On being part of a conversation
An essay to aid in talk about quality in research

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June 2015

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Research as conversations

Research is an inherently social activity ordered in innumerable loosely linked fields of inquiry. I like to think of these fields as conversations[1], where each such conversation is characterised by certain topics, expressions, knowns, unknowns, and so on. In each of these there are also more or less articulated ideas about what constitutes good research practice, what makes for a contribution, what is interesting and so forth. In short, what counts as good research.

This essay ventures to explore what quality of research might mean given the broad starting point of seeing research as many conversations. This starting point is important to me for several reasons. First, the research-as-many-conversations is a heuristic notion that is not entrenched in any particular school or tied to any specific imposing position in philosophy of science (like positivism, critical realism, constructivism to name three.) The notion of research-as-many-conversations is helpful precisely to the extent its looseness can transcend such positions and their specifications of what counts as proper scientific method.

The starting point here rests on the observation that research seems to be about communication. Research as a practice involves communication between researchers and with society more broadly. Furthermore, these on-going activities of communication seem to be ordered in several semiautonomous clusters. The notion of research-as-many-conversations thus gives a somewhat free position from which to acknowledge and appreciate different expressed ideas about quality of research. It gives, in other words, a way to explore the theme of quality without preparing a procrustean bed branded "QUALITY" that are made to measure for particular school of thought, only to be soon used to assess everything.[2]

Freeing ourselves from the expectation of being able to specify a set of uniform criteria of QUALITY, makes it possible to explore quality of research as ideas and practices cherished in specific conversations without giving such observations a generalised status. This essay thus hopes to set a stage for reflecting on the topic of quality of research without offering a

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[1] The metaphor of conversations is aimed to capture something more precise and limited in the ordering of research than does the notion of disciplines. Economics, anthropology or indeed science and technology studies (STS) is here seen as involving numerous semi-autonomous conversations. Moreover, a conversation does not have to acknowledge or at least strictly adhere to disciplinary boundaries.

list of general prescribed standards or, at the other end of the spectrum, offering little else than a credo to the effect that 'anything goes, everywhere, at any time.' The aim is instead to offer a way to talk about quality as something that is tied to how research is ordered in many semi-autonomous conversations.

The research-as-many-conversations starting point is meant to appreciate the co-presence of many, and indeed sometimes conflicting, standards of what counts as good research. It is further meant to provide a position from which some broader themes can be deduced. The chosen starting point can also accommodate a constructive principle of dual assessment when it comes to formulating a critique against a contribution. Let me begin with exploring a few concrete consequences of the research-as-many-conversations starting point when it comes to discussing the quality of attempts to make research contributions.

Implications of seeing research as different ongoing conversations

A central consequence of looking upon research as ordered in a large number of semi-autonomous conversations is that any scholarly writing or presentation becomes seen as an attempt to make a contribution to at least one such conversation. This, then, provides a fundamentally *relational* view on quality: the quality of an attempted contribution can only be assessed in relation to the conventions of identified research conversations. Normally, and to be fair, this is the very same conversation(s) with which the contribution is aimed to engage with.

Conversations as ordering research

Some central implications stemming from this relational view on research as a practice can be given form by questions such as: What practices are at play in ordering and separating conversations? Can we normally see signs in texts as to what conversation(s) it wants to be part of and contribute to? Are there general patterns as to what counts as a contribution in this particular conversation?

Questions such as these evoke a large number of overlapping and broad topics. This include the topic about the various locales in which different conversations take place. A particular conversation can be distributed across a large variety of academic journals, blogs, workshops,

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[2] As an example of such a practice would be when the highly specific and situated notion of "evidence" in "evidence based medicine" is brought in to assess quality of a contribution to another conversation and attuned

conferences, and so on and the items of it can be articles, books, editorial letters, blind reviews, book reviews and so on. The questions above thus allude to there being patterns as to what is said in what locale and in relation to what conversation.[3]

Another topic thus evoked relates to the practices conducted to order and trim a conversation, which includes things such as both the visible cross-citing and debating across articles and the less visible collegiate discussion of drafts as well as the blind review practices of article manuscripts. All such textual practices can be seen as participating in the recurrent defining of the perimeters of said conversation. This further reminds us that there is much more talk going on in any conversation than what is readily published and that scholars can be differently well positioned to listen in on what are the current hot topics of a particular conversation.[4]

A third, yet again overlapping topic, relates to the practices that determines what becomes considered an engaging contribution, a parroted repetition or otherwise failed effort. These topics has indeed for decades instigated a large set of both descriptive and prescriptive scholarly work (and yes, in a multitude of different conversations). It is here, I contend, that the relational view on quality of an attempted contribution becomes critical. The valuation of a contribution can only be done in relation to the conventions of identified research conversations. Yet, this can nevertheless lend itself to certain observations.

The following three sub-sections further discuss a few observations evoked by the rather generic questions posed at the opening of this section.

What practices are at play in ordering and separating conversations?
The place where something is published, such as what academic journal, is often an indicator of what conversation it aims to be a part of. The outlet is often somewhat lazily further taken as a giveaway of the quality of the contribution, but I leave that performance assessment practice aside here. The place is regularly not enough and the citations mobilised in a text

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to a completely different set of scholarly criteria.

[3] This is I guess a theme that the field of bibliometrics have a field day exploring using statistical methods.

[4] Being asked to comment on a draft or to review a manuscript is not only about being asked to do a favour to the community. It is also being offered to learn about what is current in the field.

serve in this sense as an important orientation sign, since they indicate intended friends and adversaries.[5]

The references used as well as other conversation-specific traits make texts bear more or less clear marks as to what conversation or conversations it wants to be part of. Not only is this helpful for those well versed in the conversation to recognise new input. It is also helpful for the outsider to identify the particular conversation that a text aims to be part of. This means, not the least, that anyone with the use of cursory knowledge and perhaps some additional work can deduce the central themes as regards quality that operate in the particular conversation. In short, texts regularly themselves give clear pointers as to by which concoction of standards it aims to be assed.

One could counter and say that contributions should not need to identify or have any specific conversation in mind. Such a universal and idealised notion of making a mark has its appeals. Yet, I contend that a text lacking any indications of what conversation it wants to be part of is as much a hit-and-miss effort as would the whispering of your hard won research results while walking alone in a dark deep forest. It is very likely that no one will take notice. However eloquently formulated, such a contribution runs the risk of not finding an appreciative recipient. (Even the random eavesdropper regularly gains more satisfaction from knowing the genuine addressee.) I would thus conclude that a contribution's ability to indicate the relevant conversation(s) itself is an indicator of quality since it demonstrates that it knows what it aims to be a part of.

Do texts indicate the conversation(s) it wants to be part of?
It is in some conversational settings common practice to adorn contributions with extensive literature reviews aiming to establish what is known (within the conversation) and to identify 'gaps' in the thus delineated body of knowledge. The extensive literature review is in this sense the perhaps clearest example of a signposting practice. Yet, such indications are provided whenever a text acknowledges and elaborates how it fits into the central themes of a

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[5] Barbara Czarniawska has written a helpful and reflexive text about the citation practices for indicating scholarly friends and foes: Czarniawska-Joerges, Barbara. "För Ett Reflektivt Refererande." In *Med Hänvisning Till Andra : En Bok Om Refererandet I Samhällsvetenskapliga Texter,* edited by Björn Rombach. Stockholm: Nerenius & Santérus, 1994.

conversation. It also includes acknowledging and perhaps discussing central conventions about quality that are central to that particular conversation.

Despite the large differences in how this is done in different fields and conversations, I would argue that such practices are really helpful whatever specific form they take. They do not have to be in the form of very long literature reviews with long shopping-lists of references. In some quarters that would be to converse in a highly deviant way, and the corresponding cues of attachment to the conversation are instead done through other textual moves and marks. Texts that acknowledge and work with *themes and styles* central to the on-going conversation is helpful to both participants of the particular conversation as well as to outsiders for appreciating how the text is set up to make a contribution to the conversation. For one, it facilitates the possibility to verify as well as challenge both alleged gaps in the body of knowledge and the claims for specific contributions.

On retaining the dualism of being part of and sticking out
There appear to be an important dualism at play when it comes to assessing what counts as a new contribution in a specific conversation. First, stating the same things as many already have stated in the same conversation appears to rarely be met with much attention.[6] A new study that through new and solid empirical material is presented as simply confirming undisputed "facts" within the conversation often appears to receive a lukewarm reception at best. The same appears to be true for the study that as a contribution confirms the usefulness of an already well-established notion (or indeed the uselessness of an already debunked notion).

Second, claiming to provide a grandiose new and challenging contribution to a conversation often seems to attract severe criticism. (The tendency that the going against cherished themes seems to attract criticism could for instance be articulated in relation to the notion of paradigmatic research.[7]) Articulations of criticism often takes the form of pointing out how the alleged contribution in fact is a failed one since it severely fails to honour established conceptions and standards within the conversation. This is all well and fine and I guess tend

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[6] This is provided, of course, that the text not plainly is a verbatim copy of something previously published without due referencing, since that is tantamount to plagiarism. But that is a kind of attention few if any scholars deliberately seek.
[7] I'm here alluding to the notion as defined by Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.

to encourage more moderate ambitions in the articulation of newness. It is often difficult to substantially change the perimeters of an on-going conversation in a single remark.

There is, however, something potentially disturbing when joining the observation about the regular lukewarm reception of the parroted contribution with the often more heated reception that the articulation of new contributions can. The confirmatory might give the illusion that it better conforms to the quality standards of the conversation simply due to the tendency that it attracts less rigorous scrutiny. On the flip side, the registers of quality appear to be more explicitly in operation, the larger the claimed contribution appears to be. The potentially disturbing circumstance is that this might produce the inference that confirmatory parroting is the safe way to go. (It is not: Try to systematically parrot in an ordinary conversation and see what happens.)

My conclusion to all this is that the ambition to make a noticeable contribution can not be separated from the discussion about the perceived quality of said research. Texts that manage to make a well attuned new contribution to a field and withstand the possible criticisms that this might attract, becomes considered of higher quality than texts that with exactly the same rigour simply parrots what is already being said in that particular conversation. Attempting to make an attuned and identifiable contribution is also a safer way to not become subject to the harshest conversational treatment of all, that is, to be passed over in silence. This can happen to any text, but I would bet that it happens more often to the plainly confirmatory as well as to the grandiosely out of touch.

Three provisional lessons and the opening for a dual assessment
The above discussion might be summarised in three provisional lessons:

- A letter has a better chance to be read if it has an addressee on the envelope: To clearly indicate the relevant conversation(s) is to practice quality in the sense that it demonstrates what the contribution aims to be a part of. Such indications are performed differently in different conversations.
- Texts that acknowledge and work with themes central to the conversation are helpful to both participants of the particular conversation as well as to outsiders. It assists in forming an appreciation of the contribution by indicating to what conversation it aims to make a contribution.

- To be perceived to as high quality contribution normally requires more than rigorously following the conventions for research maintained within a conversation. It is also about clearly attempting to make something that is considered new. In short it means successfully performing the dualism of being part of and sticking out.

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The relational view on research contributions embraced further opens for a dual assessment. We can as a primary assess how *well* a contribution seems to be *worthwhile* contribution to a conversation it aims to be part of. We can, if we are so inclined, as a second assess how *worthwhile* we think the specific conversation is and thus by implication the contributions to it. I think both are fair modes of assessment. I further contend that it is crucial to distinguish between the two, and I do detest when scholars with hegemonic outlooks use an assessment of the latter kind to stand in place of an assessment of the first kind. That is, in my view, like disparaging a game of ice-hockey simply because it does not comply to the rules and aesthetic standards of football. I think, to be fair, that one as a rule should try to at least for a moment see how well an effort succeeds in being what it tries to be. That means holding a contribution up to the standards of the conversation(s) it aims to be part of.

A few concluding reflexions

There are scholarly conversations that truly cherish notions like rigour, external validity, and objectivity when the topic of quality is raised. The conclusion of the above suggests that such notions indeed are essential, provided you have ambitions to seriously take part in conversations where they are central. Other research conversations seem to be much more in praise of engaging narratives, with wit and the revelation of a new and somewhat surprising outlook much like the good joke.[8] Again, these registers of quality are essential to understand, and practice, if one wants to be considered a god conversationalist in such drawing rooms. I think, that the reasoning outlined here also has a bearing on how to address audiences outside academia. There are in such contexts, I would suggest, other cherished notions to think about, such as relevance and how one can relate to matters of concern revered such settings.

It might, finally, be worth reflecting on a few limitations with the line of argument pursued here. The way I've reasoned give not much guidance when it comes to situations where it is

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[8] The allusion to research having a point much like a good joke, comes from Asplund, Johan. 1970. *Om undran inför samhället*. Lund: Argos.

more unclear in what conversations the readers will be immersed in. This instance occurs, for instance, when writing a grant application since you might encounter a highly diverse audience that do not hold the same catchwords dear. These are challenging situations since you cannot fully ascertain who you are trying to be in conversation with. Here it might be helpful to see if it might be possible to craft a text that tries to simultaneously cater to different audience similarly as highly crafted children's movies contain specific sub-plots and jokes addressing the parents.[9]

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[9] Think for instance of the text with a simplified broader storyline written to suit one audience supplanted with footnotes addressing specific aspects cherished by a more specific conversation.