

Building Transparency by Handling Polyphony

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How can polyphony be used to create an effect of transparency in media discourses, especially when communicating with a view to educating their audience about the media? This case study is 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 (who could be journalists, experts, the public, witnesses).

My point is that the intrinsic polyphony of any media discourse was here of particular significance, as it is used to serve the exhibition of *transparency* as a guarantee of informational reliability. This construction is indeed necessary for a trusting relationship and thus for audiences to engage. I will consider the effects of meaning produced by such a scenography, with regard to social issues; and particularly the concern of these media to be *accountable*, which, *de facto*, engages a dialogic relationship with their audience.

Transparency has gradually been considered as a necessary and positive aspect of social interaction, and even as 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.

Polyphony is an articulation of voices coming from different enunciators, it is part of any discourse — the press and media discourse notably ([Krieg 2000](#)). Charaudeau's work on this issue emphasized the evidential value of polyphony as it attests to the reporter's position, which may reflect authority, power or commitment. Charaudeau also mentioned the role of polyphony in a new democratizing perspective. Nowadays the risks of blind spots in the media discourse are 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 (Rabatel 2017), the combination of different points of view can create an effect of media neutrality, which is also one of the components of journalistic authority. However, following Rabatel once again, the primary enunciator who makes himself invisible is thus positioning himself as an overenunciator. By hiding behind the other's discourse he or she can inscribe a point of view in the very settlement of discourses.

Considering these theoretical elements, I found interesting to analyse the scenography and the role of polyphony in three online media and to identify the associated issues — particularly with regard to the expected participation of the public. These three medias are (i) [Vrai ou Fake](#) (France Info); (ii) [The Observers](#) (France 24); (iii) [The Conversation](#) UK. They have in common the fact that they are not as much a media that informs as a media that comments news 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. 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” 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). From this perspective, 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. Therefore, the *said transparency* is constantly at stake, in the escort discourses, and the *shown transparency*, on its part, can be found in the polyphony of the articles as it 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), what I want to show by postulating that the exhibition of polyphony is used in the three cases to produce transparency as an effect of meaning. Transparency is itself constitutive of the authority necessary to gain the confidence of the public, to have their concur with the way news are presented and to engage them in the game of the mutual media surveillance that transparency is supposed to achieve.

⇒ *The details of this cases study as well as the full text of the paper delivered at the conference are available on Orbi, the institutional repository of the ULiège: <https://hdl.handle.net/2268/291428>*

In these three cases, 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, in addition, appear to be conditions for the/a democratic debate (*i.e.* the public must be convinced and engaged, and thus discuss and spread reliable information). Voices such as those of the witness or the scientist used to be reported by the journalist to shed light on current events. They tend now to gain autonomy and their discourse is marked by a greater heterogeneity with regards to the journalist’s discourse. In other words, the public and, in the case of *The Observer* and *The Conversation*, experts and witnesses are here actors in their own right regarding the informational process. This democratic intention, carried by the promises, has however been overtaken by the evolution of the structures of public expression. We are indeed 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 are social facts. In that sense, 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 produced 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 utterances

(basically, people produce news commentaries and witnesses on social networks, while we can see scientists analyzing news issues on their research blogs, for instance).

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