

## How Well Do 'Facts' Travel –project Public Seminars Lent Term 2007:

10 January

Michael Poltorak (University of Manchester)

*Sacred subjects, spirits and wayward 'facts' of Tonga: an 'immaterial' story of empathy and cosmologies of relatedness*

24 January

Erna Fiorentini (Max Planck Institute for the History of Science)

*Image and Word: Robert Hooke's Strategy of Knowledge Communication*

7 February

Kelley Wilder (Max Planck Institute for the History of Science)

*Transmitting Radiation. Henri Becquerel's Radiation Photographs*

Two methods came to dominate laboratory experiments on radiation in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – the electrical and the photographic. They were sometimes set in contrast to one another and sometimes introduced as complimentary methods. In this paper I will address the photographic method of Henri Becquerel: How he defined it, its scope, and the use to which he ultimately put it. The talk is part of my ongoing work on the nature of photographic evidence, and will address the concerns of the travelling facts group for the question of how information is transferred, not only from laboratory experiment to laboratory observation, but from one person's lab to a professional public.

14 February

Linsey McGoey (LSE)

*Strategic ignorance: The regulatory usefulness of conflicting facts*

Drawing on the recent controversy over the safety of SSRI antidepressant drugs, as well as work by Nietzsche and Niklas Luhmann on the value of ignorance, this paper explores the regulatory obstacles facing the public disclosure of adverse effects surrounding SSRIs. Citing interviews with regulators and expert advisors at the UK's Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), the paper argues that a number of institutional obstacles – such as the agency's funding structure – prevented British regulators from publicly disclosing evidence of the adverse effects of SSRIs when they first learned of them. Drawing on work by Nietzsche, who has argued that ignorance should not be viewed as the antithesis of knowledge, but as its refinement, and Niklas Luhmann, who has pointed out the political usefulness of ignorance, I suggest that a strategic use of "factual ignorance" helped to mitigate the MHRA's arguable oversight in not disclosing safety data at an earlier time. For the MHRA, inconsistent scientific facts on the safety of SSRIs served as a form of regulatory and political capital. The factual complexity of debates over SSRIs helped to legitimate regulatory hesitations as prudent rather than negligent, raising a number of questions in general over the exonerating value of inconsistency and contradiction. In closing, the paper will suggest links to discussions on how facts travel, with particular attention to debates over the relevance today of the notion of tacit knowledge in the transmission (or repression) of facts.

28 February

Aashish Velkar (LSE)

*Do nested facts travel well? Decimalization of the inch and the emergence of the Standard Wire Gauge*

Often some 'facts' travel in conjunction with other 'facts' – thus, one group of facts can be said to be nested within another. For example, engineering gauges use a particular terminology to signify size or other specifications. A wire gauge could specify a No. 4 wire according to a

particular gauge. This 'fact' actually contains another one that is nested within it – the measurement unit and the linear dimension used to signify what that No. 4 actually means. Thus, when someone refers to a No. 4 wire, they refer to a No. 4 wire according to a particular gauge (say the imperial or the metric gauge) which in turn signifies wire of a particular dimension (in inches or millimetres). Using the case of the emergence of the British standard wire gauge in the late eighteenth century, I explore how as a result of standardization of the wire gauge numbers, decimal units of the inch were adopted as legal standards within the British metrological system. I argue that this is a case of 'nested' facts travelling and that they travelled well since they were nested within the gauge numbers. In other words, some facts travel well when they travel surreptitiously!

7 March

Sarah Dry (LSE)

*Traces: Registering the Weather in mid-Victorian Britain*

In 1854, the Meteorological Department was established within the Board of Trade in Britain. Headed by Admiral Robert FitzRoy, the new department was conceived of as an 'office for the discussion of observations on meteorology to be made at sea in all parts of the globe.' This paper describes the extensive system for generating and analysing meteorological observations that was subsequently established. In particular, it explores the tensions within the Met Department between the desire to collect a huge amount of meteorological data and the wish to reduce these data to simple universal laws. Self-registering instruments and mechanical analyzing devices became key tools for the reduction of data. I explore how they transformed the problem of managing data into one of managing instrumental traces.