What Authors Owe the Audience: Transparency, Trust, and Disclosure

Roundtable Facilitated by: Brianna Lantz

Within this conversation, transparency may mean a number of things: process transparency regarding AI use, ghostwriting, research methods; interest transparency such as sponsorships, brand deals, paid ads or incentives; and identity/personal transparency, meaning "morals," values, conflicts of interest, personal life, etc.

In an age of social media, generative AI, and the ability to hide behind a screen, it is important for audiences and authors to understand that honesty is an integral part of the relationships they have, both with each other, and the content they create and consume. This awareness may raise some potential questions into what information the audience is warranted, and what the author should keep to themselves.

What do authors owe readers in terms of disclosure, and where is the line between ethical transparency and performative oversharing? How important is honesty right now, during an era of social media and generative AI?

Our contributors, Wylie Janousek and Tyler Ogden, explore this question while considering other factors, such as personal relationships between the audience and author, proactive disclosure, and when honesty could become harmful.

Contributors

Wylie Janousek

I am a first year publishing student in GWU's master's of professional studies program. My professional background is in tv/film post production and I currently work as a video editor for a tech start up in Los Angeles. As a GWU student I enjoy learning about "post production" for books and journals, not just my practiced visual medium.

Tyler Ogden

Tyler Ogden-Hunter is a second-year Publishing Masters student in the College of Professional Studies at GWU. She holds a spot on the Strategy & Sustainability Committee for the GW Journal of Ethics in Publishing. Her main areas of interest are copyright and acquisitions for trade publishing.

Wylie Janousek

In regards to transparency and what the author discloses to the reader, there is undeniably an ethical necessity for an author to grant the reader transparency in regards to their process as well as their interest. When it comes to process, tools such as AI use can be valuable for both facilitating clearer written communication and also distilling large amounts of research data. The use of AI in this manner is not amoral as it stands to reason that the author's percipience was not wholly replaced by AI in any writing decisions. One could argue that the author does not have an ethical responsibility to disclose this, the same way there is no need to disclose the use of a thesaurus or a calculator. In fact, performative oversharing of this kind of AI use may diminish the disclosure of more pervasive AI use, where the use of AI could more clearly threaten the scholarly or creative legitimacy of a work. Ethically, a reader shouldn't be asking if AI was used, but rather if AI changed or dictated a creative or analytical decision. This is where an author has an ethical duty to disclose their AI use. Readers deserve to know if they are getting a true author's perspective or an author's perspective altered through the use of AI.

Moving beyond AI, there are several ways an author's perspective can be changed, and here we come to the author's interest. It may be difficult for an author to say how financial relationships, brand deals, or sponsorships may have dictated a final outcome of their written work, but this is why disclosure in this area is so important. Disclosure of this nature imparts upon the reader

the necessary knowledge to make these judgements themselves. It would be unethical to have machinations that may or may not alter an author's viewpoint without a reader being privy to these external factors. It is important to note that an author oversharing about the specifics of a financial deal would cause harm to both the author and the institution working with the author. The author has an ethical need to disclose that these financial relationships exist but should go no further than that.

Furthermore, just because the reader may be owed this information, it would be amoral for the audience to discount a work entirely just because these relationships exist. Now, the reader has an ethical obligation to not make judgement of an author based on their partnerships, but instead, take a more nuanced approach of digesting the work agnostically while still having the information to paint a whole picture of the work. If the author is going to be honest with the reader, the reader must also give the author an honest shot to get their point across. Both the reader and the author keeping an open mind with each other is paramount, especially in today's hyper algorithmic social media culture.

Where a reader isn't owed anything is in the author's identity and personal background. Here, oversharing can muddle the audience's interpretation of a work by perhaps leading the reader to fall into implicit biases. The author has no ethical need to disclose their background, but saying why they chose to work on this project can lead to a more enjoyable reader experience. That can help create a more personal relationship with the audience. But, sharing beyond a simple motivation for why a book should exist and instead disclosing a personal moral belief system in lieu of factual background or lived experiences may cause a reader to become close minded before ever giving the work a fair shot. Honesty in the publishing sphere is more important today than ever before. The combination of vast amounts of instantaneously accessible information coupled with growing ideological divisions means authors have an ethical duty to share with readers parts of their process and interests while still providing enough space for their audience to keep an open mind.

Wylie's response places an emphasis on allowing readers to make informed decisions themselves, while Tyler's focuses on the three main factors surrounding honesty that authors must consider.

Tyler Ogden

As AI and Large Language Models (such as ChatGPT) become more integrated into daily life, author disclosure is extremely important now more

than ever. It is no longer just a personal choice; it is an ethical one.

When it comes to the finite details of authorship and their work, the decision to share each and every component can be a personal choice depending on what the author feels needs to be disclosed. However, three key details are non-negotiable: funding, content, and methods.

This disclosure is especially important for scholarly and non-fiction publishing. As research is conducted and facts are claimed, readers must know who is funding the project in order to determine if any bias or bribery is influencing the data. It is also imperative that readers know where the content was found and how it was created. Any and every factual claim needs to be backed by research and evidence, and any AI use for any reason should be revealed. These are essential for both critical review and personal morals of the reader.

The line between ethical transparency and performative oversharing only exists if the oversharing is meant to manipulate the reader into consuming the content or to manipulate their view and opinion of the content.

When everything can be altered, from a blemish to a full-on controversy, honesty is at the apex of importance today. The media is at a point of consumer psychosis - what's real and what isn't? What can you believe anymore? Disclosure builds trust with the audience, and that is so important in the age of AI.

Process and interest transparency are owed to readers. By reading an author's work, readers are funding the author (even if they are not physically paying for it, they are a part of the reason the author is published). Readers deserve to know who or what actually wrote the content they are consuming, and the author deserves credit for their work (i.e. ghostwriters). Source & AI disclosure also allow readers to determine credibility and authenticity of the author as well as the content.

Personal transparency should be up to the author, especially in cases of anonymity. Personal information is just that: personal. Many personal identifiers can also cause bias from readers, even if the work is authentic and non-biased. It's best to leave it to the author's discretion.

In a perfect world, honesty is not harmful. It's stating facts. However, with social media and the human psyche, it becomes difficult for audiences to not form parasocial relationships or take certain statements personally. It can also be difficult for readers to view things neutrally, especially when personal interests are involved. So while honesty itself isn't harmful, it's important to remember that we're all just human.

Conclusion

This roundtable offers two perspectives on the responsibilities that authors have when it comes to being truthful with their audience, and how they have to recognize the line between honesty and oversharing. While we as an audience may believe that we want to have a close relationship with our favorite authors, it is important to know the appropriateness of that desire.

As readers and publishing professionals, we must stay aware of the need for honesty during a technologically focused era, while also understanding the limitations that authors may have.