Communicating Credibility by Expert Service Workers: The Credibility Tactics of Fiction Critics and Management Consultants

Phillipa K Chong and Alaric Bourgoin

Abstract
One of the fastest-growing occupational groups in the US is expert service workers: knowledge workers who sell their expert knowledge and services on the free market. In this paper, we offer a comparative case study of how expert service workers, whom are hired for their professional evaluations, navigate the tensions of the expert service-client relation in a specific but critical way: How do they convince others that their professional recommendations are credible? Specifically, we draw on two disparate cases of expert evaluators, book reviewers and management consultants, and document two communicative patterns that these professional groups use to build the credibility of their professional recommendations: (i) transparency and (ii) distanciation. Similarities in the credibility tactics of these two sets of expert service workers from two very different worlds, the Arts and business, suggest their generalizable value. Hence, we conclude by discussing how our findings offer a general approach we call, the evaluative triangle, for studying the credibility tactics of expert claims across multiple worlds of work.

Keywords: evaluation; critics; management consultancy; credibility; art; business

Phillipa K. Chong is a cultural sociologist and works as an Assistant Professor in Sociology at McMaster University.
Alaric Bourgoin is Associate Professor in the Department of Management at HEC Montréal, Canada.

Introduction

Expertise has been described as the "*sine qua non*" of professional work (Gorman and Sandefur 2011: 278). However, changes in mass education and the nature of work have engendered a new breed of workers who sell their expert knowledge and services on the free market, yet lack the traditional hallmarks of the professions. They include public relations specialists, management consultants, freelance editors and related creative workers; and they constitute the largest and fastest-growing occupational group in the US (Gorman and Sandefur 2011).

The changing structure of expert work in today's knowledge economy calls us to reconsider questions such as: *What is expertise? And whose expertise counts?* In the sociology of work and professions, questions around the legitimacy of a group's expertise were addressed through case studies recounting battles for jurisdictional control and related processes of social closure (Abbott 1988; Vallas 2001). However, we examine expert work from a different angle, drawing on another literature that has also dwelt on contests of expertise: the sociology of knowledge.

Our focus is on how taking on the market role of expert service worker affects how individuals produce expert knowledge as a market good. Specifically, we home in on a specific but crucial concern for any expert service worker: *How do they make their recommendations credible to their patron, client, or other external audience?*

To answer this question, we offer a systematic empirical portrait of how expert service workers engage in communicative work to gain the trust of their respective audiences in two different fields: the arts and business. Our empirical gateways into these worlds are interviews with individuals hired for their expert services in each one: fiction critics and management consultants, respectively. Both are exemplars of expert service workers: they sell their expertise on the free market and are hired by clients to apply their specialized knowledge to a specific problem and produce recommendations for an external audience. Yet, book critics and management consultants lack the professional autonomy, status, and accreditation characteristic of traditional experts such as doctors or lawyers. The warrant here being that since expert service workers lack such hallmarks of professions may have to engage in additional communicative or symbolic work to ensure their recommendations are accepted by their audiences.

We choose to focus on these expert evaluators—as opposed to straightforward informational experts—because part of their work is to convince their clients that their evaluations are sound. Hence, drawing on in-depth interviews with both groups, we ask: *How do*

expert service workers convince their audiences of the credibility of their advice and recommendations?

We begin by briefly reviewing previous work on expertise, and situating it in relation to studies of credibility. We then introduce our two empirical case studies as well as our analytical approach, which focuses on the micro-practices with which expert evaluators attempt to make their claims credible to their audiences. We identify two similarities across our cases. The first is an emphasis on the *transparency* of the evaluative procedure. The second is what we call *distanciation*, or separating the evaluator from their evaluation, which can be achieved through what we describe as obfuscation in good faith. While such strategies have perhaps been observed in other studies, the novel contribution of our analysis is to empirically elucidate how the same credibility ends are accomplished through different means. Moreover, we also show how the specific means used by our expert service workers are constrained by features of the particular evaluative context in which they operate. In concluding, we consider some of the theoretical implications of our study for a more general understanding of evaluation as an expert service.

Credibility in New Expert Service Work

Expert service workers as experts

How should we define an *expert*? According to Abbott's (1988) study of professions, experts are those who possess specialized knowledge of a field acquired through extensive training, and who can apply their knowledge in a decontextualized manner. That is, in contrast to the amateur, experts possess a deep rather than superficial understanding of a field, enabling them to apply their knowledge in meaningful ways across different situations.

Yet, there has been much debate about the *substance* of expert knowledge—and, as a corollary, how to draw the line between the expert and the non-expert. In the sociology of scientific knowledge, many more types of expertise have come to be recognized.[1] Lay expertise, for instance, refers to the range of technical knowledge, acquired through experience, possessed by people who are not institutionally recognized as experts. The idea of a lay expert emerges from case studies showing how the knowledge of non-scientists—such as farmworkers (Wynn 1996) and drug-trial patients (Epstein 1995)—

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[1] See also Eyal (2013), who argues for conceptualizing expertise as a network in his study of diagnoses of autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), and how this disorder came to encompass a wide range of developmental disabilities previously associated with mental illness.

was productively incorporated into technical problem-solving (see also Irwin 2002). However, Collins rightly points out that "lay" populations in such studies are rarely *truly* lay people, but rather those who have actually acquired expertise through their experience, making them "experience-based" experts (Collins 2014). Furthermore, Collins and Evans (2007) have produced a typology of expertise, with types differentiated by how the expertise is acquired and what it enables the expert to do (i.e., trivia knowledge vs. contributing to the specialized knowledge of a profession). In clarifying the boundaries and contents of the "expert" category, these studies echo early efforts in the sociology of professions to delimit what counts as a "profession."

Notwithstanding the importance of these discussions, we do not question the status of the expert workers we study, and nor do we wish to pass judgment on whether what they offer is "really" expertise. Expert service workers are hired to provide some specialized set of knowledge and apply it to help their client achieve a particular goal. Hence, we take a *relational* approach to expertise: we presume that expert service workers' status *qua* experts is partially determined by their specialized knowledge being recognized as such by clients. [2]

In privileging relations over definitions, we do not wish to dismiss studies that have explored the meaning of expertise. Rather, we hope to explore the modern workplace on its own terms, and according to its nature—permeable, transient, amorphous. We are concerned with how the unique organizational circumstances in which today's expert service workers find themselves differ from those experienced by professionals in the past, and how they may influence their work. Specifically, many expert service workers are unlikely to enjoy the same degree of autonomy, status, reward, and normative orientation towards their professional communities as did the professionals of past decades (Gorman and Sandefur 2011).

Expert service workers as service workers and the importance of credibility

We are specifically interested in the *service* relation between expert service workers and their audience. Expert service workers are hired to solve particular problems—whether that be helping readers decide what books to pick up, or telling corporations how to solve organizational issues. In this context, a central issue for expert service workers is to convince their client of the credibility of their recommendations as part of their professional service.

Shapin (1995) defines credibility as "the grounds on which scientists' pronouncements about the natural world are taken as true, objective, or reliable" (389), and argues that *trust-relations* are

2 We understand our respondents to possess "specialist expertise" that is both interactional and contributory according to Collins's (2014) scheme.

fundamental to the credibility of scientists' claims, including honesty in how data, methods, analysis, and expertise are presented. For his part, Epstein (1995) defined credibility as the capacity of actors to "enroll supporters behind their claims" and to have their voices and arguments legitimated as "authoritative knowledge" (411). Whether the focus is on trust between parties, authority commanded, or deference conferred by others, all these studies share a sense that credibility is a *relation* between speaker and listener[3]—and the crucial issue at stake is whether the listener deems the speaker's knowledge to be acceptable (Zelditch 2001). Credibility is a relational property; as such, it takes relational or communicative work to achieve. Hence, we ask: *What concrete strategies or methods do expert service workers use to convince audiences of the credibility of their advice and recommendations?*

The sociology of knowledge has much to say about how people make arguments or claims more compelling, convincing—or even factual. In the study of scientific fact-making in actor–network theory (ANT), the research program closely associated with Bruno Latour (1987, 1993), Michel Callon (1984), and Callon et al. (1986), "blackboxing"[4] refers to the concrete practices and processes by which an entity acquires an undisputed status, such as how a scientific *claim* is transformed into a scientific *fact*.[5] A key early component in this fact-making process is to distance a claim from the mouth of the speaker: Latour explains that claims become "less of a fact" once traced "back where they came from, to the mouths and hands of whoever made them" (1986: 26). Hence, making a claim more robust can involve inscribing meaning and claims into scientific tools, data, or other materials, and using them to build larger networks of

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[3] Others make this point using the concept of legitimacy not as a property of individuals, but as a relationship between audience and some producer (cf. Bourdieu 1993; Cattani et al. 2014); however, we use the term "credibility" to emphasize our micro-focus on the communication of claims.

[4]The literature on blackboxing typically concerns how scientific controversies are settled. For instance, Shwed and Bearman (2010) considered the temporal formation of scientific consensus manifested by closure in citation networks. They examined the macrostructure of citation networks, suggesting that "dissensus" presents as a segmented citation network, whereas "consensus" presents as a single group or a network with less distant modules. They proposed that, as a controversy becomes black-boxed, the process by which the consensus around the existence of this fact originally emerged becomes obscured, including the existence of dissenters. To quote: "Consensus formation is a black-boxing process: the weaving together of multiple elements of scientific propositions until their internal divisions are well hidden." (4).

[5] Note that Latour (1993, 1999) and Callon and Latour (1981) use this term extensively elsewhere.

associations comprising actors both human and non-human (Latour 1987; Callon 1981).

The more layered and extensive the associations between data, methods, and facts created by the networks, the more difficult it becomes to challenge the facticity of a statement.

The potential of material artifacts to make claims more credible is also seen in the study of demonstrations (Schaffer 1994; Rosental 2013), wherein material objects have been used to "demonstrate" some scientific or philosophical point. Studies have shown how the didactic potential of such demonstrations necessarily remains open-ended, and requires the practical intervention of the demonstrator (through gestures, for instance) to make the implication clear to audiences. Crucially, the power and appeal of such demonstrations lie in the fact these artifacts—as distinct from human actors who deploy them—embody or illustrate specific principles.

Research on public management and administration also has insights to contribute on credibility (cf. Power 1999; Strathern 2003; Shore et al. 2015). In this literature, a crucial pathway to credibility is transparency, or making workings visible. Insofar as credibility involves trust, transparency has been identified as a key means of gaining public trust, not only in science but also in policy-making (Moore 2018). Studies have typically focused on making outputs visible to the public; for instance, audit culture and associated benchmarking technologies act as a way to "check" the performance of government agencies and hold them to account (Power 1999).

The assumption here is that the greater the visibility, the deeper the trust. Yet, scholars have criticized the taken-for-granted or intrinsic value of transparency. Some emphasize how efforts towards transparency are often partial or nonreciprocal, and hence do not always equate to a more informed or empowered public (Gupta 2008; Moore 2018; Strathern 2003). Gupta (2008) argues that transparency too frequently lacks critical analysis, and suggests that more needs to be done to specify precisely how transparency and trust are related.

The studies described above explore how social actors in different spheres endeavor to bolster the credibility of their claims or actions. However, some gaps remain. First, while these studies provide good insights into how knowledge claims are fortified in the eyes of skeptical peers or citizens, for example, less attention has been paid to how expert knowledge is applied to offer recommendations in a *service* relationship.

Where there has been attention given to the performance of expert knowledge in a service relationship is in studies of business consulting. Credibility has always been crucial to professionals insofar as it secures clients' trust by guaranteeing service quality (Abbott 1981). For instance, to legitimize their services, auditors have been described as torn between a professional logic of action (focused on

ethics, expertise, commitment to the task, and the longstanding goals of the organization) and a commercial one (focused on the auditee's satisfaction, short-term financial returns, and the costs of assignment) (Gendron 2002; Wyatt 2004).

The issue of credibility is even more pressing for management consultants, to whom scholars will only grant the status of "quasi-professionals" (Alvesson and Johansson 2002). Indeed, such consultants are not governed by formal licensing or clear ethical rules as the foundation of their professional status (Greiner and Ennsfellner 2010); their expertise is considered "weak" and "ambiguous"; and their technical autonomy is contested (Alvesson 1993; Clark and Fincham 2002). In such a context, critical scholars have equated consultants with "professionals of persuasion" who use rhetorical tactics to build their credibility (Alvesson 1993). Such artifices include storytelling (Clark and Salaman 1998); packaged instruments (Legge 2002); managerial fashions (Abrahamson 1996); and theatrical performances (Clark 1995). In contrast, scholars inspired by psychodynamic theory emphasize the importance of establishing trust between consultants and their clients to build a common understanding of the problem, and fit the proposed solutions to the client's context and needs (Block 2011). Building trust implies also personal traits for the consultant, such as empathy and humility, but also expertise in communication and group dynamics (Schein 1969, 2013; Maister et al. 2000; Bourgoin and Harvey 2018).

The benefits of such studies, notwithstanding, while the literature has analyzed individual domains of knowledge-making in fascinating detail, there are few efforts to consider credibility dynamics comparatively.[6] We look at how individual agents make their claims credible to audiences in two distinct cultural–professional worlds of expertise: the arts and business. Thus we respond to recent calls for the comparative study of evaluation (Lamont 2012; Beckert and Musselin 2013; Antal et al. 2015), with an eye for crafting theory on credibility strategies and evaluation through comparison. In comparing what is common across cases we are able to abstract from the details of each expert service workers' practice to arrive at a more generalizable understanding of the features of credibility strategies – of how evaluators make their claims acceptable to their audiences—which is likely an important precondition, if not a general prerequisite, to many case studies of evaluation.

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[6] For an exception, see Osnowitz's (2010) study of freelance editors and IT workers; though she is primarily concerned with the experience of volatility of contract labor.

Case selection: comparing fiction critics and management consultants as expert service workers

We analyze the communicative efforts of expert service workers to make both their advice and recommendations credible to their audiences. Our analysis is grounded in qualitative case studies of fiction critics in the literary field and privately employed management consultants in business. These cases feature important similarities and differences.

The evaluative task

In each case, agents are hired to deploy their expertise in the service of producing some kind of solution or deliverable for a client. Our focus is on those who deploy their expertise to arrive at a professional *evaluation* of a particular entity.

There are multiple branches of book reviewing.[7] We focus on journalistic reviewers, who are a specialized form of cultural journalist. Specifically, journalists who have the broadest coverage mandate compared to other forms of book criticism: writing reviews of newly published works of fiction for the general reader. Critics' responsibility is to report on cultural news including the publication of noteworthy books. Reviewers do not evaluate which of the hundreds of new fiction titles published each week are worth reviewing. Instead, their evaluative task is limited to assessing individual books selected by the editorial staff of a publication. Readers rely on reviews, as evaluative devices, to help them choose from the many thousands of books published each year (Karpik 2010). As such, their task thus involves providing a gestalt of the book under review, as it will be the first time that readers will have encountered these materials (since they are newly published) and to proffer a written recommendation of whether they are worth reading, and why.

Management consulting is a sub-discipline within business and finance. Consultants are commonly hired by clients to assess the organizational efficacy of a team, a functional department, a technical process, etc. For example, the empirical data for this paper are drawn from three distinct cases of professional evaluation by consultants. In the first case, consultants focused on assessing the level of collaboration between the support functions (HR, finance, IT, and so on) of a hospital in a post-merger context. The second case was

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[7] There are many different types of criticism, each with its own distinct aims and audiences. Of the three branches of literary criticism—essayistic, academic, and journalistic (Van Rees 1983)—literary essays and academic criticism focus on "high culture" rather than "popular" works. Journalistic reviewers, however, write in daily or weekly newspapers and magazines about contemporary and newly published fiction. Newspaper and magazine critics decide which select few titles among the leagues of newly published works will receive any critical attention, with far-reaching consequences for an author's success.

dedicated to assessing the task efficiency of a new procurement process in a major energy group, with the aim of reducing headcount. Finally, in the last case, consultants aimed at assessing three internal processes of a major law firm in the context of increased competition: communication, business development, and key account management.

The expert service arrangement

Both book reviewers and management consultants are hired by an external party to provide their opinions or recommendations as expert service professionals.

Book reviewers are hired by the editors of book-review sections within a publication (e.g., a newspaper). They are not employed full-time, but hired for individual assignments, and often make a living outside reviewing as novelists, freelance journalists, creative writing teachers, professors, or some combination of these. Editors usually decide which books they would like to cover, then reach out to a reviewer who they perceive as having the right expertise to evaluate it.

There is no professional accreditation for becoming a book reviewer, nor any professional association that controls who can practice, or how. Therefore, editors use their extensive professional networks and knowledge of authors to seek out individuals who might be a good "match" for a book. Editors report looking for those who have written professionally on particular themes or particular historical or geographic settings, or who have used certain narrative techniques such as interweaving multiple characters' perspectives (Chong 2018). Hence, the expertise that editors seek is non-certifiable (Shen 2015) and premised on critics' individual connoisseurship. As we will see, editors can offer guidance and notes to reviewers on the reviews they turn in; however, critics otherwise have a great deal of autonomy and independence in their evaluative process and outcomes. Insofar as the reviewer's "performance" is assessed at all, it will be on the basis of reader responses (if any) to their writing—and even then, such responses are only provisional because of the accepted relativism of taste.

Consultants are usually hired by the senior executives of larger companies for single assignments, based on a business proposal. The consultant's proposal frames the client's problem, proposes a method of analysis/intervention, and provides plans and costs. For major assignments, multiple firms compete for the contract by responding to a request for proposals. Finding the right consultant can be a challenge even for seasoned managers, who report being confused by the variety of expertise and methods available (Bourgoin 2015). Although in

practice most practitioners hold an engineering degree or MBA from a prestigious school, there is no occupational or institutional qualification process to becoming a consultant. In this respect, on-the-job or internal training is paramount. Major consulting firms function like brands in the sense that they develop proprietary methods for analyzing their clients' organizations that set them apart from competitors. Although individual consultants have their own backgrounds, they tend to act as representatives of a firm's analytical approach. Thus, individual consultants' expert status is entangled with their firm's reputation.

In contrast, in the case of reviewers, consultants, as professionals entwined in a service relationship, are enmeshed in the plot, evaluating the characters even as they interact with them—and are judged by them. Ultimately, the success of a consultancy project will be measured with the rather subjective yardstick of "client satisfaction." Clearly, this is driven by a commercial logic on both sides, but there is also a pragmatic rationale—all of which has implications for building the credibility of consultants' evaluations.

Two worlds of worth

One of the most meaningful differences between our two "worlds" is the contrasting institutional logics that characterize each one (Boltanksi and Thévenot 2006). The artistic world of fiction reviewing is characterized by an "inspired" logic. Connoisseurs are invited to provide their aesthetic recommendations based on cultural tastes, yet aesthetic *value* is ultimately accepted as a matter of private and idiosyncratic taste. The business world, however, is one of quantities, not qualities. Management consultants operate in a field governed by the logic of the market, competition, and price.

We would expect the credibility of expert claims in each of these worlds to vary, given the different logics intrinsic to each. It is precisely these variations that can enable fruitful theorizing about the fungibility of credibility strategies.

Data and methods

To investigate how expert evaluators attempt to guarantee the credibility of their recommendations, we conducted in-depth interviews with expert evaluators in both our chosen fields.

In the literary sphere, the first author interviewed 40 fiction critics who reviewed for prominent US newspapers oriented toward a general audience (including the *New York Times,* the *Los Angeles Times,* the *Washington Post*, etc). Respondents were selected by first generating a list of every reviewer who had published a review in one of three major American newspapers in a single calendar year. These publications were selected based on a combination of criteria including their having (1) one of the highest national circulations;

(2) comparable target audiences; (3) a reputation for covering books. For example, *USA Today* and the *Wall Street Journal* are among the more widely circulated papers, but do not have stand-alone book sections. Although only three publications were used to generate the initial population of reviewers, all informants had reviewed for multiple publications, among them The *New York Times, Los Angeles Times,* The *Washington Post, Chicago Tribune,* The *New Yorker, The Guardian, The Times* (UK), and other news outlets

The majority of reviewers worked on a freelance basis; only four had full-time staff positions as book critics or book section editors. Interviews were conducted over the telephone and typically lasted 1–1.5 hours. During interviews, critics were asked about the different aspects of their reviewing process, including how they determined the quality of books, and the various considerations that had a bearing on how they represented their judgment when crafting their reviews.

In the case of management consultants, our analysis is informed by 21 months of participant observation in a French consulting firm we call *ConsultCorp* (a pseudonym). *ConsultCorp* is a medium-sized enterprise founded in 1999, employing 160 consultants and generating a turnover of approximately US$40 million in 2017. Consultants at *ConsultCorp* work in small teams to provide generalist management advice on post-merger integration, reorganization, adaptation to market deregulation, and the like. The second author participated as a consultant on three separate auditing assignments. He refrained from conducting structured interviews while working as a consultant, so as not to create confusion between his two roles in the field. As a full-time consultant, however, he had conversations with various informants that can be considered as open-ended, informal interviews. These covered 52 different employees, including six partners, 12 managers, and 33 consultants. The conversations were friendly chats supported by what Spradley (1979: 60) calls "contrast" questions—i.e. those focusing on the meaning of an event for informants. We chose to focus on these informal conversations because consultants could openly describe credibility tactics that are usually hidden "tricks of the trade." Drawing insights from these conversations was also a way to make our two data sets more easily comparable.

The second author observed the evaluative practices and methods used by consultants, and probed auditing practices and success criteria. He kept a diary of each project, taking notes on the spot or shortly after the events observed. These observations were supplemented with analysis of the documents that consultants produced and used in the course of their evaluations, which included emails, notes, reports, minutes, and PowerPoint presentations.

We compared how our two groups of experts went about evaluating their respective objects for the benefit of a designated audience. Our methodology consists in comparing credibility practices across these two groups by focusing specifically on how they appeal to their audiences, and how their imagined effect on audiences influences what they do. What challenges do they face when rendering their judgments? How do they factor in their audiences, and how does this change what they do?

Our work draws on comparative case study methodology (Yin 2013) and mobilizes a range of data types to conduct a broader in-depth study of each case (Bourgoin 2015; Chong, in press)—primarily interviews and participant observation.[8] By bringing these two studies into a conversation with each other, we aim to identify both similarities and differences, and thus build new theory.

Findings

We begin by describing similarities in the ways both our groups of expert service workers construct the credibility of their claims. Specifically, we find that both groups engage in efforts on the one hand to (i) make their evaluative operations *transparent* to their audiences; and yet on the other hand to (ii) *distanciate* themselves from the evaluative process by obfuscating their own agency. Below, we describe how each group accomplishes each tactic, and highlight how these similar ends are accomplished through different means depending on context.

Transparency as a pathway to credibility

Transparency, or making workings visible, has been identified as a key means of gaining public trust (Moore 2018). In keeping with previous research, we find that both groups of expert service workers buy into the idea that by laying bare the factors that inform their evaluations, and the practices that generate them, they can make their final recommendations more credible to their relevant audiences. However, going beyond this, we find that transparency does not generate trust by functioning as a means of "checking" for impropriety, as has been previously suggested. Instead, we find that transparency in our case serves to enroll the audience into a particular way of "seeing" the object under evaluation, and that this helps to make the resultant evaluations acceptable. How this is achieved, and its implications for credibility, are clarified through the empirics of our two cases.

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[8] See Lamont and Swidler (2014) on the value of interviewing techniques and participant observation as complementary methodologies.

Fiction reviewers: transparency as a window on the reading experience
The object of literary critics' evaluation comes in the ready-made form of a manuscript. Therefore, all critics use the same source material for their evaluations: a book. Yet a book, as an object of evaluation, is deceptively complex.

Fiction reviewing involves multiple tasks, one of the most important of which is to describe what a book is about. The average reader consults reviews to learn what types of new books are available. And because most reviews are of newly published novels, reviewers can safely assume that most readers will not have read the book before them. Part of the reviewer's task, then, is to offer the general reader a sense of the book under review in terms of its content, as well as its tone and sentiment. This process is far less straightforward than it first appears, in part because of the interpretive nature of literary arts (and literary evaluation). Consider, for instance, Griswold's (1987) study, which looked at how literary critics from three separate nations had different readings of the same set of books by Barbadian writer George Lamming.[9] While the setting and characters may not change from reading to reading, scholars of literature have shown that the meaning of a book is a matter of interpretation, and therefore varies (Griswold, 1987; Corse and Griffin 1997; Corse and Westervelt 2002). While most reviewers report that their editors are generally hands-off, it is common for editors to give instruction on the level of detail to offer in descriptive summaries. In this, the editor acts as a proxy for the general reader, voicing their presumed views on what information should be included.

A second crucial task of book reviewing, and the one that we are chiefly concerned with, is to offer an informed evaluation of a book's quality. This is also far from straightforward, because aesthetic value is largely understood as a matter of personal taste. As one reviewer observes: "[Reviewing is] very subjective. You and I could both read a book. You could think it's brilliant; I could think it's tedious. And [it's not] a question of right or wrong." In other words, critics start with the same object of evaluation, yet can arrive at very different conclusions on its content and value.

How can reviewers make their reviews credible if there is no objective "right" or "wrong"? The answer lies not in the substance of

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[9] Briefly, UK reviewers emphasized a stylistic reading, West Indian reviewers emphasized themes of personal and civic identity, and American reviewers focused on race relations in the books. Griswold takes this as evidence that the novels (and other cultural objects) do not have a stable set of meanings. Instead, how literary critics interpreted the novels was informed by the broader "social presuppositions" of their national context: for example, America's national preoccupation with race may have influenced American critics' race-relation readings of Lamming's work.

the judgment, but rather in *how* the critic arrives at it. One reviewer described this imperative when they noted that the task of the reviewer is "to be as clear about his criteria and his judging assumptions as he can be" when putting together a review. Reviewers insisted that because of the interpretive nature of reading and reviewing, it is critical that they lay out the factors behind their evaluation, in order to bolster its credibility.

Editors again play a mediating role in helping critics process their reading experiences into a review that clearly articulates their conclusions. One reviewer explained that editors act as a "filter between the critic and her audience … [U]ndergoing the process of being edited … is crucial because I think it's very easy to say what you like. It's not as easy to show readers *why they should also like it.*" The editor's input does not help an author evaluate a book's quality, but it *does* help them explain to readers why they should put faith in their evaluation, and even share it.

To justify their evaluation of a book's quality, reviewers must clarify how one understands what the book is about, and the criteria they used to make their evaluation. This is achieved through the selective inclusion of, for instance, plot details and extended excerpts, which critics note during their own reading and select in order to evoke the same emotional response that they had at that time (i.e. "showing" readers why they might like or dislike a book for the same reason that the critic did).

Using quotations is one way to demonstrate—rather than assert—something about the quality of a book. James Wood was singled out in part for his ability to use quotations in this regard. Describing Wood's strengths, one reviewer explains, "He'll *show* us, through quotations, what he is talking about … You know, categorically explaining why it was a bad book and *uncontroversially proving* that it was a bad book." That is, rather than merely claiming that a book has underdrawn or underdeveloped characters, a critic might share an excerpt of stilted dialogue so that readers can draw that same conclusion.

How reviewers craft their reviews influences how trustworthy and reliable their evaluations appear, inasmuch as the best reviews *show* readers why they should agree with the evaluation, rather than merely *telling* them what to think. The value of laying out the criteria and judging assumptions that bolster a reviewer's evaluation is that it brings the reviewer and reader into an evaluative alignment. The reviewer can get the reader to understand the evaluative criteria that the reviewer utilized when reading the book and, ideally, to draw the same evaluative conclusion based on the information provided in the review.

By attempting to recreate a stylized version of their engagement with a book, critics essentially treat their reviews as a "literary

technology," as Shapin and Schaffer (1985) described the writing of Robert Boyle. Boyle's writing meticulously laid bare the inner workings of his experiments, and the authors argue that this helped to convince skeptics of the validity of scientific claims by making them "virtual witnesses," so they had no need to conduct the same experiments themselves. In the same way, review readers become "virtual witnesses" of reviewers' reading experience, and may never validate the reviewer's conclusion with their own reading of the book. Critics' role in protecting readers from reading bad books is captured by the common conceptualization of them as "surrogate consumers" (Hirsch 1972).

A review is a necessarily stylized representation of the reading of a book. There may be many ways to read and enjoy a novel—for its formal writing structure, its humor, its sociopolitical relevance, or its examination of a particular contemporary setting, to name a few. Critics focus on those criteria that best approximate the needs of their audience: the imagined general reader. At the same time, by making transparent the particular factors and criteria that they employ to arrive at their evaluations, they are also seeking the audience's acceptance of a stylized way of seeing the novel. And once readers can see a book as the sum of particular qualities identified by the reviewer, the subsequent judgment that flows from this representation is likely to seem credible.

Management consultants: transparency as something more than accountability

Fiction reviewers prepare their assessment of a book for a remote and unseen audience. They are not involved with the book itself, or its author, and nor do they usually interact directly with their readers. Their client (the editor) wants their review to uphold the journal's reputation, but they do not have a significant personal stake in the quality of any single review.

In contrast, consultants are much more closely involved in the objects they are evaluating. Their "audience"—senior executives within the client firm—have a keen and immediate interest in their evaluations, which will have a direct bearing on the direction of the firm and perhaps their personal careers. They also pay the consultant's bill, giving them an individual power over the consultant that newspaper readers can only wield collectively over reviewers.

The "text" that the consultant reviews could be the entire organization, or some subset of it—for example, an acquisition to be integrated, a department to be reorganized, a strategy to be rethought. The "story" of the organization is a tale that is still being told, in

which the consultant themselves plays a part. They review the "text" in real time, even as they participate in the "plot," and partly drive it. They must "read" the organization, not just through textual materials, but also in the sense of discerning the tangled relationships and conflicting motives of the "characters" who inhabit it. And even as the consultant evaluates the organization and attempts to rewrite its story, the other "characters" are evaluating them in return—and may have the power to make changes of their own.

The information asymmetry we saw in the book world is reversed for consultants. While book readers know nothing about the book until they read a review, the consultant's "audience"—the client—is already very familiar with the organization, and is looking for an outsider to take a fresh look and offer new insights into it—a different reading of the same text, so to speak. However, this is also the root of conflict, since the client may have entrenched views that the consultant must overcome in order to drive the changes that they believe are needed.

Reading and writing are as significant for the consultant as they are for the reviewer. Through reading, the consultant learns what the organization is about; through writing, they crystallize their thoughts on how it should change. Similar to reviewers, consultants must read texts such as reports, minutes, technical manuals, business plans, and so on, and form judgments based on what they read. Having done so, they must express those judgments to clients by embodying them in written materials such as proposals and plans, synthesizing disparate knowledge into a condensed, easily digestible form similar to a book review. Such deliverables can help to shore up the consultant's authority when the time comes to persuade clients of the best course of action.

Also, like the reviewer, the consultant cannot simply impose their evaluation on the client, and expect to have their counsel accepted without question. Instead, they must say *how* they reached their conclusion, and show clients *why* their advice makes sense in the context of the organization. For the consultant, one of the most powerful "showing" artifacts is the PowerPoint slide, which combines words and spatial representation to express complex organizational realities in a simple, intuitive way. Such slides play a similar role to material artifacts in scientific demonstrations.

At ConsultCorp, consultants turn what they call "results" into "insights" for clients. Insights are locally meaningful, relevant, and actionable propositions, which calibrate more generic analysis to the specific context of intervention, and conform to what is regarded as acceptable by clients in such a context.

As a ConsultCorp manager notes, "there is a slight touch of servility in a consultant's work […] you have to find a way to make your client happy." This concern for the proverbial "client satisfaction" is certainly

driven by commercial motives—happy clients are repeat clients—but also by consultants' genuine concern to see their advice put into practice. As a manager puts it, "You can be the best doctor in the world, but if your patient doesn't take the medicine, nothing will happen."

So, how do consultants persuade clients to accept their work and see them as credible? They rely on specific tools and formal documents to manifest their work, partly because the object of evaluation is quite evanescent. Organizations may inhabit a bricks-and-mortar building, but their processes, functional units, or overall performances are less tangible. Consultants must therefore sketch a stable representation of their object, which supports their credibility by grounding the boundaries of their analysis. This is partly done by framing the evaluation early on in business proposals, specifying the business area that will be targeted, parameters and relevant criteria of the evaluation before any intervention is made. For instance, in the procurement assignment, the consultants clearly stated on their proposal that their evaluation would include "all types of purchase except for the renovation program and several partnership programs" (Field document, Business proposal), which were considered exceptional. By setting clear and realistic boundaries early in an assignment, consultants lay the groundwork for establishing the credibility of the proposals they will submit later on, managing expectations and guarding against any possible "feature creep." This helps to secure clients' agreement on scope, creating a shared understanding of what will be delivered.

During the hospital assignment, the consultants also clearly stated their structure of analysis in a deliverable to enroll their client. The idea was to break down the problem into clearly definable sub-problems that would be easier to analyze. The chosen analytical structure was then used to organize the presentation of results and express them clearly to the client. As a partner explains:

> We chose to break down our problem [evaluating the efficacy of support functions in a newly merged hospital] by focusing on "frictions and the interfaces of functions" and then by "evaluating each function on its own." For each category we had several sub-categories, such as process, tools, human resources, governance and so on. And each aspect was further detailed.

> The key aspect is to be able to show a structured rationale to your client and clearly explain why we chose this rationale to make our analysis. The client can disagree, and we are very open to contradiction, but our structure is written down in black and white, we are ready to defend it, and to walk the client through it. If a client does not understand how we got to where we are, there is a strong chance that he won't be receptive [emphasis added].

This example again displays an emphasis on opening up the consulting procedure and revealing the inner workings of decision-making. Here the respondent is clear that the reason for explaining their procedure and rationale is first to help the client understand, but also to gain their assent and acceptance—what the respondent called the client being "receptive." This strategy stands in contrast to other types of experts, whose status and authority depends on the blackboxing of their decision-making processes. For example, lawyers may not necessarily feel required to explain the case law precedents behind the advice they give.

However, the framing of the problem can also be accomplished during the evaluation process itself. For instance, one consultant recalls the pitfalls of creating a clear image of the organization during an audit for an energy group. It was vital to arrive at a shared representation of the organization, so everyone involved had a solid basis for assessing and managing its performance. "We created a scorecard," he recalls. "But crafting key performance indicators is a major political struggle. They are never self-standing, and creating them is like pulling teeth." He continues, "Our only rule was to write down all our definitions, hypotheses, and sources, so we were always covered." Process mappings, scorecards, lists of activities, charts, and diagrams of all kinds are just some of the many material inscriptions of the object under evaluation.

This section shows how consultants make their work transparent by exposing the inner workings of what they are doing to public account, in order to make their work seem more credible. However, the *mechanism* by which this is accomplished is not a simple, one-sided act of revelation, but rather an effort toward mutual alignment. Book readers are brought into the reading experience by a review in a one-way fashion—they cannot shape the evaluation, or engage directly with the reviewer. The consultant, however, builds their evaluation through iteration and collaboration, adapting their tactics based on the audience's reaction. In both situations, however, the aim of transparency is to get the audience to see the object under evaluation in a certain light.

Providing proof through distanciation

The second move that both groups use to bolster the credibility of their evaluations is *distanciation*: abstracting the self from the evaluative process. Scholars in several fields have observed that excising individual beliefs or opinions can help to fortify knowledge claims. Such practices have been named and described in many different ways in the literature, including "inscriptions" in the sociology of science (Latour 1987); "eliminating personal references" through moving to higher levels of abstraction in debates about justice

(Boltanski and Thévenot 2006); and the "folding" of idiosyncratic into universal criteria (Shrum 1996; Lamont 2009) in the case of evaluation in cultural fields. What these practices share is the aim to be seen as speaking on behalf of something other than one's own interests or tastes. The individual deliberately obfuscates their own role as a locus of knowledge production, which helps to strengthen the credibility of their claims.

Previous studies have observed experts engaging in such acts of obfuscation as a matter of professional convention, rhetorical power, or the active effort to deceive and provide "defective" expertise (Pénet 2018; see also Proctor and Shiebinger 2008). However, our respondents report engaging in what might be called "good faith" obfuscation, in the sense that they use it not as a cover or alibi, but as a way to provide proof for their evaluations. By "proof," we mean factors or knowledge that help discern whether one's evaluation is robust; "to test if your case is a good one" (Hildebrandt 2007: 85). Or, to put it another way, to test the degree to which one is operating from an idiosyncratic standpoint.

Below we outline two distinct distanciation procedures that evaluators use to "prove" their evaluations. Furthermore, we also find important differences across cases with regard to *how* distanciation is achieved, which we argue varies partly because of the different relationships that our evaluators have with their respective audiences.

Book reviewers: proof through self-inquiry

Fiction critics are viewed, by themselves and others, as connoisseurs: individuals with specialized knowledge of literature that enables them to appraise and appreciate books in ways that the average reader cannot (Bourdieu 1993). Part of critics' self-image as judges concerns their deep familiarity with literature. One reviewer reflects that part of her job is to "know a little more than the average person" and to "have some literary expertise." She gives the example of the ability to look at a book and highlight an allusion to Camus, as in an "echo" of another text that only an informed reader will pick up, but is relevant for their appreciation of the text.

Critics' reviews appear as articles within a wider publication, but feature their own individual byline (writing credit). Thus, their reviews are recognized as reflecting their own personal assessment of a book. Nevertheless, critics report aspiring to a form of generality in their artistic judgments: their reviews should reflect their judgment as connoisseurs, not simply their idiosyncrasies as private consumers.

How can critics tell where their personal opinions end and their professional responses begin? Many described a "dual reading"

strategy (Chong 2013). First, they read the book to gain a sense of its content and quality, treating these first impressions as hypotheses. On second reading, they subject these initial impressions to a test or inquiry. Dual reading helps reviewers to investigate and distinguish between their taste as private readers and their professional judgment as connoisseurs, with the intent of excising the former and preserving the latter.

Both readings serve to distance critics' idiosyncrasies as readers from their final evaluations: first by approximating the stance of an ideal reader, and second by vetting their initial responses against formal criteria.

The first way of reading can be described as a "civilian" mode. As one reviewer put it, he began by approaching the book "as if I'm a *normal reader,* and try not to be picking it apart and evaluating it on the first read, because I think that really prevents a legitimate review. That's really not how anyone else is going to experience the book" [emphasis added].

Reviewers aim to approach their first reading as general readers (his/her imagined audience) would. This involves bracketing off not only their intentions as reviewers, but also their personal tastes as readers. For instance, several reviewers mentioned that they might find aspects of a book's structure interesting, but that such observations may be too "high-minded" for the average reader. By approaching the book as an average reader would, book critics are fulfilling their role as *surrogate consumers*.

During the second, "critical" reading, reviewers focus on validating their initial reactions with formal aesthetic reasoning. For example, one critic recalled a book he disliked because the author's voice was "irritating." He used his second reading to question, "Is it my personal idiosyncrasy, or is this book not very good?" He formulated a hypothesis, but had to subject it to scrutiny by identifying the origin of his negative reaction: his own tastes as a reader, or failures intrinsic to the book? By posing this question, the critic assumed that he would be able to distinguish between his subjective preference and the objective qualities of the book. In effect, book critics engage in "trials of strength"[10] that test the extent to which they are speaking on behalf of the book or on behalf of private (illegitimate) concerns, so they can base their professional judgment purely on the former.

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[10] In *Science in Action*, Latour (1987) follows the production of scientific "facts" (i.e., blackboxing processes). These include trials of strength that test the relation between instruments and the scientists who interpret their data. Scientists are meant to report on whatever facts and data their instruments reveal. But if a critic (or "dissenter") can show that a researcher's interpretation has been distorted by some kind of subjectivity, then the scientist is revealed as a "subjective individual" rather than an "objective representative" of the empirical world (78).

Hence, both readings serve to distance critics' idiosyncrasies as readers from their final evaluations: first by approximating the stance of an ideal reader; and second by vetting their initial responses against conventional evaluative criteria. Through an ongoing process of critical self-inquiry, the critic cements the perceived credibility of their final judgment.

Another way of interpreting these data is that they corroborate observations that evaluators "fold" their idiosyncrasies into conventional formal criteria (Shrum 1996). However, the interview data reveal that this is not simply a matter of pragmatic rhetorical convenience, but part and parcel of a process of evaluative inquiry and generating proof for the final verdict.

However, reviewers also have another group of imagined readers in mind: fellow writers and industry insiders. These peers' "gaze" (Foucault 1973) acts as a powerful deterrent to any reviewer who is thinking of abusing the autonomy and discretion they are afforded. So are critics' descriptions of their self-inquiry simply a way for them to present themselves positively for the benefit of external analysts? There are several reasons to think this is not the case.

First, if reviewers are unreflexive about their evaluations, and do not vet their idiosyncratic responses against conventional aesthetic standards, they incur reputational risk. One prominent reviewer recounts a time he reviewed a book that, for personal reasons, he was enthusiastic about—but that most other readers and reviewers regarded as clearly inferior. For years afterwards, he was the butt of jokes from peers, who would bring up his review as an example of the *irrationality* of taste. While he was well established enough to retain his professional standing despite this incident, others are less fortunate. If a reviewer is found to be too idiosyncratic in their reviews, this can lead to assumptions or allegations of improper behavior. For instance, they might be charged with having some kind of ulterior motive: whether positive (e.g., helping a friend) or negative (e.g., having an axe to grind). The best defense against these charges is a reasoned, justified evaluation that is in keeping with evaluative conventions.

Second, this reflexive "inquiry" is important because it distinguishes the professional's practice from that of the amateur. As reviews written by average readers on book blogs, reader-networking sites such as Goodreads, and online marketplaces like Amazon have become increasingly common, so many observers have questioned the ongoing use or relevance of traditional book reviews. However, our reviewers were skeptical of whether reviews written by and for the common reader can properly meet the needs of the general reading public. As one reviewer noted, "If you look at [amateur reviews], you're like,

'That really doesn't tell me what I need to know. It just told me that you liked it or didn't like it.'" The same reviewer continued: "All that 'thumbs up' and 'thumbs down' and all the stars and all that stuff—it's fine, but it's not reviewing." So another argument against the idea that the process of inquiry described by reviewers is simply fabricated is that it was a matter of professional pride and distinction for so many of them.

Critics' process of inquiry, and the way they subject their evaluative judgments to self-scrutiny as a method of proof, is also shaped by the simple fact that book reviews are not dialogic. Their audiences are not physically copresent, and the review must present their entire evaluation as final. This is very different from the situation faced by management consultants, to whom we now turn.

Management consultants: proof through consensus

Like fiction critics, individual management consultants proffering their recommendations should not be seen as speaking on their own behalf, as it undermines their evaluations. However, management consultants have a very different way of using distanciation to achieve closure or persuade others to accept their views.

First, consultants' situation is different from that of book reviewers. They are not connoisseurs with their own "personal brands"; they are subsumed into the brand of the firm they represent. They achieve this by downplaying their individuality as agents of evaluation and emphasizing a generic corporate identity. Clarifying this point, a respondent explains, "I want my client to know that he's not hiring Tony or Paul, but a consultant from *ConsultCorp*."

In the business proposal sold to a consulting client, the team that will perform the assignment is rendered completely generic and anonymous. No individual resumes or photos are provided—only a grade, a level of experience, and a generic description of capacity. For instance, the client will know they are buying a manager with an MBA, six to ten years of experience in project management, and several successful assignments in the energy sector. Similarly, several junior consultants with a generic profile will be working on the team. The client cannot choose specifically who will be working on their case; instead, they are buying "types of profile," as they are known at ConsultCorp.

Large firms put considerable efforts into "producing a standard consultant," as a partner describes it—that is, training their employees in such a way as to standardize the quality of services and the process of delivery. This is also a means for the upper echelons of the firm to facilitate the staffing of consultants and retain control over their core assets—the knowledge base and client portfolio—such that they belong not to unique individuals who have developed an *intuitu personae* relation with clients, but to the organization as a whole.

Second, the world of business is not one of "qualities" and "taste," but one that takes "quantity" as its basic procedure or unit of knowledge (Karpik 2010). Hence, consultants disappear into their method. The role of quantitative methods in supporting consultants' authority is illustrated by a second partner at *ConsultCorp*, who remarks: "A consultant shouldn't give his/her opinion. S/he should provide options and scenarios to his/her clients based on a systematic and objective analysis of the data available." *ConsultCorp* therefore invested heavily in business analytics solutions, just as top strategy firms such as BCG or McKinsey do, facilitating the systematic analysis of large amounts of comparative data.

Consulting services have been described as highly intangible, heterogeneous, and subjective (Clark 1995). Consultants combat this through the distanciation afforded by technical methods and material artifacts. Their personal idiosyncrasies as evaluators fade behind the corporate branded tools of which they are merely spokespersons.

Consultants deploy quantitative methods as tools of distanciation to establish the credibility of their claims. This tactic relies on the cultural association of impersonality that is attached to technical methods. For instance, the Scientific Method, as a set of practices, is colloquially understood to remove all bias and trace of the individual conducting the operation, thereby shoring up the apparent objectivity and authority of the resultant findings (Shapin 2008). We call consultants' methods "quasi-scientific," because although they use most of the technical apparatus of traditional science—formal theories, quantitative studies, demonstrations, analysis of causal schemes, etc.—they display far less concern for methodological rigor.

For consultants, one of the most important vehicles for "objectivity" is the PowerPoint presentation. Often derided as a vehicle for meaningless management-speak or tedious corporate waffle, the PowerPoint slide is actually a vital tool for the consultant. PowerPoint decks are used to provide a focus for high-level meetings between the consultant and senior managers at the client firm, and may also be shared more widely as a way to promulgate the consultant's ideas.

By combining words, numbers, and graphic symbols in PowerPoint, the consultant synthesizes what they have learned about the client organization and presents it back to them in an intuitive, simplified form—a form that "seems true." This allows the client to make a decision that feels rational and informed, even though the framing of the decision itself is controlled by the consultant. To support this work, consultant firms such as ConsultCorp maintain libraries of "ready-to-use" PowerPoint slides that have been proven to work, allowing consultants to provide "instant insights."

The consultant's use of PowerPoint decks to support the face-to-face presentation of their ideas has parallels with the use of demonstrations in science, where material artifacts serve to "show" the audience what is true. Previous work on demonstrations shows that the hand of the demonstrator is never really fully absent from the spectacle. For their part, consultants are not even trying to pretend that the data are free from "fingerprints"; instead, it is a question of incorporating others' opinions—specifically, those of the client.

Some observers have commented on the servility of client–service relationships. But consultants are not servants at the beck and call of their client. Instead, their work is about building consensus: generating proof via deliberation, checks, and balances. When a consultant works with a client, they come together as peers and equals to determine the truth.

However, there is something more: it is a matter of coproduction. Consultants attempt to frame themselves as extensions of impersonal tools of evaluation, which include not only the quantitative methods mentioned above, but also the industry knowledge and interpretations of their clients. Thus, data become social objects that represent a *bricolage* of the consultant's own expertise, the "tools" of algorithms and methods, and the expectations and representations of the client themselves.

That point is not reached with a single leap, but through a process of back-and-forth. The consultant aims to enroll their client through an iterative process that allows ongoing mutual adjustments, and create a shared understanding of what the results ought to be. This involves making the client feel included in knowledge-making practices, and showing them that their experiences and expertise are incorporated into the final result.

This also defuses potential criticism from the client side, in the sense that consultants clarify their expectations early in the process, and make the client an active contributor to the evaluation. This echoes literature in terms of the crucial role of the "co-production of knowledge" (Bettencourt et al. 2002)—knowledge-sharing practices resulting in highly customized output to which clients actively contribute—in securing audience satisfaction for professional services. In other words, if a client feels that an evaluation emanates partly from them, they will be more likely to acknowledge its outcomes.

Consultants allow their ideas to "prove themselves" by subjecting them to a "proving ground" of interrogation and questioning. In French, the notion is called *épreuve*: the sense that it will not do to work with "hasty consensus that has not been nourished with the resistance that is to be expected in real life . . . The opposing interests of both parties thus form an intelligent network of checks and balances" (Hildebrandt and Gutwirth 2008: 595–596). True and

strong agreement is only achieved once an idea has withstood the test of disagreement.

In contrast, book reviewers are not subject to the opinions of their readers directly, since reviewing is not a dialogic situation. For them, demonstrating credibility is closer to what the French call *preuve*: adducing evidence to substantiate their opinions, which they gather by subjecting their own process to critical and reflexive inquiry. In a sense, their "proving ground" is an internal one. There is dialogue and *épreuve*, but it is internal—between the two roles that the reviewer plays during their dual reading. The reviewer embodies two 'people', the 'general reader' and the 'critic', and hosts a dialogue between them.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has examined the credibility strategies of two very different types of evaluators: book reviewers and management consultants. At first sight, the two groups seem worlds apart—yet they have much in common. Both are different types of expert service workers, who offer their expert evaluations on particular "objects" in response to clients' requests. And both express similar aims in terms of their communications with clients: specifically, the value of being transparent and generating proof.

Transparency refers to making inner workings visible, in order to enroll the audience in the means of qualifying the object and hence gain their trust. For fiction reviewers, that meant laying bare, in the text of their reviews, the various criteria and considerations that drove them to arrive at their evaluation. In a sense, they recreated their own reading experience for the reader of the review. Similarly, consultants break down the rationale for each part of their analysis to ensure that their clients understand and agree with not just their evaluation, but also their representation of the object under assessment. This stance is maintained continuously throughout the consulting assignment.

Previous work has established the importance of gestures towards transparency as a means of generating trust. We are particularly concerned with how our experts gain "trust" or acceptance for the specific evaluations that they produce. Our analysis reveals that transparency does not contribute to "trust" by revealing *all* the processes at play. All representations of the evaluative process are partial; this is particularly the case for book reviewers. Instead, transparency operates by laying out how the evaluator has *qualified* the object under consideration. Qualification refers to the practice of breaking down a social entity into discrete qualities for the purposes of

analysis or evaluation.[11] Transparency generates trust by aligning the audience with how the evaluator "creates" the objects under consideration. In the case of book reviews, we see this with the various interpretations and criteria employed, and with tactics such as quoting from the book to "show" the reader how it is. With consultants, this alignment manifests in the performance indicators they construct for how organizations should operate. Achieving this alignment in terms of how objects are qualified is a necessary step towards making any subsequent evaluation both acceptable and credible.

The second credibility strategy we observed is *distanciation*: drawing a dividing line between the self and the evaluation as a means of generating proof. In the case of book reviewers, we saw how they engage in a reflexive reading process that they report enables them to discern and maintain the distinction between their idiosyncrasies as private readers and their professional opinions as critics. Having done so, they can ensure that only the latter appear in their reviews. In the case of consultants, we see how they "fold" their individuality into the formal procedures and quantitative tools of consulting. This helps them obscure themselves from the picture, even as they "show" the client the reality of their situation, or the appropriateness of the consultant's own evaluation and advice.

Distanciation inevitably involves some obfuscation: concealing some aspect of the situation that is, in reality, present. However, we argue that this is not done with the intent to deceive, or as a rhetorical tool, but rather in good faith. Both groups exclude the self as a way of generating "proof"—meaning some indicator that one's evaluation is a "good" or "robust" one, and not merely an idiosyncratic opinion. In the case of book reviewers, the critical reading is a means of subjecting their first hypotheses about a book to a "test" against conventions—as opposed to merely "folding" their preferences into general language as a matter of rhetoric. In the case of consultants, the emphasis is on wisdom by contest and cooperation—specifically, that through deliberation among peers, a better assessment can be obtained. These two means of generating proof broadly overlap with two modes of proof described by Hildebrandt (2007); Hildebrandt and Gutwirth (2008). Specifically, in the first case, because the audience is not physically copresent and the evaluation is not dialogic, proof takes the form of a process of inquiry leading to a final conclusion ("*preuve,*" or proof based on evidence). In the second case, the conclusion is tested and strengthened through deliberation and consensus-building as a means of knowledge-construction ("*épreuve,*" or proving by testing). This contrast in credibility strategies is clearly related to the situation of the evaluator vis-à-vis their audience. While reviewers address a

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[11] On qualification see Beckert and Musselin 2013; also Chong forthcoming: chap. 3.

remote, unseen audience unilaterally, consultants face a "live audience" with whom they hold an unscripted and unpredictable dialogue.

There is also a clear tension between transparency and distanciation: the former is about "opening up," while the latter involves some "closing down." While transparency is about laying bare procedural decisions, the second is a form of obfuscation, wherein the individual evaluator's "fingerprints" are erased in order to fortify their evaluation. How can we resolve this tension?
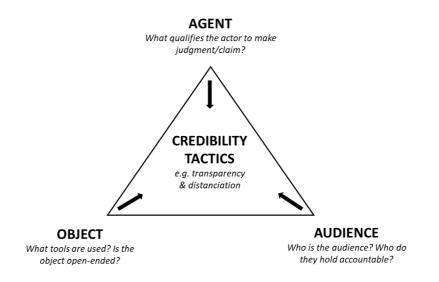
We suggest that it relates to inherent contradictions in the position of expert service workers. On the one hand, they are *experts*, and therefore are being asked to provide their professional advice, not their individual opinions. Work in the sociology of knowledge has shown how impersonal knowledge is understood as more reliable or scientific. The more the individual is absent, the more the *abstract* knowledge of the professional is understood as informing the final evaluation. Because the experts we study are offering assessments and recommendations, rather than merely submitting or verifying facts, they must balance impersonal and abstract knowledge against their idiosyncratic opinion. On the other hand, they are also *service workers,* which implies a certain "servility" and outward-facing accountability to their audiences. Hence, they must also convince their audience not only of their authority, but also the relevance of their evaluations as a consumer "product," through transparency.[12]
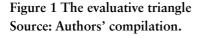
Although our experts work in two very different worlds, we find commonalities in their credibility aims, suggesting the generalizability of these findings. The fact that these two movements were observed in cases as different as the ones we study suggests that these credibility strategies may be generalizable. Our findings could be useful for other fields where agents are responsible for symbolic and material resources, and could be understood in terms of how well competing groups succeed at transparency and distanciation. However, we also found important differences in the ways our expert evaluators achieved these goals. Transparency is about achieving evaluative alignment regarding the qualities of the object, while distanciation is about generating proof (whether through evidence or testing). At the same time, as our findings show, there are variations in the ways that our two sets of experts accomplish them depending on the object in question as well as their relationship to the audience.

We offer the evaluative triangle (see Figure 1) as a heuristic for future researchers to extend to their own case studies of credibility in evaluation to help understand how the qualities of the *object* under

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[12] Osnowitz finds a similar tension in her study of the apparently oxymoronic category of "contract professionals."

consideration, the evaluators' relationship with their *audience*, and the qualifications and self-concepts of the *evaluators* themselves infuse the specific ways that credibility strategies are enacted. To illustrate the utility of this heuristic, we explicate how each point in the triangle shaped the credibility strategies presented in the above cases.

AGENT
What qualifies the actor to make judgment/claim?

CREDIBILITY TACTICS
e.g. transparency & distanciation

OBJECT
What tools are used? Is the object open-ended?

AUDIENCE
Who is the audience? Who do they hold accountable?

Figure 1 The evaluative triangle
Source: Authors' compilation.

We saw how transparency was important for qualifying the object under evaluation. In the case of fiction reviewers, the object is ready-made but the evaluative criteria are myriad. Hence, critics strove to be clear and convincing about their chosen criteria and how they supported their evaluation. In the case of consultants, the object is more evanescent, and thus consultants must be vigilant that their representations of the organizational processes and operations they assess are in keeping with clients' own expectations and experiences.

First, we saw how the *object* impresses itself on the credibility strategies of those who evaluate it. The object of evaluation must always be interpreted, but the degree to which it is understood as open-ended or closed varies. The more open-ended the object, the more work needs to be done to establish a consensus on what is being evaluated—as distinct from the individual idiosyncrasies or interests of the speaker—and to articulate a frame that all "viewers" of the object can share. Both cases show how the object of evaluation impresses itself upon the evaluative procedure. In both instances how to *qualify* an object, or make it amenable to evaluation, is an interpretive act, and must therefore be justified if audiences are to accept the final evaluation. In a situation where the procedure for assessing an object is less contestable or interpretive (e.g., measuring its cost) we might expect evaluators to use different credibility strategies, or that

transparency might be less important. Additionally, each group deals with very different objects: literary works on the one hand, organizational performance and processes on the other. Future work could examine the scope of how generalizable these credibility strategies are, for instance, across considerations of the status of the speaker, both within and across case studies. This continues the idea that objects are meaningful actors in the evaluation of things—a lesson widely shared within the science and technology studies and "new sociology of art," but in need of greater consideration within the sociology of evaluation.

Second, we also saw how our evaluators' relationships to their intended *audience* informed their credibility strategies in terms of generating proof. Specifically, because book reviewers do not directly engage with general readers, they must rely on their self-discipline and reflexivity as judges—along with some editorial guidance—and subject their own evaluation procedure to inquiry. In contrast, because management consultants are in regular interaction with the hiring organization, and engaged in a more traditional client–service relation, they have the benefit (or burden) of regular feedback from their audience, who also provide a check on the perceived acceptability of the consultants' work throughout the process. This suggests that evaluators' relationship with their relevant audiences—in terms of power, accountability, and means of communication—can have an impact on how evaluators enact credibility strategies. Our focus on the audience for professional recommendations was also instructive because it drew our attention to differences in the relative autonomy or interdependence of agents and their audiences.

Finally, we come to the *agents of evaluation* themselves. We saw how book reviewers' expertise is based on cultural ideals of connoisseurship, wherein they know more than the average reader for whom they write reviews. It is this position as connoisseurs that grants them the freedom not to "report" or seek feedback from their audiences in the first place. Hence, most of their work to fortify the credibility of their reviews is reflexive. It is largely done in the absence, but also anticipation, of the needs of their imagined readers pre-publication. In contrast, consultants' expertise derives from their familiarity and association with the procedures of the consulting firm. On the one hand, this means that they have to do relatively little symbolic work in terms of extricating themselves from the consulting process, because they are already framed as extensions of impersonal consulting practices. On the other hand, consultants' self-described utility in applying quantitative and analytical tools for the benefit of the client also means that the acceptability of their evaluations

depended heavily on the assent of their clients—demonstrating once again how audience relations matter. We venture that how *agents' self-concepts* vary—in terms of how formal or institutionalized are the bases of their qualifications to undertake particular tasks—will also impact their approach to credibility strategies.

Our analyses unpack how credibility practices are influenced by agents, objects, and audiences across two worlds of worth. In conducting them, we necessarily understate the level of internal heterogeneity within each field. For instance, we do not explore the various ways in which status might mediate the operation of credibility strategies. Indeed, we have an intentionally elite bias in our sample selection; we include book reviewers for the most prestigious publications and consultants at leading consulting firms. It is completely reasonable to presume there would be differences between the credibility tactics of high-status professionals and those who work in lower-status situations—for example, reviewers for popular magazines, or consultants who work on a freelance basis.

Research on status suggests that different evaluators might be more or less beholden to the credibility norms of the field, or have more or less influence in their credibility practices. In the literary world, for example, critics who are highly regarded within the field might have fewer concerns about "checking" their subjective preferences. Alternatively, one might hypothesize that the field will reflect the middle-status conformity dynamics described by Phillips and Zuckerman (2001).[13] People speak of things being "panned," or sometimes "mauled" by the critics. And this might be done by high-status books without impunity, while low-status reviewers can do so because they have nothing to lose. Meanwhile, the majority of reviewers—those in the middle-status range—will be most likely to write glowing reviews because their standing in the community is the least stable. Future work could examine how generalizable these credibility strategies are—for instance, across considerations of the status of the speaker both within and across case studies.

The finding that evaluations reflect the cultural embeddedness of evaluators is nothing new. Likewise, it is well established that intermediaries are important in the story of how value is constructed, whether as reputation entrepreneurs, advocates, gatekeepers, or mediators. The theoretical contribution of our analysis is a focus not

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[13] Phillips and Zuckerman (2001) describe an inverted U-shaped curve in the relationship between status and conformity, whereby high-status actors can afford to be non-conformist and low-status actors might as well be non-conformist, but middle-status actors have the most reason to conform; as Phillips and Zuckerman put it: "[M]iddle-status conservatism reflects the anxiety experienced by one who aspires to a social station but fears disenfranchisement. Such insecurity fuels conformity as middle-status actors labor to demonstrate their bona fides as group members" (2001: 380).

only on *how* mediators are embedded in contexts, but also how the contextual relations between mediators, objects, and audiences shape the credibility strategies of experts—especially those who rank among the fast-growing category of expert service workers.

Acknowledgments

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Phillipa K. Chong is a cultural sociologist who specializes in how we define and evaluate worth: this includes the value we assign to social objects (e.g., books, paintings, knowledge, opinions, etc.) and social groups (e.g., experts, artists, minority groups, etc.). Her books include *Inside the Critics' Circle: Book Reviewing in Uncertain Times* (forthcoming with Princeton University Press). She currently works as an Assistant Professor in Sociology at *McMaster University*.

Alaric Bourgoin is Associate Professor in the Department of Management at HEC Montréal, Canada. In 2015, he published *The*

Tightrope Walkers (Presses des Mines), where he discusses the valuation practices of business consultants. His 2017 co-authored book, *Capitalization: A Cultural Guide* (Presses des Mines), is an anthropological investigation of the culture of contemporary capitalism. His research has appeared in, among others, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Organization Studies*, and *Human Relations*.