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Problematicizing Digital Transparency: The Normative and Axiological Functions of “Transparency Discourse” in Online Public Relations
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Abstract:

This paper problematizes normative and axiological aspects of ‘digital transparency’ in online public relations. We scrutinize transparency’s epistemic connections to Habermasian public sphere and publicity, and position it within Bourdieu’s notion of social spaces. We argue that digital transparency is best thought of as a discursive technique and a carrier of symbolic capital – not a transcendent ideal enabling ‘public use of reason’, but an immanent technique in social actors’ discursive struggles over legitimacy and capital.

Analyzing several European public relations controversies and their uses of the discourse of transparency, we identify an ‘information paradigm’ in digital media which falsely conflates data with information, access with accessibility, and accessibility with rational-critical debate. We demonstrate ways in which transparency might be analyzed instead as a communicative strategy with specific tactical utility. Transparency guarantees nothing in itself; it rather inaugurates new rules of struggle over information and legitimacy in digital public relations.