**Towards an Ethics of Expert Communication**

As the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic has spread across the globe, our daily environments have been drastically altered. The dependable rhythms of work, family, and friends have been shattered. In this state of uncertainty, it is striking how we have turned towards scientific experts as steady hands. In the United States, as well as in most if not all Western European countries, virologists and epidemiologists have taken center stage as people seek guidance not just on how to behave in the current circumstances, but also what to expect in the weeks and months to come.

These scientific experts have become much more than sources of knowledge about the dangers of the disease. As beacons of trust in this new, Covid-ridden environment, they are also impacting society-wide behavior to an unprecedented degree, even to the extent of giving rise to new moral norms. Not shaking someone’s hand has gone from being a snub to a sign of caring and respect. Young adults’ merry socializing and subjective sense of immortality – a feature of every generation throughout the ages – is now viewed as a form of irresponsible egotism.

With this large impact has come an ethical responsibility that, I believe, has not sufficiently been acknowledged or explored. Relatively minute alterations to the phrases of scientific experts can have a disproportionate impact on the lives of citizens, and can determine the degree of public compliance. Does one emphasize the uncertainty of scientific findings? Or should one emphasize the potential dangers of the disease?

Too often it is thought, even by the experts themselves, that all they need do is to speak in the name of science. This focus on truth is present also in academic discussions: for instance, in discussing how experts should be held to account, Onora O’Neill emphasizes the experts’ “obligation to tell the truth” (O’Neill 2002, p. 59). One can discern a similar emphasis on truthfulness in communication ethics more generally. Thus for instance, in the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics, the first principle is “seek truth and report it” (SPJ 2014).

Yet, as I will argue, the mantra “speak truthfully” is not a helpful one in the context of expert communication: the true challenge for good expert communication lies in extracting the *appropriate* message from the scientific state-of-the-art. Since this involves an important ethical dimension, in this exploratory piece I would like to outline the need for an ethics of expert communication, and what this might entail.

***Scientific and Expert Communication***

The first hint of why expert communication is never simply about conveying scientific knowledge can be found in the standard unit of scientific communication , namely the scientific paper. In this communication format, the speaker (i.e., author) can assume considerable background knowledge, and can assume that the listener (i.e., reader) will be able interpret statements about the relative uncertainty of results. Certainties are never available, but only p-values and effect sizes; conclusions are only ever drawn with caution and caveats.

Such level of detail and caution would be wholly inappropriate should the scientist be communicating to the public, media, or politicians. The public and politicians are not necessarily interested in epistemological nuances for their own sake; they want to know what needs to be done. This goal entails a fundamental alteration of the communication format, which now involves the balancing of two service ideals: the scientific service ideal and a public service ideal. The former involves accurately conveying the scientific state-of-the-art, without eschewing nuance and degrees of uncertainty, while the latter involves choosing those words that will beneficially impact a public good (e.g. public health, or climate change).

Hence, on a purely conceptual level, a rather strict distinction should be made between scientific communication (directed towards fellow scientists) and expert communication (directed towards members of the public). This is why the mantra “speak truthfully” in context of expert communication raises the question: which truth? What message should be extracted from the state-of-the-art? Should potential dangers be emphasized, or rather the epistemological uncertainty? Scientific communication does not require that a choice be made, but the concise and action-oriented format of expert communication demands it.

As an example, consider how many Western experts were comparing Covid-19 to the seasonal flu, even as late as March. Yet, experts in countries such as Taiwan, South Korea, or Singapore, with access to identical scientific data, had come to radically different (and in retrospect, more appropriate) conclusions. This a further illustration of how expert deliberation and communication can depend on a host of non-scientific factors, bureaucratic, political and cultural.

***Distrust and Expert Communication***

There is a danger in not acknowledging the ethical aspect of expert communication. By not doing so, and by portraying expert communication as driven purely by a value-neutral scientific rationality, encouragement is given to those who distrust the intentions of scientific experts. They may observe, quite rightly, that expert communications involve more than pure science; however, from this they may infer, more problematically, that this ‘more’ is possibly sinister.

This shortcoming in the communication of some experts may not be easily observable in a country like the United States, where scientific experts have acquired a halo in contrast with the very publicly visible incompetence of some politicians. However, in a country such as Belgium (where I currently live), scientific experts have dominated the national stage, partly due to political factors: the current government is a temporary caretaker one and was almost wholly absent in the initial stages of the pandemic. This situation has led to experts having an unprecedented influence over daily life, and with it an unprecedented scrutiny of their utterances. Very soon, a suspicion arose in the editorials and op-eds of national newspapers that scientific experts were eroding democracy and leading the country down the path towards paternalism and technocracy. Crucial points of contention included how experts, as late as the first week of March, were comparing Covid-19 to the seasonal flu: the suspicion has been that this communication was actually motivated by a desire to prevent panic. Another is how the efficacy of mouth masks for the general public was downplayed until very recently, with many suspecting the real reason was to safeguard mouth masks for medical professions.

Such worries about paternalism and technocracy are closely related to a pattern of distrust, especially visible in some areas of the United States, with public health measures being experienced as efforts to increase ‘control’ over citizens for the sake of governmental control, and thus to erode basic freedoms. Apprehension about the erosion of basic freedoms is legitimate and sometimes highly justified. However, it is problematic when such suspicions fester and segue into a more general distrust of *everything* the experts have to say. Thus potentially reasonable suspicions morph into science denial and conspiracy theory.

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These very real dynamics of distrust show why it is so important that scientific experts not simply focus on *demanding* *trust* of others (in virtue of scientific expertise), but also and perhaps especially focus on *demonstrating* *trustworthiness* in public communications*.* By this I do not intend to say that experts have behaved or communicated during this crisis in ways that explicitly invite distrust (on the contrary); rather, every step should be taken to ensure that expert communication be as irreproachable as possible.

There may well be a reluctance to acknowledge the ethical aspect of expert communication, since this seems to introduce the possibility of human error at a time when we tend to view the human mind as riddled with biases, conscious or otherwise. We would much prefer expert pronouncements only rely to on the ‘scientific method’ rather than on human judgment. Yet, there is not much of an option here: rely on human judgment we must. Moreover, on a more positive note, careful, transparent, and collaborative deliberation can help address many such biases. Thus, by explicitly integrating non-scientific elements in expert deliberation, a step can be made towards, rather than away from, greater trustworthiness.

Here ethicists have a role to play in reflecting about the principles of the ethics of expert communication. This could result in a short code of conduct that could be of practical use to science experts. Such a code of conduct would include the following principles:

1. **Speak appropriately.** Public communication and media appearances should be approached with the same scrupulousness as ethical deliberation. Experts’ words have significant consequences, and so must be weighed carefully.
2. **Scientific and public service ideals.** In choosing what to communicate, the scientific expert must weigh the needs of the scientific service ideal and the public service ideal.
3. **Transparency of reasoning.** In order to minimize the chance that the public message will be experienced as paternalistic by the public, it is important that the scientists communicate not just the conclusions of their deliberation, but also the most important steps in their reasoning. In this way they show how their communication is justified, even if it turns out in the future that they were wrong.

Of course, the roots of distrust, both in the United States as well as within European countries (let alone between European countries), undoubtedly lie at least in part in conflicting political and financial interests, and hence one should not hope that even a fully-fledged ethics of expert communication could dispel all distrust in experts. Nonetheless, the trustworthiness of expert communication should still be as irreproachable as possible. And even though raising awareness of the ethical dimension of such communication may only be a small step towards increasing trust in polarized times, it is eminently achievable.

**Length: 1589 words.**

**References**

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