



Dr Peter Howlett and Professor Mary Morgan
Department of Economic History
London School of Economics
w.p.howlett@lse.ac.uk
m.morgan@lse.ac.uk

Introduction: How Well Do ‘Facts’ Travel?

Facts are foundational objects of academia and science, more broadly we live in an information age where facts are everywhere. Given this, it might be assumed that facts travel easily over time and from one domain to another (from physics to biology, from economics to history, from academia to policymakers or to the public), that their travel is without complication. However, some simple reflection reveals that this is not the case – an obvious recent example would be the debate in the USA over climate change, where scientific facts about climate change found great difficulty in travelling successfully into the political domain. Thus, whilst it is often assumed that a fact is a fact is a fact, those who work across disciplinary boundaries are well aware that the life of a fact is not so simple. Our research project, ‘How Well Do Facts Travel’¹, was designed as a ‘blue skies’ programme to think in broad terms about this issue. Its aim was to analyse how well facts travelled between and within disciplines and to examine why a fact considered acceptable in one context retains or loses its status as evidence in another. Our approach was via a body of case work. As well as the climate change one above, other examples investigated by the project include: technology transfer in rural India, cases as ‘fact carriers’ in contemporary medicine, the travel of facts about Ancient Greek architecture to nineteenth century architecture in the USA, the travel of small facts in bioinformatics, the travel over time of the ‘Alpha Male’ fact in romance novels, and how facts about rat pathology related to crowding travelled into many other domains.

We have found that in asking “How well do facts travel?”, in looking for answers in the

¹ The project is hosted by the Department of Economic History at the London School of Economics and is funded by the Leverhulme Trust and ESRC (F/07004/Z, held at the Department of Economic History).



travels of facts (rather than knowledge flows more generally), and in focusing attention on the facts themselves (rather than on the people and communities through which they pass), that some facts do indeed travel far and wide. And their trajectories are so extraordinarily varied and sometimes so surprisingly unexpected that we feel justified in saying that, just like some experiments and models in science, facts acquire an independent life of their own. The extent of such travel has in turn raised its own puzzles. In travelling to other spheres and in being used to address other questions, we find that facts may grow in scope, sharpen or become more rounded, they may acquire new labels and fulfil new functions, even while they maintain a strong hold of their integrity. It is through these processes that facts produced in one locality come to speak with authority to other questions, even to other fields, times and places. Thus, by following these independent lives of facts, we find answers not just to the question “How well do ‘facts’ travel?” but to understand how it is that facts come to play foundational roles in situations others than those of their production.

The papers in this volume are all based in social science history, by PhD students who chose to become members of this research project. That is, they were not commissioned as part of the “Facts” project (though one, Julia Mensink, was funded by the project), but gravitated towards the project because of their research interests. Three were undertaken in our Department of Economic History, while Ashley Millar began in our department, but subsequently transferred to International History. In each case the association of the graduate student with the ‘Facts’ project has come to influence some of the questions they have asked and the way they have set about answering those questions - as their papers in this volume illustrate. Albane Forestier is studying the commercial and social networks that linked French and British merchants in the eighteenth century to opportunities in the West Indies. Given the issue of geographical distance, the need for commercial facts (which included everything from price information to facts about potential partners and clients) to travel well was central to these networks. As her study shows, travelling facts in this context had to overcome potential problems such as information asymmetry and moral hazard; she also shows the importance of acknowledging the social embeddedness of the facts. Ashley Millar’s work is



also concerned with the eighteenth century but she tackles a very different problem: how did facts about China's political economy travel to France and Britain, and in particular how were those facts presented and recycled over time in the two European powers by different groups. Her main focus is on the relationship between what she terms 'primary facts' and the claims attached to them, which she then uses to provide a more nuanced account of the debate between Sinophobic and Sinophilic Europeans than has hitherto been presented. Aashish Velkar, who was recently awarded his PhD, moves forward in time to nineteenth century Britain to investigate how facts about the quality of wheat travelled through time and across groups. He addresses how markets captured facts about wheat quality *ex-ante* and how they ensured that these facts travelled effectively between different market groups (from initial farmer to final consumer). The story is in part an institutional one concerned with how facts were standardized and to what extent this helped or hindered their travel. Finally, Julia Mensink brings us into the twentieth century by examining the emergence of the Human Development Index in the 1990s and the ability of the facts it embedded, especially those related to poverty, to travel well and widely. The existing HDI literature has focused on technical issues related to the HDI measure itself but her study asks how well the measure has travelled, in particular from the production domain to the usage domain. The study also uses an innovative 'product approach' analysis that allows for a complex appreciation of the issues involved, for example to explain why the success of the travel of the HDI has varied according to user.

This "Facts" project was social science research conducted on a natural science model, for these four researchers were members of a larger team of post-docs and faculty. They gained much from their association with a bigger research project: a set of questions, many ways of answering them, comparative cases, and an international network of scholars who came for workshops. But the project as a whole gained immensely from the PhD student participation in developing its agenda and its conceptual resources. If you want to know more about the 'How Well Do Facts Travel' research programme, which was recently 'Highly Commended' as Research Project of the Year at the *Times Higher Education Awards* 2008, please visit our



website at: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/economicHistory/Research/facts/Default.htm>.