance to Swedes, but they are not relevant relative to the JQUD currently under discussion.

This is a good start on a definition of relevance in a public conversation, one which captures two key ways of being relevant in public conversations. But it still won't quite do. For we also want to capture the sense in which some JQUDs are more important than others to a given public, so that raising them is a *more relevant* contribution to answering the JBQ pertaining to that particular public. For example, having an answer to the JQUD, *how did the Swedish government perform on the latest opinion measures?*, is (arguably) more important to Swedes in their capacity as citizens of Sweden than having answers to JQUDs like *how are Swedish sports teams performing?* or *what's Youngblood's latest song?* The notion of importance we're after is gradable, and it would be worthwhile to enrich the JQUDs falling under the JBQs with a ranking of importance. Some sub-questions tell us more, or more that matters to us, about how to answer the JBQ that we are pursuing. This means each contribution to a public conversation is conversationally relevant to a greater or lesser degree, depending on how important the question it addresses is to members of the public in question. A contribution might be relevant, in Roberts' sense, to the JQUD it addresses. Yet that JQUD might be of relatively little importance or relevance to addressing the JBQ, even if it's relevant enough to clear the bar for offering a partial answer to that question. Relevance to a public conversation, we are suggesting, is a multi-faceted phenomenon.

This is, in effect, to put even more of a burden on the missing account of what's important to members of G in their capacity as members of G. In this chapter, we are leaving this core notion unexplained and appealing to the reader's intuitive understanding of it. One thing suggested by the discussion of this section is that further philosophical exploration of the notion of importance to members of a group in their capacity as members of that group is needed. Although we have not yet given such an account, we have sketched the structure of a broader picture of relevance to a public conversation within which one could be developed.

Given this understanding of relevance, relevance-based resistance to evidence arises in a given public conversation when the QUDs being addressed in that public conversation are predominantly irrelevant or less relevant or important than other open JQUDs that might have otherwise been addressed in that public conversation. For example, consider the public conversation with a JBQ involving UK residents. This public conversation might become dominated by discussion of Royal intrigues rather than post-Brexit trade agreements, thereby preventing UK residents from discussing and learning of evidence of importance to them in their capacity as UK residents. In such a scenario, a JQUD of less relevance to the JBQ and importance to UK residents (*what is the Royal Family up to?*) is dominating the public conversation, preventing due consideration to the more pressing post-Brexit one. Similarly, even relative to more specific JQUDs about the Royals, answers to a less relevant sub-question like *how does*

the Queen feel about Meghan Markle? might be crowding out answers to more relevant sub-questions like, *how much are taxpayers spending to support the Royal Family?* (This is assuming that the Queen's feelings about Meghan Markle are less important for residents of the UK in their capacity as such than is taxpayer support of the Royal Family.) Relevance-based resistance to evidence can happen at different structural levels of conversations, likely with worse effects the higher up in the structure it occurs.

A New (or Exacerbated) Form of Relevance-Based Resistance to Evidence

In the previous section, we took for granted that it is in general clear to participants in public conversations *which* JQUD a given contribution is answering and *which* public conversation a given contribution is a contribution to. It seems to us that prior to social media, this was generally clear – surely not in every case, but generally. And even in most cases where it may not have been clear, there was still likely to be a fact of the matter about which conversation was being contributed to and which JQUD was being answered.

This is because the ways of contributing to public conversations prior to social media typically made clear which public conversation was being contributed to, in the way we described earlier. But the advent of social media has drastically changed the way news is reported, spread, and reacted to. This, we propose, has made it more difficult for participants in public conversations to ascertain which JQUD a given contribution replies to, or which conversation it is part of. It has also made it more difficult for contributors to direct their contributions at particular JQUDs and conversations. In addition to these epistemic difficulties, moving public conversations to social media may even be breaking down the structure and coherence of, and the boundaries between, different public conversations. If so, we may be moving toward a scenario in which relevance-based resistance to evidence is guaranteed, because there will no longer be the conversational structures in place that are needed to keep public conversations on track, coherent, and distinct.

To develop these ideas, let us start with a brief description of how social media has changed public conversations. We said before that news (or, more accurately, news reporting) is a sustaining force in public conversations. A great many people now get their news, at least partly, by way of social media.¹⁵ This has changed the production, distribution, and consumption of news in profound ways. Traditionally, consumers of news played a mostly passive role in the production of news, but with the advent of social media they now have a potential audience, platform, and social network, which give them the capacity to become active producers and distributors of news. Some would-be consumers, unwittingly or not, are better characterized as “citizen reporters”, breaking news before any news organization does.¹⁶ More broadly, those who would traditionally have been consumers of news with relatively limited platforms for public reactions to that news can now engage publicly with great ease. At the press of a few buttons, they can upload photos and videos, retweet or reshare news items, respond to,

add to or comment on news items, and make calls to action concerning the news. This has drastically expanded the number of producers of news and reactions to the news, leading to a far greater volume of (purported) contributions and conversations overall.

Even if content is produced by a professional journalist or news organization, the process of distributing the news increasingly relies on would-be consumers' decisions to engage with and/or spread news reports further on social media. This is because news is distributed on social media by way of (i) social media companies' ranking algorithms posting news items in users' "news feeds", where these "decisions" likely depend on previous engagement with the items and (ii) social media users retweeting or resharing those news items. In addition, traditional producers – i.e. those who are employed as journalists by news organizations or run their own – must continuously update and nuance their stories in response to their spread and reactions online, as well as report on what is happening in the public online conversation, which is news in its own right.

This means that these sorts of contributions – posts to social media by traditional consumers of news, posts of news stories by ranking algorithms into the news feeds of social media users, and the retweeting/resharing of news stories – have an unprecedented role in public conversation. Not only do traditional consumers have a greater capacity to participate in public conversations online by engaging in traditional sorts of contributions to public conversations, but they are now deeply involved in producing the primary driver for sustaining public conversations – news reports.

One upshot of this change in the way news is produced and distributed is that the old clues as to which public conversation a news report is a contribution to are either absent or less prominent. Particular journalistic organizations still have target audiences and still offer answers to JBQs concerning those audiences. But consumers who see the stories these organizations produce in a Facebook or Twitter feed, for instance, may not notice which publication the report comes from, or take account of who the target audience for that publication is. They consume news of varying degrees of public importance mixed in with a fairly undifferentiated stream of friends' photos and updates, videos of funny or cute goings-on, (personalized) advertisements, and others' reactions to all of these things. As a result, it will be much less clear to potential participants in public conversations whether a given news report they see on social media is supposed to be important for Swedish citizens, or for residents of Uppsala, or for those who keep dogs, or for other groups. Similarly for citizen-reporters posting to Facebook and the like: even if these contributors make explicit statements concerning for whom their news is important, consumers or algorithms will ultimately decide whose attention gets focused on what.

Even if it is difficult to distinguish different public conversations on social media, one might think that, nonetheless, there are still distinct public conversations. Traditional news sources still direct their reports at distinctive target audiences and address distinctive JBQs, and social media platforms and users have created some fixes for structuring conversations online (e.g. hashtags). Perhaps this is enough to ensure the continued flourishing of something like the

pre-social media kinds of public conversations, even if social media users are not well positioned to contribute to them. This may be so, but for reasons we already noted, matters are not so simple. Traditional news sources now rely on social media users to form part of their distribution apparatus, and to alert them to events and situations that are important for their target audiences. These sources often cannot produce reports that are relevant to their JBQs without taking account of what is happening on social media. This means that professional journalists, just as much as ordinary social media users, must assess which parts of the jumbled conversations on social media are relevant to the public conversations they are helping to drive. If social media becomes focused on certain events or situations, these are likely to receive increased coverage from traditional news sources, even if they are less important for those sources' target audiences than other matters. In this way, the difficulty of keeping public conversations distinct on social media can lead to less relevant contributions crowding out more relevant ones, even in traditional venues.

As public conversations move more and more onto social media, a larger concern is that the difficulty users have in *knowing* which conversation a post contributes to, or in *directing* their contributions at a specific conversation, may lead to a situation in which there no longer are distinct conversations addressing the kinds of JBQs we have discussed. News publications may still target, for instance, Swedish citizens in their capacity as citizens, but the conversation to which they contribute will no longer be organized around a JBQ like, *what is new that is important for Swedish citizens...etc.*? Instead, in the extreme case, they will simply be contributing to the same undifferentiated online discussion as everyone else. This discussion might have something like the BQ as an organizing question, but no sub-questions concerning matters of importance to particular groups. Instead, it would be structured by sub-questions raised by whatever contributions receive enough attention to keep the topic in people's feeds. Nothing makes any of these sub-questions more or less relevant (to the BQ) than any others. In one way, this is a situation in which relevance-based resistance to evidence cannot arise in the public conversation (at least at the level of what is to be discussed), since everything is equally relevant. But far from being a nice solution to the problem, the merging of public conversations is more like the logical extreme of relevance-based resistance to evidence. With no remaining fact of the matter concerning what is more important than what for conversational participants, and thus no facts about what is more relevant to contribute to the public conversation, the public conversation is left to blow with the winds of what grabs people's attention. It is unclear what role such a conversation can play in the social and political functioning of specific societies.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have introduced a rough-and-ready model of the dynamics of public conversations, and in particular of those public conversations sustained by journalism. We did this by modifying certain models of private conversations,

integrating the notions of journalistic big questions, journalistic questions (currently) under discussion, and the evidential common ground. This allowed us to define two notions of relevance for public conversations. The first of these had to do with whether an update to the common ground either is or contributes to an answer to the journalistic question currently under discussion. The second had to do with whether the question at which a given update to the public common ground is aimed is important to the relevant public. To the extent to which it is less important to that public than other questions which could be discussed, we take that contribution to be less relevant than other potential contributions to the public conversation.

Having introduced these twin notions of relevance to a public conversation, we then set out to understand how public conversations can become structured so as to lead them to resist available evidence. One of these ways is rather intuitive on the face of it: a public conversation can become fixated on matters of lesser importance to the relevant public. The challenge is to better understand this notion of importance for a given group, to better understand what makes certain evidence important for members of a group to have available to them *qua* members of that group. While we have not tried to answer this question, we do hope to have highlighted the interest of it for better understanding the nature of knowledge resistance in public conversations. The other way that public conversations can become structured lead them to resist available evidence, we suggested, is by means of a breakdown in the differentiation of audiences and conversations. For if there are no longer constrained publics with relatively well-defined epistemic interests, it is unclear whether it will make sense to talk about evidence as important for one or another group. While perhaps less intuitive than the first sort of structural knowledge resistance, this second kind of resistance may be even more worrisome at present, given how social media is rapidly reshaping the distribution of news in ways which interfere with the traditional methods of defining an audience.¹⁷

Notes

- 1 It also requires empirical study. For example, Durante and Zhuravskaya (2016) test the hypothesis that “politicians may strategically time unpopular measures to coincide with newsworthy events that distract the media and the public”, in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. They “find that Israeli attacks are more likely to occur when U.S. news on the following day are dominated by important predictable events”. They argue that the strategy aims at “minimizing next-day coverage, which is especially charged with negative emotional content”. If their analysis is sound, this would be an instance of politicians aiming at creating relevance-based resistance to evidence in the Israeli public conversation, since important but predictable events in the US are arguably not sufficiently important in the Israeli context to merit being discussed more than, or to the exclusion of, the attacks in question.
- 2 See, especially, Stalnaker (1978, 2002, 2014) and Roberts (2004, 2012).
- 3 Such structure has been theorized in a variety of different ways. For different options, see Stalnaker (1978, 2002, 2014), Sperber and Wilson (1986), Clark (1996), and Roberts (1996, 2004).

- 4 By “proposition”, we mean the kind of thing that can be believed, doubted, denied, asserted, and so on. For example, one might believe *that Lucy is a dog, that Lucy likes kibble*, and so on. Alternatively, one might doubt these things, or even reject them. What one is believing, doubting, and so on are things we refer to here as “propositions”.
- 5 We’ll leave it at the intuitive level what “acceptance” amounts to. Following Stalnaker, we take this to be a genus of attitudes which includes both full-on beliefs and weaker ones like assuming for the sake of conversation.
- 6 In the locution, “asserts that p”, “p” is a schematic variable: the idea is that you could fill in any declarative sentence in place of “p”.
- 7 See, for instance, Fichtelius (2008, pp. 16–18) on the difficulty of defining *news*. Note that in offering this rough-and-ready definition of news, we are not weighing in on the question of “news values”: what makes a recent event worth reporting on for journalists. (For a survey of this topic, see Harcup & O’Neill, 2017.) The question of news values is closely tied to the question of what events or situations are *important* for various groups of people.
- 8 In fact, it is probably broader than this, including, for instance, long-term residents who are not citizens. For the most part, when we use the term “citizens”, we intend this broader group, but we use “citizens” for simplicity.
- 9 If the public conversation concerns a group of people organized in a direct form of deliberative democracy, the conversation itself might produce a definitive answer to this part of the question as concerns a certain piece of news. For groups organized in representative democracies, this part of the inquiry might coalesce into stable public opinion and influence voting and other political actions accordingly (cf. Habermas, 1989; Ferree et al., 2002; Siegel, 2021).
- 10 This might be one of the reasons why journalism is so prone to brand-loyalty: restricting oneself to a single news-source yields the more cognitively tractable task of keeping track of a more restricted public common ground.
- 11 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jun/04/school-trips-to-uk-from-cu-could-halve-brexite-hits-cultural-exchanges>.
- 12 Granted, some posts will include further features or information like hashtags which, on the face of it, seem designed to indicate which questions these posts are germane to. But, as we see it, hashtags like *#freebritney* are typically much clearer about which JQUD the post they are affixed to is contributing to than they are about which JBQ they take this JQUD to fall under.
- 13 See Hobbs (1985), Kehler (2004), and Linell and Korolija (1997), amongst many others.
- 14 See Roberts (2012, 6:21).
- 15 Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020 found that 26% of people across all national markets and all age groups chose “social media” to answer the question: Which of these was the MAIN way in which you came across news in the last week? 38% of those aged 18–24 chose social media as their answer. The 2020 survey found that in the UK 39% of respondents access news through social media; in Sweden, 50%; in the US, 48%; in Canada, 53%; in Hong Kong, 66%; in the Philippines, 68%.
- 16 Consider, for instance, the video of George Floyd’s murder posted to Facebook by high-school student Darnella Frazier. (Frazier later received awards from PEN America and the Pulitzer Prizes for her documentation of the event.)
- 17 For helpful discussion and feedback, our thanks to Robyn Carston, Joshua Habgood-Coote, Fintan Mallory, Jessie Munton, Matthew Stone, and Åsa Wikforss. Thanks as well to the participants in the Online Disinformation Workshop at the University of Bologna. We are grateful to Tove Fäldt for excellent research assistance. Work on this chapter was supported by a Swedish Research Council grant (VR2019-03154).

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