

# **On conveying and not conveying expertise**

*Brian Rappert*

Department of Sociology, Philosophy and Anthropology, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK

*Catelijne Coopmans*

Tembusu College and Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, Singapore

Accepted *Social Studies of Science*

18 February 2015

## **Abstract**

This article attends to the movement between disclosing and non-disclosing in accounts of expertise. While referencing STS discussions about tacit knowledge ('experts know more than they can say') and the politics of non-disclosure (withholding can help as well as harm expert credibility), in the main it considers how experts move between conveying and not conveying in order to make their proficiencies recognized and accessible to others. The article examines this movement through a form that partakes in it, thus drawing attention to conventions and tensions in how authors make themselves accountable, and their subject matter available, to audiences. It thereby proposes to explore the possibilities of careful, and generative, non-disclosure as part of expert writing practices.

## **Keywords**

expertise, disclosure, trust, forgery, meditation

## **Corresponding author**

Brian Rappert; Department of Sociology, Philosophy and Anthropology; University of Exeter, Exeter; UK Email: [B.Rappert@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:B.Rappert@exeter.ac.uk)

Dear Both,

At long last I am getting back to you about your manuscript, 'On conveying and not conveying expertise' (manuscript ID SSS-13-182).

My apologies for the delay; your manuscript was somewhat difficult to handle because its two case studies, art authentication and Buddhist meditation, both crucial to the paper's argument, are poles apart. I felt that it was important to involve reviewers with expertise in art and Buddhism, as well as STS scholars. In the end I received four reviews. The reviewers' comments are appended to this letter.

The reviews offer a mixed assessment. Taken together, they indicate the challenging nature of the task you have set yourselves. Your text provides an intriguing addition to studies of expertise in STS. At the same time, it is in danger of making the reader do too much of the work of producing insights.

Having read the manuscript several times, I still struggle to decide on which side it lands. I think it is clever, but, much like Reviewer 2, at the end of the day I don't know how much I learn from it. So: I am not going to accept the manuscript for publication now, but I will invite you to revise and resubmit it.

The revised version needs to indicate more explicitly which forms of conveying and not conveying expertise are important to your paper's argument. This is my own view, and this is also what I believe the diverse remarks by Reviewers 1, 2 and 4 are getting at. I understand that you are foregrounding the 'performative rhetoric' (if that's the right word) through which expert writers present their knowledge as (varyingly) 'here and accessible' and 'elsewhere and inaccessible'. I can also see that the way in which this switching plays out prepares the audience to relate to both the subject matter and the expert in particular ways. What needs to be brought out more, however, is the manner in which conveying and not conveying are contingent on *how*, *where* and *why* accounts of expertise are given: the art-authenticator who regales readers with tales of his esoteric career engages his audience in a different way than the Buddhist monk who

offers training points for how to undertake meditation. While your paper discusses how authors have employed conveyance and non-conveyance to evoke the object of their study for non-experts, it does not map which forms of (non-)conveyance are important to different audiences and purposes.

Like Reviewer 4, I realize that the paper's lack of explanation about why you are engaging in your own forms of 'non-conveyance' is partly the point. Still, though, I think your revised version has to clarify the pay-off for readers in a way that is commensurate with the spirit of the paper – not an easy task, I grant you. In return for asking you to do this, however, I can promise to make a quick decision after I receive your revised manuscript.

Once your revised manuscript is prepared, you can upload it and submit it through your Author Center. To submit a revised manuscript, log into <http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/sss> and enter your Author Center, where you will find your manuscript title listed under 'Manuscripts with Decisions.' Under 'Actions', click on 'Create a Revision'. Your manuscript number has been appended to denote a revision.

**IMPORTANT:** Your original files are available to you when you upload your revised manuscript. Please delete any redundant files before completing the submission.

Thanks for sending me this interesting manuscript. Again, my apologies for the delay.

Sincerely,  
The Editor

## Reviewers' comments

### *Reviewer 1*

This paper examines how, and to what extent, experts acknowledge and express the limits of their expertise. Two illustrative examples are offered: the popular writing of a 'fake-buster' who is an expert in determining whether a work of art or an antique is fake or genuine, and that of Buddhist practitioners who are experts at producing distinctive meditative states of mind. The paper explores how such practitioner writing makes the expertise involved accessible to a general audience. Although the representation of expertise in these texts relies on exposition and explanation, the author shows that the withholding of such also plays an important role. Indeed, the paper seeks to establish 'not conveying' as a potentially generative act, through which an expert may foster an understanding of the subject matter within her or his audience. Accordingly, the paper prompts STS readers to 'ask how incompleteness can (further) become acknowledged as part of *our* accounts' (p. 1).

The paper is impressive in its ability to engage afresh with a set of questions that are relatively well entrenched in STS: How is expertise manifested in action and interaction? How do experts present themselves as credible? How do they manage their standing vis-à-vis non-experts?

In relation to such questions, I find that the paper does a good job acknowledging the relevant STS literature and articulating its own contribution, namely to draw attention to the limits conveyed in expert accounts as a (potentially) positive and productive aspect of performing expertise through such accounts. At the same time, I would like to see the insights offered by this paper brought more explicitly into dialogue with categories that STS readers are familiar with. I agree that Collins and Evans' work is in a different register than this paper, as they are concerned with mapping types of expertise. It would be nice to make some more links though, given that their attention to *transmitting* knowledge has its parallel in the paper's focus on *conveying* expertise. Also the notion of limits is central to both: the limits of what can be explicated (i.e. tacit knowledge) for Collins and Evans and the positioning of limits within the performance of expertise here. The author could flesh out how conveying expertise does not rest on codifying it. This would provide a chance further to highlight the paper's orientation to knowledge as

interactionally identified, and to sharpen the issue of how expertise is performed in and through talk (and silence too), including talk of limits (and silence about limits).

Equally, there could be a more direct comparison between different contexts in which experts find themselves grappling with the limits of ‘conveyability’. Expert witnesses, as discussed by Lynch (2004) and Lynch and Cole (2005), for example, demonstrate their expertise in and through the particular language game at play in courts of law; their balancing act between conveying and not conveying is subsumed under this. How does this dynamic work for the fake-buster and the Buddhist meditators?

I would like to offer one other suggestion for the author’s consideration. This was prompted by the minor comment in footnote 23, which made me wonder about the relevance of this paper for discussions about science. Compared to the experts discussed in the paper, it seems to me that scientific experts, when relaying expertise, maintain a stronger sense of the object or phenomenon spoken about as ultimately *knowable by the intellect*. Yes, the expert knows much more than she can say right now (or can say, period), but in principle others can have access to the same, and the road toward this is relatively clearly signposted. In contrast, the way in which the expert accounts presented in this paper highlight their own limits (or not) calls into question the very notion of a knowable object. The Buddhist meditators, in particular, seem to design their speech to wean readers off strongly ingrained expectations regarding knowledge, objects and subjects.

Probing the similarities and the differences with (more straightforwardly) scientific examples would push an already fine paper towards greater impact, as it would allow the author to go beyond simply suggesting that STS scholars be attuned to the dynamics of omission and inclusion in their own conveying of expertise. In this way, the paper could do some important groundwork that paves the way for a comparative and systematic understanding of how and why an indication of limits can be productive and generative in expert speech.

#### *Reviewer 2*

It is probably easiest to begin with my overall verdict on this manuscript. Although it is relatively engaging and quite well written in places, it has a number of important flaws that make

the whole experience pretty tiresome. It might represent an interesting talk – one that doubtless would stimulate heated debate – but it is not a paper fit for publication in a major scholarly journal.

The topic of the manuscript is provocative enough: how do authorities in their field demonstrate a sense of their aptitude while also claiming it is not possible to fully do so?

I am going to concentrate my comments on the area with which I am most familiar: art. The author examines a prominent self-account of a person engaged in detecting art forgeries in relation to his oscillations between purporting to convey – and not – his faculty.

My first criticism is the choice of focus. I appreciate the detailed level of care given by the author to Thomas Hoving's *False Impressions*. This is a significant source document inasmuch as Hoving was a well-known figure in his roles of directing New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and editing *Connoisseur*. I concur that his text exhibits signs of shifting between presenting forgeries as readily detectable in the flawed properties of the work, and undetectable through scientific and interpretative means – and that this shifting works to bolster his persona. (FYI, for another set of orientations to fakery by Hoving I would recommend consulting the 2006 documentary *Who the #\$&% is Jackson Pollock?*).

I think the author failed to appreciate that Hoving's book has two main audiences: a general readership and Hoving's art-world contemporaries. By necessity, this being a mass-market publication, he had to make his claims accessible to those without knowledge of art or the art world. I think that the author stays at this level, rather than interpreting Hoving's argument with reference to those with requisite backgrounds. That may or may not be because of the author's own competencies (I found some of the expressions somewhat awkward). For instance, on page 8, starting at line 15 the author discusses Hoving's insert photographs. The suggestion is made that the caption descriptions provide 'little elaboration of why these features prove what they are said to prove, despite the works having fooled many in the past. In other instances, it would seem impossible for any reader to gauge whether the pieces were fakes from the photos.' I had little

difficulty, however, recognising with the faults Hoving pointed out of the Greek antiquities. Other readers might well do the same for the additional works pictured.

If you would indulge me in a possible digression – reading this manuscript the same question kept appearing in my mind: where is the art? The author undertakes a discursive analysis of an autobiographical account of authentication. The art objects themselves are only appreciated as secondary phenomena. They are rendered as distant phantasms because of the preoccupation with contests of knowledge and ignorance. Absent from the analysis is an engagement with the materiality of art objects and, as a result, the complex phenomenon that is art. In my own work I have tried to understand how the qualities of artworks come into being through heterogeneous associations. Attending to their ontology in this manner enables more than talk about talk. It enables an appreciation of how both objects and viewers are ontologically constituted (either as determinate or indeterminate) in relations of meaning as forged, as real, as derived, and so on. This is a tack the author could have pursued, and one that would have enabled a more rounded analysis. It would have also enabled posing questions about how criteria for what counts as fake or real are fashioned over time.

Linking this back to the key topic of the manuscript, this tack might have prevented a recurring Janus-faced orientation. Sometimes the opacity of expertise is treated as accomplished in the writing – an effect of how a person such as Hoving puts forward his expertise. At other times, it is presented by definition as a characteristic of some types of knowledge, which may be very specialized or relating to a phenomenon that is difficult to ever really surmise. I would suggest this dual status stems from the hole created by the absence of materiality. This might apply to other areas the manuscript covers. There might well be difficulties in specifying how heterogeneous associations emerge in relation to consciousness or the mind. The author alludes to some possible obstacles – but surely not insurmountable? The basic point is that my familiarity in the case of art provides grounds for concern about the discursive approach adopted here.

*Reviewer 3*

‘On conveying and not conveying expertise’ provides an absorbing study of how proficiency is conveyed when it is said to resist being conveyed. Much appreciation can be given to the sympathetic attempt to understand the binds of proficiency, including those associated with how Buddhist teachings are expressed in contemporary thought and measured in modern scientific research.

The argument displays an understanding of the recent intersections of Western science and Eastern Buddhism (*Buddhism and Science* is an additional useful uncited resource). The analysis of current research seeking to understand the effects of meditative practice on the regulation of cognitive and emotional behavior illustrates many of the tensions at these intersections. They are epitomized in the apt observation that cognitive studies often seek to enroll advanced meditation practitioners, yet a recognizable act that characterizes spiritual advancement within many Buddhist systems is a demonstrable *lack* of desire to proclaim advancement. Indeed, an attachment to a sense of self or ego is regarded as misguided in Buddhism.

The argument rightly points out how first person descriptions of felt experience are almost wholly missing from existing neuroscientific studies of meditation (also *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 48(11), 1105-1112). A plausible case is made that this absence de-emphasizes Buddhist religious connotations, thereby sidestepping challenging experimental testing validity questions that might arise if such connotations were kept present. Equally, as argued, the absence of first person descriptions from popular meditation training guides may be encouraging inter-subjective agreement about the meaning of undertaking meditation. Interestingly, the felt sense of meditative experiences is often absent from modern Buddhist scholasticism as well, particularly notable, for instance, in studies of Mādhyamika systems because these critically rely on experience to inform their epistemology (as in Tsong khapa).

In many respects ‘On conveying and not conveying expertise’ provides an admirable argument. By considering non-disclosure as produced in both science and Buddhism, the paper avoids lapsing into treating them, respectively, as exoteric and esoteric knowledge.



In other respects, though, the argument does not adequately embrace the subtlety of how language, including the language of scholasticism, is used within schools of Buddhism. While attention is given to how the writing of prominent Buddhist scholars and practitioners often contains explicit denials that any true insights can be gained from the writings, the study does not dwell enough on why this is the case and as a result hazards perpetuating common misunderstandings.

To summarize the issues at stake in a manner so brief that it risks being misleading, Buddhist thought, and its canons and its commentaries, are not ultimately aimed at exposing metaphysical or philosophical truths. Rather, it points to a path for liberation from dukkha (dissatisfaction) and toward bodhi (enlightenment).

Words are potentially dangerous because they are never the experiences of dukkha or bodhi. They are pointers to experience, nothing more. Ultimately, for advanced meditators, those experiences themselves come to be understood as *suññatā* that is empty of fixed or inherent meaning (though to write this is merely to point to experience beyond language – it is not meant as a matter to be included in this study as it relates to advanced stages of meditation practice).

In Western languages, important distinctions can be made between knowledge and understanding. Understanding can be taken to imply something more significant than knowing, and may not require the latter at all in the conventional sense of the term. One can know all the sutras of the Buddha by heart, but that does not mean one has opened up to them. Many of the arguments presented in the study appear to relate to the conveying and not conveying of understanding, not simply knowledge.

Wrapping superimpositions around experience in order to produce codified knowledge is likely to reinforce habitual intellectual tendencies toward grasping and subsequent delusion. Words get mistaken for concrete things; those things are then drawn together to produce theories, theories then become taken as doctrines. While many Buddhist traditions would agree on this point (though some have a complex relation to words and experience, for instance, Dzogchen), they also take it in different directions. Within Yogācāra systems of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the

dependent and empty nature of reality renders it ineffable to the dualisms of language (see the Tattvārtha Chapter of Asaṅga's Bodhisattvabhūmi for further commentaries on all dharmas). Language becomes part of the fabrication of parikalpitasvabhāva (the imagined reality) that prevents realization.

Whatever the specific differences, the danger with the elaboration, explication, and evaluation of experience, especially for those new to meditation, is that reading words leads to striving to obtain preconceived notions of *atta* and experience. Because of the potential for words to reinforce *avijjā* (ignorance), it is best to stick with experience itself. In this sense, it is not simply that experience is 'ineffable', as it is too often characterized, but that it is better left undescribed.

The absence of articulations of what meditative experience is like is put forward in 'On conveying and not conveying expertise' as part of creating *recondite* expertise. But a counterpoint that can be posed to this paper is, 'Why is it important to answer the question, "What is it like to meditate?"' Unless doing so helps advance human liberation, it is likely to further *avijjā* and confound insight.

#### *Reviewer 4*

For a start, I should say that I know the identity of the two authors. I saw an early version of this paper presented at the 4S/EASST conference in Copenhagen. Actually, it wasn't a complete version, more of a discussion of different kinds of responses to the question 'what is meditation like?' In this paper, I see that you both have made first-person accounts of esoteric expertise the theme, thus lessening the focus on meditation *per se*. A bit of a shame, since that focus seemed pretty rich, but I presume that for this journal you wanted to give your analysis of the rhetorics of revealing and concealing a broader appeal.

In the two main accounts analyzed in your paper, Hoving-the-fakebuster and Ricard-the-monk address their lay audiences very differently. Hoving, as you show (...or would tell be the right word?), creates the impression of 'telling all' through exquisitely detailed recollections of episodes in his career and the unrelenting exposure of other players in the art world (*names, names, names!...*) but leaves us with much ambiguity about whether forgeries can be reliably

known for what they are, and what kind of expertise this requires. Ricard subverts all that Hoving's writing stands for, by insisting that the experience of meditation resists representation; whatever is said about it, in virtue of having been *said*, disqualifies itself as conveying what this experience is really about. This is a nice contrast for sure.

But that's just a summary of what's *in* your paper, and I know better than to concentrate on (only) what it says .... Equally important, of course, is what the paper doesn't say, and how this is meant to engage us readers. There's an experiential element here, a sense in which we are made to *feel* the work that Hoving and Ricard hand to their own readers: the work of navigating 'what's there', 'what's not there', how this is made apparent (or not), and what that means for how we understand the nature and subject of the expertise being conveyed. This experiential dimension drives home the question that underlies the discussion of conveying and not conveying: how do we bring our readers in on our subject in a way that honors the responsibility we feel towards them *and* it?

Seriously, I think that you could make the paper more self-assuredly reflexive! Make the movement between conveying and not conveying even more palpable in your text.

How to do this..?

Truth be told, I am not sure how you would do this effectively and without coming across as annoying or trying too hard.

But maybe you could try to create a dialogue, or triologue, between your paper and two heavyweight STS voices on the limits of representation that your paper currently ignores. One could be Bruno Latour on religious art and how it manages, through 're-presentation' rather than representation, to convey what resists being conveyed. He's written on this in several places but the piece I know best is in Law and Fyfe's (1988) *Picturing Power: Visual Depiction and Social Relations*. The other could be John Law on 'the productive oscillations between absence and presence' through which realities are enacted. Some of Law's case studies provide quite a nice parallel to this paper, especially the way they are written in the co-authored piece with Michel Callon 'On qualculation, agency, and otherness'. There's the Quaker meeting being characterized as 'a set of material and discursive practices for disentangling from qualculability' (parallel with your Buddhist writers?) and there are the proliferative accounts after the rail crash

at Ladbrooke Grove in London in 1999 that are partially overlapping and partially contradictory (parallel with Hoving?).

Despite their attention to presence/absence, neither Latour nor Law are too fond of reflexive writing – at least not reflexive writing that destabilizes the text too far; see Latour, ‘The politics of explanation’, in Woolgar (ed) *Knowledge and Reflexivity*. The next question would then be how to hammer home the virtues of revisiting that possibility for the specific phenomenon you’re dealing with. What makes the pairing of obscurity and reflexivity more than an attempt at being clever? How can your text do greater justice to the problem of conveying in words what resists being conveyed than an unreflexive account?

### **Acknowledgements**

Our thanks to everyone who has helped us make sense of these reviews and the paper they are based on – in particular Erika Mansnerus, Jeremy Fernando, Thokozani Kamwendo, Ingmar Lippert, Claes-Fredrik Helgesson, all the reviewers for Social Studies of Science, and Sergio Sismondo.

### **List of All References Mentioned by Reviewers**

Callon M and J Law (2005) On qualculation, agency, and otherness. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23(5): 717-733.

Collins HM (2010) *Tacit and Explicit Knowledge*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Collins HM and Evans R (2014) Quantifying the tacit: The imitation game and social fluency. *Sociology* 48(1): 3-19.

Dean Willis J (trans) (1982) *On Knowing Reality: The Tattvārtha Chapter of Asaṅga's Bodhisattvabhūmi*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Hewitt Group (producer) Moses H (director) (2006) *Who the #\$&% is Jackson Pollock?*, USA. New Line Cinema.

- Hoving T (1996) *False Impressions: The Hunt for Big-time Art Fakes*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Kuyken W, Watkins E, et al. (2010) How does mindfulness-based cognitive therapy work? *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 48(11): 1105-1112.
- Latour B (1988a) Opening one eye while closing the other...a note on some religious paintings. In: Fyfe G and Law J (eds) *Picturing Power: Visual Depiction and Social Relations*. London: Routledge, 15-38.
- Latour B (1988b) The politics of explanation: An alternative. In: Woolgar S (ed) *Knowledge and Reflexivity: New Frontiers in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Sage, 155-176.
- Lopez Jr. DS (2008) *Buddhism & Science: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lynch M (2004) Circumscribing expertise: Membership categories in courtroom testimony. In: Jasanoff S (ed). *States of Knowledge: The Co-production of Science and the Social Order*. New York: Routledge, 161-180.
- Lynch M and Cole S (2005). Science and Technology Studies on trial: Dilemmas of expertise. *Social Studies of Science* 35(2): 269-311.
- Ricard M (2007) *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill*. London: Atlantic.