Commentary on Fields

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Commentary on John E. Fields’ “Internet Testimony and the Alleged Culture of Youth Gullibility”

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1. INTRODUCTION

John Fields takes up the problem of why we ever prudently rely on others’ words. As he notes, our predicament may be even more pressing online. We can now receive communications from any of the billion or more other internet users. But “looking at typed letters on a screen” is not, as Fields remarks, “a particularly effective way of determining” whether what those letters express is true.

Fields’ elegant and (I believe) cogent solution is the Commitment View of testimony. According to this View, we are warranted in relying on someone’s testimony because in testifying, he has committed himself to the truth of what he is saying, and even to allowing himself to be cross-examined about it. We can presume that he would not rashly put his reputation for veracity at risk, and therefore conclude that he is taking care to tell the truth.

In his paper, Fields outlines this View in some detail, and shows its power by proposing a finer-grained analysis of why students are reasonable when they check only the first few pages of a Google search, glance over a website’s design, or are influenced by fake Better Business Bureau seals. In this response, I want to start by picking up a hint Fields throws out briefly, and tying the problem of relying on what someone says back to an even more general dilemma. Testimony, I will suggest, is one of the many practical strategies we can use to create conditions which justify reliance. The online context presents new challenges to the strategy of testimony, but there are ways to modify it so that it will still do its job. Nevertheless, I argue that some of the student behaviour Fields reports is indeed imprudent. So while I find Fields’ overall approach rewarding, and his defence of undergraduates noble, I must also conclude: our students are gullible!

2. SOURCES AND RECEPIENTS OF TESTIMONY AS AGENTS AND PRINCIPALS

Fields asks how R (the recipient, say an undergraduate, or me) can ever prudently rely on what S (a speaker, a source of testimony, say the author of a website) tells her. S holds himself out as telling me the truth. But he, and not me, knows whether he’s a honest...
person in general, and whether what he’s telling me now actually is true. He, not me—for otherwise, I wouldn’t ordinarily be bothering to ask him.¹

Not to belabour the obvious, there are many reasons for me to at least consider the hypothesis that S is not telling me the truth; he may be an habitual liar, or may have interests which in the immediate situation which rank higher than his interest in veracity. Thus I’m facing a dilemma—a dilemma, as Walton (1997) has noted, already well recognized in antiquity. I need S to tell me the truth about some matter, but because I need him, I can’t really assess whether he’s doing so. It seems that I can only, as Fields says, rely “upon S’s word to establish whether S’s word is to be relied upon.” If so, the prudent choice would be for me to ignore his testimony, and seek the information by other means.

We can’t seem to get this communicative transaction to work because of “asymmetric information”—R is being asked to rely on S, although it is only S who possesses the information needed to assess whether he’s worthy of reliance. As suggested by Fields’ cite to Akerlof’s Nobel-winning work on the market for lemons, this problem for communicative transactions is just a special case of a problem for transactions generally: what has been called the “principal-agent problem” (e.g., Shapiro 2005; Mitnick 2008). Asymmetric information threatens to close down all sorts of transactions:

• transactions between stockholders who need to figure out whether to rely on CEOs to conduct their business, and CEOs who know more about the operation of the business than stockholders do.
• transactions between managers who need to figure out whether to rely on employees to do their jobs, and employees who know better than the managers whether they’re competent.
• transactions between health insurers who need to figure out whether to rely on applicants by insuring them, and applicants who know better than insurers their own health or sickness.
• transactions between legislators who need to figure out whether they can rely on bureaucrats, and bureaucrats who know better than legislators how they’ll implement the laws on a day to day basis.

Now, transactions such as these go on every day even in the face of asymmetric information. Participants in them are facing a practical problem, and there are many practical strategies they can use to manage it—strategies, as Fields say, which allow “R to rely upon S” without having “to try to establish beforehand S’s” reliability. For example, managers may find it easier to rely on their employees not to shirk if they offer profit-sharing as an incentive; or they may try to get more information by monitoring their employees actual conduct, firing those who don’t measure up (see Klein 2000 and Shapiro 1987 for extensive catalogues of similar means).

Fields explains to us that in the communicative context, one standard solution is for the speaker to offer a bond. This strategy is easy enough to understand. Why should I

¹ There are exceptions; as for example, when I ask students exam questions, I know the right answer better than they do. In these cases, what I call below the “strategy of testimony” is likely unnecessary. Thus students don’t need to “testify” in their exam answers, and in fact, they don't need to vouch for the truth of what they write at all.
rely on S? Let’s say he offers to put a million dollars in the hands of a person I trust, to be surrendered to me in case it turns out that what S says isn’t true. I can reason that S doesn’t want to lose the money, and so will likely take care to tell me the truth. Of course, most speakers don’t have millions of dollars available to post as bonds, so instead they put at risk a resource they do have, namely, their reputation for veracity. As Fields puts it:

Reputation, on this View, is the only thing that a testimonial source S has to offer an addressee or recipient R that would help to convince R that S is cooperating with R in achieving at least some of R’s epistemic and doxastic goals. By openly espousing certain claims and thereby inviting further inspection, S makes herself potentially vulnerable to embarrassment, scorn, even ridicule. She risks the likelihood of losing her reputation, of being designated by her peers as an unreliable collaborator in their respective searches, either with respect to some specific situations and subject matter or more generally.

In openly taking responsibility for what he is saying, and even risking cross-examination about it, S enables his auditor, R, to reason in any or all of the following (interrelated) fashions:

- S considers himself truthful; he would be chagrined to find that he has spoken falsely. Therefore, to prevent this, he’s likely to tell me the truth.
- S values my opinion of him; he would be pained if I thought less of him because he had spoken falsely. Therefore (etc.)
- S values his reputation in the community; he would be injured if it became known that he had spoken falsely. Therefore (etc.)

In telling me something, S commits himself to it; I can rely on him to protect his own self-recognition, his recognition by me, or his recognition from the community at large—in sum, his dignity—by telling me the truth. Our words are our bonds, literally.

3. THE STRATEGY OF TESTIMONY IN ONLINE CONTEXTS

Will this strategy work in online contexts? Other things being equal, the speaker’s practical strategy of offering his reputation as a bond creates a good reason for the recipient to rely on his testimony. But, as Kenneth Burke once said, other things never are equal. Local circumstances will often make the bond offered questionable, and the strategy itself will therefore have to be adapted. And much online communication falls into this category. Although online speakers can take responsibility in the same ways that speakers do face-to-face, in many instances, online speakers cannot be held responsible. The online speaker therefore has difficulty assuring me that he is risking his reputation on the truth of what he is telling me. Consider:

- online, it may be that I don’t know who in the world S is, so I can’t be assured that he would be chagrined to speak dishonestly.
- online, it may be that I don’t know whether S and I will ever have dealings again, so I can’t be assured that he cares about his standing with me.
online, it may be that I don’t know that the wider community of internet users will ever find out if S lies to me.2

In the online context, it is as if the speaker is trying to offer me a million dollar bond, but cannot locate a third party whom I trust to hold the cash. But if a speaker cannot take an enforceable risk, it’s not reasonable for me to undertake a transaction with him. The practical strategy which constitutes the act of testifying won’t work in the online context.

Because of the lack of effective reputation-enforcement mechanisms online, at least one of the undergraduate behaviours Fields discusses appears to me to be imprudent: the self-announced Better Business Bureau seal of approval. Fields hypothesizes that the Recipient of such a webpage can reason that someone would have caught that the graphic was fake, let’s say when they attempted to buy something from it and went to the Better Business Bureau for satisfaction.” But in the online context, what could the BBB do about the fraudulent use of their seal, committed (let’s say) by an anonymous user on a page hosted on a server in Estonia? In fact what the BBB did in response to a similar instance online fraud was to issue a news release (Better Business Bureau 2007). Although a news release may be an effective method of notifying internet users who do independent investigations of a online speaker’s reliability, they have no effect on the fraudulent misuse itself. Online, such fraud may be functionally unpunishable. But if Speakers cannot be held responsible for misuse of the seal, the seal by itself can provide me no assurance, and I have no reason to rely on the testimony.

In this case, I believe that the undergraduate behaviour Fields reports from the studies is significantly imprudent. Can there then be no reliable communication online? A second case from Fields’ paper shows us one way the basic practical strategy of testimony can be adapted to work in the online context. Undergraduates apparently stick with sites from the first or second page of a Google search. That’s not surprising, since I often do likewise. Why is this behaviour reasonable? Because we Google users are right to rely on Google, which is acting as a third-party guarantor of the reputation3 of the sites it ranks highly. (Notice that in this case the internet user consults Google about a

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2 Indeed, I’m not sure whether the set of all internet users is a “community” among whom a speaker even can have a reputation (at least, absent some efforts to construct such a community; see below). There may be hundreds of thousands of internet users out there with opinions about S’s reliability. But their opinions are not manifest to each other. Online, there may be no mutual knowledge of S’s reliability—in other words, S has no reputation. Field’s remarks about how reputations are established and changed reflect communication patterns more common in face-to-face contexts than online. He refers to “the alacrity with which a reputation for incompetence or insincerity spreads and the intensity of negative feelings that it tends to occasion,” and imagines that “people from all over the world have read these [online] claims and talked about them with their friends, family, fellow students, and fellow Internet user.” But such face-to-face, local communications seem to me to be unlikely to constitute a global, internet reputation for S.

3 To be precise, Google undertakes to lead searchers to “important” websites. Although the exact definition of “importance” is a trade secret (and evolving), one of the variables in the algorithm is the number of links to the website from other websites—and even more specifically, from other “important” websites (Aubuchon 2009 [a website I found on the first page of a Google search for “google rankings”]). Linking to a website suggests that the link-er has some confidence in its quality. An algorithm which takes such linking into account therefore provides an indirect measure of the website’s general repute online. In fact, I think something stronger can be said: Google's rank-ordered results list, based on its “importance” algorithm, make “the Web's” (i.e., everyone's) assessment of a website manifest to everyone: it constitutes a website's reputation.
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website’s Google ranking, instead of taking the website’s word for it.) But why are we prudent to rely on Google? For the same reasons we rely in face-to-face contexts.

- The Googlers are manifestly proud that the algorithm underlying their search engine offers users results which are not only relevant but also highly regarded by other internet users. Based on Google’s conspicuous undertaking, and what I know of its history and culture, I’m convinced that the Googlers would be deeply disturbed if their algorithm was not leading searchers to reputable websites.
- I’m not in a one-time transaction with Google; I know they want me to return, which I won’t do if they consistently lead me to sites with a poor reputation.
- Google is a much-written-about, publicly-traded service business that has an international reputation of its own to protect. Although that reputation wouldn’t be much hurt by my individual complaint, if their algorithm is way off, it’s likely my complaint won’t be alone. So it’s reasonable to think that poor performance for me will hurt Google’s reputation.

In short, I can reasonably conclude that Google is risking its own reputation (with itself, with me, and with the world at large) when they offer me a rank ordering of websites. So as a Recipient, I have no problem relying on Google’s rankings, at least in a general way and on matters of relatively low importance. In particular, for many information needs it seems reasonable to conclude that Google has taken care that the two or three of the most reputable sites appear somewhere among the top 20 in the results list.

It’s worth noting how the details of this strategy for making online communication work tend to confirm the basic soundness of Fields’ Commitment View. As above, Google offers users a metric of a website’s reputation with other reputable websites. EBay and Amazon Marketplace do something similar; both aggregate feedback from a seller’s prior transactions into a reputation measure signalled by “star” icons. These and other evolving strategies online reinforce the idea that reputation is key to communicative transactions. When participants online cannot put their own reputations at risk, they seek to involve third parties who can, and who can by doing so certify to Recipients the reputation of Speakers.

4. CONCLUSION

I agree with Fields that decrying undergraduate gullibility is not worth our time. In fact, as an ancient Chinese sage once said, “the bad are the makings of good”—our students’ imprudence keeps us teachers in business. And I also agree with him that undergraduates

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4 Google says: "We stand alone in our focus on developing the "perfect search engine," defined by co-founder Larry Page as something that, "understands exactly what you mean and gives you back exactly what you want." To that end, we have persistently pursued innovation and infrastructure and breakthrough PageRank™ technology that changed the way searches are conducted. . . . Traditional search engines rely heavily on how often a word appears on a web page. We use more than 200 signals, including our patented PageRank™ algorithm, to examine the entire link structure of the web and determine which pages are most important. We then conduct hypertext-matching analysis to determine which pages are relevant to the specific search being conducted. By combining overall importance and query-specific relevance, we're able to put the most relevant and reliable results first" (Google 2009).
likely know (in some sense) how they should be reasoning in deciding whether to rely on websites.

We disagree, however, as to the cause of the undergraduate failings. He believes they lack the content knowledge that would enable them to apply their reasoning skills. I think the required content knowledge is quite limited; recipients of online testimony only need to realize that they don’t know whether the source will get into trouble for false testimony. Instead, my sense is that undergraduates aren’t choosing to use their reasoning skills much at all. They may be relying instead on heuristics or “secondary processing.” In the face-to-face world of college, a rule of thumb like “the easiest available source is reliable” works: most everything available on campus has been certified by at least two reliable third parties (the editor/publisher and the librarian/professor). But this heuristic obviously leads to poor results online.

If my guess is right, I’m confident that when necessary, students will be able to use “primary processing” to figure out when to rely. Life, if not college, will learn them.

References