

# How well do **FACTS** travel?

A fact is a fact – or is it? Why does evidence considered acceptable in one context retain or lose its status in another? **Mary Morgan** and **Jon Adams** explain their research.



Above: Research officer Dr Simona Valeriani inside the roof at St Benet Paul's Wharf, a 17th century Christopher Wren church

Below: Posters for the component projects can be viewed at [www.lse.ac.uk/collections/economicHistory/Research/facts](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/economicHistory/Research/facts)



Above the decorative ceiling of St Paul's high vaulted interior there is a narrow structural cavity that very few people have ever seen, and fewer still have taken an interest in. But for LSE researcher Dr Simona Valeriani, that dusty interior tells a story about technological change and innovation that spread across Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. And the story it tells – if you know how to read it from the craftsmen's signature notches, graffiti and joinery – is one of travelling craftsmen and architects on Grand Tours, of sketches made in Florence and Rome, of journeymen, apprentices, and of the conflicts between Christopher Wren's elegant designs and the capacities of English carpenters to actualise them.

Dr Valeriani is part of a multi-disciplinary team working within LSE's Department of Economic History investigating 'How well do "facts" travel?' on a Nature of Evidence grant awarded by the Leverhulme Trust in association with the ESRC. There have been numerous studies of knowledge transfer, but where this project departs is in investigating how – and how well – information considered factual fares as it makes its way around different groups who may have use of it. Rather than being preoccupied with what a fact is, or how facts are produced, or whether any particular facts are true, this project asks what happens to facts, and what roles facts play, when they travel. Facts – on account of their prestigious and seemingly immutable character – might seem to be unproblematic travellers. Yet, the cases investigated suggest that facts need good companions to travel well: labels, packages, vehicles and good associates; while at the same time, facts that travel well have (or acquire in the course of their journey) sufficient character to enable them to play various functional roles in their travels.

By taking as our starting point whatever a given community considers a fact, we can concentrate attention on how facts travel. For example, Dr Patrick Wallis' recent account of the plague village Eyam, in

Derbyshire, shows how far some very limited facts of 1665-6 have almost seamlessly altered as they travelled through the interpretations of 19th century romantic poets, and 20th century novels and musicals. Another story of the historical travels of facts, resonant with current claims for the possibility of radical life extension, concerns the alleged longevity of Thomas Parr, said to have died at the age of 152 in 1635 – a fact apparently corroborated by no less an authority than the surgeon William Harvey. Dr David Haycock (now at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich) recounts how, with such an eminent medical professional as a companion, Parr's unlikely lifespan was accepted as a fact for some 250 years, and eventually lost its status only because in the 19th century facts about old age were reconstructed in statistical terms.

## Scientific data

The rise of statistics created increasingly large volumes of information, and in the modern age, the sheer speed at which facts may be circulated makes data storage and retrieval of especial importance to questions of how well facts travel. Dr Sabina Leonelli is studying how biologists increasingly rely on shared electronic databases – such as from the Human Genome Project – which act as repositories for the work of an entire scientific community. These massive reservoirs are controlled by only a few curators who organise and package many small facts for circulation to other biologists. By labelling these data traces in such a way that they can be seen as relevant to a wider group of scientific users, these packaging methods affect not only the way in which science is carried out but the content of the science as well.

Information technology also plays an important role for Dr Erika Mattila, who looks at how computer simulations are used to model the spread of infectious diseases, such as potential pandemic flu. Such modelling requires that facts about disease transmission fulfil a variety of tasks in the cooperation between computer scientists, epidemiologists and

public health workers. Some facts are especially contagious, spreading and fitting easily into this community's requirements, while others remain shy and recalcitrant. Facts in this situation seem neither to mutate as quickly as gossip nor to grow as wildly as rumour; rather they play important functional roles in bringing community expertises together.

## Logo facts

In other situations, we found facts that changed remarkably in scope and generality even while maintaining their integrity. Professor Mary Morgan, the project's leader, has traced how a modest fact from applied economics about the varying national characteristics of demand for washing machines in the 1980s (Germans want high spin speed but Italians low speed, French consumers want top-loaders, et cetera) was expanded, by *The Economist's* reports of the work, into a 'fact' about the impossibility of there ever being a single European market. Such facts that travel free of their original producer and community and beyond their original evidential context come to stand as 'logo facts' for general claims or as 'headline facts' that speak loudly about a matter of importance.

The disciplinary range of travels and their effects is sometimes truly surprising – a point amply demonstrated by the research of Dr Edmund Ramsden into the animal ecologist John B Calhoun who, in the 1950s and '60s, supplied enclosed rodent populations with everything they could want – except space. They bred quickly, but the stress of constant social contact resulted in a range of physiological and mental pathologies. The comparisons with crowded inner cities were seductive, and many were happy to make the inference across species to diagnose the same causes behind problems in urbanised humans. Calhoun's rats quickly found their way into the vocabulary of architects and city planners, as well as psychologists and sociologists, and came to have concrete effects on the layout of urban spaces, college dorms and prisons.

One place where Calhoun's facts proved especially fertile was fiction, where the dramatic potential of an overcrowded world proved especially appealing to sci-fi and comic book authors. Here, the facts make the fiction more plausible – but the boundary

between facts and fiction is easily smudged. Dr Jon Adams looks more closely at just these cases where popularising a fact through fiction can sometimes involve fictionalising the fact, and may even result in authors offering the fiction itself as a source of facts. A US based population pressure group even produced an anthology of short stories about overcrowding which were offered as proof of the need to curb unchecked reproduction.

The devastating effects of increasing numbers of humans, memorably described as the 'Population Bomb' by Paul R Ehrlich, have never transpired, largely because of innovations in agricultural technology. Fittingly, India's Green Revolution and a current agricultural extension project in Tamil Nadu provide the substance for another wing of the project. Dr Peter Howlett and PhD candidate Aashish Velkar are investigating how facts about agricultural yields and technologies must be packaged in ways that survive travel across multiple disciplines, levels of expertise and bureaucratic strata to create the kinds of increases in food output that draw rural farmers out of poverty and succeed in feeding extra urban mouths.

These cases may not look like the typical work of an economic history department, but the broad remit of the project requires flexibility and familiarity with a wide range of sources – statistical, mathematical, historical and literary – that are the stock in trade for economic historians. Centred around the work of five full-time postdoctoral researchers, the project has incorporated the work of PhD students alongside faculty and research staff, drawn international scholars to LSE for a series

of workshops, and co-hosted a major conference on 'Enquiry, Evidence, and Facts' at the British Academy. The project website hosts an array of posters for the individual case work, along with toolkits for students, and working papers en route to publication. These activities, as well as presentations at conferences and universities across Europe and America, ensure that facts about the Facts project are travelling well. ■



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## Mary Morgan

is professor of the history of economics at LSE and heads the Facts project.



For more information on the Facts project see [www.lse.ac.uk/collections/economicHistory/Research/facts](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/economicHistory/Research/facts)

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