Notes about Common Sense and Academic Knowledge[1]

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Abstract

These notes discuss the difference between academic knowledge and "common sense" or the belief that "facts" have meanings that can be taken for granted and that are somehow self-evident. The acquisition of a proper epistemological perspective is indeed the linchpin of any training in media and communication studies (and more in general, in social sciences).

Keywords   Common Sense, Academic Knowledge, Media And Communication Studies, Pedagogy

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1   These notes are part of a much more articulated discussion of the methodological, conceptual, theoretical and epistemological linchpins of communication studies in France (see Cabedoche, 2016).

Whatever the specific disciplinary tradition adopted, any basic training in me-dia and communication (and more in general, in social sciences) must start from the assumption of a peculiar perspective on "reality". From an epistemological point of view, indeed, "academic knowledge" differs by definition from "common sense", or the belief that facts have meanings that can be taken for granted and that are somehow self-evident.

Many scholars have addressed this set of "pre-notions", from which social actors try to impose their own understanding of the world and of the way a society should be organised, in depth. The following table – that draws mainly on Clifford Geertz's work and his distinction of "common sense" from global knowledge and local knowledge (Geertz, 2002: 94-118) – aims at providing an overview of the notion of common sense, and in particular of the different nature of the pre-notions constituting it, and of the main rhetoric of their justification.

Table 1: The mechanism of "common sense"

Formulation	Process	Justification	Reference	Idealtype	Posture
Things are going on like that	Naturalization	The evidence	The false disciplinary analogy	The journalist: "I heard it on TV"	Populism: to say aloud what everyone thinks silently
This is useful	Applicability	The immediate utility	The engineering sciences	The medicine man, the technician, the practitioner	Pragmatism: the ideologues seen by Bonaparte
This is unequivo-cally crystal-clear	Sensory perception	Transparency	Language and senses	The child, the demagogue	Positivism: a fact is a fact
This is right	Moralization	Justice	The proverbial formulation	The elder, the native, the authority	Gerontologism: the sage is right
This is going in the right way	Politicization	The political cause	The sense of history	The victim, the colonized man, the woman, the worker	Activism: the activist has/is an answer
This is simple	Immediate accessibility	Understanding without prerequisites or research protocol	The communication techniques	The educator, the witness	Simplism: the researcher makes the simple complicated

Whatever the way pre-notions are justified, many authors – like Durkheim, Bachelard, Bourdieu and Moles among the others – warn against the illusion of immediate understanding, of the transparency of "facts" and of any other form of spontaneous understanding. On the contrary, they invite us to be wary of pre-no-tions and of subjective and non-reflexive knowledge; to be careful with intuition in

favour of construction; to reject a naive sociology which believes that it is possible to firmly grasp the intentions of social actors; to be sceptical about testimonial history, where individual social actors are given a dominant place; to use methodological, conceptual and theoretical deconstructive techniques to get rid of any immediate and seductive understanding of "*reality*".

This means that media scholars as well should assume the epistemological perspective that Fernand Braudel (Braudel, 1987) and Henri-Pierre Jeudy called a "long term perspective", in order "*to get out of the world in order to better understand the world*". Indeed,

> [this temporal distancing] allows us to distance ourselves from short-term opportunism (the reign of present) and to fully assume as impossible to understand certain objects […] if they are not referred to the past, including the distant one […], to be wary of the 'normality' of the present […] and to examine what, in the past, constitutes a legacy to shape this present (Bautier, 2004).

This is particularly true when dealing with our hyper-mediated societies, since media news mostly represents a form of non-cumulative knowledge, which has always been in competition with cumulative knowledge (like academic knowledge). Hannah Arendt traces back this opposition to Greeks and Romans: while the former used to cultivate appearance and youth, abandoning themselves to the instant, the latter respected age, spirit, permanence, eternity (Arendt, 1954). Indeed, many authors consider the production of academic knowledge as an ongoing battle against non-cumulative information. According to Walter Benjamin (1936), for example, "[media] information has value only as far as it is new. It lives only in the moment". At the same time cause and effect of the intensification of contemporary immediacy, media news would have profound effects on the transmission of knowledge, contributing precisely to the development of non-cumulative knowledge. This tendency would call into question the possibility of a real education, with severe consequences on the structuration of human beings (Benjamin, 1936: 124).

Actually, critical scholars have always warned against pseudo non-cumulative knowledge: how is it be possible to really learn in societies characterized by fluidity, by the intensity of accelerated fluxes of information and of sensory stimuli? (Gitlin, 2002). Liquid modernity produces fragmentation, dispersion and disengagement, preventing continuity and causing psychic insecurity (Bauman, 2000). The triumph of everything that is transient, ephemeral and discontinuous – briefly, the triumph of instability – makes hard or even impossible for people to gain an understanding of reality based on cumulative knowledge (Haroche, 2008 and 2008b).

That's why researchers have to be particularly careful (and have the social responsibility) to avoid raising "pre-notions" to the rank of evidences. A solid lit-

erature research and review about the phenomena under study; the clarification of the main concepts used to address and describe the object of research (especially when these concepts are commonly used, and therefore carry "common sense" meanings); the adoption of a long-term historical perspective on the phenomena under study and on the schools of thought that have already addressed them; the assumption of a methodological distance from the social actors' beliefs; the methodological rigour and the soundness of theorization can help PhD students (and, more in general, academic scholars) to take up this key challenge.

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Biography

Bertrand Cabedoche is Professor of information and communication sciences, UNESCO chairholder on International Communication at the University of Grenoble Alpes (UGA), member of the executive board of ORBICOM (Montréal). *Docteur d'*état in political sciences (1987), graduate of the Higher School of Journalism of Lille (1978), Bertrand Cabedoche is now in charge of the international development of GRESEC, a well-known French academic research team in the field of information and communication, and responsible for the international development of the Doctoral School of UGA. He is also a member of the board of advisors of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA). In December 2012, proposed by Mrs Irina Bokova, General Director of UNESCO, he was appointed as the president of ORBICOM, the international network of UNESCO chairs in Communication.

As a researcher, he has worked (1992-1996) on the representations of the European Union in the main member states' newspapers for FUNDESCO, *Fundación para el desarrolo de la Communicación* (Madrid). He has particularly been working on media discourses on North-South relations since the 1970s in the field of international information (one of his first scientific works has been quoted in the famous UNESCO *MacBride Report* at the end of the 70s). More recently, he has been working on the ways societies are constructed when they become the subject of public (polemic) debates (for instance in the case of energies; nanotechnologies; Cultural Diversity ; Information and Communication Industries; ICTs and social change), with the advantage of a long professional experience over the past three decades as a journalist in France and Canada (chief editor), and as an international consultant for multinational organisations.

Among several scientific publications (in France, Canada, UK, Germany, Spain, Romania, Brazil, Lebanon, Tunisia, Morocco, Turkey, Madagascar, DRC, Russia, United States and China), he is the author of *Les chrétiens et le tiers-monde. Pour une fidélité critique* [*Christians and the Third World. Criticism and loyalty*], Paris: Karthala, 1990 and *Ce nucléaire qu'on nous montre. Construire la socialité dans le débat sur les* énergies [*The nuclear show. Building sociality on public debates about energies*], Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003.

Bertrand Cabedoche has been invited to organise seminars or give lectures in 50 universities, all over the world. He regularly works as an expert for UNESCO, UNICEF and UNITAR.

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