

***Upstream, Anyone? A Critical Reply to J. J. Fellows' "Downstream of the Experts"***  
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**Introduction**

Surveying the works of various scholars, Jennifer Fellows (2013) convincingly argues that an optimal relationship that bridges the expert-lay divide must include reciprocal knowledge-sharing as a means to enhance, if not fully establish, mutual trust. The thrust of the argument, with the case study of "marine protected areas," relates to the notion of objectivity that expert knowledge claims for itself, and the three levels at which they are perceived (or from which they emanate): institutions, communities, and individuals. If in the past lay people, even when they are "stakeholders" (those for whom expert knowledge is crucial as opposed to the more benign "shareholders" term used in economic and business discourses), were marginalized and ignored even though expert knowledge affected them directly, it is the present contention that they ought to be consulted, and that the "burden of proof" now lies squarely with experts who must earn the trust of these so-called stakeholders.

Overall, I'm sympathetic to this procedural or policy recommendation, one that encourages the reciprocal exchange of knowledge claims by experts and laypeople in regards to policies that affect local residents in direct ways. I also agree that trust must be earned rather than be assumed to exist. Yet, there are some issues that may be briefly mentioned in the essay but that require a broader examination. In what follows, I offer comments for future elaboration.

**First Observation**

First, unlike the so-called high priests of yesteryears that commanded authority and the loyalty of their flock (less so nowadays with the Catholic Church and its pedophile scandals around the world), scientists were always suspect. One may reasonably suggest that only because science took away the claim for trust *a priori*, it was able to earn it *post hoc*. By this I mean that Descartes' demand for radical doubt set the stage (of initial disbelief or skepticism) for any kind of claim for knowledge which is certain (science). It's because you doubt my claim, and that you subject my claim to rigorous examination (tests), that you eventually find my claim to be true or false. Trust isn't granted but earned because of the method and ethos of scientific inquiry (and the practices of the scientific community). It is in this sense, then, that it might be naïve to suggest that the "burden of proof" in order to earn one's trust lies on this or that party; in fact, it lies with or is absent from any party that wants to investigate or participate in the discussion. Besides, is it trust that is being expected or respect?

**Second Observation**

Second, when describing the so-called gap between the knowledge production and dissemination of experts and laypeople, there is always a danger that one might be guilty subtly or subconsciously of a sort of paternalism against which ethicists warn us. What

do "they" need to know?, what would be relevant to "them"? experts are asking, according to Fellow's report. If knowledge-sharing is taken seriously, then all participants should be able to choose freely from a host of data available to experts and non-experts alike. The very question already presupposes a hierarchy of knowledge and the power of those "on top" to share with those "below" them. Can we not start with a leveling-scheme of all knowledge claims (no matter their source)?

### **Third Observation**

Third, this brings us back to who should participate in the discussion: laypeople or experts, or both? In fact, in the Internet Age, we can all participate on some level. Are the decks stacked against laypeople? Sure enough. How can they gain sufficient expertise to engage on par? How can they filter and fully analyze competing or incommensurable knowledge claims? Perhaps this ideal is chimera, perhaps it's something public education still attempts to achieve with its STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) curriculum. The only way I know of leveling the playing field when it gets to policies that affect a particular local group is through direct discussion and voting. The experts may suggest whatever they want, but if enough laypeople aren't convinced, the vote will be against the proposal (this is true of patients confronting their doctors, and local communities in Colorado, for example, where natural gas "fracking" is proposed). Expert authority, unlike the old days when the high priests controlled the village, can easily be trumped by the sheer will (and power) of locals.

### **Fourth Observation**

Fourth, there is a more fundamental issue about knowledge in general and its claims for rationality and objectivity that warrants further discussion. Whether its origins are social epistemology (on a good day when it deals with theory rather than case studies alone) or postmodernism, any scientific claim is itself open to mistrust, not only by laypeople but also by experts. Is there such a thing as objectivity? Or are we inevitably dealing with what Kant termed inter-subjective claims or what Nietzsche insisted was perspectival reporting? (Eventually this takes on the mantle of Situated Logic first in Popper and then with feminism in the 1970s and 1980s). We (those of us critical of the scientific establishment) thought that once science was exposed to the public as not to be wearing any clothes (or at least not wearing royal clothes), so to speak, we'd be in the clear. So, why is it that the breaking news of yesteryear about the debunking of science's prestige and neutrality and rationality and so on have not made it outside the reified halls of the academy? One answer is that the academy is insulated and its news don't even travel in between floors in the same buildings; another is that scientists keep it a secret that theirs are castles built on sandy shores; and finally, it might be that the trusting and adoring public likes to keep on thinking that the new high priests—expert scientists—have the answers to all their queries. I don't know which answer is empirically true, since I fail to run surveys and questionnaires.

### **Fifth Observation**

Fifth, there is an issue to which Fellows thankfully attends in her first endnote, and that is the long tradition, already formulated by Aristotle with a list of fallacies, namely, that one ought to separate the argument from the one who makes it. Hence, all questions of trust, if directed towards people or even communities of scientists or their institutional affiliations, are spurious. One can be trustworthy personally but make a silly argument that shouldn't be trusted; likewise, one can trust the University of Colorado, but find a particular professor guilty of plagiarism. So, is trust a code word for forcing scientists to pay attention to laypeople? Is trust, then, a clever means by which to undermine the presumed privileged authority of experts? But if trust is removed from the debate, around what pivot will the debate ensue? Data? That's refreshing. Whose data? Fellows offers to include laypeople's observations, too. Postmodernists suggest that we should include anyone's data as long as s/he cares to share it; some even argue to have all data be considered on par until proven false (see Popper's putative truths and the process of conjectures and refutations). Will that solve the problem?

### **Sixth Observation**

Sixth, Fellows and those she quotes suggest in one way or another that there is a linguistic or discursive gap between experts and laypeople. Let's assume it's true. What can be done about it? It's unlikely that all laypeople will get PhDs in all the sciences or that experts will abandon the short-cut conveniences of their jargon (it's also about accuracy and subtlety). But experts can do what some of us do in the classroom when faced with high-school graduates whose interest in our subject matter (in my case, philosophy) is dubious at best, and non-existent in "service" courses. We try and speak their language, we translate, modify, and reconfigure what we say so that the ideas we transmit or "share" are accessible. Yes, Fellows is right, "the burden of proof" is on our shoulders; yet, it's not necessarily a burden of earning the students' trust, but instead commanding their attention for a few hours, ensuring that what we say is understood if not accepted, because we present what are novel (nice way of saying it) or crazy (more in line with their initial perception) ideas or ways of thinking critically about their cherished ideas (such as abortion, gay rights, faith in the after-life). Are we always successful? Check "ratemyprofessor.com" for anecdotal data.

### **Seventh Observation**

Seventh, Fellows' recommendations might be exactly "what the doctor ordered" insofar as they leave policy implementations more open-ended, a process of give and take, reciprocal learning and knowledge-sharing, with all that this entails. The sad part is that some experts are immature inasmuch as they lack the confidence to admit that their expert knowledge is putative at best, and therefore they become defensive. Likewise, laypeople may claim to have "authentic" and therefore immutable knowledge even where theirs is putative as well. In this environment, disclosure of doubt might be the added medicine all parties must take daily. In this way, any expert or local advice would be more genuine, however tentative. It would start the dialogue rather than conclude it.

## **Conclusion**

So, by way of concluding these critical comments (in the sense of being constructive), let me suggest that Fellows and those she quotes are correct in identifying a problem in communication between so-called experts and so-called laypeople. Her approach towards a solution of reciprocal knowledge sharing as a way to build trust might be workable in many contexts. But when doing so, I would urge her and other policy practitioners to take the discussion to another level of theoretical consideration, one that might help in breaking down the dichotomy between the two discourses. It's not that this is a false dichotomy, but rather that it's a dichotomy whose boundaries are fuzzy at best. It's in this gray or fuzzy area between prefigured discursive practices that we find ourselves in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, neither rationalists nor empiricists, neither scientists nor laypeople, but instead members of the same democratic community from which no one escapes, even those of us who enjoy the protective walls of the ivory tower.

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## **References**

Fellows, Jennifer Jill. 2013. "Downstream of the Experts: Trust-Building and the Case of MPAs." *Social Epistemology* DOI: 10.1080/02691728.2013.782582.