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## Becoming artists (again)! : interview with Jean-Philippe Denis

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## BECOMING ARTISTS (AGAIN)!

*Interview with Jean-Philippe Denis*

### Abstract

In this interview, which closes the section dedicated to the role of publishing in the urgency of integrity, we wanted to capture the analysis of a professor who has extensive experience in the world of publishing in the broadest sense. Jean-Philippe Denis is committed to the promotion of French-speaking management research and to how management sciences can and should inform public debate. He has been Editor-in-Chief of the management journal *Revue française de gestion* (RFG) since 2013. This multidisciplinary journal, in line with the original knowledge project of management sciences (explanatory, but also prescriptive and critical), is the leading French-language scientific publication in the field of management. Jean-Philippe Denis has also created an audiovisual laboratory dedicated to scientific promotion: IQSOG—Fenêtres Ouvertes sur la Gestion. In this capacity, he conducts academic interviews for Xerfi Canal, and more than 800 short videos have been broadcast in some seven years. The third aspect of his commitment consists in co-editing two collections (‘Grands auteurs francophones’ and ‘Lectures, relectures’) put out by Éditions Management & Société (EMS).\*

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## Interview

• *Jean-Philippe Denis, do you think that our traditional system of publication by scientific journals is a danger to knowledge?*

This is a very complicated subject if we consider the diversity of practices that we encounter in the field of the so-called ‘exact’ sciences versus in the so-called ‘human and social sciences’, and even within these fields when we consider the variances between disciplines. Works by some fabulous writers have directly questioned the very status of science, from Gaston Bachelard to Paul Feyerabend or Michel Foucault, to name but a few...

I would therefore like to formulate the problem more concretely: does the double-blind evaluation of articles still make sense when we have the technical means at our disposal to engage in ‘open review’ or when, on the other hand, the best debates that I have ever witnessed around a manuscript have been ‘open’. This is the principle of the ‘wide-angle’ category that I initiated as soon as I became Editor-in-Chief of *Revue française de gestion*. I would therefore like to say that what first endangers knowledge is the fact that the entire system of scientific production is ultimately based on anxiety and fear: of not being published, of not being recognized, of not meeting the requirements set by institutions in terms of production. And when one finds oneself wearing the reviewer’s hat, this anxiety can be transformed into a spirit of revenge, according to the same principle whereby which battered children often become abusive parents.

So, yes, our traditional system of scientific publication is indeed a danger to knowledge, because it has been transformed into an issue of political power: publishing (or not) allows researchers and their institutions to shine (or not). In short, this is the whole paradox: how can one imagine that what some call ‘academic capitalism’ will produce anything other than what economic capitalism produces everywhere, and has always produced: a game with rules, and therefore more or less well-

organized fraud within the framework of these rules. And it is perhaps even worse in the scientific field, where the denial and outward show of disregarding questions of profit and money authorize—even justify—all the games of influence and shadowy practices.

But, when I see a young author with his manuscript, who is sometimes like a child in the street—alone, anxious, and worried, a perfect target of predatory magazines—I feel like telling him to always be wary of strangers who promise him candy or offer him a ride home and to never get into their cars. In other words, he should ask his professors and other young researchers questions. And when in doubt, he should only go to known and respected places.

We can then ask those who want to see our traditional system of publication by scientific journals disappear: what should replace it? What other practices would allow us to modify and/or improve it? For my part, I am convinced that we should reverse the trend: above all, we should not set objectives and encourage the next publication! On the other hand, why not set a maximum number of publications to be taken into account in the evaluation of researchers, beyond which an additional publication would no longer count? Why not also consider radical forms of self-organization of scientific production? Above all, why not spend much more time valuing what has been published rather than running in an endless headlong rush after what will be published?

• *Do you agree with Jacques Py (2021) that the shortage of reviewers and editors puts the whole system at risk? How would you describe an editor's pressure and workload?*

Of course, I agree, although I have never actually had to review an article myself because of a lack of reviewers. This is a point to which I am very sensitive and which I have endeavored to develop at the *Revue française de gestion*: multiplying the number of reviewers for a paper from the outset, sometimes contacting up to seven reviewers in the hope that at least one or two would respond. On the other hand, I have

sometimes accepted a paper on the basis of a single expert review or, on the contrary, to reject it, and I have rejected many, since the journal receives nearly 400 manuscripts per year.

My feeling again is that the system is very sick: the incessant pressure put on researchers to publish encourages them to publish too much, too young, too fast. This makes the system completely unmanageable, since the best colleagues end up being exhausted because they are constantly solicited for reviews. I therefore advocate three key ideas: (1) a general end to anonymity: for authors and reviewers alike; (2) compensation for authors and reviewers, as well as editors and members of editorial boards; and (3) accountability at all levels in the event of failures, especially on the part of editors, as a corollary to the compensation they would receive. Paradoxically, transparency about the fact that scientific activity is a source of income seems to me to be the best guarantee of recreating genuine independence in the field of knowledge production.

To come now to the question of the work that an editor's mission represents, I would like to answer: a colossal workload, yes... and no.

Yes, of course, because I will let you imagine what it means in operational terms to ensure the production of eight issues per year for a journal like *Revue française de gestion* and to administer nearly 400 manuscripts per year. When I leave the editorial office of *Revue française de gestion* in June 2021 after eight years of hard work, I will have the feeling that this mission alone would have been more than enough to occupy an honest worker. That being said, it would be hypocritical to complain: when I became editor-in-chief, the journal received a little more than 150 manuscripts per year and this was the heart of my work: to make authors want to submit their manuscripts to RFG, to choose this medium rather than another, to be proud to be published in it, and thus to reassure them about the processing time for their article. I am happy with the work we have done and, obviously,

when one obtains such a reward and satisfaction, the burden of the work necessary to achieve it is less heavy.

No, because in the end, as always, it all depends on how you see your mission. Today, the journal attracts authors to publish in it and guest editors to propose calls for papers and coordinate special issues; it is being read since it has nearly two million hits via the Cairn platform; it now has a base, built up by sheer force of will, of more than a thousand regular reviewers. In short, it has once again become a must in the French-speaking world. This is certainly the result of a Herculean effort. At the same time, what created the conditions of possibility was first of all the desire to do, to create, to invent new spaces, to give new productions the right to exist, to open new doors. My activities then grew and accumulated: teaching, research, writing, publishing, etc.

• *But being an editor also means making the final decision... Do you feel you are making more friends or enemies?*

I feel like asking the question again in a different way: to be a professor is to be a creator and an artist, and this consumes you because your passion always devours you.

As an artist, researcher, or editor, you have to have an appetite for the fight. Otherwise, you should choose another profession. When you fight, as you know, you always make a lot of enemies. But the more enemies you make, the more friends you make, too. And then, sometimes, yesterday's enemies can become tomorrow's friends and vice versa... These are the hazards of life, in research as elsewhere. On this point I would like to mention something I heard a father tell his children when I was young, which I have always found powerfully stimulating: 'I am not sure I always made the right choice for you, but at the time I did, I guarantee that I had in mind only to make the best choice for you'. These words have often come back to me when authors get angry about their reviews or when I have to argue about a rejection. For accepted manuscripts, it is obviously simpler: when two reviewers

(or one reviewer and one referee in case of disagreement between two reviewers) give the green light to publish an article, who am I to refuse publication?

The real question becomes: can one engage in this kind of editorial activity if one does not have this passion? And we must never forget that a journal is a common good, and that for its own good, it must pass from hand to hand... and not remain too long in the hands of one person.

*• Is open science an alternative in the short and medium term to the deviations in our traditional academic journal model?*

I don't believe in miracle solutions. Open science reminds me of the adage 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions'. Because I see several major flaws in open science: first, we forget that nothing is free, and that if it is open, it is because someone somewhere is paying and expects a return on their investment. The case of the Social Science Research Network (SSRN) should be discussed and thought about much more than it is. For the largest open access network, with more than 572,000 full-text 'preprint' articles in its database and more than two million users, built by one of the most ardent defenders of shareholder value creation (Gregg Gordon)... has finally fallen into the hands of Elsevier. That should give you food for thought!

In open science, I see first of all the motive and the means of a future impact war. And the frauds to come (e.g. in the citation calculation algorithms) could make old-style plagiarism or self-plagiarism look like your grandfather's scams...

But there are also real new perspectives because of 'open' that could seriously reshuffle the game. I would like to mention an example that may seem out of step, but, when you think about it, it is symptomatic: the #MeToo movement, denouncing sexual violence. This may be what can change practices: the fact that social networks, which are 'open' by nature, end up shifting the organizational and institutional lines. We could mention the VroniPlag Wiki, which collaboratively analyzes

doctoral theses, but also the case presented in Soufron's chapter in this book in which the denunciation came from an anonymous, collaborative Twitter account.

In other words, I believe in open, but perhaps not exactly in the terms in which it is traditionally understood.

• *Now let us talk about another way of disseminating knowledge: when and why did you decide to embark on the Xerfi Canal adventure?*

This is a major issue and one that is close to my heart, since what has been done over the past seven years with Xerfi Canal has been my way of putting all my convictions into practice.

When I applied for the position of editor-in-chief of RFG, I set myself an uncompromising goal: to gain recognition for the value of knowledge produced in the French language in general, and in management science in particular. With this objective in mind, I wanted to take the opposite view from all the journals for which it was necessary to remain within one's own specialty and to be recognized by the English-speaking world, by proposing to remain a generalist journal, open, I would almost say 'conglomerate' according to this strategic logic that financial analysts abhor. And this was to better aim at something else: enhancing the value of the work and injecting it into the public debate, in particular by establishing partnerships with media players.

Once elected, I immediately wanted to implement this project. I found myself facing at best silence, at worst a clear refusal from all the French newspapers I contacted. This project to increase the visibility of French management sciences was therefore at a standstill. However, I had previously tried various editorial innovations: self-publishing ebooks and creating a small digital publishing house, keeping a regular blog, being present on social networks, especially Twitter which was then, in 2010–2012, a real Wild West where everything seemed possible. Moreover, I was a subscriber and a big consumer of the programs I received in my mailbox, produced by Xerfi Canal

Productions—in particular, the interviews conducted by Jean-Michel Quatrepoint. So I simply wrote an email to the president of the Xerfi group, via the contact form on the site. He answered me within 15 minutes. The next morning, I was in his office and we agreed on the formula: I would interview *Revue française de gestion* authors using the resources of Xerfi Canal Productions.

The IQSOG letter—Fenêtres Ouvertes sur la Gestion, which is published on Saturdays, has about 5,000 subscribers. Xerfi's daily letters are sent to 100,000 subscribers. The formula is therefore unique. Of course, it is very easy today to record a video for an institution (the famous 'knowledge' offers). All the newspapers are also developing various video formats. On the other hand, the principle of an editorial collaboration led by an academic with total scientific freedom, with a radically independent actor, simultaneously involved in the media industry, but also in economic studies, is absolutely unique and has no equivalent in the world, to my knowledge. I am very proud of this, and infinitely grateful to the president of the Xerfi group and his teams for committing themselves to this project from the outset with unflagging enthusiasm. In seven years, we have produced more than 800 programs.

• *How has your collaboration developed over the past seven years through your audiovisual laboratory?*

I have outlined the process, but the constitution of the Xerfi group and our relationship deserves a closer look. Xerfi is a mostly family-owned company, dedicated to economic research. *Xerfi Canal* is conceived of as a kind of audiovisual magazine, since it is obviously more than a magazine. As time went by, we realized that professors', teachers', and researchers' needs for expression and visibility went far beyond the framework of *Revue française de gestion*, of which I was editor-in-chief.

We therefore decided to engage in a co-production dynamic and this is how I created a sort of innovative audiovisual laboratory dedicated to

scientific promotion, IQSOG—Fenêtres Ouvertes sur la Gestion. IQSOG uses Xerfi Canal's technical resources, but it is first and foremost an editorial collaboration that unites us: the programs produced within the framework of IQSOG are broadcast independently. All the programs are broadcast via *Xerfi Canal's* social media, but also those of *Revue française de gestion*.

IQSOG has gradually become a key forum for debate. I am very proud of this, because I know the quality of the debate. And I have also been able to measure, above all, how many of the subjects dealt with would never have been covered in traditional newspapers, where journalists alone would have been in charge.

- *Why did you choose this kind of program with this type of interviewee?*

The format of the programs is diverse (some programs have lasted more than twenty minutes!), but it is true that we are now focusing on formats of around five minutes. This is for a simple reason: the attention span on the web, which we know is very demanding. Our programs are used a lot in courses by teachers, and five to seven minutes appeared to be the best length.

Precisely because the world is speeding up. The weekly IQSOG—Fenêtres Ouvertes sur la Gestion letter and the daily Xerfi letters include seven programs, so you can see that a listener who watched each program in a letter in its entirety would spend about 30 minutes in front of her screen watching programs from IQSOG.

As far as the guests are concerned, I have several types: first of all, *Revue française de gestion* authors, who often also have other works to publicize (articles, books, etc.); then those who are now regulars, because they appreciate the exercise and have understood how much it also allows them to give new meaning to their job as a teacher; finally, the dozens and dozens of guests we meet here and there, whom we agree

to immortalize for a few minutes of eternity in a world where everything goes so fast.

To think that some programs were broadcast for the first time five or six years ago and are still regularly rebroadcast, month after month! This is because the principle is that each program must contribute something new; otherwise, it is not worth it. Of course, behind this ‘new’, there are many hours of work, disappointments, and joys, and so of passion, work, and courage. These are the hallmarks of all forms of creative work.

For the contributors are all artists: teachers whom I ask to focus on a point and talk about it without my interrupting or restating it. The format thus takes the opposite view from the drama of the race to publish: researchers produce a lot of indigestible and uninteresting writings in English-language journals that no one reads; while, at the same time, professionals, confronted with very new subjects, invent authentic solutions and very new knowledge. I have also had professionals on, but always because they were reflective and had things to contribute to the scientific debate.

This is precisely what IQSOG, as an innovative audiovisual laboratory, seeks to ensure: this bridge between worlds that no longer speak to each other. Today, there are around 800 programs in our ‘library’, mainly on the themes covered by *Revue française de gestion*: management, strategy, or organization, but we also welcome more specialized research (finance, marketing, human resources, etc.) and we are very open since many sociologists and economists have come to visit us!

- *Could this formula be a future solution to disseminate knowledge or to make a name for an author?*

My role has progressively become that of a real artist’s agent. And I am very proud of this because, having seen how difficult it is to break

down prejudices and open doors, my ambition was also to give a voice to those who had no access to visibility for their work.

If I may use a musical analogy that is dear to me, I would say that a magazine editor is like an artistic director: he receives projects, has them evaluated, selects them, and puts them into production and distribution. Then you have to make the public aware of your artists' work, which is precisely the purpose of the broadcast. I feel less like a talent scout (although I like this idea...) than a showman revealing the value of the productions that come to us from these artists that management researchers should always be, since their goal is to create something new.

Our formula—me alone with my guests—and not a debate about ideas between contributors, for example, was decided at the beginning by *Xerfi Canal*'s teams. I simply agreed to do it like that. We tried to debate ideas and even to organize controversies; but we noticed that the format of the program, and also the place, are more favorable to intimate interviews in a tone of confidence than to the 'clashes' that make the TV programs on twenty-four-hour news channels such a horror. Since one thing leads to another, the idea that only an academic could interview and truly listen to academics took hold.

Finally, after the musical analogy, we can take one from high fashion: the show is a kind of fashion show where authors come to present their creations. It is a deliberately high-end program, which also protects against the excesses arising from the need of traditional media, financed by advertising, to gain an audience, whatever the cost. And during a fashion show, it is neither the time nor the place to argue with others, but rather the time to proudly show off and explain your creations. IQSOG provides the setting for this. But this does not prevent some shows from causing heated debates, off set, as soon as participants come out... The proof: I was once threatened with a lawsuit because of

questionable research results and comments made by interviewees on set!

- *Could Canal Xerfi replace the old-fashioned conferences where people used to go to discuss ideas, which have been cut to the bone because of the pandemic? Do you fear that the post-pandemic period will affect these 'annual pilgrimages', to paraphrase David Lodge?*

In my view, these pilgrimages represented by the annual congresses of scientific associations lost their *raison d'être* long before the public health crisis. They have become mere stages in a process whose only outcome is the production of the next article. There is no longer any debate about anything, except for the purpose of managing careers, or even transfers between institutions. I will therefore go further and express the wish that they would disappear from the landscape, once and for all, in order to force people to invent something else.

And then, if you let a professor talk about his favorite subject for five minutes, he sincerely gives everything he believes in. You cannot cheat in this exercise. This is probably a powerful preventive tool because it is much harder to cheat or plagiarize in an on-camera interview than it is in front of a computer. This creates a real truthfulness effect.

Finally, the effect of media exposure and the dissemination of ideas at the speed of light creates a major risk for cheaters and manipulators. The site has over 6.5 million unique visitors per year. This creates a form of pressure in terms of responsibility: it would be awkward to come and expose oneself on screen to defend results of which one was not really the author...

- *Why not consider the integration step of doing Zoom conferences where participants would listen to a vignette (five minutes) and then debate the topic among themselves.*

In 2017, we launched the concept of ‘RFG events’: an annual ‘festival’ to celebrate the release of the end-of-year issue; ‘showcases’, several times a year, to highlight the release of each new issue.<sup>236</sup> If I were to use the analogy borrowed from the music industry, I would say that we sought to import the logic of concerts into the academy so that artists can perform ‘live’.

We held two festivals, in 2017 in Grenoble, in 2018 in Paris; several showcases were organized within institutions: Luxembourg, Paris, Tours, Poitiers, etc. This is a subject I consider important, because authors, freed from the pressure of publication, can discuss their productions live with an audience. It’s so much nicer than moving on to the next piece without having the time to experience with an audience the song you have just composed and which has just been made available!

• *But do these true artists of which you speak, these researchers who take the time to carry out a long-term project, really exist? Or are we all condemned to chase after publications that are made fast, published fast, cited fast, and forgotten fast?*

Recent years have shown that nothing is set in stone and that the lines could move considerably. In any case, I find it hard to accept that young researchers whose doctoral schools now explain that their thesis can/should be based on articles or that the references cited must be less than three years old, should be placed under the same roof as experienced colleagues who have lived through these changes from the inside. They have often wallowed in it, sometimes out of conviction, often out of imitation and conformity. Or even out of self-interest, when they are co-authors with their doctoral students, who learn to produce but not really to think.

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<sup>236</sup> J.-P. Denis, ‘La RFG fait son cinéma’, *Revue française de gestion*, 270 (2018), 11-16.

So your question raises another point that is very interesting: is there a certain propensity, in the field of research as in others, for a kind of ‘McDonaldization of the academic world’? And here my answer is yes. Because, in the end, if the article counts for the author, if she has put her heart into it, one should never forget that for her institution or her publisher, it is the number of Big Macs sold that counts most of all—that the shelves are always stocked... In a way, the regularity of the flow counts more than the quality of the stock of knowledge that accumulates. I therefore feel like launching an appeal in which I firmly believe: authors must rediscover the paths to real independence and find the weapons to ‘pull their weight’ in fighting against this trend toward the McDonaldization of scientific and cultural production.

I will be even more precise: we must rediscover the meaning of research, that is to say, rediscover the joy of the creative act; otherwise, what is the point of spending hours doing research! This is why I like to remind people that the researcher is always an artist. There are many analogies to bring into play in order to invent other means of creating and promoting knowledge than the pre-formatted model of the academic article preconceived for an English-language journal that is highly ranked in the *Financial Times*! Cinema, music, literature give us many examples to ponder. They also remind us that, in the field of human affairs, the distinction between science and culture is delicate, to say the least. This also explains my attention to matters of scientific integrity and academic responsibility: I simply cannot bear the idea that an author can be robbed of the possession of his creations and thus of his ‘children’.

In Hollywood, screenwriters have sometimes been able to go on strike in order to influence producers. Real and authentic professors’ unions will probably be necessary from now on, even indispensable. It is time they looked into the meaning of the ‘deontology’ of a profession,

ours, from *deon* (from the Greek for 'duty') and *logos* (from the Greek for 'intelligible speech'). So let us talk about it.

• *To conclude, why are you such a faithful defender of the French language? Is it out of patriotism or because the dominant English-language thinking seems to you to be reductive?*

This is a wide-ranging debate on which many people have written much more pertinent things than I could say. I will therefore focus on some of my deepest convictions. First, discovering research, reading an author, letting yourself be affected by an article, a book or an author can change your life. Under these conditions, the principle of an *a priori* submission to a language or a standard is unbearable for me. For example, when I hear that a production is necessarily of low quality, because it is not written in English, I always feel like answering: it has often been said that black people's excrement must have been worth less than white people's, since they were not allowed to defecate in the same toilets, at certain times in history, in the USA or in South Africa... In short, I am sure you understand me: this *a priori* classification into 'quality' classes is always the vehicle of an ideology that we must flush out and fight for what it is and always tries to make us forget: an ideology.

On the subject of language, without even going as far as the subject of cultural diversity, which has been used to justify public policies in France in terms of cultural exception, I will just make this observation: the role and value of memory. However, the headlong rush to feed academic business mechanically erases memory; that is even its objective since only the next performance counts. This is precisely the reason for a collection such as the 'Grands Auteurs Francophones' that we launched and that I co-edit: to ensure this work, which is essential for individual freedoms and the critical and scientific spirit. This is the kind of memory that all tyrannies, always, try to erase... with their

obsession with burning books. There is no need to paint a picture, I think... This is a very serious subject.

Every time I hear a young colleague talk to me about these texts, many of which were no longer available, neither in paper nor in digital format, I am very touched by their reactions and to hear them say that they could never have imagined that so many beautiful things had already been said, and for so long! This is also why in 2015 we republished the most influential articles in the history of *Revue française de gestion*.

- *Are you an optimist?*

I hope I have shown you that I am!

We are all big consumers of Wikipedia, which is celebrating its twentieth anniversary this year, without ever deviating from its principles. Its model is the very representation of this concern with sharing, of this kind of tension between the new world of possibilities and the old world populated by powers that do not want to lose control... I would be delighted, on my own small scale, to think that I could contribute to creating a mini-audiovisual Wikipedia since all the IQSOG—Fenêtres Ouvertes sur la gestion programs are available on all video platforms (*Xerfi Canal* website, YouTube, Dailymotion, etc.), but now also audio, in podcast format (via Deezer, Spotify, Apple Podcast, etc.). So everyone can listen to them freely. And everyone who wants to contribute is welcome, provided of course that they respect our rules concerning contributions and scientific intent.

So I end with a recommendation to read a magnificent book whose existence I am very proud to have contributed to by creating the ‘Grands Auteurs Francophones’ collection at EMS: *Le temps entre science et*

*création*, by Michelle Bergadaà, published this year.<sup>237</sup> It will soon be found on the IQSOG—Fenêtres Ouvertes sur la Gestion channel!

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<sup>237</sup> M. Bergadaà, *Le temps entre science et création* (Caen: Éditions EMS, 2020).