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Facts, Deliberation and Efficiency: A Reply to Pauli

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The review process for our paper at *Social Epistemology* has been one of the most productive and engaged in our experience. We find it very rewarding that we can continue the discussion beyond its anonymous review mode, and are grateful to Benjamin Pauli (2022) for reaching out with his comments.

First, we definitely agree with Dr. Pauli that the alternative of “we treat facts as given and forge ahead, dragging those who haven’t seen the light along with us—is too self-evidently artificial, too associated in people’s minds with arrogance and elitism and arbitrary coercion, to be especially viable in this day and age” (15). Although we may have differing philosophical and methodological approaches to the definition of fact and the study of how facts are produced in public deliberation, we share the same concern about identifying ways to deal with factual disagreements democratically.

What is essential in our approach as linguists is that we take specific language material as our starting point in our study of how facts are constituted and negotiated. We doubt that it is empirically possible to make a verifiable distinction between observable verbal behavior and “perceptions of the facts themselves” (17). Thus, observable language material becomes our main point of reference. It is undoubtedly true that any given communicative exercise, i.e. what people “do with facts,” forces a particular format on factual statements. However, we assume that there are no facts completely disassociated from the communicative efforts within which they are being constituted, i.e. no facts “themselves.”

Given this methodological premise, we would like to respond to some specific questions and objections that Dr. Pauli raises with regard to our analysis, particularly to the question of whether the problematic task of identifying stand-alone facts matters for the overall quality of deliberation and efficiency of the process.

Instructions and Mapping

As Dr. Pauli notes, Citizens’ Initiative Review (CIR) participants, indeed, seem to ignore the exact instructions on identifying simple facts and, instead, map a set of conflicting factual points that bring the practical implications of ideological tensions to light. We agree with Dr. Pauli that—to some degree—it is a success of pragmatic citizen-driven process over technical definitions.

However, we do see this as a challenge. First, the scope of this challenge is much broader than is possible to demonstrate in a short paper. The one example that we discuss in depth, and that Dr. Pauli references, is an illustration of a recurring problem, rather than an exception.

Second, in the absence of instructions to map conflicting data points, rather than identifying “accurate information,” it is difficult to ensure that all the key tensions are accounted for. In this particular CIR, many participants express concerns about gambling addiction and the effect of the casino on the overall moral climate in Portland and the local community, where the casino is located. From our personal observation of informal discussions among

participants, many of them tended to the con-side primarily for reasons related to these concerns. No “facts” related to gambling addiction and community climate are found in Key Findings. Yet, there are at least four arguments in opposition and four arguments in favor of the Measure that derive from this theme.

For example, the following two “arguments” in support and in opposition of Measure 82 could be put side by side in a fashion similar to what we observe in “Key Findings”:

Con argument: According to local experts more than 70,000 adult Oregonians have problems with gambling. Our concern is that an increase of private casinos will increase addictions to gambling, alcohol and drugs.

Pro argument: Research has shown the existence of a casino in a community does not in and of itself increase gambling behavior and does not cause the behavioral problems that many fear.

These arguments contain descriptions of current circumstances that define an existing problem (“more than 70,000 adult Oregonians have problems with gambling”; “the existence of a casino in a community does not in and of itself increase gambling behavior”). The absence of these parameters from “Key Findings” is an important signal that the definition of “facts” provided by conveners may not be functional for citizen deliberations. This is of concern because many CIR panelists ultimately took a stance against Measure 82 on the basis of their negative attitudes to casinos as a type of business rather than on the basis of transactional Theme 2 Scenarios, particularly given the uncertainty of economic forecasts.

As for the relevance of this to the efficiency of the process, participants struggled with meeting the deadlines for agreeing on the language of factual statements to be taken to the vote, which may be a partial reason for why some relevant statements did not make it into Key Findings.

Also, tellingly, CIR organizers changed the procedure in the next round of CIRs in 2014, asking participants to vote on statements provided by advocates, and only in exceptional circumstances making their own statements. Even under those conditions, participants did feel the need to do so, and spent a significant amount of time negotiating such statements.

Therefore, we would see participants’ attempts at mapping areas of disagreement as something to capitalize on, rather than dismiss as ‘artificial.’ It may be the most appropriate format for collective fact finding in the context of public deliberation, which lays bare the “valence” of individual data points in relation to the problem at stake.

Propositions and Facts

On the philosophical plane, this makes the somewhat technical discussion on whether atomistic propositions constitute “facts” quite pertinent. The problem with such propositions, even seeming tautologies, is that they can only be meaningfully verified in some communicative context. A proposition such as “water is a drink” may or may not be true, or may possess varying degrees of accuracy, depending on the problem scenario, within

which this proposition is involved (and not just in relation to a set of circumstances in the environment). Even as we verbally constitute objects that designate stable expectations that we have of our environment, the signifying force of such objects (and, hence the relevance of other objects in any given circumstance) will be subject to revision.

Therefore, we cannot know whether or not it would have been easy (or easier) for participants in a deliberation to agree on atomistic propositions related to a given problem outside of their attempt to map differences. Outside of this pragmatic function in an empirically given event, we cannot be certain what those propositions might have or should have been.

Finally, and, perhaps, most importantly we would like to acknowledge the emotional component of this discussion brought up by Dr. Pauli. Given the disturbing socio-political developments around the world, there is a certain stress that we ourselves experience as we engage in this research enterprise. We hope that getting through this malaise will ultimately lead to a better understanding of how we can live with the irreducible diversity of perspectives.

References

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