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Paradoxes of opinion

‘No opinion’.

That’s the last box the survey offers, after all the choices the researcher can imagine, and the humiliating ‘Don’t know’. The British news magazine *The Economist* used to have an advertisement saying simply:

No Economist. No opinion.

Apparently readers are terrified at the thought of being unable to give an opinion on some topic when challenged, even if that opinion has to be provided by a magazine. Somehow it is important in a society that considers itself democratic that everyone have an opinion on certain issues, and that they be willing and able to tell other people what it is. Yet everyone must control their expressions of opinion as well; it is never a compliment to call someone ‘opinionated’.

If we ask why we should have these opinions, why we need them ready for conversation, or why we should read a magazine to find them, we come to a series of paradoxes in our opinions about opinions:

- We cherish our own opinions, but we can also dismiss opinions as a poor substitute for facts.
- Opinions are meant for public discussion, but are also private, individual, protected.
- Opinions are personal, but shared with a group.
- Opinions display one point of view, but the same speaker can express two contradictory opinions.
- Expressions of opinions are assumed to be ephemeral, but are also part of the on-going structure of society.

- Each individual expression of an opinion is limited to a particular space and time, but ‘public opinion’ has broad effects on national or global events.

In this book, I argue that all these paradoxes arise because we often overlook two aspects of opinions: opinions are always expressed in some interaction between two or more people, and opinions have to be collected and transmitted in some way to become public opinion. We need to look at how people say things, and how this saying is transformed, as well as what they say.

Imagine filling out a survey: there’s a man with a clipboard on your front doorstep (he’s standing one step below you, as you hold open the door), or a woman on a street in a shopping area (wary shoppers pass by quickly), or a voice on the phone interrupting your dinner, or a questionnaire arrives in the post and you sit with it at the kitchen table. When you respond you may want to impress the interviewer, or get rid of them, or present yourself as a certain type, or avoid revealing anything about yourself, or turn the conversation to something more interesting. The interviewee can treat the survey as a way of accomplishing any of these interactive goals.

The complexities of interaction are not restricted to surveys. A person may be expressing an opinion at a public meeting, or at a dinner party, or across an empty room at the television set. If we are interested in the distribution of opinions, how they are maintained and how they change, we need to know about these interactions too. When researchers, or readers of research, or policy-makers, or theorists of public opinion ignore this immediate context, and treat opinions as if they were things inside us, or as if they were things out there in the social structure, the opinions become puzzling. What seems straightforward enough, at the time and in the place we hear it and respond to it, gets caught up in problematic slides between opinion and fact, or gaps between the public and private, or irrational contradictions.

When I say opinion is a matter of interaction, it is not just my opinion. It has been emerging as sociologists discuss the construction of *facts*, as social psychologists question the concept of *attitudes*, as political philosophers try to define the *public sphere*, as conversation analysts look at *talk*, as media studies scholars look at *broadcast talk*, and as social scientists reflect on their use of *methods* such

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as interviews, oral history, focus groups, surveys, or experiments. I am not saying that the work of all these researchers converges, but they have all come to take seriously the particular ways opinions are expressed in context and transformed by media, whether television, tape, or paper and pencil. In the next chapter I will discuss analytical methods. In the rest of the book, I will present detailed analyses of specific cases in which opinions are expressed or packaged. But first, in this chapter, I will identify some of the strands of this wider research project by discussing each of the paradoxes I have raised and considering some of the wider implications of this approach, such as why opinions matter in the study of language, in the study of society, or in our own roles as citizens.

Facts and opinions

In an early episode of the television situation comedy *Friends*, Phoebe, a stereotypical enthusiast for New Age beliefs, mentions in passing that the reality of evolution is a matter of opinion. Her friend Ross, who works as a palaeontologist in a natural history museum, is shocked by such an unwillingness to face facts. The situation becomes more and more comic, as he fills his briefcase with bones from the museum to demonstrate that evolution is something out there, not something conditional on anyone's belief or lack of belief. For Ross, Phoebe's resistance to facts is a barrier to any kind of talk about anything else. How can one talk to someone for whom *everything* is just a matter of personal opinion? ('Don't get me started on gravity,' Phoebe says). Surely there must be some distinction between matters of opinion and matters of fact?

The word *opinion* has multiple and complex meanings (see Myers 2002); in one sense it is 'just opinion', not knowledge or demonstration:

Opinion . . . 1. What one opines; judgement resting on grounds insufficient for complete demonstration; belief of something as probable or as seeming to one's own mind to be true (Dist. from *knowledge, conviction, or certainty*; occas. = *belief*.) (OED)

Opinions aren't facts. As Harvey Sacks remarks in his *Lectures on Conversation*, 'one of the characteristics of opinion is that it's something lay people are entitled to have when they're not entitled

to have knowledge' (1992: I.33). Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, on all those matters that are matters of opinion. One can, of course, disagree with the opinion they hold, but to deny their entitlement to have an opinion is to challenge their individual identity (that is why Phoebe gets so angry). Facts, on the other hand, are what people already agree on, what they can demonstrate; one doesn't need to argue about them, but just to inform people (that is why Ross gets angry). Facts are kept tidily on display for company in the living room; opinions are stacked up in a kind of back room, where company need not visit, and where they have no right to criticize.

Because of this long-standing opposition between facts and opinions (it can be found in Aristotle as well as on *Friends*), the meaning of *opinion* changes if the meaning of *fact* changes. And the meaning of *fact* has been changing, both in the academic study of science and in the way members of the public understand scientific facts. Some sociologists, historians, and philosophers of science have argued that scientific facts are established through social processes of persuasion (Latour and Woolgar 1979; Mulkay 1979; Brannigan 1981; Collins 1985; Latour 1987; Potter 1996). In this view, facts are something like opinions; instead of saying we believe a statement because it is a fact, these researchers say we hold a statement to be a fact because of the way we believe it (Woolgar 1988).

There have been ferocious arguments, in science studies and between science studies and scientists, about this view of science as socially constructed (for one of the most interesting and readable responses from scientists, see Dunbar 1995). These disputes would not matter to most non-scientists (or to scientists) if they were confined to the academic fields of science studies. But issues of expert and lay fact and opinion appear in all areas of our lives, from financial predictions to radiation risks to nutrition. A statement given the authority of an expert is another of the senses of *opinion* given in the *OED*:

3. The formal statement by an expert or professional man of what he thinks, judges or advises on a matter submitted to him; considered advice.

Experts have their own rhetorical strengths and their own institutional channels. As Walter Lippmann observed, in his classic essay on the formation of public opinion, 'Except on a few subjects

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where our own knowledge is great, we cannot choose between true and false accounts. So we choose between trustworthy and untrustworthy reporters' (1922). But experts do not settle the matter; their assertions just lead to further rhetoric about their trustworthiness, their own motives, limitations, and biases (see Chapter 8). If we want to pursue the ways the boundary between fact and opinion is drawn, we need to look at how claims are made and supported as people talk, what they take and don't take as a matter of opinion.

Private and public

There is something personal and distinctive about your own opinion, in the dictionary sense of 'what one opines'. It is yours, it is different from that of other people, and it is part of what marks you as an individual, like your style of dress or hair. But the *OED* has another sense of *opinion*, besides the sense opposed to fact and the sense associated with experts: as something collective and social.

Opinion . . . **b.** what is generally thought about something. Often qualified by *common, general, public, vulgar*. (*OED*)

When *opinion* is used in this sense, it is apparently both generalized and potentially criticized. The *common opinion* is just what one doesn't want to have, and *vulgar opinion*, in the sense *vulgar* now has, would be even worse. And yet for all this denigration, public opinion has an essential role in any democratic society. Democratic states depend on representation, and what the representatives represent is some form of the will of the people (Barber 1996). The will of the people is not just the sum of the opinions of individuals; it is assumed to be something collective, more considered, less ephemeral (see Chapter 4). Hannah Arendt traces the very idea of opinion to the American and French Revolutions and says that these events taught a cautionary lesson:

Even though opinions are formed by individuals and must remain, as it were, their property, no single individual – neither the wise man of the philosophers nor the divinely informed reason, common to all men, of the Enlightenment – can ever be equal to the task of sifting opinions, of passing them through the sieve of intelligence which will separate the arbitrary and idiosyncratic, and thus purify them into public views. (Arendt 1963)

What sort of forum best provides for this sifting of opinion? It's clearly not Congress or Parliament (though Arendt argues the Senate was intended for just this purpose), not newspaper editorials or leading articles, not 30-second election spot advertising, not public enquiries, not private talk over coffee or a beer. Much of the academic debate on possible forums has followed from Jurgen Habermas's argument that there is and should be a *public sphere* apart from the state and the market; Habermas first developed this argument in an early book, and it has been much debated since it was translated into English as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962/1989). He gives a historical sketch to show how the word *public* shifted from being associated with the court (public vs. private authority) to it being associated with the kind of discussion and opinion found in coffee houses and newspapers emerging in the eighteenth century. He then argues that this emerging forum for discussion was colonized by mass media such as large newspapers or broadcasters, so that discussion, when freed from the state and the church, becomes dominated by commercial interests.

There are many controversial aspects of this overview (Dahlgren and Sparks 1991; Calhoun 1992; McGuigan 1998; Sparks 1998), including the idealization of one stage and class of bourgeois society, and the view of mass media as one-way, centralized, and manipulative. John Thompson (1995) distinguishes between the public imagined by Habermas, one defined by its separateness from the state and openness to discussion, and a new sphere opened up by electronic media: 'These new media create a new kind of publicness which consists of what we might describe as *the space of the visible*' (1995: 245). An example of an intervention in 'the space of the visible' might be a television report on road protesters (Szerszynski 1999) – an apparently local and procedural issue of building a road becomes a public issue of values because we *see* it.

There are also questions about what issues are matters of public as opposed to personal concern. Feminists extending these discussions (Fraser 1992) have argued that the idea of a single unitary public sphere is itself gendered. It is not just that men have opportunities and models that enable them to dominate much of public discussion, and that they therefore have a disproportionate amount of influence. More fundamentally, the realm of 'public affairs' has been defined as excluding domestic and affective realms as the affairs of women,

and the preferred style of discussion privileges a gendered idea of rationality (Young 1996). Lauren Berlant has argued that what has developed in the US is an ‘intimate public sphere’: ‘No longer valuing personhood as something directed toward public life, contemporary nationalist ideology recognizes a public good only in a particularly constricted nation of simultaneously lived private worlds’ (Berlant 1997: 5). In this view, the blurring of the boundary of public and private is not a liberating expansion of the political, but a contraction of what is public. Institutions of opinion play their part in making isolated people spectators to citizenship.

These realms of public and private, civic and domestic, masculine and feminine are not just matters of political theory; people refer to available categories and draw on them when talking in groups and when presenting themselves. In a group recruited from women picking up toddlers at day care, a woman says ‘as a mother you just tend to step back from it’; in a group of male small-business owners, a couple weeks later in a nearby city, a man justifies his own list of concerns in terms of specialist knowledge from his job: ‘working as I do in the petrol industry, I have to think of . . .’ These approaches suggest that we must be careful not to take the ‘public’ in ‘public opinion’ as given (see Chapter 10). The ways people define the public can vary with different experiences, different purposes, and different forums. The boundaries of public and private are also open to moment-to-moment negotiation, as participants decide what is appropriate to say next.

Individual opinions and group identities

The reason a survey researcher asks for your view is that you are assumed to have one as an individual, potentially a different one from that of the next person down the street. But the organization doing the survey is only interested because this response can stand for many others. As an old textbook on public opinion research put it, ‘Opinions cluster by groups: regional, national origin, race, religion, urban-rural status, and social class or status. Consciously or unconsciously people tend to identify with such groups as these (and many more specific ones: unions, trade associations, sporting clubs, and so forth) and to draw their opinions from these identifications’ (Lane and Sears 1964: 2). There are two claims here,

that the opinions correlate with group membership, and that the identification with the group shapes the individual opinion. These claims relate to an underlying political purpose of public opinion research in its formative period; the relation of the individual to the group opinion is a major problem for the American liberalism of the 1950s, and for the research on opinion that developed in this climate (e.g., Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). If individuals generally conform to groups, how can they be said to hold an opinion? If they don't conform to groups, how can single statements of opinion be aggregated or generalized at all?

Researchers have often turned for an answer to these questions to social psychological work on the ways groups shape individuals. But this work deals with attitudes, not opinions. The terms *opinion* and *attitude* are often used interchangeably in other fields, but for these social psychological researchers they are distinct. 'Attitude is a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor' (Eagly and Chaiken 1993: 1). Opinions are the cognitive, affective, or behavioural responses that reveal these underlying psychological attitudes. In this view, opinions are indeed tied to a particular situation, and may be transitory, as I have been arguing, but attitudes are carried by individuals, and remain stable over time. The social psychological distinction is a useful corrective to methods that would mistake the instrument (polls, focus groups, experiments) for the entity itself. But from the point of view of discourse analysis, there are no grounds to propose or know about such entities as attitudes (or traits, emotions, or habits), apart from the way they are manifested in discourse and action (Potter and Wetherell 1987).

I need, then, a view that defines the self in terms of how it emerges in social interactions and I find such a view in the work of Erving Goffman (1959; 1963; 1971). Goffman conceived of the self as a role each of us plays, a way we present ourselves in encounters with others. This presentation varies from situation to situation, so that, for instance, a waiter may have a very different manner in the kitchen and out in the dining room taking orders from guests; Goffman was fascinated with the possible gap between 'frontstage' and 'backstage' performances. These performances take work, a constant attention to the way we stand or pass someone, say hello or good-bye, tell stories, or look away. Even our sense of what is real and what is

just practice, a joke, or a game is a matter of signals we give off and interpret moment to moment (Goffman 1974). Goffman also suggested that participants in interaction could take on different roles, so that I might shift, for instance, between speaking for myself and voicing the concerns of others, between being the person who is being talked to and being an eavesdropper. I will discuss these distinctions in Chapter 2 and Chapter 7.

Goffman's work has had its critics, who have seen it as individualistic, or unsystematic, or limited in its central metaphors (as we will see in the next section). But it has remained enormously influential, as it has been extended to other fields (Meyrowitz 1985; Drew and Wootton 1988; Malone 1997). After reading Goffman, it is hard to imagine a naïve self who simply reveals pre-existing opinions to a neutral stranger who asks for them. Normal people are quite capable of managing the impressions they give; indeed people who cannot manage these impressions are considered abnormal (mental health institutions are another area of Goffman's interest). We will see this self-presentation in the talk about experts in Chapter 8, the phone-ins in Chapter 9, and the analysis of vox pop interviews in Chapter 10.

Much of the painstaking work of quantitative public opinion research is an attempt to get around these little dramas of self-presentation, to bracket them off as a kind of bias so that one can get to the real opinions underlying them (See Chapter 4). But if we take Goffman's project seriously, we see that self-presentation is not methodological noise to be corrected, it is an inevitable part of any elicitation of opinion. The very fact that people produce opinions is a matter of self-presentation. Walter Bagehot noted more than a hundred years ago that people would obligingly produce opinions even where they could not have had any opinion before: 'It has been said that if you can only get a middle-class Englishman to think whether there are "snails on Sirius", he will soon have an opinion on it. It will be difficult to make him think, but if he does think, he cannot rest in a negative, he will come soon to some decision' (quoted in Lippmann 1922: 224). Bagehot takes this as an indication that the middle-class Englishman (like the reader of *The Economist* apparently) likes to have opinions. We on the other hand might take it as an indication of the way a question projects the possibility of an opinion for the answerer to take up. Constraint on opinions is

also a matter of self-presentation; no one wants to be considered *opinionated* in ordinary social settings. (According to the *OED*, Milton coined a term for holding excessive opinions that is now, alas, archaic: *opinionastrous*). In either case, the opinion emerges or is buried because of the interaction.

Goffman's concepts of roles and performances were grounded in his ethnographies of institutions such as a Shetland Island hotel and a mental hospital and illustrated with a vast collection of clips from his reading of newspapers and non-fiction. But they are more useful as methodological and theoretical suggestions than as templates for practical analysis. For more systematic linguistic categories we can turn to another influential line in the study of interaction, the ethnography of communication, which focuses on speech in its cultural context (Hymes 1972; Gumperz 1982; Moerman 1988; Saville-Troike 1989; Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Lucy 1993). Dell Hymes specified a range of dimensions in which one might describe a speech event (a wedding, a party, a theatrical performance, a class), partly as an aid to systematic comparison of such events across cultures. I consider this approach, and tensions between it and other approaches to the context for talk, when I consider speech acts involving opinions in Chapter 3.

Consistent and contradictory

The social psychological work on attitudes seeks to explain consistency: why someone says one thing today, and something rather similar on a different issue and to someone else tomorrow. Discourse analytical work tries to explain contradiction: why someone can say one thing today, and something different tomorrow, or even a few minutes later. The nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman announced at the end of 'Song of Myself':

Do I contradict myself?
 Very well then, I contradict myself.
 (I am large, I can contain multitudes)

There are a number of reasons why Mr Whitman would provide problems for a survey researcher. One of them is that surveys assume that underlying attitudes remain consistent from moment to moment, even if stated opinions may change gradually over