Not just the facts: 
A political theory of trust in expertise
Sheila Jasanoff (Harvard Kennedy School)

20th January 2021
President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr. honored the victims of the coronavirus pandemic on Tuesday, the day before his inauguration. Doug Mills/The New York Times
Toward a Political Theory of Expertise

Key question for Democracy
Why should the few be empowered to *rule* for the many?

Key question for Modernity
Why should the few be empowered to *know* for the many?
Parallel Constitutions?

• Questions of political delegation
  • Explicit
    • Is power being exercised?
    • Which powers are authorized?
    • What are their limits?
    • How do we know them?
    • Who can challenge?
    • By what processes?
    • Represented. By whom

• Questions of epistemic delegation
  • Implicit
    • Power | Knowledge
    • A world without borders – ideally!
    • Epistemic subsidiarity
    • Futures and imaginaries
    • Constructing expertise
    • Ethics and responsibility – to whom?
Constitutional Role of Science and Expertise

- Science provides common baseline for accountability
- But science enters politics as expertise
- Experts govern by appeals to science
- Under a tacit constitutional compact
- Ordinarily defined at the level of the nation state
Quality and Virtue in Science

• R.K. Merton’s norms of science - the CUDOS framework:
  – **Communalism**: science is held in common
  – **Universalism**: science is independent of place of production
  – **Disinterestedness**: science is free of interests
  – **Organized Skepticism**: science is questioned by peers
Objectivity is a political instrument

- George H.W. Bush, 1990

  *Science, like any field of endeavor, relies on freedom of inquiry; and one of the hallmarks of that freedom is objectivity.*

- Now more than ever, on issues ranging from climate change to AIDS research to genetic engineering to food additives, government relies on the impartial perspective of science for guidance. And as the frontiers of knowledge are increasingly distant from the understanding of the many, it is ever more important that we can turn to the few for sound, straightforward advice.
Cracks in the Compact
Speaking “Truthiness” to Power

• Stephen Colbert lampooned American politics under President George W. Bush as a “no fact zone”

• Frank Rich, *New York Times*, November 5, 2006:

• In retrospect, the defining moment of the 2006 campaign may well have been back in April, when Mr. Colbert appeared at the White House Correspondents’ Association dinner. Call it a cultural primary.”

• “Truthiness is a quality characterizing a ‘truth’ that a person making an argument or assertion claims to know intuitively ‘the gut’ or because it ‘feels right’ without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or facts.”

• In other words, “truthiness” is a gut assessment of the truth value of propositions.
The Challenge of Mode 2

• Knowledge is increasingly produced in contexts of application, i.e., *all* science is ‘applied’ science.

• Science is increasingly transdisciplinary, i.e., it draws on and integrates elements from many fields.

• Knowledge is generated in a wide variety of sites, not just universities and industry, but also in research centers, consultancies, and think-tanks.

• Scientists are aware of the societal implications of their work.

• Publics are conscious of the ways in which science and technology affect their interests and values.
A separatist strategy:
A non-linear approach:

• If we abandon “truth,” what’s left?
  • Only “truthiness”?
• One answer (USA): *The Fifth Branch*
  • Seek “serviceable truths”
  • Legitimated as “science” through boundary work
• Revisiting *The Fifth Branch* as apparatus of public reason in an era
  • Of global Mode 2 knowledge production
  • Of increasing knowledge about the constructed nature of facts
Regulatory science: An epistemic-political hybrid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Regulatory science</th>
<th>Research science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Truths” relevant to policy</td>
<td>“Truths” of originality and significance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutions</td>
<td>Government, Industry</td>
<td>Universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Products</td>
<td>Studies and data analyses, often unpublished</td>
<td>Published papers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incentives</td>
<td>Compliance with legal requirements</td>
<td>Professional recognition and advancement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time-frame</td>
<td>Statutory timetables, political pressure</td>
<td>Open-ended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Options</td>
<td>Acceptance of evidence, rejection of evidence</td>
<td>Acceptance of evidence, rejection of evidence, waiting for more data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability Institutions</td>
<td>Congress, courts, media</td>
<td>Professional peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures</td>
<td>Audits and site visits, regulatory peer review, judicial review, legislative oversight</td>
<td>Peer review, formal and informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standards</td>
<td>Absence of fraud or misrepresentation, conformity to approved protocols and agency guidelines, legal tests of sufficiency (e.g., substantial evidence, preponderance of the evidence)</td>
<td>Absence of fraud or misrepresentation, conformity to methods accepted by peer scientists, statistical significance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why value facts?
In democratic societies, we value facts that sustain associated normative and social orders.
The (Undervalued) Analytic-Deliberative Model

Sheila Jasanoff (Harvard Kennedy School)
## Public Knowledge and Civic Epistemologies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>US</strong></th>
<th><strong>UK</strong></th>
<th><strong>Germany</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public knowledge-making</strong></td>
<td>Pluralist, interest-based</td>
<td>Embodied, service-based</td>
<td>Corporatist, institution-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public Accountability</strong></td>
<td>Assumptions of distrust Legal</td>
<td>Assumptions of trust Relational</td>
<td>Assumptions of trust Role-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demonstration (practices)</strong></td>
<td>Socio-technical experiments</td>
<td>Empirical science</td>
<td>Expert rationality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Objectivity (styles)</strong></td>
<td>Numerical; reasoned</td>
<td>Negotiated</td>
<td>Negotiated; reasoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expertise (preferred modes)</strong></td>
<td>Formal methods</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Training, skills, experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
National Constructions of Expert Legitimacy: Three “Bodies” of Expertise

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bodies of knowledge</th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>United Kingdom</th>
<th>Germany</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Formal (&quot;sound&quot;) science</strong></td>
<td>Empirical common knowledge</td>
<td>Collectively reasoned knowledge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Technically most qualified experts</strong></td>
<td>Experienced “safe hands”</td>
<td>Authorized institutional representatives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pluralistic, interested, but fairly balanced (stakeholder)</strong></td>
<td>Members capable of discerning the public good (civil service)</td>
<td>Representative and inclusive of all relevant views (public sphere)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodies of knowledge (United States)</td>
<td>Nature of Objectivity</td>
<td>Normative Commitments</td>
<td>Administrative Practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| View from nowhere (transcendental) | • Open access to information  
• Transparency  
• Public comment and criticism | • Freedom of Information  
• Public comment  
• Legal challenge and review |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Embodied experts (United Kingdom)</th>
<th>Nature of Objectivity</th>
<th>Normative Commitments</th>
<th>Administrative Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| View from everywhere (empirical, observational) | • Issue-specific experience  
• Dedication to the public good  
• Balanced judgment | • Nominations from the public  
• Principles of public life  
• Conflict of interest rules |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advisory bodies (Germany)</th>
<th>Nature of Objectivity</th>
<th>Normative Commitments</th>
<th>Administrative Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| View from everywhere (reasoned) | • Inclusion of all relevant voices  
• Willingness to accommodate reasons of others | • Representation of relevant institutional voices  
• Appointment of substitute members |
Cascade of Deference

• **SCIENCE FOR ACTION** is not only about epistemic issues, nor about “getting the science right” *before* moving to normative decisions.

• A Cascade of Deference
• **OBJECTIVITY**
  • Constructed within diverse traditions of authorizing expertise
• **CONSENSUS**
  • Rests on prior assumptions of legitimate politics and policy
• **PRECAUTION**
  • Has roots everywhere and respects fact-value hybridity
• **SUBSIDIARITY**
  • Is warranted when costs of impinging on liberty and autonomy outweigh risks of non-cooperation
Health risk governance in a "post" everything world
A constitutional convention for the 21st century?
Grand Challenges for Expertise

- Institutional devolution
  - Resurgent national constitutions of knowledge | power
  - Expanded time horizons (irreversible interventions, new virus strains)
  - Heightened populism (increasing citizen expertise)
  - Frayed gatekeeping (publication by Tweet)
  - Recalibrated morality (whose responsibility, what stewardship?)

- Political implications and consequences
  - Asking the right questions
  - Revisiting representation
  - Re-theorizing reason
Thank you!