

Against the Grain

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Op Ed-Epistemology – Fact or Opinion

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Fact or Opinion

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How good do you think you are at distinguishing between statements of fact and statements expressing opinions?

The **Pew Research Center** issued a report last June studying that very question.¹ How well could a sample of Americans distinguish a series of factual statements (whether or not they believed them to be true) from a series of opinion statements (whether or not they agreed with them)? What factors might be at play in affecting one's ability to make those determinations correctly?

The results weren't surprising. They used five fact statements, five opinion statements and two "borderline" statements, drawn from current topics in the news and found that only 26% labelled all five fact statements correctly and only 36% were right with the five opinion statements. Sizable percentages (28% and 22%) got them all wrong.

The study defined statements as being "factual" if they were capable of being proved or disproved by objective evidence and "opinion" as something "that reflects the beliefs and values of whoever expressed it." Note that they weren't asking if the respondents thought the factual statements were true, only if they were capable of being proved or disproved.

That so many of us can't readily distinguish statements expressing facts from those of opinion is certainly one of the reasons our political discourse is so toxic. The oft quoted remark from **Moynihan** is that you're entitled to your own opinions but not your own facts. So what happens to discussion when most of us can't tell the difference?

The report was in the back of my mind when I followed a thread on **ACRL's SCHOLCOMM** discussion list in July. **Robin Sinn** had posted expressing concern (annoyance? outrage?) at **Taylor & Francis** referring to their option for making an article freely available in a hybrid journal as "gold open access."² Her assumption (as clarified in a later post in the thread) had been that "gold open access" referred at the journal level, not the article level and that **T&F** was therefore misusing the term (presumably for nefarious purposes). Over the next two days, most of the comments supported the notion that "gold open access" could be applied to individual articles as well as to journals, and examples were given of other such usage besides **T&F's**. Comments came

from a variety of people including librarians, a **T&F** rep and others who've been deeply involved in scholarly communication discussions and debates over the years. **Sinn** appeared to accept that consensus view.

Then **Jean-Claude Guédon** weighed in:

"Gold open access (not open access as a stand-alone *expression*, but *gold open access*) refers to journals, and exclusively to journals. ... On the other hand an open access article in a hybrid journal is simply an open access article, and that is not — *repeat NOT* — gold open access."³ That ended the discussion.

So is **Guédon** stating what he believes to be a fact or is he expressing an opinion? I'll leave you to ponder that for a bit, but I'll come back to it.

Consider some of the other statements that show up in scholarly communication discourse:

"...the profit margins of many academic publishers are simply not defensible..."⁴

In this case, the quote is from a comment made by **Pamela Benjamin** to a post on *The Scholarly Kitchen*, but it's easy enough to find other versions of the sentiment. Is it a fact statement or an opinion statement? Keep in mind that the **Pew** categories don't require fact statements to be true — at issue is whether there is sufficient objective evidence to prove or disprove them. Opinion statements are reflections of beliefs and values. I don't want to ascribe to **Benjamin** views she may not hold, but on the face of it, you could interpret the statement as either fact or opinion.

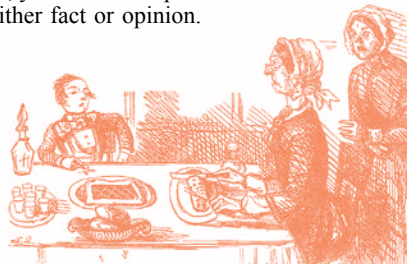
As fact, however, it is simply untrue — that is, those margins certainly can be defended, which is all "defensible" means. Whether one accepts those defenses becomes a matter of opinion. Read as an opinion statement, it appears to be saying something like, "Because of the values that I hold regarding scholarly communication, I will not accept any justification offered for those profit margins. I consider them to be antithetical to my values." The distinction matters because if the person making the statement be-

lieves it to be a fact, when it is actually an opinion, and the person they're talking to treats it simply as a fact rather than addressing the values inherent in the opinion, then they're talking past each other rather than to each other. Indeed, that's what happens in that particular comment thread and the discussion ends, having gone nowhere.

There's a similar phrase that one hears often — that the increases in journal prices are "unsustainable." This phrase is used in two ways — it may be referring to a local situation, meaning, "In my library, given my budget, I can't afford these price increases and I'm going to have to cancel stuff I'd rather keep." But here I'm interested in how it's used globally, when the claim, in effect, is that the whole subscription-based system is going to collapse because of these "unsustainable" price increases. This is an example of the third type of statement referred to in the **Pew** study — the "borderline."

Borderline statements may be based in objective evidence (the factual element) but have vague or predictive language that makes them hard to prove definitively (the opinion element). This is the case with statements predicting the global unsustainability of the subscription model. I've been hearing dire warnings about the unsustainability of the current system for decades. And yet, despite budget cuts, academic libraries continue to operate; despite mergers and acquisitions, the scholarly publishing industry remains robust; and despite decades of open access activism, the subscription model remains dominant. Does this mean the system will never implode and completely collapse? No. But the uncertainty makes it impossible to classify the statement as purely factual.

A similar situation pertains to the debates about embargoes when posting OA copies of journal articles in repositories. Those arguing for embargoes claim that without them publishers would be exposed to an unacceptable financial risk. Those arguing for the elimination of embargoes claim that there is no evidence that current embargoes have



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resulted in significant cancellations. This is a fact statement which, at present, appears to be true. But it does not lead inexorably to the conclusion that elimination of embargoes will not result in significant cancellations or even that six month embargoes won't result in significant cancellations in the future as the volume of material available under those conditions expands. When the people making the statements believe they're making strictly factual statements, they are once again talking past each other.

So, back to **Guédon** and his insistence that "gold open access" refers to journals only. Is he making a statement of fact or expressing an opinion? If it's a fact, then it should be verifiable by objective evidence. But what counts as objective evidence in determining the meanings of words? Grammarians have endlessly debated the purpose of dictionaries — are they to describe the way that language is actually used or to proscribe the way that it ought to be used? If it's the latter, who gets to decide?

If anyone can claim the right to be the authority on the terminology of open access it would be **Jean-Claude Guédon**. One of the original participants in the BOAI declaration, he has written voluminously and persuasively for many years. If your inclinations are toward the proscriptive camp of grammarians, **Guédon's** pronouncement may be sufficiently definitive. Personally, however, I've always favored the descriptive side and if you look

at how the term is actually used, for many people "gold open access" quite comfortably describes an article where the version of record is made immediately available upon publication. **Guédon** wants the usage to be less ambiguous, and in the abstract I agree with him. But in actual practice I don't think we're there yet.

So I'd be inclined to label **Guédon's** pronouncement borderline — possibly subject to verification by objective evidence, but thwarted by the ambiguity in what counts as objective evidence.

One of the more fascinating findings of the **Pew** study is that one is more inclined to judge an opinion statement incorrectly as factual if one agrees with the opinion expressed. In other words, to use one of the previous examples, if your values lead you to the judgment that corporations should not be producing large profit margins from publishing activities, you're more likely to incorrectly classify the opinion statement "large margins are indefensible" as a fact statement. If **Guédon's** definition comports with your own, you're inclined to take it as fact.

The **Pew** study was concentrated on statements in the news and there are no doubt limits to how far one can extend its findings into the debates and discussions around scholarly communication. But it's a useful exercise nonetheless. Much of the smoke and heat generated by scholcomm debates is driven by people taking their opinions as facts. They attempt to convince others with appeals to objective evidence when careful discussion of the values we hold and the

implications of those values might be more productive. It's easy to assume that others must share our values because they're so evidently true that they don't require much discussion. Aren't they?

Sorting our way through the opportunities and perils of the flux of scholarly communication in the digital age is important. We'll do a better job of making sense of it all and making decisions that are in the best interests of society if we pay close attention to the differences among the statements that we make. I believe that's a fact. I think. 🐦

Endnotes

1. **Pew Research Center**. "Distinguishing Between Factual and Opinion Statements in the News." June, 2018. http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2018/06/07161621/PJ_2018.06.18_fact-opinion_FINAL.pdf.
2. **Sinn, Robin**. "[SCHOLCOMM] Taylor & Francis and their 'gold OA' definition." scholcomm@lists.ala.org. July 12, 2018.
3. **Guédon, Jean-Claude**. "Re: [SCHOLCOMM] Taylor & Francis and their 'gold OA' definition." scholcomm@lists.ala.org. July 14, 2018.
4. **Benjamin, Pamela**. "Comment on: Anderson, Kent. 'The Core vs. the Crowd — Why Barriers to Entry May Help Restore Trust.'" *The Scholarly Kitchen*. July 2, 2018. <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2018/07/02/the-core-vs-the-crowd-why-barriers-to-entry-may-help-restore-trust/#comments>.

Booklover — Birds

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The American phrase "for the birds" connotes something that is trivial, worthless, or of interest to gullible people. *Penguin Island* by **Anatole France**, the *nom de plume* for **Jacques Anatole Thibault**, is not "for the birds" but describes the history of the mythical land of Penguinia where the inhabitants were once birds; but, have a curious story of how they became human.

Published in 1908, the story begins with how a member of a royal family, named Maël, devoted himself to serve the Lord. He embarked on a missionary journey across bodies of water in an awkward vessel of stone. Unbeknownst to him he came under the influence of the Devil and found himself on an island in an unknown part of the world. Exploring the island he discovered inhabitants that he assessed to be simple souls but of pure heart. He decided to teach them the Gospel and then baptize them. Now the story really unfolds, as the inhabitants are not men but penguins. "When the baptism of the penguins was known in Paradise, it caused neither joy nor sorrow,

but an extreme surprise. The Lord himself was embarrassed. He gathered an assembly of clerics and doctors, and asked them whether they regarded the baptism as valid."

A few chapters of debate and it was decided. An archangel delivered the news — "Maël, know thy error, believing that thou wert baptizing children of Adam thou hast baptized birds; and it is through thee that penguins have entered into the Church of God." Maël became concerned that if he left these newly transformed beings alone they might stray from their original teachings so he decided to bring the island back with him, towing it behind his vessel, to the coasts of Armorica.

In a small book of 297 pages, the reader learns the details of the religious immersion of Maël, the baptism of the penguins, the transportation of the island, the ancient times,

middle ages, renaissance, modern times and future times of Penguinia. Called a "satire of the history of mankind" on the front cover sleeve, France delivers this story in such a way that it was considered his masterpiece. And in today's tumultuous political world, it is oddly current considering that the author's perspective is over a hundred years old.

Jacques Anatole Thibault was born in 1844 the son of a Paris book dealer. His education was classical and he held numerous diverse positions, including a 14-year period as the assistant librarian at the Senate. Regardless of the type of position he made time to master his word craft and thus created an extensive bibliography during his career. He mainly worked at storytelling and novels, but explored most of the literary genres.

