Against the Grain

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Booklover — Birds

Donna Jacobs

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resulted in significant cancellations. This is a fact statement which, at present, appears to be true. But it does not lead inexorably to the conclusion that elimination of embargoes will not result in significant cancellations or even that six month embargoes won’t result in significant cancellations in the future as the volume of material available under those conditions expands. When the people making the statements believe they’re making strictly factual statements, they are once again talking past each other.

So, back to Guédon and his insistence that “gold open access” refers to journals only. Is he making a statement of fact or expressing an opinion? If it’s a fact, then it should be verifiable by objective evidence. But what counts as objective evidence in determining the meanings of words? Grammarians have endlessly debated the purpose of dictionaries — are they to describe the way that language is actually used or to proscribe the way that it ought to be used? If it’s the latter, who gets to decide?

If anyone can claim the right to be the authority on the terminology of open access it would be Jean-Claude Guédon. One of the original participants in the BOAI declaration, he has written voluminously and persuasively for many years. If your inclinations are toward the prescriptive camp of grammarians, Guédon’s pronouncement may be sufficiently definitive. Personally, however, I’ve always favored the descriptive side and if you look at how the term is actually used, for many people “gold open access” quite comfortably describes an article where the version of record is made immediately available upon publication. Guédon wants the usage to be less ambiguous, and in the abstract I agree with him. But in actual practice I don’t think we’re there yet.

So I’d be inclined to label Guédon’s pronouncement borderline — possibly subject to verification by objective evidence, but thwarted by the ambiguity in what counts as objective evidence.

One of the more fascinating findings of the Pew study is that one is more inclined to judge an opinion statement incorrectly as factual if one agrees with the opinion expressed. In other words, to use one of the previous examples, if your values lead you to the judgment that corporations should not be producing large profit margins from publishing activities, you’re more likely to incorrectly classify the opinion statement “large margins are indefensible” as a fact statement. If Guédon’s definition comports with your own, you’re inclined to take it as fact.

The Pew study was concentrated on statements in the news and there are no doubt limits to how far one can extend its findings into the debates and discussions around scholarly communication. But it’s a useful exercise nonetheless. Much of the smoke and heat generated by scholcomm debates is driven by people taking their opinions as facts. They attempt to convince others with appeals to objective evidence when careful discussion of the values we hold and the implications of those values might be more productive. It’s easy to assume that others must share our values because they’re so evidently true that they don’t require much discussion. Aren’t they?

Sorting our way through the opportunities and perils of the flux of scholarly communication in the digital age is important. We’ll do a better job of making sense of it all and making decisions that are in the best interests of society if we pay close attention to the differences among the statements that we make. I believe that’s a fact. I think.

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Endnotes

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Booklover — Birds

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The American phrase “for the birds” connotes something that is trivial, worthless, or of interest to gullible people. Penguin Island by Anatole France, the nom de plume for Jacques Anatole Thibault, is not “for the birds” but describes the history of the mythical land of Penguinia where the inhabitants were once birds; but, have a curious story of how they became human.

Published in 1908, the story begins with how a member of a royal family, named Maël, devoted himself to serve the Lord. He embarked on a missionary journey across bodies of water in an awkward vessel of stone. Unbeknownst to him he came under the influence of the Devil and found himself on an island in an unknown part of the world. Exploring the island he discovered inhabitants that he assessed to be simple souls but of pure heart. He decided to teach them the Gospel and then baptize them. Now the story really unfolds, as the inhabitants are not men but penguins. “When the baptism of the penguins was known in Paradise, it caused neither joy nor sorrow, but an extreme surprise. The Lord himself was embarrassed. He gathered an assembly of clerics and doctors, and asked them whether they regarded the baptism as valid.”

A few chapters of debate and it was decided. An archangel delivered the news — “Maël, know thy error, believing that thou wert baptizing children of Adam thou hast baptized birds; and it is through thee that penguins have entered into the Church of God.” Maël became concerned that if he left these newly transformed beings alone they might stray from their original teachings so he decided to bring the island back with him, towing it behind his vessel, to the coasts of Armorica.

In a small book of 297 pages, the reader learns the details of the religious immersion of Maël, the baptism of the penguins, the transportation of the island, the ancient times, middle ages, renaissance, modern times and future times of Penguinia. Called a “satire of the history of mankind” on the front cover sleeve, France delivers this story in such a way that it was considered his masterpiece. And in today’s tumultuous political world, it is oddly current considering that the author’s perspective is over a hundred years old.

Jacques Anatole Thibault was born in 1844 the son of a Paris book dealer. His education was classical and he held numerous diverse positions, including a 14-year period as the assistant librarian of the Senate. Regardless of the type of position he made time to master his word craft and thus created an extensive bibliography during his career. He mainly worked at storytelling and novels, but explored most of the literary genres.

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more, including: Beyond Growth: The Economics of Sustainable Development; The Age of Sustainable Development; NAFTA and Sustainable Development: The History, Experience, and Prospects for Reform; Sustaining Abundance: Environmental Performance in Industrial Democracies; and Towards Sustainable Aviation. 

Together, the above numbers illustrate the broad reach of the concepts introduced in Our Common Future and its assertion of an interlocked relationship between the global economy and ecology. The report has been used in many environmental studies curricula throughout the years as a course text, with the most recent critical analysis for classroom use by Ksenia Gerassimova for Routledge’s Macat Library series. In the thirty-plus years since its release, Our Common Future has become the common past for a broad array of scholarly publications, across many disciplines and sectors. As such, it retains a central place in a core environmental studies collection.

**Endnotes**


*Editor’s note: An asterisk (*) denotes a title selected for Resources for College Libraries.

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**Collecting to the Core**

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Thibault was awarded the 1921 Nobel Prize in Literature “in recognition of his brilliant literary achievements, characterized as they are by a nobility of style, a profound human sympathy, grace, and a true Gallic temperament.”

I leave you with a few tempting lines from the timeline of the story of Penguins:

**The Ancient Times** — “I see them,” said Bulloch. They are creating law; they are founding property; they are establishing the principles of civilization, the basis of society, and the foundations of the State. ‘How is that?’ asked old Mael. ‘By setting bounds to their fields. That is the origin of all government. Your penguins, O Master, are performing the most august of functions. Throughout the ages their work will be consecrated by lawyers, and magistrates will confirm it.’”

**The Middle Ages and Renaissance** — “The Penguin critics vie with one another in affirming that Penguin art has from its origin been distinguished by a powerful and pleasing originality, and that we may look elsewhere in vain for the qualities of grace and reason that characterise its earliest works.”

**Modern Times: Trinco** — “Ægidius Aucupis, the Erasmus of the Penguins, was not mistaken; his age was an age of free inquiry. But that great man mistook the elegances of the humanists for softness of manners, and he did not foresee the effects that the awakening of intelligence would have amongst the Penguins. It brought about the religious Reformation; Catholics massacred Protestants and Protestants massacred Catholics.”

**Modern Times: Chatillon** — “Every system of government produces people who are dissatisfied. The Republic or Public Thing produced them at first from amongst the nobles who have been despoiled of their ancient privileges.”

**Modern Times** — “No one doubted because the general ignorance in which everybody was concerning the affair did not allow of doubt, for doubt is a thing that demands motives. People do not doubt without reasons in the same way that people believe without reasons. The thing was not doubted because it was repeated everywhere and, with the public, to repeat is to prove.”

Sound familiar? 🦜