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The Promise of Transparency. Informational Validity, Scientific Knowledge and Participation in *The Conversation UK*

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The principle of transparency (1) has become an *imperative* in the communication of organizations — whether they are commercial or otherwise (Catellani et al. 2015). Media organizations are no exception and that's why, *as we have seen*, fake news treatment appears so often as an exposure or an enlightenment. And this could be observed in the media *The Conversation* (2) that brings together journalists and scientific experts to guarantee reliable information — in accordance with the slogan “Academic rigour, journalistic flair”. However, this claim for transparency must be considered critically¹ — not to deny the real value of a wide spread of the academic expertise but to discuss its issues. My purpose here (3) is thus to show (i) **how such a claim is built** in the escort discourses of *The Conversation UK*, in order to understand (ii) what is **at stake** when **scientific knowledge is used to validate information**, and (iii) how this imperative of transparency is used to **stimulate the participation of the audience** — since a *conversation* is based on a verbal exchange.

#1. Communicative promise of transparency (4)

First I will address the *promise* of transparency claimed by *The Conversation*. From a communicational perspective, the promise could be defined as “*an explicit expression of a proposal on communication and what it can bring to audiences*” (Jeanneret 2014). In other words, it is the way the media presents itself, explain its communicational goal and assigns roles to all its users. And the media device will be instrumented following that goal — here, it takes the form of a digital and collaborative media, involving both scientists and journalists, and promoting exchanges; on the one hand, by encouraging commentary on articles and, on the other hand, by making easier their dissemination in other media — and this is mostly done with sharing buttons on social

¹ Recent studies have shown how transparency can be both part of an ultra-liberal ideology and of a democratic aspiration. in all cases, the assumption of transparency intends to demonstrate the superiority of a discourse that claims it over the others. See for instance (Birchall 2014; Alloa et Thomä 2018).

networks, but also with an access to the html code that makes possible the embedding in other web publications.

This promise of transparency is thus manifested in the escort discourses², which are particularly developed on this media (probably in accordance with its claim for transparency [9]). It essentially revolves around the semantic fields of **economic or political independence** and **openness/freedom of use** (6, 7, 8).

First have a look at the **charter** for instance: (10)

- “knowledge-based journalism that is responsible, ethical and supported by evidence”, “Be open, transparent and accountable.”; “Unlock the knowledge of researchers and academics to provide the public with clarity and insight into society’s biggest problems.” “fact-based and editorially independent forum, free of commercial or political bias.” Etc.
- “We believe in open access and the free-flow of information.” <https://theconversation.com/uk/who-we-are>

Then the “**10 ways we are different**”:

- “3. We are committed to ethical journalism, with a strict Editorial Charter and codes of conduct. We are transparent: every author discloses their expertise, funding, and conflicts of interest.
- 4. “We don’t hide our mistakes”
- 8. We avoid conflicts of interest”
- (+ 9 sources of fundings => partners: <https://theconversation.com/uk/partners> “

We thus see that transparency is very fundamental in the *ethos* of *The Conversation* — i.e. the image that is built by the speaker inside a discourse — and this ethos is as much a matter of “**ethos said**” as of “**ethos shown**” — I am using here Maingueneau's categories (Maingueneau 2014). In other words, *The Conversation* claims to be transparent in its content and the way they are elaborated, but at the same time build this image of being transparent in the scenography of its website (by providing a list of funders, requiring a declaration of conflict for each contributors, etc.).

#2. Now, why is scientific knowledge used as a guarantee for transparency and what does it involve (11)?

² If we choose here to focus on the accompanying discourses, it should be noted that transparency can also be built in the design of the device or by visualization tools (Cordier 2017; Bonaccorsi 2014).

By looking again at the escort discourses, we could see that the aim is to

- “rebuild trust in journalism” <https://theconversation.com/uk/who-we-are> with reliable content

Since *The Conversation* assumes that fake news are very common on the web, there could be some suspicion regarding media publications. So, *The Conversation* pledge to diffuse “trust content” only (<https://theconversation.com/uk/resources-for-media>); and this reliability is based on contributors’ authority (12):

- “Our authors are academics and researchers with deep expertise. Our editors are professional journalists so you can rely on high quality content that’s also easy to read. Our codes of conduct ensure accuracy. All articles carry a disclosure statement listing any potential conflict, and authors retain final sign off on all their articles. Our content is subject to an [Editorial Charter](#), so you can rely on evidence-based, independent and trusted journalism”

So the expertise related to the content of articles is ensured by scientists, while the respect of journalistic ethics and editorial standards is ensured by media professionals. And all this stuff is “delivered direct to the public” (cf. “Who we are”: “*The Conversation is an independent source of news and views, sourced from the academic and research community and delivered direct to the public.*”).

In a certain sense, scientific knowledge is here treated like gospel, but such an assumption could be discussed since the scientific field is full of struggle. It is complicated, when it comes to recent events at least, to have certainty in short time — as we currently could see with the controversies on the origins of the coronavirus. Scientific truth is usually provisional... and the truth — or rather knowledge that could be considered as valid —, that is accepted in the field of Social Sciences and the Humanities is not, or not only, an empirical one, since it mainly relies on a critical and reflexive approach of its objects. Because of this, this knowledge is necessarily unstable since, more than facts, the Humanities are rather dealing with their register of disclosure (and Elise has just talked about it)³.

Actually (13), using scientific knowledge as a mean for informational validation could be analyzed as a *win win* for the content producers. On the one hand, a media organization can legitimize itself

³ To a certain extent, the imperative of reproductibility of research results underpins the publicity of methods and data, which is coherent with transparency. The same worth for openness... Promise of transparency in scientific communication could thus be studied.

by re-establishing the facts, and indeed the journalistic ethics involves the ability to evaluate the sources. Scientific knowledge appears then as a fence against approximations, popular rumors or misinformation. On the other hand, the institutional environment (stimulated among others by European policies) requires scientists to make their research known to the Society. This could include a strong media presence, and from this point of view *The Conversation* is able to ensure a very large dissemination by the very materiality of its device, *i.e.* by facilitating republications, providing an internal search engine to find experts, and by referencing carefully each article following the indexing and visibility logics of the web (Stassin 2020).

As a collaborative media, *The Conversation* plays thus on both of these two approaches. It disseminates information on current events by using the expertise of the academics as well as the editorial and ethical skills of journalists — that actually play the role of Jacobi's third men (Jacobi 1984) implying that scientists aren't able to communicate to an extra-academic audience and thus need media professionals to do that. However, doing so, it still ratifies preconceived lines of demarcation such as true *vs.* false, academia *vs.* the lay world, the passivity of the public as a source of error *vs.* its emancipatory activity, etc. — the only particularity being the role of the journalist who as a professional becomes the provider of an editorial and communicational competence that would be missed by the scientist. Moreover, *The Conversation* assumes that journalists are using their *flair* (as mentioned in the slogan) to use scientific sources and, then, to build this specific relationship between science and the treatment of current events. Now, what about the audience? I will now move on and address the issue of "participation".

#3. On Participation (14)

There is an apparent consensus on strong links that could exist between **democracy and transparency**, since transparency makes **participation** possible.

First (15), even if *The Conversation* is a free media, a voluntary financial participation is required, starting with a pop-up "Donate now" that appears at the first connection to the site. We could say that transparency as a promise is likely to create the trust that attracts funding, the publicity of which is itself a source of transparency, since the independence of this media is justified by its collaborative funding (<https://theconversation.com/uk/friends>).

Then (16), readers can react to the articles by commenting and discussing them according with the “Community standards” that show transparency is also a requirement for users (“*We require your real name*”). In any case, it does not seem that participation is expected to contribute to the content (for example, as a complementary source). What is aimed for is the contribution of citizens to the democratic debate after the reading of articles:

- “Access to independent, high quality, authenticated, explanatory journalism underpins a functioning democracy. Our aim is to allow for better understanding of current affairs and complex issues. And hopefully allow for a better quality of public discourse and conversations” (<https://theconversation.com/uk/who-we-are>)

(17) The participation of the broader audience could also take the form of republishing contents in other media or social media — the licence is open but requires complete attribution and no changes⁴

- “The Conversation is a free resource: free to read (we’ll never go behind a paywall), and free to share or republish under [Creative Commons](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) licensing. All you need to do is follow our simple guidelines.” (<https://theconversation.com/uk/who-we-are>) (<https://theconversation.com/uk/republishing-guidelines>)

Participation of the media audience is thus for a large part conceived outside the media, by sharing and/or by feeding public discourses in order to improve the quality of the democratic debate. Trust on contents is based on transparency (of sources of knowledge, of funding, etc.) as a guarantee; and, in a certain way, the reader is led to reproduce the journalist's gesture of selecting sources before using them. From this point of view, the discourse of scientific experts is considered as a strong base to forge opinions on politic, social, economic issues.

#4. A few words to conclude (for the time) (18)

What I wanted to show (19) is that transparency must be considered not in an evidential way but in a critical one. In this case, promise of transparency leads to subordinate scientific research to its broad mediatization (20) and allocate to it a social role, and that role also implies that a quality debate requires to build opinions on a fact-based *truth*, and such a fact-base truth does not include the place for the dissensus associated with scientific debate.

⁴ (“You are free to republish the text of this article both online and in print. We ask that you follow some [simple guidelines](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Please note that images are not included in this blanket licence as in most cases we are not the copyright owner. Please do not edit the piece, ensure that you attribute the author, their institute, and mention that the article was originally published on The Conversation.” > “Republish” button)

The many declarations of openness and transparency (21) should lead to consider what the device does not show, *i.e.* on the one hand, a discourse that's in fact very much in line with research funding policies aimed at proving the social utility of academics as experts. In other words, it is also part of an economy of scientific publication, open and diffusible. On the other hand, the media seems to play again the paradigm of media education as a discipline aimed at the emancipation of non-specialist audiences by enlightened experts. From this point of view, media education is here supported by the media itself, which legitimizes its actions in being transparent with regard to its sources of knowledge and funding — which are presented as the most reliable for validating information (22). Audience is thus lead to reproduce the editorial gesture of source selection when using the contents coming from *The Conversation* in publics debates and to use scientific expertise as an unavoidable basis for exchange.

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