20220524 Building Transparency by Handling Polyphony

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In this talk I would like to examine how polyphony could be used to create an effect of transparency in media discourses, and especially when these media seek to prove their authority as they are engaged in media education of their public. So it’s about examining media scenographies, that’s to say — in a nutshell — how a media can stage an informational and communicative enterprise by, for instance, assigning enunciative positions among the different stakeholders (that could be journalists, experts, public, witnesses).

My hypothesis is that the intrinsic polyphony of any media discourse is here of particular significance in this scenography, as it is used to serve the exhibition of *transparency* as a guarantee of informational reliability. The latter should serve as a basis for a trusting relationship to engage audiences. I will therefore be interested in the effects of meaning that such a scenography will produce, with regard to social issues; and particularly the concern of these media to be *accountable*[[1]](#footnote-1), which, *de facto*, engages a dialogic relationship with their audience.

# Why transparency? (Why is it necessary to pretend to be transparent in media communication?)

Transparency has gradually been considered as a necessary and positive aspect of social interaction, and even an imperative in the communication of organizations (Catellani et al. 2015). In the field of media, transparency is required as it facilitates access to information, its circulation, its understanding — however Sandrine Baume notes that *transparency* is often taken in this context as a synonym for *publicity*, whereas the relationship between the two notions is more complex than it. Kant uses only the word *publicity* (never *transparency*) as a requirement for critical reasoning. For Bentham *publicity* is a way to fight bad governance by mutual surveillance and, in the public sphere, to prevent bad behaviour — even though Bentham sometimes uses both words interchangeably (*publicity* and *transparency*, which comes actually from the vocabulary of optics and thus is used in a metaphorical meaning) (Baume in Alloa et Thomä 2019). At the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century, *publicity* was the most commonly used term, but in the 20th century, the 1980s more specifically, *transparency* takes the upper hand, as Sandrine Baume has shown by using the Google NGram viewer. In any case, the transparency of media is often presented as desirable in that it should be a necessary condition for democratic debate and an empowered citizenship[[2]](#footnote-2).

However, from a scholarly point of view, considering that media could be transparent is a kind of nonsense — and here we see that the term *transparency* brings a slightly different sense than *publicity* (of course the media can give publicity to texts, but they are never transparent as if they were a window on the world). It is well established that any media contains an underlying point of view, values and ideologies — in a nutshell, that media are operators of *representations*, that’s to say the way in which media pretend to communicate the truth, pretend to be transparent, for instance by establishing authenticity of sources which will help to create authority, building trust and, from there, lead to adherence to the message[[3]](#footnote-3). It is needless to remind that the authority takes a particular dimension in the digital environment. It could involve criteria such as quantification, popularity, virality, against which the news media must now position themselves while taking into account that adherence to this authority is a matter of negotiation (Hobbs 2021, 226)[[4]](#footnote-4). Transparency, which according to Alloa appears to be a matter of social consensus, is then presented as a characteristic of reliable information production and as a condition for the recognition and adherence to an authority.

# Why polyphony?

Polyphony could be shortly defined as an articulation of voices coming from different enunciators. It is part of any discourse (since any discourse is made up of reiteration of already used statements). However, it is particularly notable in the press and media discourse. A a printed newspaper involves a plurality of enunciators, and articles rely on a plurality of sources to build the information (Krieg 2000). Charaudeau's work on media discourse emphasized the evidential value of polyphony: polyphony attests to the reporter's position, which may reflect authority, power or commitment[[5]](#footnote-5). Charaudeau also mentioned the role of polyphony in a new democratizing perspective. Nowadays the risks of blind spots in the media discourse is well known (for instance, in that it has too often been produced by some social actors at the expense of others), so media are therefore now attentive to echoing the different voices (Charaudeau 2005). On the other hand, as Rabatel's work on media discourses has shown, the combination of different points of view can create an effect of media neutrality, which is also one of the components of journalistic authority. Although, according to Rabatel again, the primary enunciator who makes himself invisible is thus positioning himself as an overenunciator. By hiding under other’s discourse he or she can inscribe a point of view in the very settlement of discourses.

Finally, this is obviously a connection between the materiality of press discourse and that of digital discourse (particularly in terms of structuring the content into a plurality of frames according to standards and templates), and polyphony is also a main characteristic of digital texts, which materially arranges voices through the editorial enunciation (Souchier et al. 2019) — as any text on the screen can be read as a result of both an enunciation of an editorial instance, *i.e*. the architext (CMS or software responsible for content formatting) but also of an authorial instance responsible for content updating. Online media then reinforce the scenography of plural voices, through the settlement of enunciative frames that will search their contents in different databases. To this we must add that the reader also participates in the writing of the text on the screen, in the generation of the textual form, when he clicks, scrolls, etc. — in this respect the term "wreader" is sometimes used.

We can therefore see, through this first route, that the management of polyphony is already an issue in press discourse. With the rise of misinformation as a social issue, journalists have now to manage and integrate discourses of other people into their own practice and prove their authority in saying what is reliable information and what is not. To distinguish the latter from the former, *transparency* appears to be the first criterion. The exhibition of transparency is therefore a crucial issue.

# Case study

I will now analyze the scenography and the role of polyphony in three online media and identify the associated issues — particularly with regard to the expected participation of the public. These three medias are (i) [Vrai ou Fake](https://www.francetvinfo.fr/vrai-ou-fake/) (France Info); (ii) [*The Observers*](https://observers.france24.com)(France 24); (iii) [The Conversation](https://theconversation.com/uk) UK. They have in common they are not so much media that inform as media that comment news that are already known publicising the ways in which the words of others related to an event can be evaluated. In that they have an educational dimension, they publicize methods and invite the public to participate in the information flow process, the challenge being that the information disseminated is reliable. So there is in this media content an intertext made up of different social discourses (to put it very quickly, an intertext is the presence of a text in another text, which is most explicitly illustrated by quotations but can also take the form of allusions, repetitions, etc.)[[6]](#footnote-6) that are going to deal with facts that have already been covered by other media.

Among the three cases studied, the promise is not always the same, and so does the type of transparency they build with polyphony — I understand 'promise' here in the sense given by Yves Jeanneret, *i.e*. as the explicit expression of a proposition about communication and what it can bring to its audiences (Jeanneret 2014, 14). It would be appropriate to remember the dividing line between the "said" and the "shown": the media says it is transparent, explains in what way (that’s part of the promise), and shows it. So we have constantly at stake the *said transparency*, in the escort discourses, and the *shown transparency*, where the polyphony is one of the means used by the media to represent transparency.

My intention is in no way to make transparent the claims of transparency of these media. As Jeanneret reminds us after others of course, studying media imposes, in first analysis, to mourn any claim to transparency. What remains then, are strategies of actors, of self-legitimation (Jeanneret 2019, 108‑9), and this is precisely what I wish to investigate here, by postulating that the exhibition of polyphony is used in the three cases I will now present to produce transparency as an effect of meaning. Transparency is itself constitutive of the authority necessary to gain the confidence of the public, to make them adhere to the “true news” that are presented to them and to engage them in the game of mutual media surveillance that transparency is supposed to achieve.

## Which Voices? (Examining the promises of three online media concerned by news processing in a media educational approach)

### Vrai ou Fake

I'll start with the website that is perhaps the most classic in the way it articulates voices, namely [Vrai ou Fake](https://www.francetvinfo.fr/vrai-ou-fake/) (France Info). This is the fact-checking and debunking platform for the entire French public audiovisual sector. Journalists pick up the discourses circulating in media spaces (public statements, rumours, texts on social networks) to evaluate, check and, if necessary, debunk them. In terms of editorial enunciation, the content is part of a tab on the *France info* website and, since it is a platform, it re-enunciates some content that was already published elsewhere, for instance the podcast "Le vrai du faux" broadcasted on France Inter or the "Detox" caps on Arte. We can find elements of reported speech in the titles, but also dialogical repetitions of unformulated statements[[7]](#footnote-7). For instance, saying « No, Bill Gates' Twitter account was not suspended by Elon Musk » assumes that someone once argued otherwise. To extend this example, which editorializes a cap of Arte, there is a text transcribing the audio part of the cap, whose documentary elements (screenshots, tweets) are communicated under hypertext links[[8]](#footnote-8). The public is invited to react to the articles by commenting, but above all is asked to take part in the process of verifying the information with the "all factchecker" resources in the side column. Further down, educational resources on the use of the media are offered.

*Vrai ou Fake* sticks as closely as possible to transparency standards of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) to which it is affiliated (by the way, this is also the case for the other two), thats to say, transparency of sources, methods, fundings and correction. These transparency standards are spelled out in such a way as to make it possible for the public to control the media, in response to the problem already stated 2000 years ago by Juvenal “Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?” — or “Who watches the Watchmen” (Alloa also mentions this as perhaps the greatest issue of our time (Alloa et Thomä 2019, 24), and of course we find a well-known variation of this maxim in a graphic novel by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons. As you have probably read in the latter, the lack of control and accountability of the self-appointed *Watchmen* is actually the source of a breakdown in trust and social unrest.

Transparency thus plays a role at the level of the enunciative instances involved in the production of sources: originating the reported speech, opposing it with other documented discourses, showing, as it were, the work of ranking the claims. Transparency responds here to a challenge enabling information production professionals to legitimize themselves through the exhibition of *good practices* intended to be used as criteria for assessing the reliability of news and to equip users in their understanding of informational texts (Doutreix et Barbe 2019; Schürgers 2021). Recognition appears indeed to be one of the pillars of authority (alongside others, such as reputation or visibility) and the exhibition of a good practice such as giving a voice to different points of view is likely to build it (Broudoux et Ihadjadene 2020).

### The Observers

The communication project carried out by [*The Observers*](https://observers.france24.com)(France 24) makes this relationship to social discourses somewhat more complex. This media presents itself as a collaborative news website based on the processing of first-hand testimony; [and it reads] “*We cover international current affairs by using eyewitness accounts from "Observers" - that's to say people who are at the heart of an event. They send us photos and videos, which our team of professional journalists in Paris verify and contextualize*”. This figure of the *Observer* as it is constructed by this media is that of a “witness-world-citizen”, providing raw material based on direct experience. Journalists stay here an instance of validation, they authenticate and contextualize testimonies and first-hand images thanks to their expertise. Yet this expertise is re-used in another section that’s *Debunked*: [and it reads] “*Our work with amateur contributors has made us experts at verifying images from nontraditional sources. Since 2014 our team of journalists put that expertise to use in a special section called “Debunked*.” (and here we have to a certain extend something similar to *Vrai ou Fake*).

Regularly headlines contain reported speech marks. Inside the articles, quotation are emphasized[[9]](#footnote-9), some sources are hyperlinked — which reinforces traceability of digital statements (Paveau 2017, 285 sqq.) and marks the trace of another voice that is here called as evidence to support the point (I will come back to this with the next example). The social discourses studied are either screen captured and reproduced in the article or directly inserted and clickable[[10]](#footnote-10); they can ever complete the testimony of an Observer, as in this example[[11]](#footnote-11).

At the bottom of the home page you will find a section "The Observers How To" with direct addresses to the public: “Contribute”, “Follow the Guide!”. It contains practical information, a re-categorisation of the debunked category and a guide with tutorials on how to spot truncated or falsified images, with case studies. So here the public is not only solicited as an instance of control, even if, in *The Observers*, we find the same affiliation to the IFCN and the concern for the validation of the words (an images) of others. Here the expertise of the eyewitness is valuated, and everyone can become an Observer. *The Observers* is thus based on a different promise of transparency, which is that of an immediacy between the fact and its reporting by someone who has experienced it directly. Transparency is thus closer to the optical sense: we see reality through Observer’s eyes as if we were there (it reads "They are your eyes across the globe.").

### The Conversation UK

[The Conversation UK](https://theconversation.com/uk)'s project is somewhat different, in that the intertext here is not made up of social claims, or even testimonies, but of the most part of both news combined with scientific references[[12]](#footnote-12). Indeed, it claims as the slogan indicates to associate *academic rigour* with *journalistic flair.* When logging in for the first time a window appears, establishing the role of academics as producers of facts, needing, like journalists, to be financially supported as such. The raw material is here expert, scientific discourse, which is adapted to the media with the help of information professionals. It should be noted that, in no way, does the scientist present current events on his or her own: when the article deals with recent events, the informational content is presented from the established news media (BBC, etc.) and completed by institutional/governmental data sources, while analyses are generally supported by scientific sources. Articles show a high degree of *numericity* (Paveau 2017), there are a lot of elements that can be activated such as hypertexts, that materially manifests the presence of an intertext — and, thus, other voices called in to corroborate the scientist's exposition. Here the link shows the immediate availability of the source, and reinforces the transparency of the origin of the data that were used. The pragmatic and evidential function of hypertext has been underlined by Grosmann and Rosier (Grossmann et Rosier 2018). This is obviously a pragmatic function, since one cannot necessarily imagine an average reader reading a medical article in extenso to verify its use.

In its editorial enunciation, *The Conversation* is the closest from a traditional news media, except that it emphasizes its collaborative dimension. It renews the content it published on social networks, ranks most read articles; the updating of content is here the result of a mechanical, quantifying enunciation. The community aspect is also visible on this first page with the acronyms of the partners, coupled elsewhere with a gallery of the "friends" of *The Conversation*, *i.e*. the donors. This emphasis on the collective character shows the community-funded production as a plural enunciation resulting from a collective effort supporting scientific and journalistic production. *The Conversation* differs from the other two in its attention to republication — that is, the anticipation of re-enunciation in other spaces: not only are there sharing buttons on social media (that is also the case with the others), but there is an explicit invitation to circulate the content through liberal Creative Commons Licenses, as well as partnerships with other news media that re-publish the articles.

Finally, as the media title (*The Conversation*) expresses itself, dialogue with the public and social stakeholders is at the very heart of the promise. The articles are open to comments, but the scientist is expected to be able to respond to them: each author thus has a profile listing his or her contributions and the responses he or she has sent to the reader. So transparency is also linked to the quantitative and qualitative exhibition of the conversational activity, for which the scientist is accountable — it should be noted that this is also the case for the public, who is invited to present themselves under their true identity and are subject to the rules of exchange defined publicly for the community. Transparency is here for the most part about identifying voices and situating them very precisely, which is supposed to prevent any conflict of interest that would compromise the independence of the information on which its authority is based (cf. quotation). On the other hand, scientists, as so-called producers of facts, play in a certain way the role of witnesses attesting to the production of knowledge.

# Conclusion

With these three examples, I wanted to show how the polyphony of media discourse was exhibited and mobilised in order to produce transparency as an effect of meaning. There is a consensus on transparency as a proof of authority to assess the reliability (or in some case the falsity) of sources and documents. It will thus build trust with the public and engage it to adopt a common standard of informational validation and exchange. The promise of delivering reliable information is then coupled with a media educational intention, since each citizen is called upon to become himself a fact checker operating at two levels, first of all, that of the information they may read on digital media, then, that of the news media themselves that have to be controlled.

We see then how the constitutive polyphony of any media discourse, namely that of the journalist and his sources (documents, expertise or testimony), is addressed with an attention to new issues of legitimacy and participation which appears to be a condition for democratic debate (*i.e*. the public must be convinced and engaged, and thus discuss and spread reliable information). Voices whose words were previously reported by the journalist (witness, scientist) tend to gain autonomy in the way they speak. Their discourse is marked by a greater heterogeneity with regards to the journalist's discourse. In other words, public and, in the case of *The Observer* and *The Conversation*, experts and witnesses are here actors in their own right in the informational process. This democratic intention, carried by the promises, has however been overtaken by the evolution of the structures of public expression.

Indeed, we are living in the era of media convergence (Jenkins 2006), and the participation of audiences or, more broadly, the multiplication of enunciative instances in the digital environment is a social fact, so the news media ratify and justify their added value by the authority they have in producing rules of transparency to identify, assess and articulate these voices, which is also a way of getting everyone to participate, but on the basis of rules that have not been collectively developed. So the idea here is to bring citizens to verify the application of professional standards enacted by the media themselves, not to incite them to propose other evaluation criteria. If the verification of information is meant to be participatory, it is therefore in the application of criteria edicted by the media sphere — a kind of quality control procedures.

Doing so, the news media provide a framework for participation which still happens spontaneously as people comment on news on the web. They reposition the news media as an intermediary in a world where people, in any case, have multiple voices and take over the news in various enunciations (basically, people produce news commentaries and witnesses on social networks, while we can see scientists analysing news issues on their research blogs, for instance).

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1. Accountability could be conceived as « a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has the obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose question and pass judgment, and the actor may face consequences » (Bovens 2007, 450, quoted by Baume in (Alloa et Thomä 2019, 214) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Information is indeed the very basis of the democratic functioning and the right to freely spread opinions and information (of course, within the limits of the law) is enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights « Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” (*This exercise of taking part in democratic debate is therefore supposed to be coupled with a media education that would develop the ability to evaluate the reliability of information sources*). — transparency appears then as a magic concept which is not questioned and seems thus to be a consensus, as Alloa pointed out (Alloa et Thomä 2019, 25). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Representation media theory seems to come from Stuart Hall (to be precised) cf. this blog from a Chicago Scholar : « Clearly, for Hall, representation involves understanding how [language](http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/language.htm) and systems of knowledge production work together to produce and ciruclate meanings.  Representation becomes the process or channel or medium through which these meanings are both created and reified.” (<https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/representation/>) => Stuart Hall, ed.  Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. London: Open University Press, 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. — and I quote here Renée Hobbs in her handbook *Media Literacy in Action*: “Trust in authority is thus reciprocal, because although we give up control to authorities, in exchange we expect to gain a sense of safety and security.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In 2011 [2005] §26 du chap. 8: “Vis-à-vis de soi, en s’appuyant sur l’opération de démarquage, le discours rapporté vise à produire la preuve d’un certain positionnement du locuteur rapporteur : positionnement d’autorité, dans la mesure où rapporter c’est montrer que l’on sait, c’est dire : « Je sais » (les citations dans les écrits scientifiques jouent entre autres choses ce rôle) : positionnement de pouvoir, dans la mesure où citer c’est faire savoir quelque chose à l’autre, lui révéler ce qui a été dit et qu’il ignore, c’est dire : « Je te fais savoir ce que tu ne sais pas » (les médias en rapportant les déclarations des hommes politiques prennent cette position de pouvoir) ; positionnement d’engagement, dans la mesure où rapporter révèle, par un certain choix des mots, l’adhésion du locuteur-rapporteur aux propos du locuteur d’origine (« Il est vrai que, comme il dit, “la guerre du Golfe n’a pas eu lieu” »), ou sa non-adhésion en contestant le contenu de vérité du déjà dit ou en prenant des distances vis-à-vis de celui-ci, voire en en dénonçant la fausseté (« Il a prétendu que la guerre du Golfe n’avait pas eu lieu.”  [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. If, as Charaudeau mentions, "The reported event includes facts and what is said" (chap. 10), it is a question here of evaluating discourses from various social backgrounds on the facts. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For instance : <https://www.francetvinfo.fr/internet/reseaux-sociaux/twitter/desintox-non-le-compte-twitter-de-bill-gates-n-a-pas-ete-suspendu-par-elon-musk_5116048.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. (this is the case here, sometimes posts of the organizations or individuals concerned denying the claim are shown, and the journalist could refers to an official documentary source if necessary)But other examples are available. P. ex. this one <https://www.francetvinfo.fr/replay-radio/le-vrai-du-faux/covid-19-est-il-vraiment-prevu-que-tous-les-francais-se-fassent-vacciner-dix-fois-par-an-comme-l-assure-l-animateur-benjamin-castaldi_5118955.html> => the intertext is mostly social network posts (denial), again, but there is also a link to the FR government health site. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. P. ex. <https://observers.france24.com/en/africa/20220504-this-is-the-final-straw-gabonese-activists-outraged-by-yet-another-oil-spill-by-perenco> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For instance <https://observers.france24.com/en/europe/20220428-debunked-claims-volodymyr-zelensky-ukraine-cocaine>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. from an Observer, « Mark » : <https://observers.france24.com/en/tv-shows/the-observers/20220426-drcongo-adf-islamic-state-attacks-ituri-invasion> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://theconversation.com/severe-covid-is-equivalent-to-20-years-of-ageing-new-study-182341> ; in other articles more in line with current events, the intertext is rather media-related for instance <https://theconversation.com/ukraine-abduction-of-uk-aid-workers-raises-safety-questions-over-humanitarian-organisations-182458> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)