

How Well Do 'Facts' Travel?

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It is often assumed that a fact is a fact is a fact, yet those who work across disciplinary boundaries, or who package facts for travelling from their production to their place of use, are well aware that the life of a fact is not so simple. Is it the case, as everyday experience suggests, that like gossip, facts that travel rarely remain stable? Or are there qualities that keep travelling facts resolutely stubborn? When facts travel well, what kinds of narratives or models, labels or vehicles, are involved? What happens to facts at boundaries, interfaces and frontiers? How can we characterise the life histories of facts and their life cycles?

The sites and fields for research on this project range broadly, and the research team members (faculty, postdocs and PhD students) have disciplinary roots in the various humanities and social sciences, even when they are studying the natural sciences. Yet we share a common question and our research work is concerned with three main directions in which facts travel:

a) *From Producer to User.* Here our projects include four cases of contemporary travelling: the transfer of agricultural knowledge from scientists to farmers in India; the freedom shown by economics facts that travel from producer to various users; the travels of small facts to assess larger claims in biological knowledge; and the two-way travelling of scientific and folk facts in evolutionary psychology. Other research investigates the intersection between travelling facts and standardization of weights and measures in the mid-nineteenth century; traces the twentieth century travels of poverty measures both national and internationally; and considers the reception of facts based on experience versus expertise. Scientific facts that are popularised into fictional form provide an unusual case that marks out the limit of our research efforts.

b) *Across natural and social sciences.* When facts travel from the natural to the social sciences and between them, they seem to take off into multiple new sites. Our projects here include, first, the transfer of facts derived from experiments on rat behaviour to the human sciences, and thence to urban planning, building design etc; second, the myriad of ways in which facts about plants were associated with many different social science reactions to the Green Revolution in India; and third, the role of particular facts in bringing together the various experts concerned with epidemiological knowledge and associated social policy actions (a project which overlaps our first cluster on travels from producers to users).

c) *Across time.* These time travelling questions include studies on how facts travel in material objects in early modern building and architecture, and via documents and travellers in the European reception of facts about the Chinese economy in the eighteenth century; an examination of the historical contexts in which early modern people believed in facts about old age reported in the Bible and the newer facts about the efficacy of early medical treatments. The problem of reconstructing the commercial facts that travelled across the Atlantic and the transfer of tacit knowledge facts through apprenticeship provide two other historical puzzles about travelling facts in and from the early modern period.

As a project group, we have been investigating together a number of questions that have helped us to conceptualise the problem of assessing how well do 'facts' travel by seeking answers to the following questions:

1) What are the facts that are travelling?

The research has so far progressed by taking a community's view (from the communities we each study) about what constitute their facts, rather than by the project members imposing any definition or prescribed view about what counts as facts in any particular time, place or discipline. Nevertheless we have found it useful to develop a set of adjectives to describe the different kinds of facts used, and to suggest the work such facts do for the community.

2) What is being travelled through?

The two basic concerns here might well be treated in metaphorical terms: Do facts travel through empty space, or through/across a landscape? And, what is the nature of the boundaries or barriers? Despite these geographical and topological metaphors, no one interpretation seems sufficient: we can construct the terrain in sociological terms, in terms of the elements of practice, or in cognitive terms.

3) What kinds of processes and vehicles of travel are involved?

We found it most useful here to think of facts that travel well arriving in different sorts of packages or vehicles: narratives, theories, patterns, images, artefacts, skills, expertises, and so forth. This invokes not only the material objects or forms within which facts may travel, and the processes they undergo in travel, but also the agency of those people involved and their social arrangements.

4) What are the characteristics of facts that make them travel?

The answer continues on from the discussion above, but is more explicitly concerned with the characteristics of facts that make them amenable to travelling or not. Here we found many possible attributes in the various different cases we studied, which lead us in turn to questions about the stability of facts, and their functions in their new sites.

5) What happens to facts as they travel?

Again, our research is suggestive of multiple answers. Facts can retain their integrity or adapt to their new surrounding. They can increase or decrease in scope, usability, reliability and so forth, as they travel. All this relates back to our earlier questions about the characteristics of facts, and how those that travel change or maintain their characteristics and attributes.

These questions and discussions emphasise how this project is concerned not with the production of facts - of fundamental concern to many recent discussions of scientific evidence - but what happens to them after production: that is, how, and how well, facts travel from their production site to various other sites of usage, be they scientific, policy, or lay public.

In summarising our preliminary answers to "How Well Do 'Facts' Travel?" we project that the answer lies in a combination of the characteristics of those facts that travel, their functional roles, and their packaging. But a more detailed generalisation is difficult to obtain - for, in different circumstances, different things happen!