

the variables are, and how much risk is involved in judging and predicting the odds. However, as critical thinkers, we do not assume that all the authorities we consult are always right; in the last analysis, we make our own decisions based on our own research and our decisions about the experts' opinions.

Standards for Judging Opinions

1. Is this opinion an expression of sentiment, belief, ideas and feelings, or a judgment?
2. Does this opinion require support? If so, is it sufficient?
4. Is this opinion debatable? Credible?
5. Is this the opinion of an expert with a reputation for reliability?
6. Does this opinion seem to be based on a study of the facts?
7. Does this opinion claim to be a fact?

Discussion/Writing

1. Give an example of a time you succeeded in getting your opinion across.
2. In your family or community, was opinion sharing encouraged or discouraged?
3. How do you interpret the expression: "Everyone is entitled to an opinion"?

Opinions are not Facts

A fact is something *known* with certainty to exist or have existed. The actuality and truth of a fact can be verified through experience, observation, measurements, testimony, records, experimentation, testing and research.

An opinion is an *interpretation* of experience, ideas, facts or evidence. Opinions express what we feel, think and judge. Opinions offer advice, they evaluate, state preferences, express taste, share conclusions and certainties. Opinions are debatable, whereas facts, once established, are not.

Seeing the definitions of facts and opinions side by side can be instructive. It becomes apparent how much trouble can develop from confusing the two. After studying the definitions given in the box above, test your

own understanding of their differences through the following examples. Discussion questions will follow.

1. Physician: What are your symptoms?
Patient: I had a heart attack. I know I had one.
Physician: What are your symptoms?
2. Judge: What exactly did your husband do to you on September 14?
Woman: I was abused, insulted and abandoned by that criminal called my husband.
Judge: What exactly did he do to you on September 14?
Woman: Well, he yelled at me, calling me a word that I won't repeat. Then he left the house and did not return.
3. News Interviewer: I notice that you use charged words a lot in describing your political opponents. For instance, you refer to them as Nazis, hucksters, and deadbeats.
Politician: That's because I think the words are accurate.
4. "Carbon dioxide is portrayed as harmful. But there isn't even one study that can be produced that shows that carbon dioxide is a harmful gas." (Michele Bachman)
5. "Let's start with these facts. Really poor children in really poor neighborhoods have no habits of working and nobody in their families have jobs. So they have no habit of showing up on Monday. They have no habit of staying at work all day." (Newt Gingrich)

Questions for Discussion

1. Which of these examples offer opinions when asked for facts?
2. Which seem to assume their opinions are facts?
3. Which opinions seem to be drawn from confusion about the facts?

The Intermingling of Facts and Opinions

It is easy to get confused when facts and opinions are intermingled. In reading newspapers, for instance, we expect news reports to stick mainly to the facts, leaving opinions to editorials and letters to editors. On television news programs, we expect interviewers to remain neutral while inviting their guests to express opinions. But there are times when we hear reporters or anchors step over the line. Moreover, within speeches and news articles, facts and opinions are often intermingled. The following is a short quiz to test your ability to separate facts from opinions.

Writing/Discussion

Underline the facts and encircle the opinions.

1. Home schooling in the U.S. grew from around one million in 1999 to between 2.5 and 4 million in 2007. This growth is due to the failure of public education to meet student needs.
2. Today the stock market rose on the news that retail sales were up for the Holidays!
3. A Facebook phone may sound like a good idea, but consumers won't buy it.
4. The real name of Woody Allen, the greatest American comic genius, was Allen Konigsberg.
5. The deficit-busting "super committee" was doomed to failure. (Headline. *L.A. Times*, 22 November 2011)
6. "Among patients with increased cardiovascular risk, sodium intake that is too high or too low appears to be associated with an elevated risk of cardiovascular events, an analysis of two large, randomized controlled trials showed." (*MedPage Today*, 22 November 2011)
7. A 19-year-old man pleaded not guilty to the charge of impersonating six students, including a girl, to take tests for them. It was alleged that he was paid up to \$3,500 per test.
8. The Oregon governor has announced that he will ban the death penalty for the rest of his term because he was morally opposed to capital punishment. The governor said: "I don't believe executions make us safer."
9. TV Anchor: "Well, we have just heard another presidential debate where the candidates revealed some gaps and gaffes concerning their knowledge of history and geography."

Public Opinion

"There is no such thing as public opinion. There is only published opinion." (Winston Churchill)

Winston Churchill's words might have been perceptive about public opinion in the 20th century if he meant that the only public opinion that mattered was what got into newspapers. He might also have been implying that those who controlled the press would always be able to shape and censor public opinion. With the growth of computer literacy in the 21st century, all this was about to change. Suddenly there was an explosion of opinion sharing and broadcasting through e-mail newsgroups, blogs, the social media, cell phone texting, and comment columns. Online retailers began to invite us to comment

on their products. Hotels asked us to review their accommodations. Online television news sites like CBS and PBS invite our comments. Now we routinely use YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook to broadcast our likes and dislikes. Thus there are ample opportunities to articulate and broadcast—without expense—whatever we see and feel. We can post our ideas up for challenge, challenge others, converse, influence and change one another's minds. In the U.S. this freedom has fostered new political pressure groups such as Moveon.org and The Tea Party. And it has stirred up revolutions in countries where the free sharing of opinion had hitherto been unknown. By 2011, political opinion linked to political activism erupted with the Arab Spring, the Occupy Wall Street movement and with the protests in Russia. Suddenly the morning news showed us images of people holding up their cell phones and iPads to record and broadcast their actions and their treatment by the police. Written opinions, held up to cameras appeared written on panels torn off of cardboard boxes, or even on lined pieces of notebook paper. Around the world anyone with a computer could witness people literally on the street engaged in direct political expression. Instead of hoping for media coverage, protesters found themselves providing the mass media with footage.

Discussion

1. Have you ever submitted a video to YouTube?
2. Do you participate in the social media? How do you and your friends share their opinion there?
3. Do you participate in blogs or comment columns?
4. Do you think it is a good thing for people to unite in expressing their political opinions even if they use unconventional ways to get attention?

Looking at Public Opinion Polls

We can have informed opinions about polls.

DISCOVERY EXERCISE

Poll on Polls

(1) Write out your answers to the following questions. (2) Form small groups in which to share your answers.

1. Have you ever been interviewed by a pollster?
2. If so, was it a marketing poll or a public survey?