

May 18th, 9:00 AM - May 21st, 5:00 PM

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Goodwin, Jean, "Demonstrating objectivity in controversial science communication: A case study of GMO scientist Kevin Folta" (2016). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 69.

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# Demonstrating Objectivity in Controversial Science Communication: A Case Study of GMO Scientist Kevin Folta

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**Abstract:** Scientists can find it difficult to be seen as objective within the chaos of a civic controversy. This paper gives a normative pragmatic account of the strategy one GMO scientist used to demonstrate his trustworthiness. Kevin Folta made his talk expensive by undertaking to answer all questions, and carried out this responsibility by acting as if every comment addressed to him—even the most hostile—was in fact a question in good faith. This presumption of audience good faith gave in turn his audience good reason to presume his good faith, and a situation of reciprocal distrust was transformed into one with the potential for reciprocal candor.

**Keywords:** argument, argumentation, controversy, candor, GMOs, Kevin Folta, normative pragmatics, science communication, scientific objectivity, trust

## 1. Introduction

We want our countries' very expensive science to contribute to our political decision-making. As soon as science enters the public sphere, however, it gets caught up in the often heated controversies characteristic of our democracies. Democratic deliberations bring together diverse people and inevitably invite disagreements. We'd like science to be in the arena, but above the fray; or at a minimum, to cut across current battle lines. Judging from our linguistic habits, we are looking to science to stand in contrast to politics: to be non-partisan, im-partial, dis-interested, dis-passionate, im-personal, un-committed, un-biased, un-prejudiced. In short, we look to science to be objective.

What does it mean for science to be objective? As usual, philosophers have come up with many answers (e.g., Janack, 2002; Reiss & Sprenger, 2014). In this paper, I take a different tack. While for those of us at OSSA the nature of scientific objectivity in political deliberations is an interesting theoretical question, for those trying to bring science to publics it is an urgent practical task. How can scientific objectivity be made apparent—and even forceful—within the “barnyard” of political life? I am going to presume that science (most of it, most of the time) is objective; instead I want to ask: how can public science not only *be* objective, but even *seem* to be so?

This is the kind of question that the normative pragmatic approach to argumentation theory has been raising for some time now (e.g., Goodwin, 2000, 2001; Innocenti, 2007; Jacobs, 2000; Kauffeld, 1998; Kauffeld, 2009). We do not assume that participants in an argumentative transaction or “dialogue”—especially in civic life—will inevitably be cooperative, reasonable, or possessed of any of the multitude of virtues that make transactions run well. Instead, we examine what arguers themselves can do to design or modify the contexts in which arguments are exchanged. Arguers bear some responsibility for creating the conditions in which their arguments will be heard, considered, and assessed. As Aristotle pointed out (*Rhetoric*, 1.1), it is up to speakers to ensure that what is true manages to prevail.

I here advance the normative pragmatic program and our understanding of how to display scientific objectivity through a case study of a scientist grappling with the problem of making objectivity apparent. Kevin Folta is a professor of horticulture who studies strawberries. He also has undertaken an active program of public communication on transgenic crops—in ordinary parlance, GMOs—blogging, podcasting, giving numerous public talks and training other scientists how to do the same. Needless to say, GMOs are a controversial topic and Folta has repeatedly found himself in the middle of the dispute. Most notably, in September, 2015 he was featured in an above-the-fold article in the Sunday *New York Times*, which described how his emails, released through a FOIA request from an anti-GMO group, showed that his public communication project had received a \$25K grant from Monsanto, the much-scorned biotech company (Lipton, 2015).

This incident encapsulates a central challenge of scientific objectivity in political controversies. Of course, the easiest way preserve a public appearance of objectivity is to take the “Caesar’s wife” approach and not get anywhere near industry money. Realistically, however, it is very difficult for scientists to avoid any entanglement with economic, political and social interests; after all, someone must be paying for their work. (Climate change skeptics, for example, routinely accuse climate scientists of perpetuating a myth in order to stay on the “climate change” gravy train.) In Folta’s case, is a grant from “the world’s most evil corporation” enough to damn him? Or do the facts that the funds were fully disclosed according to his university’s rules and given to the university for outreach and not to him personally or for research relieve him of suspicion? Opinion on this issue tends to fall out based on prior beliefs. Anti-GMO folk conclude that he is an industry shill. Pro-GMO folk see him as a victim of an anti-science inquisition. But if the audience’s view on a scientist’s objectivity is driven entirely by their view on the underlying political issue, then the scientist can contribute nothing unique to the deliberative process (a point trenchantly made by Kahan, Jenkins-Smith, & Braman, 2011). The scientist’s objectivity is already blessed or damned for partisan reasons, before he even opens his mouth. Objectivity thus lacks force to alter preconceived opinions; science becomes just one additional kind of ammo for the warring sides. And that seems a shame.

Scientists need practical methods to ensure that they are seen as objective even in the midst of controversies; for being in the political world, but not of the political world. We can look to Folta, a masterful scientist-communicator, to gain a sense of how this can be done. A few months prior to his front page appearance, Folta had visited my campus for both a training and talk; I here analyze the latter (Folta, 2015). Overall, it had a typical pattern of organization. The introduction announced his goal, explained who he is, previewed his main points, and made explicit his overall perspective that new technologies can be beneficial. He then developed his three points: what GMOs are, why people resist them, and what future holds for biotechnology. And he closed with a brief conclusion wrapping up the value appeals of the talk. As I will fill out more below, the talk is remarkable for the way it gives the audience good reasons to trust Folta’s objectivity.

## **2. What objectivity looks like**

The objectivity we are interested in is a personal characteristic: the question for an audience is whether the *scientist* can be trusted to be objective. So an obvious first course for Folta is project an ethos that shows himself to be non-partisan, im-partial, dis-interested, un-biased and so on.

Indeed, throughout his presentation Folta presents balanced information, stressing for example the potential harms along with the benefits of GMOs. Overall, this “is a technology that can have some risk, that you could potentially have a problem,” [0:15] he is careful to explain at the beginning. As he discusses individual crops he makes these limitations explicit, identifying several downsides for each. For one, he notes a “really important...a major problem” [0:29]; for another, he says that “there are a lot of valid criticisms of this particular product” [0:45]. And he concludes by explaining that although GMOs have been “demonstrated as safe over many years, of course everything has to be considered on a case by case basis” [0:52]. Going beyond journalistic balance, Folta offsets the overall pro-GMO tendency of his talk by disavowing or even arguing against several of the standard pro-GMO claims. He acknowledges, for example, that GM monoculture has led to the evolution of herbicide-resistant weeds, saying that anyone who had predicted otherwise would have been “wrong” [1:00]. He echoes the language and spirit of anti-GMO activists in spurning monoculture [1:41], praising organic agriculture [1:39], expressing disdain for big corporations [0:36], and denouncing the notion that GMOs could ever be the “silver bullet” for all farm problems [e.g., 1:28]—sometimes to the surprise of his audience. “This isn’t ‘biotech will save the world’—I don’t believe that,” he says with scorn.

But I believe that there will be some important cases where this technology can change the life for some people, some populations that can benefit, farmers in some countries that can derive some sort of relief, farmers in Florida that can see their citrus crop restored. It may not change *the* world, but it can change *a* world, and if that world is your world, it’s an important world. [0:53]

These remarks are delivered with apparent passion and conviction. Will they be enough to demonstrate objectivity to a reasonably skeptical audience? The problem is that saying things like this is “cheap talk.” It’s an easy thing to do, whether or not it’s true. The apparent passion may be *merely* apparent. Folta’s friends at Monsanto (using “Monsanto” as the standard synecdoche for the biotech industry) would likely forgive him this verbal disloyalty, if it had the effect of alleviating some of the sentiment against them.

A display of ethos isn’t enough. Instead, Folta needs to do something to make his talk *expensive* (Goodwin & Dahlstrom, 2013): to bear costs if the ethos he is projecting turns out to be insincere. The normative pragmatic perspective suggests that one key method speakers have for doing this is by undertaking enforceable commitments to their audiences. The practical rationale works like this:

NP Step 1. A speaker openly takes responsibility for what he is saying.

NP Step 2. By openly taking responsibility, the speaker has made himself vulnerable in case things go wrong. If he fails to meet his responsibility, he can now be held responsible by his audience; he can be the object of blame, be criticized and/or penalized.

NP Step 3. The speaker’s vulnerability licenses his audience to reason as follows: “He would not dare to put himself in this position unless he was confident that he can and will meet his responsibilities.”

NP Step 4. This reasoning about the speaker licenses his audience to trust what he is saying.

In the most basic case, a speaker takes responsibility for the truth of what he says, and his undertaking licenses his audience to believe it (Kauffeld, 2001). More broadly, the responsibilities speakers undertake are quite varied, tailored to meet the audience's specific reasons for distrust. For example, audiences may doubt whether it's worth their time even to consider a new plan; in making a proposal a speaker undertakes a burden to answer all their reasonable doubts and objections, an undertaking which licenses his audience to give the plan their serious consideration (Kauffeld, 1998). Again, an audience may doubt whether an expert is speaking within his expertise; in exercising her authority a speaker takes responsibility for speaking as an expert, an undertaking which licenses his audience to defer to what she is saying (Goodwin, 2010; 2011). Or an audience may be concerned that some subject is really too technical for them; in making a report a speaker undertakes to put his audience in a position to critically assess the subject, an undertaking which licenses his audience to be willing to explore it (Kauffeld, 2012).

Let us therefore examine how Folta makes his talk expensive by taking responsibility. Right at the beginning of his talk, after thanking the audience for their presence, he immediately proceeds to frame the interaction he is about to have with them:

The story I'd like to tell you about tonight or the information I'd like to give you really comes from that desire to distill what we know from the scientific literature and make it understandable to people who are concerned—a general public that hears a lot of information from a lot of different sources and doesn't always have the proper scientific level of scrutiny. [0:02]

This statement may seem abstract and almost descriptive—Folta does not, for example, lay claim to “that desire” or identify his immediate audience with that “general public.” But very quickly Folta turns personal, avowing his dedication to helping this audience understand. After giving a brief overview of his work, he goes on to announce his purpose:

I really want you to understand the nuts and bolts of how this stuff works so that if you're walking out of here, whether you love the stuff or hate the stuff, that you know exactly how it works. [0:02]

Folta's orientation is thus exclusively towards helping his audience understand; as he later says, he is “not gonna argue” [0:20, 0:56], nor try to change the minds of the “lovers” or “haters.” This express desire, however, could still be construed as a form of cheap talk, since it potentially risks little. Even if the exchange between him and his audience breaks down, he could claim that he had done his best to help them understand, and thus wiggle out of blame. After a detour through a story about our love/hate relationships with new technology, he therefore proceeds to back up his express desire by openly taking on a responsibility:

And by the way, I neglected to mention: I'll stick around for questions and answers as long as you want to go tonight. I have to be on a plane at six a.m. in Des Moines, which means that I've got to be out of here by four [a.m.]. So, we'll pull that off. [0:09]

Folta circles back to reiterate this central undertaking at the end of his prepared talk, announcing that “I’m staying around as long as you are and I’m happy to answer any of your questions” [0:54]. Finally, he repeats the undertaking when after more than an hour of Q&A no further questions are forthcoming, promising to continue answering questions indefinitely:

Oh, I made it. My voice lasted the whole night. If you have any follow-up questions, I would be really happy to talk to you anytime. Just send me an email. I’m always pretty accessible. Most of all I really appreciate you sticking around tonight. It was really nice of all of you to do that. So thank you very much and have a really good night. Thank you. [2:07]

In contrast to the relatively cheap expression of his general purpose to achieve understanding, this open undertaking of responsibility is expensive. It sets a specific and enforceable standard. If Folta fails to answer questions, he is now going to be open to criticism. The risk he runs if he fails to live up to this responsibility licenses his audience to infer that he well prepared to help them—both the “lovers” and “haters”—understand the technology. This in turn licenses them to invest their time and attention in what he has to say.

Folta’s basic strategy fulfills the schema articulated in normative pragmatics. He gives his audience a reason to trust. But will it be a good enough reason? Under the circumstances, not likely, at least with one segment of his audience. An anti-GMO audience member could reasonably suspect that Folta would give his answers a positive spin, sneaking in some “stealth advocacy” (Pielke, 2007) under cover of explaining the technology. They could fear that given his superior expertise, they won’t be able to catch his distortions. And the fact that he’s willing to answer questions indefinitely doesn’t prove that he’s unbiased; any advocate wants to keep his audience in their seats for as long as possible.

Folta needs to do something above and beyond the basic strategy to earn the trust of these reasonably skeptical audience members. What is that something? In fact, the very severity of controversy that makes Folta appear (to some) untrustworthy also makes available to him an additional strategy for earning trust. Let’s start by noticing that the fears of bias in this case are reciprocal: Folta has some reasonable concerns of his own. Anti-GMO audience members might badger him with questions, not in order to understand—they might think they *already* understand—but in order to show him up, aggravate him or simply to waste his time. They might try to argue with him, or get angry and heckle him. Even as some in his audience may suspect him of giving biased explanations, Folta himself has reason to expect that his explanations will be met with a biased reception.

There is plenty of evidence in the speech to show that Folta understands that he may receive a biased reception from at least some in his audience. Nowhere does he try to minimize the broader controversy over GMOs; quite the contrary, he repeatedly makes the background controversy visible in the immediate event. His initial goals statement quoted above acknowledges an audience who may “love the stuff or hate the stuff.” He puts the range of opinion in his immediate audience on display by polling them to reveal who thinks genetic modification is a “really great idea” and “not such a good idea,” [0:11]. He acknowledges the emotions driving the “hate the stuff” faction, showing several slides reflecting fears of “frankenfood,” e.g., an ear of corn getting injected with some mysterious chemical. So if anything, Folta encourages his audience remember the depth of disagreement on the topic.

Ordinarily, a speaker expecting a biased reception tries to manage or limit the risk he faces of being badgered or insulted. Often he does this by qualifying his core obligations. Thus the speaker may undertake to respond to objections—if they are worth considering; to answer doubts—if they are reasonable; or, in situations like Folta’s, to reply to questions—if they are posed in good faith, by a person open to the answer. Qualifying the obligation allows the speaker to decline to engage with audience members who won’t treat him fairly.

But Folta does not take this approach. He nowhere qualifies his responsibility to answer all the audience’s questions. He sticks with his original undertaking, accepting the heightened risk of biased reception. Instead, he addresses the problem of abuse from his audience by acting as if it doesn’t exist, adopting what I will call an *aggressive presumption of good faith*. Complementing the impartial ethos he constructs for himself, he projects on his audience a “second persona” (Black, 1970) of being people with legitimate concerns, not driven by ideology, passion, or interest. He shows that he is confident that they will listen to what he says in an unbiased fashion, whether they are “lovers” or “haters” of GMOs. This is how he explicitly characterizes his audience, and it is implicit in the way he interacts with them—even when their lack of good faith is conspicuous.

Turn first to Folta’s explicit characterization of his audience. In response to a friendly question about how to communicate about GMOs, Folta explains:

really what we need to do is to remember that these [the audiences for scientists and farmers] are concerned people who are really worried about their health and worried about their food, and I love that. And how do we help them understand the science in very compassionate way as teachers, to help them understand.  
[1:46]

“People who are concerned” [0:02] about food is Folta’s first and most frequent description of his audience. “Whether we’re for or against this technology” [0:13], he explains, “we”—his audience and himself—care about the environment, care about farm sustainability, care about world hunger, and care about safe, healthy and affordable food for American consumers. “So these are our priorities,” he concludes; “and I think that if I polled the audience, . . . every hand would go up with every one of those target area. So whether you’re for this technology or against this technology, we all are on the same page at the end of the day” [0:15]. Note that he does not in fact poll his audience about their values; instead, he presumes they are primarily motivated by the legitimate concerns about food that he himself shares.

Folta’s presumption of audience good faith is also implicit in the way he interacts with his questioners. Many in the audience were pro-GMO—not surprising for an event on a campus known for the technology. In addition, an anti-GMO event was being held the same night. Of the 32 distinct question/answer sequences over the 73 minute question period, 15 were neutral, apparently good faith questions with no explicit markers of the questioner’s position vis-à-vis the controversy; for example:

You talked about using GMOs to add beta-carotene, what other vitamins could we add to plants? [1:59]  
How would you reply to someone who said, "I’m morally opposed to moving genes from one species into another from bacteria, plants and I don’t care to eat any food derived from that process?" [1:10]

Another 7 questions were friendly, where the speaker either identifies with the pro-GMO side or distances him- or herself from the anti-GMO side. Interestingly, these were largely concentrated towards the end of the question period, like the following:

So with less than 2 % of the American population being farmers, I'm guessing somewhere around there, [together] with scientists [who are for the technology]...and then you add people like Vandana Shiva...who have just these immense followings [who are against the technology], and then you have people in the middle who don't know which way to go, but the obvious clear way is with this evidence. How are we supposed to get to those people, get to them before these activists? [1:45]

It is of course easy—i.e., cheap—for Folta to interact with such good-faith questioners in a friendly fashion. There was also a contingent of anti-GMO folk, however, and it is in the discursive work he does with them that his commitment to treating everyone as willing to listen becomes most visible. His interactions with two audience members in particular are worthy of note.

Consider first the fourth questioner in, whom I will call Persistent Woman (PW). She starts by warning Folta that she has “a few questions, if that’s OK.” Folta invites her to “fire me” the first one, but suggests that to be fair he’ll then “go around” to other questioners, while also promising “that I’ll keep coming till you’re done, I’m happy to keep answering questions” [0:59]. Her question is a rather assertive one about alleged industry claims that weeds would not develop resistance to glyphosate (the herbicide that many GM crops are designed to withstand). Folta not only embraces the question (“I’d love to answer that” [1:00]), but also continues to give her chances to challenge his replies until wrapping up three minutes later by saying that “we should follow up on that,” and offering to send a relevant scientific paper [1:02].

After this first exchange, Folta fulfills his promise and comes back to PW seven additional times. PW’s initiating “questions” are often extended statements.

I think that’s one of the issues is the arrogance of the technology. We do this and there’s just not been a lot of study about its effects on the environment, the effects of things. The studies that are done are very minimal. [2:04]

I actually was referring to an article from the British Journal of Nutrition that was a review study of, I don’t know, some 60 or 100, right in there, it was definitely double digits, triple, of studies on organic versus non-organic. She [Vandana Shiva, who had given a talk on campus a few weeks before] kinda conflated non-organic with GMO but that’s somewhat reasonable to do. I mean, it was remarkably higher levels of antioxidants in the organic. [1:14]

As far as the word “technology” goes, I don’t think that GMO antagonists are against technology per se. I think that when you have a tool like genetic engineering, that’s like a hammer and then everything looks like a nail. So there’s a blindness problem because people aren’t getting enough Vitamin A or beta-carotene and so, "Oh, there’s one way to fix it!" You hit it on the head with a nail, you get a banana, you get some rice. You put a gene in that will cause the body to manufacture beta-carotene. Whereas, there are so many leaves even, crops, carrots

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and—carrots are the most obvious one everyone knows cause they're orange, but you know there's so many crops that have that much higher levels of beta-carotene than the rice does. [1:52]

These are standard lines of argument against GMOs, stated in a technical vocabulary that suggests that the speaker is already quite familiar with the subject and not in need of information. When PW does ask a question, it is often just a lead-in to an extended statement. Thus when she starts with the apparently open

Do you think there are ethical issues surrounding biotechnology that need to be addressed? [1:20]

her follow-up confronts Folta with the view that seed companies had been patenting (i.e., stealing) genetics perfected by farmers around the world. Similarly, the apparent request for information in

You mentioned that the BT crops have no effect on beneficials and I really want to know where in fact, in research, is based in" [1:24]

signals that she does not believe that Folta will "in fact" be able to provide it. And once PW cuts right to the chase, framing the upcoming interaction not as "question/answer" but as argument, leading with

I simply have to disagree with your characterization there." [1:40]

In addition to failing to ask questions, PW also proceeds to challenge Folta's initial responses in all but two instances, instigating relatively prolonged interactions. Overall, her turns take up 27 minutes—more than a third of the overall question period.

Despite PW's dominance of the discussion, Folta does not interrupt her. Instead, he continues to reframe PW's statements as questions, to welcome them, answer them, and return to her for more. He supports her longer comments with agreement markers like

I'm with you, you're right, you're 100%. [1:54]

Yeah, that's true....Absolutely. [1:14]

Oh, you're absolutely right. [2:00]

before starting an explanation of the topic she proposed. Closing out one sixteen minute dialogue, including from PW near-accusations of unethical behavior and one statement that Folta characterizes mildly as having "a place where reality separates from the fiction" he nevertheless says to her,

I'd love to follow up with you on all this stuff. You seem like a wonderful, nice person who just has questions, and I'm glad to talk to you, absolutely." [1:23]

And then, when no one else raises a hand, he immediately gives PW another turn, to the audience's amusement. The session doesn't end until PW runs out of questions, at which point

Folta invites her up to shake her hand and give her his card, saying “thank you very much for all your questions, I appreciate you a lot” [2:05].

Folta’s commitment to treating his audience as people of good faith is even more tested by a second interlocutor, whom I will call Hostile Man (HM). HM is first heard from about a third of the way into Folta’s prepared talk, when he interrupts, saying “you have to stop right there, because that is the biggest lie that there ever was” [0:19]. Instead of seeking the moderator’s help or shutting down the interruption himself, Folta listens, letting HM finish his statement before replying:

This is a great opportunity for us to have a conversation, I’d love to be able to follow up on you. You can be the first person at the end when we talk about it. I’d love to answer that question. We’ll never go through the whole night if we have interruptions. [0:20]

Notice here the re-characterization of HM’s intervention as a “question” that’s part of a “conversation,” and the commitment to answering the question. HM interrupts again about twenty minutes later with a demand for evidence [0:37], to which Folta agrees. HM then responds that “I think about 90% of everything you’ve said could be proven false;” Folta again appears to be trying to defer the “question” until later, when another audience member steps in to tell HM to be quiet.

At the end of his prepared presentation, Folta immediately lives up to his earlier promise, skipping over the first raised hands in order to go to “the gentleman in the back,” and inviting HM to start the conversation with “What’s your one big ringer right off the top?” [0:54]. Folta lets HM make an extended statement about the harmfulness of GMOs before inserting a slight prod requesting a question:

Okay do you have a question only? I’d love to answer questions for other folks....I’d love to answer questions for other folks too. Do you have one that I can really jump or would you rather me comment on what you’ve said? [0:55]

Instead, HM continues the litany of problems with GMOs. He finally hits a topic that Folta thinks he can explain, jumping in with a supportive “well that’s true, alright so I’ll address that” [0:56]. But HM interrupts again, finally ending up making an assertion Folta considers incorrigible:

HM: I’m talking about your gene gun technology, where you shot, use a 22-caliber bullet.

KF: No, you don’t use a 22-caliber bullet, you use a puff of helium, you create a vacuum inside the chamber, you place your sample, you place particles on top, with DNA on them, you produce a puff of helium, from a helium tank that

HM: That’s another lie. It was a 22-caliber.

KF: Okay. Well, I’m gonna have to stop there because I buy the tank of helium for a gene gun. I’m not gonna argue with you.

HM: Think for themselves, and not just think that somebody that gets up in front of them with a PhD is talking about science when they’re really talking about monopolizing technology.

KF: Okay, well, everybody noted, okay? The guy with the PhD doesn't know what he's talking about, the guy in the audience does. You know, I don't mean to be disrespectful.

HM: I will debate you on any stage at any place in the world.

KF: Well, I'll tell you what, tell you what. Why don't we organize that and I will happily show up for that?

HM: No problem.

KF: Thank you for coming tonight though, I do appreciate it, it does help. [0:57]

Note that Folta starts by trying to take HM's remarks as a misunderstanding inviting an explanation of how gene guns work. When HM cuts him off again with an open refusal of trust, Folta finally gives up. He no longer tries to reframe HM's talk into a "question." He declines to switch to another sort of talk—he's "not gonna argue." All he can do is to thank HM for his "help." Although Folta's responses here seem quite mild, it's worth noting that he immediately takes back his "disrespectful" claim to special expertise. Later in the question period (after HM had left) he went on to admit "regrets":

KF: Being very civil in our conversations is good and that's—I get a little frustrated when I'm here. I probably regret the way I approached him with this. You get in those moments, you gotta really watch it.

Audience member #1: It's hard.

Audience member #2: I thought you did a good job.

KF: Well thanks. I think, I'd like to have back, I'd like to call back a few things. I got a little pointy there. [1:52]

It is hard to see either PW or HM as asking questions; both were pursuing other agendas. It's fair to say that they met his explanations with a biased reception. But Folta nevertheless works hard to interact with both as if they were really seeking his help in understanding GMOs. He reframes what they say into welcome questions, and apologizes when he cannot. He presumes their good faith, even against the evidence, and he addresses them in accordance with that presumption.

Let us pick up the thread of the original argument. I started by asking what Folta can do to show himself to be objective. I suggested that simply displaying an unbiased ethos was insufficient, because it was too easy to do—too cheap. Work on normative pragmatics suggests that Folta can earn his audience's trust by making his talk expensive—by undertaking responsibilities that his audience can hold him to. I showed Folta doing just that: undertaking a responsibility to answer all his audience's questions in order to help them understand. But even this could be seen to be cheap talk by those with anti-GMO views, who could suspect that he was hiding his bias under a veneer of "answering questions." I have now shown how Folta openly speaks of and treats his every member of his audience as if they were themselves unbiased; he aggressively presumes their good faith, even when they themselves don't display it (NP Step 1). So the question is: What does Folta's treatment of his audience show his audience about him? He treats his audience as if they were unbiased; how does that give them reason to think that he is unbiased, too?

Notice that Folta's presumption of audience good faith is "expensive" in normative-pragmatic terms: he openly accepts a heightened risk of abuse in talking about a controversial

subject, and on top of that conspicuously performs the substantial discursive work of reframing both persistent and hostile challenges into legitimate, answerable questions (NP Step 2). Under what circumstances, his audience could wonder, would any speaker be willing to accept this risk and do this labor? He must be confident (his audience can reason) that what he has to say will pass muster if scrutinized by one of the good faith audience members he works so hard to construct (NP Step 3). He must be confident that his explanations are non-partisan, im-partial, dis-interested, un-biased. Folta's apparent work to maintain the presumption of audience good faith gives them go reason to trust he is being objective.

### 3. Conclusion

In sum, Folta's strategy for making his objectivity apparent consists in:

- (a) making apparent his desire to help his audience understand;
- (b) conspicuously taking responsibility for answering all questions his audience has about the subject;
- (c) conspicuously acting on the presumption that every one of them is asking questions in good faith.

Combined, these visible orientations and undertakings give even skeptical audience members a good reason to trust Folta's objectivity. It is worth noting that Folta's strategy works not *in spite* of, but *because of*, the harshness of the controversy over GMOs. Without the "help" of Hostile Man and Persistent Woman, his speech would not have been expensive; he would not have been able to demonstrate the way he entrusts himself to even the most difficult of conversation partners. Indeed, this very idea comes up in discussion. Late on that long evening, a friendly audience member engages Folta on the subject of GMO communication:

Audience member: Right now it's a pretty powerful storm against technology and it seems like that side, it's really emotional about it. They're irrational, they throw out expletives, nasty language. And if we're trying to communicate with them, you're not gonna probably change that side. The middle she's talking about...If we're having a mature conversation with the other side, and someone's just reading those comments and they see how mature we're being, how calm you're staying and not going back what like they are. I think that goes a long ways.

KF: Bingo. No, it's perfectly said. That your audience isn't MonsantoSucks666 and you in a chat room. It's the other millions of eyes that are looking at that and weighing who has the credibility here.... But really, you have to really keep your cool, because it doesn't change hearts and minds. What changes hearts and minds is talking to people about science. Talking to people about farming....So being very civil in our conversations is good. [1:50]

At the beginning of this paper, I pointed out that participants in a controversy tend to filter information about scientists through their pre-existing positions. Folta's strategy works against this tendency, by using distrust as a resource for creating trust. But like all the reasoning-about-communication theorized in normative pragmatics, the reasons Folta's discursive work creates for his audience are defeasible. Folta's confidence in his audience's good faith is likely—

but only likely—due to his legitimate confidence in his own good faith. Another hypothesis the audience may entertain is that Folta is still trying to sneak some biased (non-objective) explanations by them, under cover of this complex strategy of treating them as if they were in good faith. To draw this conclusion, the audience would have to believe that Folta was such an exceptionally skilled advocate that he could avoid lapsing into open advocacy (i.e., arguing) on the spot, even under great pressure as when confronted by a hostile audience member. Or the audience may believe that Folta’s confidence in his own good faith is false—that he is deceiving himself about his objectivity. If so, the challenge for the speaker would be to invent even more expensive strategies to meet these doubts; and the challenge for normative pragmatics would be to account for them.

The normative pragmatic program is directed towards how saying things creates reasons for the audience, and so tends to be cautious about assessing persuasive effects. And certainly, not all audience members were persuaded. HM conspicuously refuses to ask questions or listen to Folta’s explanations, seeks instead another kind of interaction—a debate, with arguments—and leaves before the event is over. But it does seem possible to say that at least one audience member felt the force of Folta’s strategy. Close to the end of the event, after PW had delivered a long series of challenges to Folta, he turns the tables and asks her a question: “Is there a case by adding a gene to something would be acceptable to you? By adding a gene by a trans gene to solve a problem? You don’t have to answer. I just always like to ask that” [1:55]. After evading a bit, PW admits that one novel case Folta had discussed “probably” would be something that she could “support” [1:57]. In the context of the deep divisions of the debate over GMOs, this small moment of partial convergence should be treated with respect.<sup>1</sup>

Even as suspicions of bias can be reciprocal in a controversial situation, with each side skeptical of the other, presumptions of good faith can be as well. A speaker’s presumption of audience good faith provides the basis for the audience’s presumption of speaker good faith. This reciprocity is not well captured in talk of “objectivity,” which refers primarily to what good faith requires from a scientist. It is perhaps better captured by the word “candor,” at least in its Enlightenment sense. Candor, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, means “freedom from mental bias, openness of mind; fairness, impartiality, justice.” Whereas now we consider candor primarily a virtue of speakers, earlier usage emphasized it equally, or perhaps especially, as a virtue of audiences. For example:

Men of candid sinceritie will be readie...to give it a friendly welcome (1643).

Your Lectures meet with a very Candid Reception (1718).

A Species of candour which is shewn towards every other book, is sometimes refused to the Scriptures (1795).

The candid manner in which my Communication has been treated, lays me under strong obligations (1800).

—not to mention the US Declaration of Independence’s self-address to a “candid world.” Folta’s overall strategy is to shift the situation from reciprocal skepticism to reciprocal candor, not by (cheaply) insisting on his own candor, but by (expensively) presuming the candor of even his most hostile audience members. As Adam Smith (1790), a central representative of this

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed first-person account of Folta’s persuasiveness can be found in Julee K. (2015). The author—a former anti-GMO blogger—vividly narrates how Folta’s investment of time in answering her questions and his calling on her to treat the subject open-mindedly eventually upended her preconceived beliefs.

Enlightenment tradition, summarized the strategy: “frankness and openness conciliate confidence. We trust the man who seems willing to trust us” (7.4).

**Acknowledgements:** Thanks are due to commentator Pat Bondy and the OSSA audience for useful feedback on this paper.

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