Transparency and the Dynamics of Trust and Distrust

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In 1961 the Journal of the American Medical Association published a survey suggesting that 90% of doctors who diagnosed cancer in their patients would choose not to tell them (Oken 1961). The doctors in the study gave a variety of reasons, including (unsubstantiated) fears that patients might commit suicide, and feelings of futility about the prospects of treatment. Among other things, this case stands as a reminder that, while it is a commonplace that lay people often don’t trust experts, at least as important is that experts often don’t trust lay people.

**Paternalist Distrust**

I was put in mind of this stunning example of communicative paternalism while reading Stephen John’s recent paper, “Epistemic trust and the ethics of science communication: against transparency, openness, sincerity and honesty.” John makes a case against a presumption of openness in science communication that — although his argument is more subtle - reads at times like a rational reconstruction of a doctor-patient relationship from the 1950s. What is disquieting is that he makes a case that is, at first glance, quite persuasive.

When lay people choose to trust what experts tell them, John argues, they are (or their behaviour can usefully be modelled as though they are) making two implicit judgments. The first, and least controversial, is that ’if some claim meets scientific epistemic standards for proper acceptance, then [they] should accept that claim’ (John 2018, 77). He calls this the ‘epistemological premise’.

Secondly, however, the lay person needs to be convinced that the ‘[i]nstitutional structures are such that the best explanation for the factual content of some claim (made by a scientist, or group, or subject to some consensus) is that this claim meets scientific “epistemic standards” for proper acceptance’ (John 2018, 77). He calls this the ‘sociological premise.’ He suggests, rightly, I think, that this is the premise in dispute in many contemporary cases of distrust in science. Climate change sceptics (if that is the right word) typically do not doubt that we should accept claims that meet scientific epistemic standards; rather, they doubt that the ‘socio-epistemic institutions’ that produce scientific claims about climate change are in fact working as they should (John 2018, 77).

Consider the example of the so-called ‘climate-gate’ controversy, in which a cache of emails between a number of prominent climate scientists were made public on the eve of a major international climate summit in 2009. The emails below (quoted in Moore 2017, 141) were full of claims that might - to the uninitiated - look like evidence of sharp practice. For example:

"I should warn you that some data we have we are not supposed [to] pass on to others. We can pass on the gridded data—which we do. Even if WMO [World Meteorological Organization] agrees, I will still not pass on the data. We have 25 or so years invested in the work. Why should I make the data available to you, when your aim is to try and find something wrong with it.”
“You can delete this attachment if you want. Keep this quiet also, but this is the person who is putting in FOI requests for all emails Keith and Tim have written and received re Ch 6 of AR4 We think we’ve found a way around this.”

“The other paper by MM is just garbage. … I can’t see either of these papers being in the next IPCC report. Kevin and I will keep them out somehow – even if we have to redefine what the peer-review literature is!”

"I've just completed Mike's Nature trick of adding in the real temps to each series for the last 20 years (ie from 1981 onwards) and [sic] from 1961 for Keith's to hide the decline."

As Phil Jones, then director of the Climate Research Unit, later admitted, the emails “do not read well.”1 However, neither, on closer inspection,2 did they show anything particularly out of the ordinary, and certainly nothing like corruption or fraud. Most of the controversy, it seemed, came from lay people misinterpreting the backstage conversation of scientists in light of a misleading image of what good science is supposed to look like.

The Illusions of Folk Philosophy of Science

This is the central problem identified in John’s paper. Many people, he suggests, evaluate the ‘sociological premise’ in light of a ‘folk philosophy of science’ that is worlds away from the reality of scientific practice. For this reason, revealing to a non-expert public how the sausage is made can lead not to understanding, ‘but to greater confusion’ (John 2017, 82). And worse, as he suggests happened in the climate-gate case, it might lead people to reject well-founded scientific claims in the mistaken belief that they did not meet proper epistemic standards within the relevant epistemic community. Transparency might thus lead to unwarranted distrust.

In a perfect world we might educate everybody in the theory and practice of modern science. In the absence of such a world, however, scientists need to play along with the folk belief in order to get lay audiences to adopt those claims that are in their epistemic best interests. Thus, John argues, scientists explaining themselves to lay publics should seek to ‘well-lead’ (the benevolent counterpart to mislead) their audience. That is, they should try to bring the lay person to hold the most epistemically sound beliefs, even if this means masking uncertainties, glossing complications, pretending more precision than you know to be the case, and so on.

Although John presents his argument as something close to heresy, his model of ‘well-leading’ speech describes a common enough practice. Economists, for instance, face a similar temptation to mask uncertainties and gloss complications and counter-arguments when engaging with political leaders and wider publics on issues such as the benefits and disadvantages of free trade policies. As Dani Rodrik puts it:

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1 In a statement released on 24 November 2009, http://www.uea.ac.uk/mac/comms/media/press/2009/nov/cruupdate
2 One of eight separate investigations was by the House of Commons select committee on Science and Technology (http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmsetech/387/38702.htm).
As a professional economist, as an academic economist, day in and day out I see in seminars and papers a great variety of views on what the effects of trade agreements are, the ambiguous effects of deep integration. Inside economics, you see that there is not a single view on globalization. But the moment that gets translated into the political domain, economists have this view that you should never provide ammunition to the barbarians. So the barbarians are these people who don’t understand the notion of comparative advantage and the gains from trade, and you don’t want… any of these caveats, any of these uncertainties, to be reflected in the public debate. (Rodrik 2017, at c.30-34 mins).

‘Well-leading’ speech seems to be the default mode for experts talking to lay audiences.

An Intentional Deception

A crucial feature of ‘well-leading’ speech is that it has no chance of working if you tell the audience what you are up to. It is a strategy that cannot be openly avowed without undermining itself, and thus relies on a degree of deception. Furthermore, the well-leading strategy only works if the audience already trusts the experts in question, and is unlikely to help - and is likely to actively harm expert credibility - in context where experts are already under suspicion and scrutiny. John thus admits that this strategy can backfire if the audience is made aware of some of the hidden complications, and worse, as was case of in climate-gate, if it seems the experts actively sought to evade demands for transparency and accountability (John 2017, 82).

This puts experts in a bind: be ‘open and honest’ and risk being misunderstood; or engage in ‘well-leading’ speech and risk being exposed - and then misunderstood! I’m not so sure the dilemma is actually as stark as all that, but John identifies a real and important problem: When an audience misunderstands what the proper conduct of some activity consists in, then revealing information about the conduct of the activity can lead them to misjudge its quality. Furthermore, to the extent that experts have to adjust their conduct to conform to what the audience thinks it should look like, revealing information about the process can undermine the quality of the outcomes.

One economist has thus argued that accountability works best when it is based on information about outcomes, and that information about process ‘can have detrimental effects’ (Prat 2005: 863). By way of example, she compares two ways of monitoring fund managers. One way is to look at the yearly returns. The other way (exemplified, in her case, by pension funds), involves communicating directly with fund managers and demanding that they ‘explain their investment strategy’ (Prat 2005, 870). The latter strategy, she claims, produces worse outcomes than those monitored only by their results, because the agents have an incentive to act in a way that conforms to what the principal regards as appropriate rather than what the agent regards as the most effective action.

Expert Accountability
The point here is that when experts are held accountable - at the level of process - by those without the relevant expertise, their judgment is effectively displaced by that of their audience. To put it another way, if you want the benefit of expert judgment, you have to forgo the urge to look too closely at what they are doing. Onora O’Neill makes a similar point: ‘Plants don’t flourish when we pull them up too often to check how their roots are growing: political, institutional and professional life too may not flourish if we constantly uproot it to demonstrate that everything is transparent and trustworthy’ (O’Neill 2002: 19).

Of course, part of the problem in the climate case is that the outcomes are also subject to expert interpretation. When evaluating a fund manager you can select good people, leave them alone, and check that they hit their targets. But how do you evaluate a claim about likely sea-level rise over the next century? If radical change is needed now to avert such catastrophic effects, then the point is precisely not to wait and see if they are right before we act. This means that both the ‘select and trust’ and the ‘distrust and monitor’ models of accountability are problematic, and we are back with the problem: How can accountability work when you don’t know enough about the activity in question to know if it’s being done right? How are we supposed to hold experts accountable in ways that don’t undermine the very point of relying on experts?

The idea that communicative accountability to lay people can only diminish the quality either of warranted trust (John’s argument) or the quality of outcomes (Prat’s argument) presumes that expert knowledge is a finished product, so to speak. After all, if experts have already done their due diligence and could not get a better answer, then outsiders have nothing epistemically meaningful to add. But if expert knowledge is not a finished product, then demands for accountability from outsiders to the expert community can, in principle, have some epistemic value.

Consider the case of HIV-AIDS research and the role of activists in challenging expert ideas of what constituted ‘good science’ in conduct of clinical trials. In this engagement they ‘were not rejecting medical science,’ but were rather “denouncing some variety of scientific practice ... as not conducive to medical progress and the health and welfare of their constituency” (Epstein 1996: 2). It is at least possible that the process of engaging with and responding to criticism can lead to learning on both sides and the production, ultimately, of better science. What matters is not whether the critics begin with an accurate view of the scientific process; rather, what matters is how the process of criticism and response is carried out.

We Are Never Alone

This leads me to an important issue that John doesn’t address. One of the most attractive features of his approach is that he moves beyond the limited examples, prevalent in the social epistemology literature, of one lay person evaluating the testimony of one expert, or perhaps two competing experts. He rightly observes that experts speak for collectives and thus that we are implicitly judging the functioning of institutions when we judge expert testimony. But he misses an analogous sociological problem on the side of the lay person. We rarely judge alone. Rather, we use ‘trust proxies’ (MacKenzie and Warren 2012).
I may not know enough to know whether those climate scientists were not doing good science, but others can do that work for me. I might trust my representatives, who have on my behalf conducted open investigations and inquiries. They are not climate scientists, but they have given the matter the kind of sustained attention that I have not. I might trust particular media outlets to do this work. I might trust social movements.

To go back to the AIDS case, ACT-UP functioned for many as a trust proxy of this sort, with the skills and resources to do this sort of monitoring, developing competence but with interests more closely aligned with the wider community affected by the issue. Or I might even trust the judgments of groups of citizens randomly selected and given an opportunity to more deeply engage with the issues for just this purpose (see Gastil, Richards, and Knobloch 2014).

This hardly, on its own, solves the problem of lay judgment of experts. Indeed, it would seem to place it at one remove and introduce a layer of intermediaries. But it is worth attending to these sorts of judgments for at least two reasons. One is because, in a descriptive sense, this is what actually seems to be going on with respect to expert-lay judgment. People aren’t directly judging the claims of climate scientists, and they’re not even judging the functioning of scientific institutions; they’re simply taking cues from their own trusted intermediaries. The second is that the problems and pathologies of expert-lay communication are, in large part, problems with their roots in failures of intermediary institutions and practices.

To put it another way, I suspect that a large part of John’s (legitimate) concern about transparency is at root a concern about unmediated lay judgment of experts. After all, in the climate-gate case, we are dealing with lay people effectively looking over the shoulders of the scientists as they write their emails. One might have similar concerns about video monitoring of meetings: they seem to show you what is going on but in fact are likely to mislead you because you don’t really know what you’re looking at (Licht and Naurin 2015). You lack the context and understanding of the practice that can be provided by observers, who need not themselves be experts, but who need to know enough about the practice to tell the difference between good and bad conduct.

The same idea can apply to transparency of reasoning, involving the demand that actors give a public account of their actions. While the demand that authorities explain how and why they reached their judgments seems to fall victim to the problem of lay misunderstanding, it also offers a way out of it. After all, in John’s own telling of the case, he explains in a convincing way why the first impression (that the ‘sociological premise’ has not been fulfilled) is misleading. The initial scandal initiated a process of scrutiny in which some non-experts (such as the political representatives organising the parliamentary inquiry) engaged in closer scrutiny of the expert practice in question. Practical lay judgment of experts does not require that lay people become experts (as Lane 2014 and Moore 2017 have argued), but it does require a lot more engagement than the average citizen would either want or have time for. The point here is that most citizens still
don’t know enough to properly evaluate the sociological premise and thus properly interpret information they receive about the conduct of scientists. But they can (and do) rely on proxies to do the work of monitoring and scrutinizing experts.

Where does this leave us? John is right to say that what matters is not the generation of trust per se, but warranted trust, or an alignment of trust and trustworthiness. What I think he misses is that distrust is crucial to the possible way in which transparency can (potentially) lead to trustworthiness. Trust and distrust, on this view, are in a dynamic relation: Distrust motivates scrutiny and the creation of institutional safeguards that make trustworthy conduct more likely. Something like this case for transparency was made by Jeremy Bentham (see Bruno 2017).

John rightly points to the danger that popular misunderstanding can lead to a backfire in the transition from ‘scrutiny’ to ‘better behaviour.’ But he responds by asserting a model of ‘well-leading’ speech that seems to assume that lay people already trust experts, and he thus leaves unanswered the crucial questions raised by his central example: What are we to do when we begin from distrust and suspicion? How we might build trustworthiness out of distrust?

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References


