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Epistemic Agency in Communication Science Writing: Challenges Posed by Practitioner Sources

Abstract: Most scholars who approach communication practices in their writing will encounter popularization materials created by practitioners in the field of advertising, public relations, or journalism, and will often consider using them as sources for their academic works. Such materials often include autobiographical accounts of these professionals, case studies of work done by them for clients, or their personal views on what excellence should mean in the areas of communication in which they have developed their own careers. Yet, being published in non-scholarly contexts and not having undergone any form of peer review, this category of sources may have serious weaknesses from an epistemic standpoint: many of them are based on anecdotal evidence instead of systematic research, while others can be focused only on the client who pays for a campaign and not on the audience who sees the material, and therefore circulate (and thus validate) a form of moral disengagement in what regards the responsibility towards the public. How should these sources be integrated in students' academic papers? To answer this question, I bring the concept of *epistemic agency* in the center of the source integration process. Epistemic agency can work as a framework within which these sources can be provisionally accepted, but further worked on. The information in the source therefore becomes a starting point, from which the scholar can further develop original methods to investigate the transferability of that particular insight shared by a practitioner to other contexts and situations.

Keywords: epistemic agency, source integration in academic writing, practitioner bias, credibility excess.