

Boston University School of Law

## Scholarly Commons at Boston University School of Law

---

Faculty Scholarship

---

2024

### A Matter of Facts: The Evolution of Copyright's Fact-Exclusion and Its Implications for Disinformation and Democracy

Jessica Silbey

*Boston University School of Law*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarship.law.bu.edu/faculty\\_scholarship](https://scholarship.law.bu.edu/faculty_scholarship)



Part of the [Intellectual Property Law Commons](#), [Legal History Commons](#), and the [Legislation Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Jessica Silbey, *A Matter of Facts: The Evolution of Copyright's Fact-Exclusion and Its Implications for Disinformation and Democracy*, in 70 *Journal of the Copyright Society* 365 (2024).

Available at: [https://scholarship.law.bu.edu/faculty\\_scholarship/3651](https://scholarship.law.bu.edu/faculty_scholarship/3651)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Commons at Boston University School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons at Boston University School of Law. For more information, please contact [lawlessa@bu.edu](mailto:lawlessa@bu.edu).



**A MATTER OF FACTS:  
THE EVOLUTION OF THE COPYRIGHT FACT-EXCLUSION AND  
ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR DISINFORMATION AND DEMOCRACY**

*by* JESSICA SILBEY\*

*The Article begins with a puzzle: the curious absence of an express fact-exclusion from copyright protection in both the Copyright Act and its legislative history despite it being a well-founded legal principle. The Article traces arguments in the foundational Supreme Court case (Feist Publications v. Rural Telephone Service) and in the Copyright Act's legislative history to discern a basis for the fact-exclusion. That research trail produces a legal genealogy of the fact-exclusion based on early copyright common law anchored by canonical cases, Baker v. Selden, Burrow-Giles v. Sarony, and Wheaton v. Peters. Surprisingly, none of them deal with facts per se, but instead with adjacent and related copyright doctrines. A close look at these cases and relevant legislative history uncovers provocative aspects of the fight over facts through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.*

*This fight is really a debate over the role facts play in the evolving place of human labor and the contours of social progress in crucial periods of economic and political development. The nature of "facts" and their increasingly central role in governance and technological progress puts pressure on their production and control, including by and for businesses and democratic institutions, such as legislatures and agencies. Revisiting this history amplifies the need for a broader copyright fact-exclusion and a richer public domain that*

---

\*Professor of Law and Frank R. Kenison Distinguished Scholar in Law, Boston University School of Law. I am especially grateful for email and in-person conversations with Amy Adler, David Ardia, Shyam Balganesh, Barton Beebe, Oren Bracha, Robert Brauneis, Dan Burk, Maggie Chon, Julie Cohen, Jorge Contreras, Jeanne Fromer, Brian Frye, Woody Hartzog, Justin Hughes, Jessica Litman, Glynn Lunney, Michael Madison, Bill Marshall, Bill McGeeveran, Mark McKenna, Mike Meurer, Tyler Ochoa, Gideon Parchomovsky, William Patry, Jennifer Rothman, Pam Samuelson, Susan Silbey, Kara Swanson, and Rebecca Tushnet. Early drafts of this Article were significantly improved by comments from participants at WIPIP 2022, IPSC 2022, the University of Pennsylvania Copyright Roundtable 2023, and the UNC and Boston University Law School Faculty Workshops. I had invaluable help from my research assistant Siddhu Anandalingam, from law librarians Shira Megerman, Stefanie Weigman, and Sarah Stupak, and from Stephanie Sykes. Many thanks to the faculty and student editors of the Journal of the Copyright Society for shepherding the article to print. This Article was awarded a grant by the University of Houston Law Center's Institute for Intellectual Property and Information Law, in partnership with the Honorable Nancy F. Atlas Intellectual Property American Inn of Court. It was also supported by funds from Boston University School of Law.

*will lead to doctrinal clarity in our digital age. It also has political implications for considering the contestability of facts in the twenty-first century as a matter of access to information and the stabilization of societal institutions – such as law, science, and a free press – that are critical for sustaining U.S. democracy.*

INTRODUCTION.....	366
I. <i>FEIST</i> AND ITS GENEALOGY .....	379
A. <i>Feist Publications v. Rural Telephone Service Co.</i> (1991) .....	380
B. Pre- <i>Feist</i> Cases .....	385
1. <i>Burrow-Giles Lithographic Co. v. Sarony</i> (1884) .....	387
2. <i>Baker v. Selden</i> (1880) .....	391
3. <i>Wheaton v. Peters</i> (1834) and <i>Publici Juris</i> .....	399
4. <i>INS v. AP</i> and the “Science” of Journalism .....	401
5. <i>Wheaton v. Peters</i> and Knowledge of Law .....	406
II. LEGISLATIVE HISTORY OF THE 1976 COPYRIGHT ACT: AUTHORIAL LABOR AND THE VALUE OF THE PUBLIC DOMAIN .....	411
A. 1956: Study 3 and “The Meaning of Writings in the Copyright Clause of the Constitution” .....	413
B. 1961: Kaminsstein Register’s Report .....	414
C. 1975–76: Hearings Before the House Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on Courts, Civil Liberties, and Administration of Justice.....	415
III. THE EMERGENCE OF “FACTS” AS A TWENTIETH- CENTURY CATEGORY OF TRUTH AND KNOWLEDGE .....	423
A. Pragmatism, the New Disciplines, and Situated Truths .....	428
B. Legal Realism and Deference to Disciplinary Knowledge .....	432
C. Taming <i>Bleistein</i> and Broadening the Fact-Exclusion .....	439
CONCLUSION: <i>FEIST</i> ’S FUTURE APPLICATION .....	443

## INTRODUCTION

There is a puzzle at the heart of copyright law with far-reaching implications for disinformation and democracy. It starts with the assumption that facts circulate freely and are excluded from copyright protection. But we only know this because a 1991 Supreme Court case, *Feist Publications v. Rural Telephone Service*, says so.<sup>1</sup> The Copyright Act of 1976 does not expressly exclude facts.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the legislative history of the Copyright Act says almost nothing about a fact-exclusion, thus failing to clarify both the reason for

<sup>1</sup> *Feist Publ’ns, Inc. v. Rural Tel. Serv. Co.*, 499 U.S. 340, 363 (1991).

<sup>2</sup> Copyright Act of 1976, 17 U.S.C. § 102(b).

*Feist*'s holding and the conspicuous absence of a fact-exclusion from the Act.<sup>3</sup> This puzzle has purchase for our current moment when apprehending facts is vital to, among other things, assuring transparency and objectivity in the regulation of everyday life.

Here are three examples of the confusion over facts in copyright law and its relevance to critical regulation today. Imagine insurance companies refusing to insure homes because they predict that fires and floods will devastate vast regions of the United States.<sup>4</sup> To question and assess the insurers' denials requires access to the information on which the companies base their decisions. The National Weather Service collects climate data, which is a publicly accessible resource. But when private companies collate, analyze, and process data for influential forecasting systems, that information—the facts and expert evaluations on which billions of dollars of investments may rely—may be claimed as copyrightable expression and therefore inaccessible for reviewing or auditing except with permission and payment.<sup>5</sup> Insurance companies can refuse insurance, devastating real estate markets and other businesses without explaining the basis of their decisions. When they do so by claiming their evaluations of data as copyrightable expression, ownable and licensable at their discretion, insurers become one of the many “data cartels” in our world in which “companies . . . control and monopolize . . . information”<sup>6</sup> to the detriment of most ordinary market participants.

Imagine a different but related scenario. Building, fire, and electrical codes are mandatory guidelines when constructing (or reconstructing) property in many states and municipalities. Organizations staffed by experts and other knowledgeable members produce and sell these codes to interested parties as indispensable reference materials for building safety. When a town adopts a code as its law, either expressly or by reference, do those who must follow the law—and thus read and abide by the code—have to pay for access to it? Does following the law require paying a fee for the code book, which the organizations claim as their copyrighted expression? Standard drafting organizations and other expert bodies say yes and are litigating their claims in court.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> See *infra* Part II.

<sup>4</sup> One need not imagine it. Juliana Kim, *State Farm Has Stopped Accepting Homeowners Insurance Applications in California*, NPR (Mar. 28, 2023, 11:23 AM), <https://www.npr.org/2023/05/28/1178648989/state-farm-home-insurance-california-wildfires-inflation/>.

<sup>5</sup> Madison Condon, *Climate Services: The Business of Physical Risk*, 55 ARIZ. ST. L.J. 147 (2023) (describing the problem of privatizing climate data and proposing a model that enables access, testing, verification, and competition in the assessments).

<sup>6</sup> SARAH LAMDAN, DATA CARTELS: THE COMPANIES THAT CONTROL AND MONOPOLIZE OUR INFORMATION (2022).

<sup>7</sup> See *Am. Soc'y for Testing & Materials v. Public.Resource.Org*, 896 F.3d 437 (D.C. Cir. 2018) (technical standards incorporated by reference into law remain protected by copyright but whether their copying and distribution are fair uses and thus exempt from

Finally, imagine a third scenario. A playwright produces an award-winning musical based on a true story. The playwright is subsequently sued for infringing the copyright in an autobiography, which was one of the many sources relied upon to retell history. The musical depicts historical events and repeats true statements drawn from an array of truthful accounts. The copyright owner of the autobiography who sues is the heir of the autobiography's ghostwriter; only after years of litigation, an appeal, a trial, and a second appeal is the musical free and clear from the copyright encumbrance.<sup>8</sup> Writing about the true past comes with significant costs.

All three scenarios describe copyright law restricting access to facts and information. These are just a few examples, but as a trend, they raise red flags. The insurance and climate data scenario could instead be about financial information;<sup>9</sup> the building code scenario could be about annotated statutes;<sup>10</sup> and the playwright scenario could be about a journalist, filmmaker, or writer.<sup>11</sup> The Supreme Court's 1991 *Feist* decision states clearly that facts are in the public domain and thus unownable, but disputes like these persist. This Article exposes *Feist*'s lingering ambiguity as grounded in the puzzle with which the Article began: *Feist* says that facts are in the public domain, but without clear statutory text or history, we do not know what "facts" are. Section 102(b) of the Copyright Act excludes "ideas," "concepts," and "discoveries" from copyright protection.<sup>12</sup> However, as described below, courts do not treat "facts" as synonymous with these other words. *Feist* nonetheless puts facts in the public domain as if they are part of, but different from, the statutory list in §102(b).<sup>13</sup>

---

copyright enforcement is a question for the jury). The district court eventually entered judgment of fair use for the defendants. 597 F. Supp. 3d 213 (D.D.C. 2022). The Court of Appeals affirmed. 82 F.4th 1262 (D.C. Cir. 2023). *See also* Veeck v. S. Bldg. Code Congress Int'l, 293 F.3d 792 (5th Cir. 2002) (holding the code lost copyright when the town adopted it as law).

<sup>8</sup> Again, not a fictional account. *Corbello v. Frankie Valli et al.*, 974 F.3d 965 (9th Cir. 2020) (affirming decision below because facts cannot form the basis for a copyright claim and each of the alleged similarities between the musical and autobiography were based on historical facts, common phrases, and scenes à -faire, or elements that were treated as facts in the autobiography and were thus unprotected by copyright even though now challenged as fictional).

<sup>9</sup> *Swatch Grp. Mgmt. Servs. Ltd. v. Bloomberg L.P.*, 742 F.3d 17 (2d Cir. 2014) (copying and distribution of investor call transcript regarding quarterly earnings fair use in part because of the public purpose of disseminating important financial information).

<sup>10</sup> *Georgia v. Public.Resource.Org, Inc.*, 590 U.S. 255 (2020).

<sup>11</sup> *Hoehling v. Universal City Studios, Inc.*, 618 F.2d 972 (2d Cir. 1980) (no copyright infringement when similarities based on historical theories and facts); *Salinger v. Random House, Inc.*, 811 F.2d 90 (2d Cir. 1987) (scholar's work about Salinger accurately quoting from letters held unlawful under copyright law).

<sup>12</sup> 17 U.S.C. § 102(b) ("In no case does copyright protection for an original work of authorship extend to any idea, procedure, process, system, method of operation, concept, principle, or discovery, regardless of the form in which it is described, explained, illustrated, or embodied in such work.").

<sup>13</sup> *See infra* Part I.

We need a clearer understanding of what *Feist* means by “raw facts may be copied at will.”<sup>14</sup>

This issue goes beyond copyright law, of course. Clarification of misinformation and competition for reliable arbiters of truth are essential to self-governance, democracy, and human flourishing. Today, we witness the contestation of facts disrupting democratic elections and exacerbating violent attempts to impede the constitutional transfer of power.<sup>15</sup> We watch the Supreme Court accept as “fact” deeply contentious views of health care and their implications for liberty and equality.<sup>16</sup> We read about stacked legislative hearings manufacturing false claims to justify restricting civil rights.<sup>17</sup> Political candidates, after winning office, admit to falsifying their credentials and experience, explaining their lies as “embellishment” and “stupid” but refusing to admit their mendacity.<sup>18</sup> The nature of facts and their import appear to be in flux. All the while, laws that regulate truth and falsehood put a premium on the former and assume the ability to distinguish truth from lies.<sup>19</sup>

Yet copyright law and its exclusion of facts from subject matter protection is an underexplored area. *Feist* makes it seem obvious and inevitable that facts are in the public domain—even those produced through hard work and skilled labor—and yet the history of the fact-exclusion is anything but straightforward. The fact-exclusion in copyright doctrine has a century-long evolution that, when examined closely, illuminates the evolving status of facts in contemporary society as central to sustaining twentieth-century democratic institutions based

<sup>14</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 350.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Melissa Block, *The Clear and Present Danger of Trump’s Enduring ‘Big Lie,’* NPR (Dec. 23, 2021, 5:00 AM), <https://www.npr.org/2021/12/23/1065277246/trump-big-lie-jan-6-election/>.

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Org.*, 142 S. Ct. 2228, 2238, 2277 (2022) (describing reliance interest on abortion care as both “intangible” and not “very concrete” like those involving “property and contract” and an “empirical question that is hard for anyone . . . to assess”); *Gonzales v. Carhart*, 550 U.S. 124, 159 (2007) (describing as “unexceptional” the fact that some women come to “regret their choice to abort the infant life they once created and sustained”). For analysis of federal appellate decisions that question established facts and demand scientific infallibility in order to manufacture factual uncertainty and justify their counter-factual result see Ari Ezra Waldman, *Manufactured Uncertainty in Constitutional Law*, 91 *FORDHAM L. REV.* 2249 (2022).

<sup>17</sup> Allison O. Larson, *Constitutional Litigation in an Age of Alternative Facts*, 93 *N.Y.U. L. REV.* 175 (2018).

<sup>18</sup> Michael Gold & Grace Ashford, *George Santos Admits to Lying About College and Work History*, *N.Y. TIMES* (Dec. 26, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/26/nyregion/george-santos-interview.html/>. See also Oliver Hahl et al., *The Authentic Appeal of the Lying Demagogue: Proclaiming the Deeper Truth about Political Illegitimacy*, 83 *AM. SOCIO. REV.* 1 (2018).

<sup>19</sup> Courtney M. Cox, *Legitimizing Lies*, 90 *GEO. WASH. L. REV.* 297 (2022); Suzanna Blumenthal, *Humbug: Toward a Legal History*, 64 *BUFFALO L. REV.* 161 (2016); AUSTIN SARAT, *LAW AND LIES: DECEPTION AND TRUTH-TELLING IN THE AMERICAN LEGAL SYSTEM* (2015); Helen Norton, *Lies and the Constitution*, 2012 *SUP. CT. REV.* 161 (2012).

on the rule of law, the pursuit of scientific truth, and a free press.<sup>20</sup> “Facts” are much broader than the “raw facts” (*i.e.*, telephone numbers) at issue in *Feist*. The early twentieth-century history of “facts” parallels the development of legal, scientific, and journalistic institutions on which our democracy has come to rely, making this history crucial for the contemporary moment. The status of facts as such—and their place in the public domain—depends on their production as credible and authoritative in the context of disciplinary knowledge and through these institutions, which are themselves fundamental to U.S. democracy. As it turns out, these institutional outputs—law, science, and news—were discussed and debated within the early copyright law canon of the twentieth century in the context of “public property”—what is unownable and belongs to the public. Although *Feist* relies only implicitly on this history, making it explicit is one goal of this Article.

Copyright law’s fact-exclusion is underexplored in part because we have taken it for granted for so long. *Feist* makes the question and answer seem easy, but when we scratch the decision’s surface to decide contemporary copyright disputes, the Court’s clear statements reveal contested doctrine regarding both what “facts” are and also whether “sweat-of-the-brow” (*i.e.*, labor and hard work) is sufficient to justify taking facts from the public domain and protecting them under copyright law.<sup>21</sup> This Article explores the fact-exclusion by following three interrelated paths: the first two resemble traditional legal arguments discussing case law and legislative history, and both end with incomplete answers to the puzzle; the third path follows an institutional approach. Only after exploring this third path does a full explanation of the origins and applications of the copyright fact-exclusion emerge. Each path is a section of the Article. As the Article concludes, we end where we started, only with a sharper vision: all roads lead to *Feist*, and also, inescapably, *Feist* needs further explanation.

---

<sup>20</sup> See *infra* Part III.

<sup>21</sup> The debate over sweat-of-the-brow before *Feist* was extensive and complex. See, e.g., Robert A. Gorman, *Copyright Protection for the Collection and Representation of Facts*, 76 HARV. L. REV. 1569, 1584 (1963); Robert A. Gorman, *Fact or Fancy: The Implications for Copyright*, 29 J. COPYRIGHT SOC’Y U.S.A. 560 (1982); Ray Patterson & Craig Joyce, *Monopolizing the Law: the Scope of Copyright Protection for Law Reports and Statutory Compilations*, 36 UCLA L. REV. 719, 763 (1989) [hereinafter Patterson & Joyce, *Monopolizing the Law*]; William Patry, *Copyright in Compilations of Facts (or Why the “White Pages” Are Not Copyrightable)*, 12 COM. & LAW 37, 64 (Dec. 1990); Jane Ginsburg, *Creation and Commercial Value: Copyright Protection of Works of Information*, 90 COLUM. L. REV. 1865 (1990) [hereinafter Ginsburg, *Commercial Value*]; Robert Denicola, *Copyright in Collection of Facts: A Theory for the Protection of Nonfiction Literary Works*, 81 COLUM. L. REV. (1981). See also Robert Brauneis, *The Transformation of Originality in the Progressive Era Debate over Copyright in News*, 27 CARDOZO ARTS & ENT. L. J. 321, 364 (2009) [hereinafter Brauneis, *Transformation*] (explaining that in 1884 “[c]ourts and treatise writers uniformly supported the view that a work which presented facts that had been gathered by observation of the world should be protected under copyright law.”).

Put simply, *Feist* oversimplifies the matter. The story of copyright's fact-exclusion is as much about how writings can "promote the Progress of Science" (copyright's constitutional object) as about the interrelationship of law, political institutions, and technological development.<sup>22</sup> Copyright law intervened early in U.S. political history, scoping the First Amendment's speech and press freedoms at the beginning of the twentieth century when journalism was first professionalized and the First Amendment as we know it today was nascent.<sup>23</sup> Copyright law in the early 1900s left important scientific and economic innovations in the public domain, generating competition and collaboration within scientific and social-scientific fields, even when doing so left certain authors or inventors without intellectual property.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the story of copyright law's fact-exclusion reveals deep-seated commitments both to the free circulation of facts as essential to developing knowledge (*i.e.*, the progress of science), wherein facts are not discoveries but learned truths, and also to the vitality of knowledge-producing institutions and organizations.<sup>25</sup> Yet because *Feist* predates the internet revolution, its application to the digital age's most pressing issues is unsettled. These issues concern the nature of facts vis-à-vis our new institutions, political circumstances, and cutting-edge technologies,

<sup>22</sup> U.S. CONST. art. I, § 8, cl. 8 ("Congress shall have the power to .... promote the progress of science and the useful arts, by securing for limited times to authors and inventors the exclusive right to their respective writings and discoveries."). For a history of this clause and the meaning of "progress of science," see, e.g., JESSICA SILBEY, *AGAINST PROGRESS: INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY AND FUNDAMENTAL VALUES IN THE INTERNET AGE* 4-6 & note 20 (2022) (citing among others, Margaret Chon, *Postmodern Progress: Reconsidering the Copyright and Patent Power*, 43 DEPAUL L. REV. 97 (1993); Jeanne Fromer, *The Intellectual Property Clause's External Limitations*, 61 DUKE L.J. 1329 (2012); Ned Snow, *The Meaning of Science in the Copyright Clause*, 2013 BRIGHAM YOUNG U. L. REV. 259 (2013)) [hereinafter SILBEY, *AGAINST PROGRESS*]. See also Barton Beebe, *Bleistein, the Problem of Aesthetic Progress, and the Making of American Copyright Law*, 117 COLUM. L. REV. 319 (2017) [hereinafter Beebe, *Aesthetic Progress*].

<sup>23</sup> See *infra* Part III.A. (discussing journalism); *Int'l News Serv. v. Associated Press*, 248 U.S. 215 (1918). See also John Witt, *Weaponized from the Beginning*, 4 J. OF FREE SPEECH L. 715 (2023) (describing early decade of First Amendment jurisprudence when "Freedom of speech in 1919 had barely been invented" and "absent a First Amendment to rely on, critics and advocates turned not to free speech doctrine ... but to mediating institutions that offered bulwarks against distortion in the domain of public opinion.").

<sup>24</sup> See *infra* Part I.B.2. discussing *Baker v. Selden*, 101 U.S. 99 (1879). For further discussion of the value and scope of public domain in the context of interpreting § 102(b), see Jessica Litman, *The Public Domain*, 39 EMORY L. J. 965, 989-91, 996-99, 1016-18 (1990); Tyler Ochoa, *Origins and Meanings of the Public Domain*, 28 U. DAYTON L. R. 215 (2003); Pamela Samuelson, *Enriching Discourse on Public Domains*, 55 DUKE L. J. 783 (2006).

<sup>25</sup> As explained *infra* note 32, an interpretation of "discoveries" as synonymous with "facts" (instead of with "inventions") is inconsistent with the constitutional grant of power to Congress.



which challenge us to differentiate between objectivity and subjectivity and truth and lies.<sup>26</sup>

We live in an age of AI-generated expression, the proliferation of information resources, political polarization, and both moral and epistemological relativism.<sup>27</sup> Together, these characteristics of contemporary culture complicate the meaning and role of “facts” as foundations of public discourse.<sup>28</sup> This Article’s account of copyright’s fact-exclusion clarifies its history by shedding new light on the major Supreme Court case construing the doctrine (*Feist*), thereby guiding both contemporary and future debates concerning copyright’s application to information goods. It aims for copyright law to help (and not hinder) public debates and institutions that rely on access to quality information for democratic self-governance.<sup>29</sup> At stake are the effects on industries, like law, science, and journalism, that produce predominantly fact-based works central to the socio-political institutions at the heart of U.S. democracy.<sup>30</sup>

\*\*\*

<sup>26</sup> Woodrow Hartzog & Jessica Silbey, *The Upside of Deep Fakes*, 78 MD L. REV. 960 (2019); Danielle Citron & Robert Chesney, *Deep Fakes: A Looming Challenge for Privacy, Democracy, and National Security*, 107 CAL. L. REV. 1753 (2019). See also, e.g., Tiffany Hsu & Stuart A. Thompson, *Disinformation Researchers Raise Alarms About A.I. Chatbots*, N.Y. TIMES (Feb. 8, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/08/technology/ai-chatbots-disinformation.html/>; Barry Forbes, *ChatGPT: Five Alarming Ways in Which AI Will Lie For You*, FORBES.COM (Dec. 20, 2022, 7:53 AM), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/barrycollins/2022/12/30/chatgpt-five-alarming-ways-in-which-ai-will-lie-for-you/?sh=63475d575cb9/>.

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., Mathias Osmundsen et al., *How Partisan Polarization Drives the Spread of Fake News*, BROOKINGS INST. COMMENT (May 13, 2021), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-partisan-polarization-drives-the-spread-of-fake-news/>; Tiffany Hsu & Steven Lee Myers, *A.I.’s Use in Elections Sets off a Scramble for Guardrails*, N.Y. TIMES (June 25, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/25/technology/ai-elections-disinformation-guardrails.html/>.

<sup>28</sup> See JONATHAN RAUCH, *THE CONSTITUTION OF KNOWLEDGE: A DEFENSE OF TRUTH* 40-41, 85-94, 131-138 (2021) (describing political polarization rooted in conversion of facts to markers of identity and affiliation) [hereinafter, RAUCH, *THE CONSTITUTION*]; ROBERT POST, *DEMOCRACY, EXPERTISE, ACADEMIC FREEDOM: A FIRST AMENDMENT JURISPRUDENCE FOR THE MODERN STATE* 6-10 (2012) (grounding marketplace of ideas approach in First Amendment jurisprudence to belief in expertise and its role in democratic governance).

<sup>29</sup> These debates include: how to sustain quality journalism; facilitating access to information for good governance and scientific progress; the contested role of professional publishers and user-generated platforms in the internet ecosystem; and whether labor justice and wage equity is something copyright law should assure even at the expense of follow-on creativity and knowledge.

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., MICHAEL SCHUDSON, *DISCOVERING THE NEWS: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF AMERICAN NEWSPAPERS* (1981) (showing “that the very idea of impartial, objective ‘news’ was the social product of the democratization of political, economic, and social life in the nineteenth century”).

This Article consists of three parts. Part I starts with *Feist* in 1991 and works backward to describe the cases on which *Feist* relies. This inquiry offers a revised legal genealogy of *Feist*, highlighting in that genealogy a curious absence of a coherent fact-exclusion doctrine despite *Feist*'s conclusion that such a doctrine is deeply rooted.<sup>31</sup> Part I reorients and reinterprets these cases, which are purportedly about facts, as actually about disciplinary knowledge and knowledge-producing institutions. As reinterpreted, these cases describe not just "facts" but the acceptability of facts as a foundation for knowledge, produced through processes and within institutions with increasingly accepted social and political authority. For the past century, facts have been (and still are) an evolving concept, not just data points on a graph or singular statements about the world. Understanding how facts evolved from disciplinary knowledge into shared public understandings of verifiable truth claims is key to understanding *Feist*'s future application. In other words, *Feist* is not wrong, it just does not say enough.<sup>32</sup>

Part II excavates the legislative history of the Copyright Act of 1976. It connects the case history in Part I with the rise of the authorial labor theory of copyright, a flash point in the legislative debate preceding the 1976 Act.<sup>33</sup> *Feist* categorically rejected the labor theory of copyright fifteen years after the Act's passage, extinguishing a debate that waged for over a century.<sup>34</sup> The labor theory (or sweat-of-the-brow) posits that hard work and skill justify copyright protection to incentivize "intellectual labor."<sup>35</sup> The theory favors a particular brand of individualism and freedom-to-labor rhetoric often at the expense of institutional and community well-being, despite having roots in organized labor and the Progressive movement, as Part II discusses.<sup>36</sup> The co-optation of the

---

<sup>31</sup> Part I owes a great debt to several previous articles about *Feist*, especially: Craig Joyce & Tyler T. Ochoa, *Reach Out and Touch Someone: Reflections on the 25th Anniversary of Feist Publications Inc. v. Rural Telephone Service Co.*, 54 HOUS. L. REV. 257 (2016) [hereinafter Joyce & Ochoa, *Reach Out*]; Justin Hughes, *Created Facts and the Flawed Ontology of Copyright Law*, 83 NOTRE DAME L. REV. 43 (2007) [hereinafter Hughes, *Ontology*]; Pamela Samuelson, *Why Copyright Law Excludes Systems and Processes from the Scope of its Protection*, 85 TEX. L. REV. 1921 (2007); Wendy Gordon, *Reality as Artifact: From Feist to Fair Use*, 55 LAW & CONTEMP. PROBS. 93 (1992) [hereinafter Gordon, *Artifact*]; Ginsburg, *Commercial Value*, *supra* note 21.

<sup>32</sup> For earlier related critiques of *Feist* focusing on the ambiguity of "facts," see Gordon, *Artifact*, *supra* note 31, at 94-95 (making the point that even created facts (like census data) are facts, but that *Feist* oversimplifies facts as "discoveries"); Hughes, *Ontology*, *supra* note 31, at 83 (criticizing *Feist* in the context that "facts are not pebbles waiting to be picked up; the size and shape of the pieces of reality we see are just the result of how we hammer and chisel the world").

<sup>33</sup> See *infra* Part II.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.*

<sup>35</sup> *Id.*

<sup>36</sup> *Id.* See also C. B. MACPHERSON, THE POLITICAL THEORY OF POSSESSIVE INDIVIDUALISM (HOBBS TO LOCKE) (1962) (describing possessive individualism's roots and its central

labor theory by businesses, some of them corporate authors and many that become copyright owners (*e.g.*, publishers, distributors, and media conglomerates), is an old story about copyright rhetoric subverting copyright's benefactors and ultimate purpose (individual authors and "progress of science").<sup>37</sup> In the case of fact-based works, the rhetoric of protecting the fruits of one's labor (and thus protecting its output with property rights) has two negative effects: (1) devitalizes expertise and (2) undermines the institutions producing news, science, databases, and forecasts essential to the regulation on which our technologies, socio-legal organizations, and democratic politics rely.

Part II's main focus is the small part of the voluminous legislative history that discusses the fact-exclusion. It features a debate between a then-prominent copyright lawyer, Irwin Karp, representing the Author's Guild and its interests in protecting creative labor, and a coalition of librarians advocating for more open access to books via interlibrary loans and library photocopying. This debate rehashes a familiar tension in copyright law regarding the proper balance between copyright's public interest and private rights, reorienting that debate around the production and role of facts as a core copyright concern and with renewed interest in our information age.<sup>38</sup>

Part III situates the cases and copyright's authorial labor theory within the turn-of-the-twentieth-century philosophical and political debates about the production of knowledge. Facts as we understand them in the twenty-first century are modern in concept.<sup>39</sup> Facts—as distinguished from truth and value—developed at the turn of the nineteenth century with the evolution of the modern university and the emergence of the social and varied physical sciences.<sup>40</sup> From the Enlightenment epistemological fields of religion, moral philosophy, and so-called "natural" philosophy (*e.g.*, anatomy, botany, geology, and zoology) came the new sciences of sociology, psychology, economics, anthropology, and urban studies, along with the diversification of the natural sciences of biology,

---

idea that a person's normative essence consists in self-ownership, a theory that today pervades the basis and continued purchase of global capitalism).

<sup>37</sup> MARK ROSE, *AUTHORS AND OWNERS: THE INVENTION OF COPYRIGHT* (1995). *See also* SILBEY, *AGAINST PROGRESS*, *supra* note 22, at 44 (discussing this rhetoric in the context of digital photographers and digital photography platforms and publishers).

<sup>38</sup> Readers who did not know that librarians often play the part of subterranean revolutionaries in copyright law—on the side of labor *and* access to information—will also learn this history in Part II. Kyle Courtney & Juliya Ziskina, *The Publisher Playbook: A Brief History of the Publishing Industry's Obstruction of the Library Mission*, THE INTERNET ARCHIVE (2023), <https://archive.org/details/the-publisher-playbook/>.

<sup>39</sup> *See infra* Part III.

<sup>40</sup> RAUCH, *THE CONSTITUTION*, *supra* note 28, at 68. A Google n-gram of "fact," "truth," "knowledge," and "value" between 1800 and 2010 shows "fact" and "value" peaking in 1920 and "truth" at its nadir. "Knowledge" remains fairly constant. The n-gram is hardly empirical proof, but as a rough estimate of word usage it shows the word "fact" on the rise in the early twentieth century and "truth" used frequently until the turn of the twentieth century and then not again as frequently until the turn of the twenty-first century.

chemistry, and physics.<sup>41</sup> These evolving disciplines produced new “truths,” also called “facts,” from empirically grounded methods with consensually established standardized practices characterized by experimentation, verification, and falsification.<sup>42</sup> This twentieth-century history established “objectivity” as a new measure of “truth” with a variety of “facts” at its core.<sup>43</sup>

Jonathan Rauch explains this development in his book *The Constitution of Knowledge* as the decentralized and impersonal social adjudication process of objective understandings about the world.<sup>44</sup> This progression includes the evolution of the modern university and its disciplinary fields, with the so-called “liberal sciences” as an “epistemic regime—that is, a public system for adjudicating differences of belief and perception and for developing shared and warranted conclusions about truth.”<sup>45</sup> Debates about new disciplinary knowledge circulated between the 1880s and 1910s as a result of new information industries, including the telegraph and the rise of national journalism (with its share of “fake” news).<sup>46</sup> They also tracked the revolution in legal education and law courts from legal formalism to legal realism, with the attendant rise of

<sup>41</sup> *Id.* at 68-69. See also JONATHAN R. COLE, *THE GREAT AMERICAN UNIVERSITY* 22 (2009) (describing revolution in American universities and the creation of “new knowledge”).

<sup>42</sup> RAUCH, *THE CONSTITUTION*, *supra* note 28, at 68-69.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.* at 99. Of course, historic events, geographic details, and scientific truths were age-old subjects of knowledge and debate. See *infra* Part III & note 275 (citing M.T. Clanchy and Hayden White). The emergence of “facts” as such is as much about the measure of knowledge – its smallest common incontestable denominator – as much as it is about the process of its production. The very idea of the “fact-exclusion” could not arise in copyright without understanding how facts came to be understood. New fields of expertise, scholarly disciplines, and research methods provided some answers to the increasingly fraught truth/value distinction and the contested claim to universal truths that plagued 19<sup>th</sup> century politics and science because of bias and error. See also LORRAINE DASTON & PETER GALISON, *OBJECTIVITY* 27-28 (2007).

<sup>44</sup> RAUCH, *THE CONSTITUTION*, *supra* note 28, at 5. See also Max Weber, “Science as Vocation,” in *THE VOCATION LECTURES* 1-31 (Rodney Livingston trans., David Owen & Tracey Strong eds., 2004) (explaining how science provides methods of explanation and means of justifying an outcome, but not moral questions which is the domain of philosophy and religion). Robert Merton’s canonical work, *SOCIOLOGY OF SCIENCE* (1973), popularizes some of Weber’s ideas when explaining an ethos of science (“Mertonian norms”) that includes disinterestedness and organized skepticism. See also STEVEN SHAPIN, *SOCIAL HISTORY OF TRUTH: CIVILITY AND SCIENCE IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND* (1994) (historical account of scientific knowledge production rooted in trust and social civility norms around dispute resolution).

<sup>45</sup> RAUCH, *THE CONSTITUTION*, *supra* note 28, at 76. The goals of such a regime include producing knowledge (distinguishing reality from non-reality), freedom (encouraging human autonomy), and peace (fostering institutional resolution of disagreement and nonviolence). *Id.*

<sup>46</sup> WILL SLAUTER, *WHO OWNS THE NEWS? A HISTORY OF COPYRIGHT* 109-12 (2019) [hereinafter SLAUTER, *NEWS*] (describing evolution of news industry, its relation to copyright, and early fake news scandals).

legislative facts and courts' deference to them.<sup>47</sup> The debates in law, news, and science eventually resolved into what became the New Deal politics and its modern government structure—administrative agencies, expert bodies, and deferential judicial review, as well as professional journalism strengthened by constitutional guarantees.<sup>48</sup> This metamorphosis came only after industry consolidation and professional institutions could rely on law (including copyright law) to support their missions and refrain from interference.<sup>49</sup> The new understanding and role of “facts”—a revised way to understand both the inputs and outcomes of knowledge and disciplinary learning—was at the center of these institutional changes.

What Wendy Gordon has called the “odd epistemology” of *Feist* can be explained in part by the popularization of “facts” as a synonym (and sometimes replacement) for “truth” in the early twentieth century.<sup>50</sup> *Feist* does not talk about “truth” because the case was about the legality of unauthorized copying of phone book information (*i.e.*, numbers and addresses organized alphabetically). These were “facts” (or “data,” as the Court says repeatedly). But what *Feist* means when it says “no one may claim originality as to facts” is broader than simply: home addresses are public domain information. It means that facts form truths about the world, be they social, scientific, legal, or historical truths, and copyright ownership of even compilations of facts cannot keep truths from circulating freely.<sup>51</sup>

As Part III explains, *Feist*'s reasoning is both slippery and seems inevitable. This is because the word “fact”—absent from the 1976 Copyright Act and its legislative history—only fully emerged as a category of “truth” forming the bedrock of “knowledge” in the early twentieth century, along with the institutions that produce both knowledge and facts (*e.g.*, journalism, natural and social sciences, agencies and research centers, and legislatures).<sup>52</sup> As the authority and influence of these knowledge-producing institutions evolve alongside their ability to shape public policy and law, the facts produced by

<sup>47</sup> Jessica Silbey & Jeanne Fromer, *Retelling Copyright: The Contributions of the Restatement of Copyright Law*, 44 COLUM. J. L. & ARTS 341, 346-47 (2021).

<sup>48</sup> See, *e.g.*, *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*, 376 U.S. 254 (1964).

<sup>49</sup> This would occur with the overturning of *Lochner v. NY*, see *infra* Part III. See also SLAUTER, NEWS, *supra* note 46, at 109-12.

<sup>50</sup> Gordon, *Artifact*, *supra* note 31, at 93 n.18. See also Hughes, *Ontology*, *supra* note 31, at 49-52 (continuing Gordon's critique and describing a “very short history of facts” citing MARY POOVEY, *THE HISTORY OF THE MODERN FACT* 2-9 (1998) and scholarship of Lorraine Daston that was a precursor to her co-authored book *OBJECTIVITY*, *supra* note 43).

<sup>51</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 347.

<sup>52</sup> This is the same time when certain government agencies, such as the GSA, and independent nongovernmental organizations with similar missions such as RAND (efficient and evidence-based governance), originated and quickly became influential. To be sure, the word “fact” existed and was used before this time, but the institutionalized, diversified production of facts while remaining authoritative and discernable as truths is the twentieth-century innovation this Article describes. See *supra* note 40 (describing n-gram results), and Part III.

them become less contestable and more self-evidently “facts.”<sup>53</sup> That was true in 1991 about phone book data when *Feist* was decided, but the earlier decades debated “truths” or “facts” from journalism, human biology, and labor economics, which were more contestable than phone numbers. Absent from *Feist* is the specter of the early twentieth-century debate between “truths” or “facts” and “values,” a kind of “ontological politics”<sup>54</sup> that preoccupied the new sciences and law. But that specter was present when the canonical copyright cases leading to *Feist* were decided. Part III fills in that history to clarify why *Feist* is correct and explains how to apply *Feist* today given our democracy deficit and the predominance of our new information industries. (Who uses phone books anymore?)

*Feist* came about because producing “facts” is hard work, and the telecommunications industry sought to protect its fact-producing labor—the telephone book—with copyright. It was rational to do so given that copyright’s first subject matter categories of “maps, charts, and books” were fact-intensive works; the grant of a fourteen-year copyright (by the Copyright Act of 1790) was intended to incentivize their laborious and skilled production.<sup>55</sup> When *Feist* excised the sweat-of-the-brow principle from copyright law, but preserved copyright protection for information goods that contained originality in the “selection, coordination, and arrangement” of their information (although not for the alphabetized phone book, which lacked such originality), it avoided answering the question at the heart of the labor theory of copyright: Who is the primary beneficiary of copyright law, the author or the public?

Therein lies the reason that the third path to *Feist* is both the most helpful and the most complicated. Whether to protect an author’s labor to the detriment of the public interest is ultimately a policy question that becomes a legal question when human labor produces what are called “facts.” Standing in the way of clarifying *Feist*’s definitive statement on the issue—that works are in the public domain when they lack originality no matter how much skill they take to produce—is the Court’s other most famous copyright decision, *Bleistein v. Donaldson Lithographing* (1903).<sup>56</sup> *Bleistein* was written nearly a century before *Feist* by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes during his first year on the Court; it has since become a celebration of the inevitability of human originality, standing for the principle that all expressive works have “something irreducible,

---

<sup>53</sup> The “facts” produced by these organizations were called “data” and “information,” not necessarily “facts.” Today we may consider these terms synonyms, or we might say that facts are derived from analysis of data and information.

<sup>54</sup> John Law & John Urry, *Enacting the Social*, 33:3 *ECONOMY AND SOCIETY* 390, 390 (2005) [hereinafter Law & Urry, *Enacting the Social*].

<sup>55</sup> Copyright Act of 1790 § 1, 1 Stat. 124 (current version at 17 U.S.C. et seq.).

<sup>56</sup> *Bleistein v. Donaldson Lithographing Co.*, 188 U.S. 239, 251 (1903).

which is one man's alone."<sup>57</sup> *Feist* cites *Bleistein* exactly once.<sup>58</sup> Reevaluating *Feist*'s fact-exclusion in the context of its history and its future application, as this Article does, also requires a reassessment of *Bleistein* and its hold on U.S. copyright law.<sup>59</sup> Part III does just that in order to clarify *Feist*'s holding and extend its future reach. This reassessment is an important step to help resolve current disputes over access to information necessary for human flourishing in the Anthropocene.

The Article concludes with examples of *Feist*'s broader application to a range of scenarios actively in litigation. It shows that *Feist*, properly understood, actually means that facts *and other forms of objective knowledge produced within knowledge-producing institutions* are uncopyrightable and in the public domain, even if they require substantial labor and investment to produce. The upshot is threefold. First, reading *Feist* this way helps define the public domain of facts not as physical-world discoveries but instead as building blocks of knowledge and expression. Second, it emphasizes the need to reinforce the institutions and organizations—scientific, professional, and expert—that are vital to the production and dissemination of knowledge and are under pressure in the Internet age.<sup>60</sup> And finally, it prepares the *Feist* doctrine for the twenty-first century (in which facts are again being contested) in order to prevent copyright law, in the guise of “originality” or “natural rights” from interfering with the dissemination of expertise essential to self-governance and promoting the public good. In concrete terms, facts should not be so narrowly defined that copyright interferes with the circulation and amplification of knowledge and expertise. Copyright law has been and should continue to be a regime serving the public interest by promoting the progress of science—and of knowledge more broadly—by granting limited rights to authors over their expression, *but not over the knowledge it contains*. Where copyright law fails to remunerate labor or sustain an industry because the outputs are largely fact-based or principally objective, we must not compromise these other values of copyright law, but

<sup>57</sup> *Id.* See also Ginsburg, *Commercial Value*, *supra* note 21, at 1882 (“Justice Holmes set forth the most celebrated American judicial espousal of the ‘copyright as personality’ approach in *Bleistein*...”). See *infra* Part III for further explanation of the celebration and critique of *Bleistein*, especially Beebe, *Aesthetic Progress*, *supra* note 22, at 250 (describing *Bleistein*'s “damaging influence” and “culturally regressive trends”).

<sup>58</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 359 (citing *Bleistein* for the proposition that there are “a narrow category of works in which the creative spark is utterly lacking or so trivial as to be virtually nonexistent”); *but see* *Bleistein*, 188 U.S. at 250 (saying even directories may be copyrighted), which *Feist* does not overrule. See *infra* Part III.

<sup>59</sup> Other copyright scholars have been working to tame *Bleistein* as well, see Barton Beebe, *Aesthetic Progress*, *supra* note 22, at 250. See also Joyce & Ochoa, *Reach Out*, *supra* note 31, at 268-74, 308.

<sup>60</sup> See, e.g., Claudia E. Haupt, *The Limits of Professional Speech*, 128 YALE L.J. F. 185 (2018) (narrowly defining professional speech, in terms of First Amendment doctrine, to protect its qualities of accuracy, comprehensiveness, and reliability and in accordance with the insights of the relevant knowledge community).

instead look to the many other ways to enable working people and valuable industries to thrive.<sup>61</sup>

### I. *FEIST AND ITS GENEALOGY*

This Part describes *Feist* and then traces the cases on which it relies, along with their histories, to make three points. First, the earliest incarnations of the copyright fact-exclusion doctrine in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cases did not discuss facts *per se*. The word “facts” was rarely uttered in these canonical cases. Instead, early cases concerned legal opinions, photographs, news headlines, graphical forms, and financial information. In each situation, courts had to justify the scope of copyright protection in light of copyright’s corollary: the public domain. A close look at these cases and the case families they produced reveals that the fight over facts through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a fight over how copyright serves the public interest by enabling the unfettered dissemination of various forms of knowledge. The matter of “facts” in these early pre-*Feist* cases was tied to a contingent and contextual public domain of various subject matter that the Court claimed critical to preserve as free even, as it turns out, at the expense of under-protecting the outputs of human labor. With each case, the copyright public domain grew in scope and importance, as did the plausible categories of “facts” to which *Feist* would eventually refer. The result was an expanding landscape comprised of various forms of common property for “promot[ing] the Progress of Science and the useful Arts.”<sup>62</sup>

Second, these early cases are about evolving *industries* (e.g., law, news, finance) with rising socio-economic power, epistemic authority, and developing professionalism. In addition to diversifying what eventually came to count as “facts” for public domain purposes, these cases connect the production of facts to their institutional contexts (e.g., of law, journalism, and finance). These cases concern the copyright status of law reports, journalism, and photography, along with the social progress produced through and because of these evolving institutions in crucial periods of political, economic, and technological development. Thus, when the Court analyzes the copyrightability or non-copyrightability of a work or its parts, it also considers how the work is produced (*i.e.*, the institutional and professional structures that produce and disseminate it) and the consequences for excluding the public from it unless payment is made.

Third, we learn from these cases that even though a “fact” may be contingent and contestable, facts are also discernible and reliable. Facts are knowable according to socio-political processes grounded in professional expertise and institutional authority. And thus, one explanation for the absence

<sup>61</sup> For a similar critique in another context, see, e.g., Jessica Silbey, *New Copyright Stories: Clearing the Way for Fair Wages and Equitable Working Conditions in American Theater and Other Creative Industries*, 83 OHIO ST. L. J. ONLINE 29 (2022).

<sup>62</sup> U.S. CONST., art. I, § 8, cl. 8.



of clear, consistent case law guidance on the fact-exclusion from copyright before the 1991 *Feist* decision is that, for a century prior, facts and the institutions producing them (such as university disciplines, professional organizations, legislatures, and even courts) were subject to debates over their power and influence. As Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison write in *Objectivity*, the modern notion of “objectivity” is a scientific ideal that emerged only in the mid-nineteenth century and is grounded in “epistemic virtue,” which they describe as a moral attribute of those producing knowledge.<sup>63</sup> As courts debate whether a “fact” is in or out of copyright protection—be it arising from a photograph, a financial report, the law, property evaluations, weather forecasts, or a news headline—the institution or the professional community that produces the “fact” requires authority, a kind of power or influence.<sup>64</sup> And so the absence of clear precedent on the copyrightability of “facts” is explained by a century-long evolution of the institutional authority of organizations producing facts on which we have come to depend.

This Part builds on these three points and demonstrates that *Feist* is not wrong, but its reasoning is insufficiently clear to answer complicated questions about the copyright fact-exclusion for today’s purposes. By situating the cases *Feist* relies on within their socio-institutional histories, the defeat of sweat-of-the-brow doctrine in *Feist* becomes more justifiable, and our ability to discern new categories of public domain “facts” and knowledge becomes easier.

A. *Feist Publications v. Rural Telephone Service Co.* (1991)

*Feist* was a dispute between rival phone directory publishers.<sup>65</sup> Rural Telephone was a local Kansas public utility with a state mandate to publish a directory in exchange for its utility monopoly. Newcomer Feist Publications was a publication company whose directory covered a wider geographic territory, and thus was arguably more useful.<sup>66</sup> Both companies provided directories free

---

<sup>63</sup> DASTON & GALISON, OBJECTIVITY, *supra* note 43 at 27-29 (introducing the term). Daston and Galison write a social and institutional history of the concept of objectivity based on a case-study of atlases, putting into practice what Emile Durkheim calls “coercion” in his canonical essay “What is a social fact?” about the development of field expertise and community standards and norms. ÉMILE DURKHEIM, *What Is a Social Fact?*, in THE RULES OF SOCIOLOGICAL METHOD (W.D. Halls trans., Steven Lukes ed., The Free Press 1982) (1895).

<sup>64</sup> When Durkheim theorizes about the force or “coercion” of facts, he does not mean physical force, but the force of norms in culture, e.g., “collective aspects of the beliefs, tendencies, and practices of a group that characterizes social phenomena.” *Id.* at 50-59. “Currents of opinion, with an intensity varying according to time and place, impel certain groups [to behave in certain ways]. . . . These currents are plainly social facts. At first sight they seem inseparable from the forms they take in individual cases. But statistics furnish us with the means of isolating them. . . . It is a group condition repeated in the individual because imposed on him.” *Id.* at 8-9.

<sup>65</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 343.

<sup>66</sup> The *Feist* directory covered 11 different telephone service areas in 15 counties and contains 46,878 white pages listings – compared to Rural’s approximately 7,700

of charge and, according to the Court, “compete[d] vigorously for yellow page advertising.”<sup>67</sup> Rural was a lone holdout among other local utilities refusing to license its listings to Feist. Because Feist was not a utility, it “lacked independent access to subscriber information.”<sup>68</sup> Feist wanted to produce a directory that included the geography Rural’s listings covered and thus used the listings in Rural’s directory without Rural’s consent. Feist verified the accuracy of Rural’s listings with independent research, discarding those listings outside Feist’s geographic area and adding information not contained in Rural’s directory (including street addresses). Feist eventually copied 1,309 of Rural’s 7,700 listings. Feist’s total directory contained 46,878 listings. When Rural sued Feist for copyright infringement, Feist defended by saying it took no copyrightable material from Rural because the listings were facts and not authorial expression.<sup>69</sup>

Both lower courts ruled in Rural’s favor based on a “string of . . . court decisions” holding directories and factual compilations copyrightable.<sup>70</sup> The Court did not disturb this line of cases; instead, it sought to resolve an “undeniable tension” between the principles that “facts are not copyrightable” because they lack originality and that “compilation of facts generally are”<sup>71</sup> copyrightable. In reversing the lower rulings and holding for *Feist*, the Court

---

listings. *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 343. For a fuller exploration of *Feist* and its backstory, see Joyce & Ochoa, *Reach Out*, *supra* note 31.

<sup>67</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 343. There is evidence in the papers of Justice Stevens, who wrote the memo encouraging the Court to grant cert. in *Feist*, that he and others were motivated to take the case to promote competition in the phonebook industry and among telecommunication companies. See Justice Stevens’ Papers (copies on file with author and available in Manuscript Room, Library of Congress, Box 590). The original vote on the certiorari petition indicated that Justices Stevens, White, Marshall, and Scalia voted to grant cert., whereas Chief Justice Rehnquist, Justices Blackmun and O’Connor voted to deny cert., and Justice Kennedy voted to defer and relist. Justice Souter had not yet been appointed, but he was on the Court in time for the oral argument. This is a notable line-up because Justice O’Connor, who voted to deny cert., authored the unanimous opinion in *Feist* reversing the lower court’s ruling in favor of Rural and “sweat of the brow.” (Blackmun indicated his concurrence in a single line.).

<sup>68</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 343.

<sup>69</sup> Rural proved copying-in-fact because Feist’s listings included four fake listings that Rural used in its directories to detect copying of this sort. *Id.* at 344. Fake listings were not facts in the world like places on a map or historic dates, and they arguably contained some minimal originality. But Feist’s copying of the four listings was determined to be “de minimis.” Rural’s assigned phone numbers were “created facts” like the name of a person or a street address, not originating from “nature” but from the mind of a person, and yet copyright calls these “facts” or “information” as essential features of efficient and accurate communication. See *infra* note 73.

<sup>70</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 344. See also Robert Gorman, *Copyright Protection for the Collection and Representation of Facts*, 76 HARV. L. REV. 1569, 1584-89 (1963) (collecting and discussing cases about copyrightability of directories).

<sup>71</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 345.

confirmed both principles and explained their harmonious coexistence.<sup>72</sup> In the context of a directory containing only phone numbers and addresses, the Court said that content did not “originate” with Rural.<sup>73</sup>

Rural may have been the first to discover and report the names, towns, and telephone numbers of its subscribers, but this data does not “ow[e] its origin” to Rural. . . . Rather, these bits of information are uncopyrightable facts; they existed before Rural reported them, and would have continued to exist if Rural had never published a telephone directory.<sup>74</sup>

According to the Court, compilations of facts may be protectable if the particular selection, coordination, and arrangements of facts contain some originality. If, however, the facts’ selection, coordination, and arrangement are “entirely typical,” “obvious,” “mechanical or routine,” or “devoid of even the slightest trace of creativity,” the compilation, like any other work, lacks copyright protection.<sup>75</sup> Rural’s white pages had all these non-original qualities: it was alphabetical and comprehensive (thus lacking selectivity), making it a “garden-variety white pages directory” lacking any creativity.<sup>76</sup> The Court concluded that “Rural expended sufficient effort to make the white pages directory useful, but insufficient creativity to make it original.”<sup>77</sup>

The prelude to this determination includes two key paragraphs about the matter of facts and their exclusion from copyright protection:

---

<sup>72</sup> *Id.*

<sup>73</sup> Well, of course it did. Rural created and assigned the phone numbers. This is part of the “odd epistemology” of *Feist*, which Wendy Gordon describes in her article, *Reality as Artifacts: From Feist to Fair Use* explaining that even “created” facts are uncopyrightable. This comports with the word’s etymology. Gordon, *Artifact*, *supra* note 31, at 96 n.16. The word “fact” comes from the Latin “factum” which means “a thing done or performed” and derives from the Latin root “fac” meaning “to make or do” (e.g., “factor,” “manufacture”). See *supra* note 69.

<sup>74</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 361 (citation omitted).

<sup>75</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 362. Compilation copyright must meet requirements of 102(a), 17 U.S.C. §§ 102(b), 103. Compilation copyright was expressly added to the Copyright Act of 1976. See 17 U.S.C. §§ 101 (defining compilations), 103 (defining what is protectable subject matter of compilations).

<sup>76</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 362. “There is nothing remotely creative about arranging names alphabetically in a white pages directory. It is an age-old practice, firmly rooted in tradition and so commonplace that it has come to be expected as a matter of course. See Brief for Information Industry Association *et al.* as *Amici Curiae* 10 (alphabetical arrangement ‘is universally observed in directories published by local exchange telephone companies’). It is not only unoriginal, it is practically inevitable. This time-honored tradition does not possess the minimal creative spark required by the Copyright Act and the Constitution.” *Id.*

<sup>77</sup> *Id.* at 363.

It is [a] bedrock principle of copyright that mandates the law's seemingly disparate treatment of facts and factual compilations. "No one may claim originality as to facts" [Nimmer sec. 2.11[A]]. This is because facts do not owe their origin to an act of authorship. The distinction is one between creation and discovery: The first person to find and report a particular fact has not created the fact; he or she has merely discovered its existence. To borrow from *Burrow-Giles*, one who discovers a fact is not its "maker" or "originator." "The discoverer merely finds and records" [Nimmer sec. 2.03[E]]. Census takers, for example, do not "create" the population figures that emerge from their efforts; in a sense, they copy these figures from the world around them. Denicola, *Copyright in Collections of Facts: A Theory for the Protection of Nonfiction Literary Works*, 81 COLUM. L. REV. 516, 525 (1981). Census data therefore do not trigger copyright because these data are not "original" in the constitutional sense.

The same is true of all facts—scientific, historical, biographical, and news of the day. "[T]hey may not be copyrighted and are part of the public domain available to every person."<sup>78</sup>

In response to the "unfairness" of declaring public property all these "facts" produced with significant labor, investment, and effort, the Court said:

It may seem unfair that much of the fruit of the compiler's labor may be used by others without compensation. . . . As Justice Brennan has correctly observed, however, this is not "some unforeseen byproduct of a statutory scheme." *Harper & Row* (dissenting opinion). . . It is, rather, "the essence of copyright," . . . *ibid.*, and a constitutional requirement. The primary objective of copyright is not to reward the labor of authors, but "[t]o promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts." . . . To this end, copyright assures authors the right to their original expression, but encourages others to build freely upon the ideas and information conveyed by a work. . . . This principle, known as the idea/expression or fact/expression dichotomy, applies to all works of authorship. As applied to a factual compilation, . . . only the compiler's selection and arrangement may be protected; the raw facts may be

---

<sup>78</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 347. Note here the persuasive authority of treatise and scholarly writings. Other than Nimmer and Denicola, the Court relies on Ginsburg, Patry, Patterson and Joyce to fill in the gaps left by case law suggesting more legal ambiguity that Feist admits. *Id.* at 347-48 (citing William Patry, *Copyright in Compilation of Facts*, 12 COMM'NS. & L. 37, 64 (1990); Ginsburg, *Commercial Value*, *supra* note 21; Joyce & Patterson, *Monopolizing the Law*, *supra* note 21). See also Joyce & Ochoa, *Reach Out*, *supra* note 31, at 292-93 (making a similar point about reliance on scholarly citations).

copied at will. This result is neither unfair nor unfortunate. It is the means by which copyright advances the progress of science and art.<sup>79</sup>

The Court relies on several cases dating from the mid-1800s to the mid-1990s for this “bedrock” principle.<sup>80</sup> *Feist* reads like a statement of how past cases about copyright’s public domain definitively and inevitably sum to the present moment about a phone book. But the common law of copyright is less clear.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>79</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 349 (citing *Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc. v. Nation Enters.*, 471 U.S. 539, 589 (1985)).

<sup>80</sup> For the “constitutional requirement,” *Feist* relies on a law review article and Nimmer’s treatise. *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 347. The article is Patterson & Joyce, *Monopolizing the Law*, *supra* note 21, at 759-60, 763 n.155, which supports its assertion with *Bleistein v. Donaldson Lithographing* (1903) and *Durham Indus. Inc. v. Tomy Corp.*, 630 F.2d 905, 911 (2d Cir. 1980), which itself cites to *Chamberlin v. Uris Sales Corp.*, 150 F.2d 512 (2d Cir. 1945). Nimmer’s 1990 treatise describes original authorship to be a “statutory as well as a constitutional requirement,” and also that “a modicum of intellectual labor . . . clearly constitutes an essential constitutional element.” 1 NIMMER ON COPYRIGHT §1.06[A], §1.08[C][1]. As one commentator at the time wrote, “The *Feist* opinion . . . blurs the concept of originality in relation to authorship with two quotations from Nimmer.” Leo Raskin, *Assessing the Impact of Feist*, 17 U. DAYTON L. REV. 331, 335 (1992). As best as I can determine, the pre-*Feist* Nimmer treatise grounds the constitutional requirement of originality in authorship via his interpretation of the constitutional text alone. *See* 1 NIMMER ON COPYRIGHT, §1.06[B] (1987) (as quoted and analyzed in Ralph Oman, *The Copyright Clause: “A Charter for a Living People,”* 17 U. BALTIMORE L. REV. 99, 107 (1987) (citing 1 NIMMER ON COPYRIGHT, §1.06[A] (1987) for the proposition that “originality is different from intellectual labor: the former stems from the copyright clause’s use of the term ‘authors’ and refers to independent creation, while the latter suggests an absolute, although minimal, standard of creativity.”)).

None of these citations adequately clarify “originality,” “authorship,” or their relationship to sweat-of-the-brow, except with a circular reference to the Constitution. What “authorship” means remains subject to substantial debate. Christopher Buccafusco, *A Theory of Copyright Authorship*, 102 VA L. REV. 1229, 1230-31 (2016). And none of these citations explain why the Constitution would leave objective knowledge created with substantial investment of time and intellectual labor in the public domain as a constitutional matter, unless the First Amendment (or some other constitutional interest) limits copyright’s scope.

<sup>81</sup> For scholarship highlighting the lack of clarity on this issue, *see supra* note 21 (describing sweat-of-the-brow debates). Also, a circuit split existed relating to directories, which appeared to be one motivating factor to grant certiorari. *Compare* *Illinois Bell Tel. Co. v. Haines & Co.*, 905 F.2d 1081 (7th Cir. 1990) *with* *Cooling Sys. & Flexibles, Inc. v. Stuart Radiator, Inc.*, 777 F.2d 485 (9th Cir. 1985), *Southern Bell Tel. & Tel. Co. v. Associated Tel. Directory Publishers*, 756 F.2d 801 (11th Cir. 1985), *and* *Eckes v. Card Prices Update*, 736 F.2d 859 (2d Cir. 1984). *See also* Justice Stevens’ papers, Memo dated Sept. 11, 1990, describing the circuit split related to “sweat of the brow” and fact-based works, *see supra* note 67.

B. *Pre-Feist Cases*

The cases on which *Feist* relies fall into three categories that have developed into different (but related) doctrinal paths. The first, *Burrow-Giles Lithographic Co. v. Sarony*, undergirds *Feist*'s proposition that the *sine qua non* of copyright is originality. *Burrow-Giles* (and later *Bleistein v. Donaldson Lithographing Co.* (1903) and *Harper & Row, Publishers v. Nation Enterprises* (1984)) identifies the scope of originality and distinguishes between uncopyrightable facts in the world and copyrightable factual compilations. But, as this part explains more fully, *Burrow-Giles* also pertains to the new technology of photography: Do photographers use cameras to make portraits like the painters of the past, producing creative expression with new and different tools, or are they merely mechanical recorders of contemporaneous life? Implicit in this analysis are assertions that new technologies advance knowledge (*i.e.*, we learn about the world through photography), and that photography also shapes what we know by influencing *how* we know. Is photography different from other forms of expression or "writings," like maps, charts, books, engravings, and illustrations, that were already within the scope of copyrightable subject matter and whose limited copyright protection is understood to promote "the progress of science"? That was the question presented in *Burrow-Giles*.

*Feist* also relies on *Baker v. Selden* (1880), which has become canonical for distinguishing methods and systems as patentable subject matter from creative expression as copyrightable subject matter. *Baker* further designates certain ideas, discoveries, and principles as in the public domain. This holding was eventually codified in the 1976 Copyright Act as part of §102(b), which notably does *not* include "facts" within its long list of exclusions. Although *Feist* depends on *Baker* to ground the fact/expression distinction in a century's worth of copyright case law, it confounds this distinction with the *idea*/expression dichotomy, which is what *Baker* really says. *Baker* is concerned with innovations in accounting and financial records—specifically, the imperative of learning and teaching the new "science" of double-column bookkeeping without copyright law impeding its practice. One way to understand the evolution of facts as constitutional constructs anchoring a broad copyright public domain and promoting knowledge production is to recognize *Baker* as limiting copyright scope in order to disseminate knowledge and promote the practice of "useful arts." On this reading, *Feist* is correct, but does not go far enough or explain its reasoning fully.

The third set of cases on which *Feist* relies begins with *International News Service v. Associated Press* [*INS v. AP*] (1918), whose central holding is anchored in the first Supreme Court copyright case, *Wheaton v. Peters* (1834). Both *INS* and *Wheaton* justify unremunerated labor under copyright law. *INS v. AP* allows copying and distribution of news bulletins among competing news

services.<sup>82</sup> *Wheaton* decided that the production and editing of judicial case reports and the work of Henry Wheaton (the first paid Supreme Court reporter), when left unregistered despite the requirements of copyright law, rendered the valuable edited volumes in the public domain. *Wheaton* is often cited for the by-then blackletter proposition that judicial decisions specifically, and law more generally, are not copyrightable and thus free for all to copy and disseminate. But its reach and extension in modern times remains contested given the many private-public partnerships that produce essential legal materials, such as annotated statutes and regulatory standards.<sup>83</sup>

*Feist* relies on this case family to refute the sweat-of-the-brow theory of copyright protection denying copyright revenue to news organizations in their headlines and law reporters in their edited court decisions. *Feist* renders defunct the labor theory of copyright, even while appreciating that the industries producing the materials (here, news organizations and law reporters) are indispensable to democratic governance and that the lack of copyright may weaken their economic vitality. It does so by explaining, albeit implicitly, that sometimes the most valuable information and knowledge (*i.e.*, journalism and the law) are not private property but “public property,” or *publici juris*.<sup>84</sup> This recognition requires first accepting that these industries produce valuable public goods that should be accessible to all. Journalism in 1918 and the Court in 1834 were still establishing themselves as institutions with public authority. *Feist*’s reliance on *INS* and *Wheaton* to protect a public domain in “facts” (qua news and law) despite the expensive labor required to produce them is therefore intertwined with these institutions earning reputations as serving the public interest in the production of and access to knowledge. In all these cases and case families, the unprotected “facts” are tied to the developing industry, its reputation for epistemic authority, and copyright’s role in preserving public domain knowledge produced by and through those industries.

---

<sup>82</sup> To be sure, while defeating a copyright claim because AP failed to register any copyrights, an impracticality for most news organizations, *INS* contrives the “hot news” misappropriation doctrine, which the court describes as a quasi-property right and has rarely been extended beyond the facts of the case. See Shyamkrishna Balganesh, *The Uncertain Future of “Hot News” Misappropriation After Barclays Capital v. TheFlyOnThewall.com*, 112 COLUM. L. REV. SIDEBAR 134 (2012) [hereinafter *Balganesh, Hot News*].

<sup>83</sup> *Public.Resource.Org*, 590 U.S. at 263 (holding annotated statutes are not “authored” works under copyright law); see also *supra* note 7 and *infra* notes 264, 392-406 (discussing model code and legal material cases).

<sup>84</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 354 (citing *INS*, 248 U.S. at 235, 241-42). See also Tyler Ochoa, *Origins and Meanings of the Public Domain*, 28 UNIV. DAYTON L. R. 215 (2003) (on the evolution and meaning of *publici juris* and related terms) [hereinafter *Ochoa, Public Domain*].

1. *Burrow-Giles Lithographic Co. v. Sarony* (1884)

*Feist* relies on *Burrow-Giles* for the proposition that the Constitution limits copyright protection to original authorial expression.<sup>85</sup> *Burrow-Giles* defines an author as “he to whom anything owes its origin; originator; maker.”<sup>86</sup> Importantly, novelty is not the touchstone for originality, but that which springs from the “intellectual conception” of a person.<sup>87</sup> *Feist*’s reliance on *Burrow-Giles* makes the most sense in the context of the fact-exclusion when we understand that *Burrow-Giles* debates authorship in photography because its technology and artistry in 1884 were still contestable.

The case centers on photographer and portraitist Napoleon Sarony, who made a photographic portrait of Oscar Wilde. When the Burrow-Giles Lithographic Company made unauthorized copies of the photograph and sold them, Sarony sued. To win, Sarony had to prove that he added something recognizably his own in the photograph, something that did not come from Wilde himself or other preexisting things in the world; he had to explain what he “authored” of the reality reproduced in the photograph. At the time, many people understood photography as a mechanistic and unartistic practice.<sup>88</sup> Cameras were new technologies that could reproduce the world as it exists rather than reconstruct or create original images of it.<sup>89</sup> “It is insisted, in argument,” the Court said, “that a photograph being a reproduction, on paper, of the exact features of some natural object, or of some person, is not a writing of which the producer is the author.”<sup>90</sup> Competing with this view of photography was an alternative conception: that of photography as “a misleading form of

<sup>85</sup> U.S. CONST. art. I, § 8, cl. 8 (protecting “writings” of “authors”).

<sup>86</sup> *Burrow-Giles Lithographic Co. v. Sarony*, 111 U.S. 53, 58 (1884).

<sup>87</sup> *Id.* at 59.

<sup>88</sup> There was a competing view of photography at the time, too, however, which was that it created ghostly apparitions and fictions. See, e.g., Jessica Silbey, *Judges as Film Critics: New Approaches to Filmic Evidence*, 37 MICH. J. L. REFORM 493 (2004); Jennifer Mnookin, *The Image of Truth: Photographic Evidence and the Power of Analogy*, 10 YALE J. L. & HUMAN. 1 (1998) [hereinafter Mnookin, *Truth*]. See also Christine Haight Farley, *The Lingering Effects of Copyright Law’s Response to the Invention of Photography*, 65 U. PITT. L. REV. 385 (2004).

<sup>89</sup> FRANCOIS BRUNET, *THE BIRTH OF THE IDEA OF PHOTOGRAPHY* xiii-xiv (2019) [hereinafter BRUNET, *BIRTH*] (describing the origins of photography as “an art without art” and “essentially a natural, or ‘atechnical’ image” but also, importantly, as an invention and a cultural practice “of making pictures”). Oliver Wendell Holmes famously called photographs “mirrors with a memory.” Oliver Wendell Holmes, *The Stereoscope and the Stereograph*, 3 ATLANTIC MONTHLY 738 (1861), reprinted in CLASSIC ESSAYS ON PHOTOGRAPHY 71, 74 (Alan Trachtenberg ed., 1980).

<sup>90</sup> *Burrow-Giles*, 111 U.S. at 56.



proof”<sup>91</sup> and the product “of human agency.”<sup>92</sup> At stake in Sarony’s argument was an understanding of photography as both creative *and* factual.

The Court drew on several analogies to rule in Sarony’s favor. The first was to compare copyright in photographs to copyright in “maps and charts,” the first subject matter of U.S. copyright law in 1790.<sup>93</sup> The second analogy was to engravings and etchings—reproductions of historical prints—which were the subject of the 1802 amendment to the Copyright Act:

Unless, therefore, photographs can be distinguished . . . from . . . maps, charts, designs, engravings, etchings, cuts, and other prints, it is difficult to see why Congress cannot make them the subject of copyright. . . . The only reason why photographs were not included in . . . the act of 1802 is probably that they did not exist, as photography, as an art, was then unknown.<sup>94</sup>

By explaining that photographs are tools of knowledge production—akin to “science,” in the language of the Constitution, like other “writings”—the *Burrow-Giles* Court blessed photography as both factual (containing knowledge about the world) and plausibly authored (originating from a person), and thus protectable under copyright law.<sup>95</sup> This was no small feat. As mentioned, photography was not uniformly considered to perform like a telescope or looking glass—transparently and without substantive distortion, simply bringing into focus things already in the world the human eye cannot see. Some thought photography to be a phantasmic practice, creating apparitions and ghosts, a fictional exercise not always to be trusted.<sup>96</sup> By blessing photography as both art and science, *Burrow-Giles* implicitly recognizes that photography follows a

---

<sup>91</sup> Mnookin, *Truth*, *supra* note 88, at 4 (describing the early history of photography as courtroom evidence based on the evolving understanding and acceptance of photographic technology as a product of professional practice and expertise).

<sup>92</sup> *Id.* at 20-21 (describing early use of photographs as disputed forms of “the most dangerous perjurer”).

<sup>93</sup> *Burrow-Giles*, 111 U.S. at 56-5.

<sup>94</sup> *Id.* at 58. “Art” used in this context does not mean “fine arts” but the more general “art” as a skilled or learned practice, usually technical or practical. For a discussion of the Progress Clause’s “useful Arts” as opposed to “Science” (and its exclusion of “fine arts”), see Beebe, *Aesthetic Progress*, *supra* note 22, at 338.

<sup>95</sup> *Burrow-Giles* relied on contemporary English precedent, *Nottage v. Jackson*, to conclude that photography is authored, extending illustrations and painting to photographs, citing Lord Justice Cotton for the proposition that “‘author’ involves originating, making, producing, as the inventive or mastermind, the thing which is to be protected, whether it be a drawing or a painting, or a photograph.” *Nottage* also says that “photography is to be treated for the purposes of [the Copyright Act] as an art, and the author is the man who really represents, creates, or gives effect to the idea, fancy, or imagination.” *Nottage v. Jackson*, 11 Q.B.D. 627 (1883).

<sup>96</sup> See *supra* note 88.

predictable, physical process directed and influenced by its maker.<sup>97</sup> This view reflects the emerging modern conception of scientific constructivism, foreshadowing the imminent evolution of sciences and university disciplines in the coming years.<sup>98</sup>

From these propositions, *Burrow-Giles* held that Sarony could own in the portrait that which was a product of his own “intellectual conception,” namely

[the] useful, new, harmonious, characteristic, and graceful picture [which was] . . . entirely from his own original mental conception, to which he gave visible form by posing . . . Wilde in front of the camera, selecting and arranging the costume, draperies, and other various accessories in said photograph, arranging this subject so as to present graceful outlines, [and] arranging and disposing the light and shade, suggesting and evoking the desired expression.<sup>99</sup>

In other words, photographs can be copyrighted as long as they contain some aspects of the author’s “intellectual conception.”<sup>100</sup> Like maps, charts, engravings, and etchings, photographs contain both authorial expressions and promote the “progress of science” by disseminating knowledge about the world.<sup>101</sup> This shift did not happen overnight, of course. The history of photographs becoming reliable evidence, as well as both high art and “the most democratic art,” took more than a century.<sup>102</sup>

*Feist*’s reliance on *Burrow-Giles* omits this socio-technical history, but it is central to *Feist*’s application of precedent. Copyright’s public domain—unauthorized parts of photographs or other works—is hidden in *Burrow-Giles* but made explicit in *Feist*. In the passage quoted earlier,<sup>103</sup> *Feist* cites the famous Melville Nimmer copyright law treatise to connect *Burrow-Giles*’ positive ruling (Sarony has copyright in his photograph of Oscar Wilde) with *Feist*’s negative ruling (Rural has no copyright in its alphabetized phone directory).

<sup>97</sup> Mnookin, *Truth*, *supra* note 88, at 4 (confirming authentication of photographs).

<sup>98</sup> See *infra* Part III (defining scientific constructivism).

<sup>99</sup> *Burrow-Giles*, 111 U.S. at 54-55.

<sup>100</sup> *Id.* at 55.

<sup>101</sup> Copyright law permits copying only factual parts of factual works – names and places, or visual information. This practice was rare until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as previously only the whole work was usually copied (the entire photograph or map or chart), not just parts of it. And when whole works were copied, whatever authorial expression the work contained was also copied. Not until the early-20<sup>th</sup> century did copying parts become more common, developing the doctrine of literal fragmented similarity and the substantial similarity test. This development highlights the importance of the “de minimis” defense, about which there is some doctrinal confusion. See Oren Bracha, *Not DeMinimis*, 68 AM. U. L. REV. 139 (2018); see also Jessica Silbey, *De Minimis Copying: An Empirical Study* (with Samantha Zyontz) (July 2024) (unpublished draft on file with author).

<sup>102</sup> Mnookin, *Truth*, *supra* note 88; BRUNET, *BIRTH*, at xiii (describing photography as “the cultural face of the political idea of equality, it heralded a democratic art”).

<sup>103</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 349.

Several aspects of this *Feist* passage deserve attention. First, Nimmer equates “discoveries” with “facts”—a problem because “discovery” in the Constitution means “invention.”<sup>104</sup> Nimmer conflates “facts” with “discoveries” despite their differences as a matter of semantics and statutory and constitutional text. The Court relies on Nimmer’s interpretation as a “bedrock” interpretation of statutory law.<sup>105</sup>

Second, *Feist*’s reliance on *Burrow-Giles* inverts the latter’s focus, suggesting that *Burrow-Giles* concerns both what is within and outside copyright law. One must scour *Burrow-Giles* to find the “facts” of the photograph that are unprotected by copyright law. Their mention is buried in the middle of the opinion. There, the Court hypothesizes a situation wherein the photograph

is simply the [result of] manual operation, by the use of these instruments and preparations . . . transferring to the plate the visible representations of some existing object [for which] the accuracy of this representation [is] its highest merit.

This may be true in regard to the *ordinary* production of a photograph, and . . . in such case, a copyright is no protection.<sup>106</sup>

Like census takers and directory publishers, photographers in 1884 or today can reproduce “scientific, historical, biographical” facts or “news of the day,” with the production of “accuracy” being the “highest merit.”<sup>107</sup> *Burrow-Giles*’ breakthrough is understanding that photography in 1884 was doing just that and that Sarony was the exception to that rule. His photograph contained creative choices that originated from his mind and was not an “ordinary” photograph. Or, as *Feist* says about Rural’s directory, it was not “mechanical or routine,” “entirely typical,” or “garden-variety.”<sup>108</sup> The photograph’s originality needed proving in *Burrow-Giles* because photography was still a contested communicative medium: Was it informational, artistic, or both?

<sup>104</sup> U.S. CONST. art. 1, § 8, cl. 8.

<sup>105</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 347 (citing MELVILLE NIMMER & DAVID NIMMER, 1 NIMMER ON COPYRIGHT § 2.11[A] 2-157 (1990)). Earlier *Feist* cites *Harper & Row* (a decision authored by Justice O’Connor) for the proposition that facts are not protected by copyright, *id.* at 345; *Harper & Row* in turn cites *INS*. See *infra* at 219 discussing both cases.

<sup>106</sup> *Burrow-Giles*, 111 U.S. 53 at 282 (emphasis added). The court said on this question, “we decide nothing.” But the comparison between “ordinary” photography and the Sarony photograph justifies protecting the latter. And thus, identifying the difference between an ordinary photograph and an original photograph becomes critical for defining the boundaries of copyright. See also Justin Hughes, *The Photographer’s Copyright—Photograph as Art, Photograph as Database*, 25 HARV. J. L. & TECH. 339, 342 (2012); Jessica Silbey, *Justifying Copyright in the Age of Digital Reproduction: The Case of Photographers*, 9 U.C. IRVINE L. REV. 405 (2019).

<sup>107</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 349.

<sup>108</sup> *Id.* at 362.

Third, when *Feist* considered the same question for phone directories, both photography and phone directories were understood to contain “facts” available for copying and use. Yet *Feist* leaves implicit the evolution of that institutional history of knowledge production within a disciplinary practice developing its expertise. *Feist* relies on *Burrow-Giles* for its blackletter definition of authorship. Left unmentioned is the nineteenth-century debate over photography as both an emerging expressive genre with creative components and a new technology producing reliable information about the world. Thus, *Feist* lacks an explanation of what facts are. By 1991, facts were assumed to be self-evident—a weakness in the case to be sure.<sup>109</sup> However, the production and identification of facts in earlier and novel forms of expression were exactly the focus of these earlier debates, which were structured around the technological production of new expressive forms and their sources of epistemic authority. *Feist* assumes away these historical and institutional foundations by universalizing the identification and production of facts.

An astute reader of *Feist* might say that it cites *Burrow-Giles* less frequently than the latter’s twentieth-century corollary, *Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc. v. Nation Enterprises* (1985).<sup>110</sup> *Harper & Row* protected President Gerald Ford’s autobiography from an unauthorized quotation by *The Nation* in a scooped story about the soon-to-be-released book and its description of Richard Nixon’s pardon. Like *Burrow-Giles*, *Harper & Row* was a case about a fact-based work.<sup>111</sup> And like *Burrow-Giles*, the copyright owner in *Harper & Row* won its case against the unauthorized copier despite the “thin” copyright in fact-based works. But for reasons explained below, *Feist*’s reliance on *Harper & Row* is more directly related to the next case family with roots in *Baker v. Selden*, which establishes the importance of keeping useful inventions either under patent protection (and thus disclosed as part of the patenting process) or in the public domain, even if made with significant investment of time and labor.<sup>112</sup>

## 2. *Baker v. Selden* (1880)

*Feist* cites to *Burrow-Giles* more often than *Baker v. Selden*, but this earlier case best supports *Feist*’s holding that facts are in the public domain despite the expense of the labor required to collect, produce, and organize them. *Baker*

<sup>109</sup> See Gordon, *Artifact*, *supra* note 31, and Hughes, *Ontology*, *supra* note 31, pointing out these weaknesses.

<sup>110</sup> *Feist* cites to *Burrow-Giles* seven times and to *Harper & Row* eight times.

<sup>111</sup> *Harper & Row* was about pre-existing facts reported by President Ford in his own voice, and *Burrow-Giles* was about Wilde’s appearance as posed and captured by the photographer. There is a fine line between pre-existing facts and created facts, but neither case sufficiently interrogates it for the purposes of copyrightability or otherwise. See, e.g., Justin Hughes, *Photographer’s Copyright—Photograph as Art, Photograph as Database*, 25 HARV. J. OF L. & TECH. 327 (2012).

<sup>112</sup> *Baker v. Selden*, 101 U.S. 99 (1879).

anchors *Feist*'s conclusion that "[t]he primary objective of copyright is not to reward the labor of authors, but '[t]o promote the Progress of Science and the useful Arts.'"<sup>113</sup> As quoted in full above, *Feist* says:

[C]opyright assures authors the right to their original expression, but encourages others to build freely upon the ideas and information conveyed by a work. This principle, known as the idea/expression or fact/expression dichotomy, applies to all works of authorship. As applied to a factual compilation, . . . only the compiler's selection and arrangement may be protected; the raw facts may be copied at will. This result is neither unfair nor unfortunate. It is the means by which copyright advances the progress of science and art.<sup>114</sup>

The slippage in this canonical paragraph between "ideas" and "information" and also between "idea/expression" and "fact/expression" goes unnoticed, perhaps because they are assumed to be synonyms.<sup>115</sup> Yet they are not. As Section III describes in more detail, the debate in the 1880s over copyright protection for factual works, especially regarding the development of professional journalism, begs the question whether facts (as opposed to ideas, principles, and discoveries as discussed in *Baker*) are or should be protected by copyright. As already noted, §102(b) of the Copyright Act contains the word "idea" but not "fact" (or "information"). *Feist* conflates "ideas" with "facts" however, rendering them indistinct for the copyright public domain.

*Feist* appears to say that *Baker* originates a century-long doctrine that takes facts as self-evident and uncopyrightable. But a closer look at *Baker* makes *Feist*'s reliance on it more complex, revealing that *Feist* erroneously characterizes *Baker* as the origin of the conflation of "ideas" with "facts":

This Court has long recognized that the fact/expression dichotomy limits severely the scope of protection in fact-based works. More than a century ago, the Court observed: "The very object of publishing a book on science or the useful arts is to communicate to the world that useful knowledge which it contains. But this object would be frustrated if the knowledge could not be used without incurring the guilt of piracy of the book." *Baker v. Selden*, 101 U.S. 99, 103 (1880).<sup>116</sup>

*Feist* then cites *Harper & Row v. Nation* to "reiterate[] this point":

---

<sup>113</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 349.

<sup>114</sup> *Id.*

<sup>115</sup> The Court made this slippage in *Harper & Row* as well, so it is making it again in *Feist*. (Thanks to Tyler Ochoa for bringing this to my attention.)

<sup>116</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 350.

‘[N]o author may copyright facts or ideas.’ . . . ‘[C]opyright does not prevent subsequent users from copying from a prior author’s work those constituent elements that are not original—for example . . . facts, or materials in the public domain.’ [*Harper & Row*, 471 U.S. at 547-48] . . . This, then, resolves the doctrinal tension: Copyright treats facts and factual compilations in a wholly consistent manner. Facts . . . are not original, and therefore may not be copyrighted. A factual compilation is eligible for copyright if it features an original selection or arrangement of facts, but the copyright is limited to the particular selection or arrangement. In no event may copyright extend to the facts themselves.<sup>117</sup>

But *Baker* is not about the non-protectability of facts. It is about the non-copyrightability of methods of operation, processes, or systems—in particular, an accounting (or “bookkeeping”) system described and made popular by Charles Selden. Those words—“processes,” “systems,” and “methods of operation”—are listed in §102(b) (along with “idea,” “principle,” “concept,” and “discovery”). Understanding the eventual inclusion of “facts” as public domain material arising from *Baker v. Selden* and its progeny requires a closer look at *Baker* and its underlying principles.

*Baker* is much discussed in legal scholarship for its canonical holding that copyright in Selden’s book about bookkeeping did not protect the system it describes or the forms necessary for its use.<sup>118</sup> *Baker* also contains three subsidiary and often-cited holdings. First, it instantiates copyright law’s “idea/expression” distinction, declaring that “ideas” are in the public domain but “expression about ideas” may be copyrighted.<sup>119</sup> It also exemplifies the principle of “merger”: when there are limited ways to express an idea (e.g., the accounting system in Selden’s forms), those expressions are in the public domain to also keep the idea or system in the copyright public domain.<sup>120</sup> Finally, it distinguishes patentable subject matter (i.e., inventions) from copyrightable subject matter (i.e., authorial writings).<sup>121</sup> As Pamela Samuelson writes, the first two holdings are not new but merely restate earlier copyright principles.<sup>122</sup> Yet

<sup>117</sup> *Id.* See also *id.* at 357 (“Section 102(b) is universally understood to prohibit any copyright in facts. *Harper & Row, supra*, ... *Accord*, Nimmer § 2.03[E] (equating facts with ‘discoveries’). . . . Congress emphasized that § 102(b) did not change the law, but merely clarified it: ‘Section 102(b) in no way enlarges or contracts the scope of copyright protection under the present law. Its purpose is to restate that the basic dichotomy between expression and ideas remains unchanged.’ H.R. REP. at 57.”).

<sup>118</sup> See, e.g., Pamela Samuelson, *The Story of Baker v. Selden: Sharpening the Distinction between Authorship and Invention*, in *INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY STORIES* (Jane C. Ginsburg & Rochelle C. Dreyfuss eds., 2005) [hereinafter Samuelson, *The Story of Baker v. Selden*].

<sup>119</sup> Samuelson, *The Story of Baker v. Selden, supra* note 118, at 13-14.

<sup>120</sup> *Id.*

<sup>121</sup> *Id.* at 17.

<sup>122</sup> *Id.* at 2-3.

*Baker*'s third point "is unusual in the attention it gives to the distinction between copyrights and patents and the respective roles of these laws in the protection of the fruits of intellectual labor."<sup>123</sup> Samuelson attributes this "unusual attention" in part to Selden's failed attempt to obtain a patent on his bookkeeping system.<sup>124</sup> It was therefore in the patent public domain, and the question for the Court was whether it was also in the copyright public domain.

Samuelson explains the Court's reasoning that renders Selden's valuable forms and charts free to all: Selden's system of double-entry bookkeeping was an improvement on prior bookkeeping systems, but it was an iteration of existing methods, not a wholesale revolution or novel invention.<sup>125</sup> Selden's system combined ledgers into one book, where previously debits and credits were spread among several books, thereby making the system less error-prone, more efficient, and better for preparing future business plans.<sup>126</sup> By the trial court's account, Baker copied from Selden's book, leaving the lower court to question whether he copied too much, copied some but made his own work with it, or, by some coincidence, independently authored a similar accounting book. As Samuelson asks, "[w]as Baker a 'pirate,' . . . an improver, . . . or an independent creator?"<sup>127</sup> At the Supreme Court, however, the arguments shifted from these typical copyright infringement questions to whether what was copied (a version of the form used to practice double-entry bookkeeping) was the proper subject for copyright protection in the first place.<sup>128</sup> This question changed the case from one about piracy and impermissible free-riding on authorial expression into one about the dissemination of information about and the essential tools for performing "useful arts."<sup>129</sup> The new framing threatened the most valuable aspect of Selden's book because "[i]n the absence of a patent, the useful art depicted in a work, along with its ideas, could be used and copied by anyone, even indirectly competing works."<sup>130</sup>

A reader of *Baker v. Selden* might think that Baker, the alleged copier, was the story's hero. And that is because, when explaining why Selden's book could and maybe also *should* be copied, the decision celebrates the progress of

---

<sup>123</sup> *Id.*

<sup>124</sup> *Id.* at 2-3, 17-18, 23. Business method patents were not considered patentable until *State St. Bank Trust Co. v. Signature Fin. Grp., Inc.*, 149 F.3d 1368 (1998).

<sup>125</sup> Samuelson, *The Story of Baker v. Selden*, *supra* note 118, at 13-14.

<sup>126</sup> *Id.* at 2.

<sup>127</sup> *Id.* at 12-13.

<sup>128</sup> *Id.* at 17.

<sup>129</sup> *Id.* at 18-19 ("The Baker opinion introduced a new kind of inquiry to the framework for analyzing copyright claims. In essence, it directed courts to consider whether the defendant had copied the author's description, explanation, illustration, or depiction of a useful art (such as a bookkeeping system) or ideas, or had only copied the useful art or ideas themselves. In the absence of a patent, the useful art depicted in a work, along with its ideas, could be used and copied by anyone, even in directly competing works. Any necessary incidents to implementing the art (*e.g.*, blank forms illustrating use of the system) could likewise be used and copied by second comers without fear of copyright liability.").

<sup>130</sup> *Id.* at 19.

learning as well as innovation and industry that Baker's unauthorized copying produced. The case neither uses the term "facts," nor, as Samuelson points out, does the decision use the term "expression."<sup>131</sup> *Baker* can therefore hardly be the origin of the "fact/expression" distinction that *Feist* claims it is. The case is about the peremptory interest in promoting the progress of the useful arts by disseminating ideas and systems, and if copyright law thwarts that dissemination by stretching too far, copyright law must yield. The examples of "useful arts" in *Baker* include medicine, the construction and use of plows, and modes of drawing lines to produce the effect of perspective.<sup>132</sup> That is, *Baker* analogizes the "useful art" of bookkeeping to other "useful arts" that were well-established at the time to remind readers that copyright adhering in medical textbooks, industrial manuals, and books about fine art techniques could not be asserted to prevent the *practice* of medicine, farming, and the fine arts. *Baker* explains:

The copyright of a work on mathematical science cannot give to the author an exclusive right to the methods of operation which he propounds, or to the diagrams which he employs to explain them, so as to prevent an engineer from using them whenever occasion requires. The very object of publishing a book on science or the useful arts is to communicate to the world the useful knowledge which it contains. But this object would be frustrated if the knowledge could not be used without incurring the guilt of piracy of the book. And where the art it teaches cannot be used without employing the methods and diagrams used to illustrate the book, or such as are similar to them, such methods and diagrams are to be considered as necessary incidents to the art, and given therewith to the public.<sup>133</sup>

Several features of this reasoning deserve highlighting given that *Feist* eventually held that twentieth-century "facts" should be understood as part of the broader conception of "knowledge" and its practical applications. Ostensibly, one reason *Baker* analogizes bookkeeping to medicine, fine art drawing, and plow construction is that bookkeeping was not yet well-understood to be either a "science" (a form of "knowledge") or a "useful art." To be sure, keeping accounts was a practice as old as money. But whether bookkeeping was to be studied like a learned "science" and practiced as a "useful art" would turn on the discipline's social and innovative significance, professional organizations, and reigning expertise (here producing competing treatises). Without being explicit about its historical context, *Baker* (both the decision and the dispute that gave rise to it) is anchored in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, during which bookkeeping became central to commercial successes as businesses grew larger and more complex and the post-Civil War United

---

<sup>131</sup> *Id.* at 20, n.111. See generally *Baker v. Selden*, 101 U.S. 99 (1879).

<sup>132</sup> *Baker*, 101 U.S. at 99.

<sup>133</sup> *Id.* at 103.



States expanded in wealth, geography, and global significance.<sup>134</sup> In other words, bookkeeping was most certainly “useful” (and became more so) at this time.

Also, by analogizing bookkeeping and accounting to these other learned practices essential to contemporary society and culture, *Baker* indicates that copyright plays a role in promoting learned domains. First, it explains that copyright attaches to authorial explanations, but not to the useful art itself. Books cannot be pirated (and should be read and learned from), but a book describing “useful arts” cannot prevent the application of the arts it contains.<sup>135</sup> Second, *Baker* relies on many other cases wherein copyright claims failed or were narrowed because of the importance of preserving access to information and enabling its use. These other cases concern weekly publications about “the state of the market” and “daily price-current[s]”;<sup>136</sup> furniture catalogs;<sup>137</sup> cricket-scoring sheets;<sup>138</sup> and dress patterns.<sup>139</sup> In them all, copyright either did not

<sup>134</sup> B.S. Yarney, *Scientific Bookkeeping and the Rise of Capitalism*, in 1 *ECON. HIST. REV.* 99 (1949); JOHN L. CAREY, *THE RISE OF THE ACCOUNTING PROFESSION: FROM TECHNICIAN TO PROFESSIONAL, 1896-1936* (1969).

<sup>135</sup> “[A]s a book intended to convey instruction in the art, any person may practice and use the art itself which he has described and illustrated therein.... The copyright of a book on bookkeeping cannot secure the exclusive right to make, sell, and use account books prepared upon the plan set forth in such book. Whether the art might or might not have been patented, is a question which is not before us. It was not patented, and is open and free to the use of the public. And, of course, in using the art, the ruled lines and heading of accounts must necessarily be used as incident to it.” *Baker*, 101 U.S. at 104.

<sup>136</sup> *Id.* at 105 (citing *Clayton v. Stone*, 5 F. Cas. 999 (C.C.S.D.N.Y. 1829) (No. 2872)) (“the term ‘science’ cannot, with any propriety, be applied to a work of so fluctuating and fugitive a form as that of a newspaper or price-current, the subject matter of which is daily changing, and is of mere temporary use. Although great praise may be due to the plaintiffs for their industry and enterprise in publishing this paper, yet the law does not contemplate their being rewarded in this way; it must seek patronage and protection from its utility to the public, not a work of science. The title of the act of Congress is ‘for the encouragement of learning,’ and was not intended for the encouragement of mere industry, unconnected with learning and the sciences.”).

<sup>137</sup> *Id.* at 106 (citing *Cobbett v. Woodward*, (1872) 14 L.R. Eq. 407 (Eng.)) (furniture catalog drawings not subject of copyright because when “done .... solely for the purpose of advertising particular articles for sale, promoting the private trade of the publisher by the sale of the articles which any other person might sell as well as the first advertiser, and if in fact it contained little more than an illustrated inventory of the contents of a warehouse, I know of no law which .... would prevent him from using the same advertisement”).

<sup>138</sup> *Id.* (citing *Page v. Wisden*, 20 L.T.N.S. 435 (1869)) (“cricket scoring sheets not fit subject for copyright .... because to say that a particular mode of ruling a book constituted an object for copyright is absurd.”).

<sup>139</sup> *Id.* at 107 (citing *Drury v. Ewing*, 7 F. Cas. 1113 (C.C.S.D. Ohio 1862)) (book of dress designs could be copyrighted but that does not prevent their use which generates copies of the exact patterns and designs as “exemplified in cloth on the tailor’s board and under his shears; in other words, by the application of a mechanical operation to the cutting of cloth in certain patterns and forms. Surely the exclusive right to this practical use was not reserved to the publisher by his copyright of the chart”).

cover the works at issue (prices and scoring sheets) or copying was allowed because of the nature of the use (information to sell consumer goods).<sup>140</sup> These copyright limitations and exclusions foreshadow future legislative debates. The protectability of price predictions, fashion, manufacturing catalogs, and sports scorecards became part of early twentieth-century copyright reform discussions, and was mentioned specifically in legislative history as unprotectable subject matter under the new §102(b).<sup>141</sup> These cases and examples support the growing consensus that copyright cannot extend to mere “industry”<sup>142</sup> or the “practical use”<sup>143</sup> of information and information-containing images, which is one way to understand “facts” and their constitution through tables, charts, graphs, and narratives.<sup>144</sup>

One final point about *Baker*: it only implicitly relates truth, as a goal of “Progress of Science and the useful Arts,” with a reliably open public domain. But it is hard not to read into the Court’s reasoning their necessary interdependence. The Court explains:

Where the truths of a science or the methods of an art are the common property of the whole world, any author has the right to express the one, or explain and use the other, in his own way. As an author, Selden explained the system in a particular way. It may be conceded that Baker makes and uses account books arranged on substantially the same system, but the proof fails to show that he has violated the copyright of Selden’s book, regarding the latter merely as an explanatory work.<sup>145</sup>

The Court states copyright’s role as encouraging multiple dialogues on “truths of . . . science,” which ideally produce diverse perspectives on that subject. Later, the Court says:

---

<sup>140</sup> See *supra* notes 135-39.

<sup>141</sup> See Part II (discussing legislative history). See also cases litigated on these subjects: *N.Y. Mercantile Exch., Inc. v. IntercontinentalExchange, Inc.*, 497 F.3d 109 (2d Cir. 2007) (daily price currents); *CCC Info. Servs. v. MacLean Hunter Mkt. Reps., Inc.*, 44 F.3d 61 (2d Cir. 1994) (car prices); *CDN Inc. v. Kapes*, 197 F.3d 1256 (9th Cir. 1999) (coin prices); *ATC Distrib. Group, Inc. v. Whatever It Takes Transmissions & Parts, Inc.*, 402 F.3d 700 (6th Cir. 2005) (illustration and organization of auto parts in catalog were not sufficiently original); compare *Kregos v. AP*, 937 F.2d 700 (2d Cir. 1991) (on forms for predicting outcomes of baseball games based on pitching statistics); *Star Athletica, L.L.C. v. Varsity Brands, Inc.*, 580 U.S. 405 (2017) (shape, cut, and dimensions of cheerleader uniforms not copyrightable).

<sup>142</sup> See *Clayton*, *supra* note 136.

<sup>143</sup> *Baker*, 101 U.S. at 107 (discussing *Drury*, *supra* note 139).

<sup>144</sup> Cf. HAYDEN WHITE, *CONTENT OF THE FORM: NARRATIVE DISCOURSE AND HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION* 1-25 (1987) (describing how historic events recorded in annals and calendars inevitably become narrativized challenging the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity).

<sup>145</sup> *Baker*, 101 U.S. at 101-2.

To give to the author of the book an exclusive property in the art described therein when no examination of its novelty has ever been officially made would be a surprise and a fraud upon the public. . . . The claim to an invention or discovery of an art or manufacture must be subjected to the examination of the Patent Office before an exclusive right therein can be obtained, and it can only be secured by a patent from the government.<sup>146</sup>

This declaration confirms the right to rely on and assume an open public domain for debating “truths of . . . science” and practices of useful arts. Unless notice exists that a patent has been issued on the art, there are no limits on its use. Copyright law must be interpreted to make sure that patent law—and only patent law—protects novel and useful inventions. Copyright cannot cover truths of “a science or the methods of an art,” which are society’s common property absent a patent on the subject matter.

These copyright principles apply despite the hard work of producing and communicating “truths” and developing “methods” of discerning or applying them. *Baker* clarifies that Selden’s loss in the case is not fortuitous or an accident of legal formalities. It is, to use *Feist*’s updated formulation, a “result [that] is neither unfair nor unfortunate. It is the means by which copyright advances the progress of science and art.”<sup>147</sup> In so stating, *Feist* relies on *Harper & Row v. Nation*, a case about the line between protecting expression and the facts it contains. *Feist* paraphrases that case:

Others may copy the underlying facts from the publication, but not the precise words used to present them. In *Harper & Row*, . . . we explained that President Ford could not prevent others from copying bare historical facts from his autobiography . . . but that he could prevent others from copying his “subjective descriptions and portraits of public figures.”

As we saw above, *Feist* then affirms that, though “it may seem unfair that much of the fruit of the compiler’s labor may be used by others without compensation,” such use is actually “the essence of copyright” and constitutionally required: “The primary objective of copyright is not to reward the labor of authors, but ‘[t]o promote the Progress of Science and the useful Arts.’”<sup>148</sup>

As such, *Baker* could copy Selden’s accounting charts and other material from Selden’s book necessary to explain and practice the “art,” but he could not copy the whole book containing Selden’s “particular” descriptions and explanations. Similarly, *The Nation* could copy facts and truths of history

<sup>146</sup> *Id.* at 102.

<sup>147</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 349.

<sup>148</sup> *Id.* at 348-9 (quoting *Harper & Row*).

contained in President Ford's forthcoming autobiography for its news reporting, but not the "subjective descriptions" contained therein. And while Baker might benefit from Selden's labor (writing and publishing his book) by drawing on it to write and publish a competing treatise containing similar illustrations and charts, so too might *The Nation* reveal facts and truths about the President contained in his autobiography without having done the hard work of collecting them. Likewise, Feist may copy the facts of Rural's directory without expending the time or money collecting the facts. *Feist*'s rejection of protections for "sweat of the brow" or "industrious collection and labor" has roots in both *Baker* and *Harper & Row*.<sup>149</sup>

*Feist* extends its discussion of public domain facts and rejection of sweat-of-the-brow to yet a third case and its resulting genealogy: *Wheaton v. Peters* by way of *INS v. AP*. Like *Burrow-Giles v. Sarony* and *Baker v. Selden*, *Wheaton* and *INS* do not mention "facts" in their conclusions denying copyright to law reports and news. But as with the other cases, they focus on the "Progress of Science and the useful Arts" and copyright's role in the pursuit of knowledge within imminently authoritative industries whose relevance to "truth" and "science" was at first controversial, then widely debated, and eventually stabilized due in part to an open public domain. The origin of twentieth-century "facts" that *Feist* refers to emerges in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries within institutionally generated and disciplinarily grounded knowledge-producing industries—the subjects of these cases on which *Feist* relies.

### 3. *Wheaton v. Peters* (1834) and *Publici Juris*

*Feist*'s holding that facts are not copyrightable was uncontroversial in 1991. However, its holding that sweat-of-the-brow can never justify copyright protection was subject to significant controversy that started a century earlier in the 1880s and endured until *Feist*.<sup>150</sup> Robert Brauneis recounts this history of the Progressive Era debate over copyright in news as inaugurating copyright's "originality" doctrine.<sup>151</sup> But this history also anchors copyright's fact-exclusion to its public domain in knowledge and truth.<sup>152</sup>

Recall that maps were among the original copyrightable subject matter, and they were full of facts.<sup>153</sup> But in the early days of copyright, the justification for

<sup>149</sup> See Brauneis, *Transformation*, *supra* note 21, at 321 (discussing industrious labor doctrine). See also Miriam Bitton, *Trends in Protection for Informational Works under Copyright Law during the 19th and 20th Centuries*, 13 MICH. TELECOMM. & TECH. L. REV. 115 (2006) (discussing the historical treatment of informational goods under copyright as a "complicated spectrum" between industrious labor and creativity).

<sup>150</sup> See *supra* note 21 (citing scholarship on sweat-of-the-brow).

<sup>151</sup> See Brauneis, *Transformation*, *supra* note 21.

<sup>152</sup> See Ochoa, *Public Domain*, *supra* note 84.

<sup>153</sup> See generally Copyright Act of 1790, 1 Stat. 124; "[F]or the first three-quarters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the notion that copyright incorporated an originality requirement which excluded factual matter from protection was unknown to Anglo-American law. Courts routinely found infringement of fact-based works, such as maps, charts, road-books,

protecting maps from unauthorized copying did not require distinguishing the labor to collect the facts from the facts themselves.<sup>154</sup> Mapmakers competed because mapmaking was hard and affordably pirating whole maps was nearly just as hard.<sup>155</sup> Once copying and communication technology evolved to threaten the markets in copyrighted works, including maps—as it did with affordable lithography and photography in the mid-1800s—justifying the protection of works with “thin” copyright would follow.<sup>156</sup> According to Brauneis, this is when the originality standard develops, finding its nineteenth-century apex in *Burrow-Giles*.<sup>157</sup>

As technological innovation accelerates knowledge production and dissemination via new discovery tools, communication technology, and delivery systems, the value of labor diminishes and the value of information increases. *Feist* affirms this result, deriving its anti-sweat-of-the-brow holding from the case of *INS v. AP*, which itself has origins in *Wheaton v. Peters*. These two cases concerned developing professions and industries (news and the law) that, like the directories in *Feist*, produced informational works and compilations of preexisting materials for sale. By reaffirming these cases’ holdings, *Feist* claims to correct an off-course line of twentieth-century cases that wrongly protected “component parts of the work” and “directories, gazetteers, and other compilations”<sup>158</sup> in the absence of originality. *Feist* expressly says that “some courts . . . infer[ed] erroneously that directories and the like were copyrightable per se.”<sup>159</sup> *Feist* explains:

Making matters worse, these courts developed a new theory to justify the protection of factual compilations. Known alternatively as “sweat of the brow” or “industrious collection,” the underlying notion was that copyright was a reward for the hard work that went into compiling facts. . . . The “sweat of the brow” doctrine had numerous flaws, the

---

directories, and calendars, on the basis of the copying of their factual content, and concluded that the industry of plaintiffs in gathering and presenting facts—their ‘intellectual labor’ should be protected under copyright law.” Brauneis, *Transformation*, *supra* note 21 at 321. See also Joyce & Ochoa, *Reach Out*, *supra* note 31 (describing competing lines of authority for copyright protection, some requiring originality, and some not).

<sup>154</sup> Brauneis, *Transformation*, *supra* note 21, at 321.

<sup>155</sup> For map cases discussing sweat-of-the brow, see, e.g., *Blunt v. Patten*, 3 F. Cas. 763, 765 (S.D.N.Y. 1828); *Emerson v. Davies*, 8 F. Cas. 615, 619 (C.C.D. Mass. 1845); *Farmer v. Calvert Lithographing, etc., Co.*, 8 F. Cas. 1022 (C.C.E.D. Mich. 1872); *Perris v. Hexamer*, 99 U.S. 674 (1878). For a history of map-making as it relates to copyright law, see ISABELLA ALEXANDER, *COPYRIGHT AND CARTOGRAPHY: HISTORY, LAW, AND THE CIRCULATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL KNOWLEDGE* (2023).

<sup>156</sup> See Brauneis, *Transformation*, *supra* note 21, at 321.

<sup>157</sup> *Id.* Joyce & Ochoa, *Reach Out*, *supra* note 31, agree with Brauneis that *Burrow-Giles* is a dividing line and resolved the competing lines of authority in favor of originality.

<sup>158</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 353 (discussing the 1909 Copyright Act).

<sup>159</sup> *Id.*

most glaring being that it extended copyright protection in a compilation . . . to the facts themselves. Under the doctrine, the only defense to infringement was independent creation. A subsequent compiler “was not entitled to take one word of information previously published,” but rather had to “independently wor[k] out the matter for himself, so as to arrive at the same result from the same common sources of information. . . .” “Sweat of the brow” courts thereby eschewed the most fundamental axiom of copyright law—that no one may copyright facts or ideas.<sup>160</sup>

To support its anti-sweat-of-the-brow principle, *Feist* cites *INS*, a case confirming the denial of copyright protection to news bulletins and the facts they contain.<sup>161</sup> Without copyright protection (and only the limited “hot news” protection), competition intensified in the production and dissemination of news, inaugurating a new era for the journalism industry.<sup>162</sup> Because *INS* was allowed to republish AP’s news bulletins without copyright liability even if it did not collect the news, the scope of AP’s monopoly over (and value in) its news enterprise diminished, especially with the ease of telegraphic copying and dissemination. *Feist* cites *INS* as the “best example” of copyright’s scope and purpose concerning the value and status of information goods.<sup>163</sup> Citing *INS*, *Feist* affirms that “[t]he news element—the information respecting current events contained in literary production—is not the creation of the writer, but is a report of matters that ordinarily are *publici juris*; it is the history of the day.”<sup>164</sup>

#### 4. *INS v. AP and the “Science” of Journalism*

*Feist*’s citation to *INS* highlights two key features of the evolution of facts as elements of authoritative knowledge in the twentieth-century public domain. First, for “news” to be *publici juris*, an understanding of news as truthful and trustworthy (as “fact”) had to be established. This would take time, as newspaper publishing was still local and unprofessionalized.<sup>165</sup> Second, for journalism to be valued and sustainable given rapidly evolving business models and industry standards, paying for news production and keeping it reliable triggered arguments about its copyrightability.<sup>166</sup> As Brauneis explains, the tumult in the news industry between 1875 and 1910 driven by technological change (e.g., telegraphy and printing) forced its reorganization from an industry

---

<sup>160</sup> *Id.*

<sup>161</sup> It did grant AP a limited misappropriation claim, today called the “hot news” doctrine which has not been expanded beyond its original context. See Balganes, *Hot News*, *supra* note 82.

<sup>162</sup> See Brauneis, *Transformation*, *supra* note 21.

<sup>163</sup> See *supra* note 82 (describing how *INS* was primarily an unfair competition case).

<sup>164</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 353.

<sup>165</sup> SLAUTER, NEWS, *supra* note 46, at 109-12.

<sup>166</sup> See Brauneis, *Transformation*, *supra* note 21.

that did not rely on copyright (because copying was hard and local journalism the norm) to one that sought copyright protection.<sup>167</sup> This reorganization included investing in journalists, which raised questions about how to pay for them, with copyright being one potential answer. This shift inaugurated the new career of professional journalists, who previously were considered gossip columnists or mere “collectors” of news items.<sup>168</sup> Journalists would eventually become expert investigators and “writers,” commanding respect, deference, and reasonable pay for their high-quality, truthful accounts of contemporary events. *Feist*’s reliance on *INS* takes for granted the 1991 quality standards of journalism, even though *INS* does not discuss facts per se (but *news*) because journalism in 1918 was still establishing itself as a dependable, reliable profession.

*INS* preceded three decades of fighting among expanding news organizations competing for national coverage.<sup>169</sup> Starting in the mid-1800s, the news industry evolved from many small local papers (which, because of geographically constrained markets, happily copied news stories from each other, sharing across distances through subsidized postal services) to consolidated, regional news organizations and national news services like the Associated Press and Western Union.<sup>170</sup> Changing communication technology accelerated these organizations’ growth. Journalism transformed with the telegraph, improvements in printing, ease of railroad transportation in the 1880s, and the shrinking of political subsidies for newspapers.<sup>171</sup> Lead-time advantages for stories shrank as distances and time became more traversable, and more news stories could be copied quickly, across greater distances, and without adhering to professional courtesies that were part of local journalism’s norms of reciprocity and delay.<sup>172</sup> Competition among newspapers increased and

---

<sup>167</sup> *Id.* See also SLAUTER, NEWS, *supra* note 46.

<sup>168</sup> See Brauneis, *Transformation*, *supra* note 21, at 355 (describing the critique of journalists as not authors and news gathering and journalism not considered the product of “skilled labor” or “intellectual conception of the writer”). As Brauneis describes, news was considered unlike original copyright subject matter – maps and charts – which required lengthy expeditions, special tools, and expertise. An 1884 article from the *Nation* described news reporters in the following way, as part of a critique of a new bill that would protect copyright in news.

“[I]t is absurd to talk of a man who picks up a piece of news or an “item” as an “author” at all. The reason why copyright laws are passed is to secure the fruits of original, intellectual labor. But the proposed copyright in “news” does not do this. Any one may collect news without any original intellectual effort, and with very little effort of any kind. Some people do it by listening at keyholes ... [or] in the ordinary course of conversation with the persons whom they meet in the way of business or pleasure.”

*Id.*

<sup>169</sup> See SLAUTER, NEWS, *supra* note 46, at 227.

<sup>170</sup> *Id.* at 87-107.

<sup>171</sup> See Brauneis, *Transformation*, *supra* note 21, at 345-49.

<sup>172</sup> Laura J. Murray, *Exchange Practices among Nineteenth-Century US Newspaper Editors: Cooperation*, in LAURA J. MURRAY, S. TINA PIPER & KIRSTY ROBERTSTON,

newspapers became more dependent on sales and advertising.<sup>173</sup> Companies and larger associations emerged and came to dominate the market; all of them were accused of anti-competitive practices, putting even more pressure on local papers.<sup>174</sup>

From these changes came calls for copyright (or something!) to protect the news from expropriation.<sup>175</sup> Intriguingly, local newspapers were not asking for these changes—they did not want copyright because they depended on copying.<sup>176</sup> Only new media conglomerates were asking for stronger copyright to prevent competition in national news services. In 1883, AP hired a lobbyist (Henry Watterson) to seek passage of the “News Copyright Bill” that would grant short-term protection to articles published in newspapers.<sup>177</sup> Although the bill never got out of committee, debates about it foreshadowed copyright’s implied fact-exclusion that *Feist* makes blackletter law, extinguishing sweat-of-the-brow to protect *publici juris*.<sup>178</sup>

How did the notion of *publici juris*—property so important for general welfare that it must be free—enter copyright’s canon?<sup>179</sup> *Feist* does not quote Justice Louis Brandeis’s famous *INS* dissent but is surely channeling it.<sup>180</sup> Brandeis’s opinion reflects the changing nature of journalism at the turn of last century and the growing emphasis on the public interest in freedom of information as a mainstay of scientific progress and democracy:

News is a report of recent occurrences. The business of the news agency is to gather systematically knowledge of such occurrences of

---

PUTTING INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY IN ITS PLACE: RIGHTS DISCOURSES, CREATIVE LABOR, AND THE EVERYDAY 86, 86-109 (Oxford Univ. Press 2014) [hereinafter Murray, *Exchange Practices*].

<sup>173</sup> See Brauneis, *Transformation*, *supra* note 21, at 341.

<sup>174</sup> *Id.*

<sup>175</sup> *Id.* See also Douglas Baird, *The Story of INS v. AP*, in INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY STORIES (Rochelle Cooper Dreyfuss & Jane C. Ginsburg eds., Foundation Press, 2006) (referring to *INS* as a “concocted controversy”).

<sup>176</sup> Murray, *Exchange Practices*, *supra* note 172 (describing the accepted process of cutting and pasting among newspapers as “cabbaging”).

<sup>177</sup> Compare Brauneis, *Transformation*, *supra* note 21, at 355, with Journalism Competition and Preservation Act of 2022, S. 673, 117th Cong. (2022). Recently, similar calls to specially protect journalism have arisen as the internet has profoundly disrupted journalism’s predictable revenue streams from advertising. How to fund reliable news is once again a pressing concern.

<sup>178</sup> Instead of extending copyright to news, the Court decided *INS*, which as stated above, ended in a limited *sui-generis* “hot news” doctrine that has rarely been extended beyond facts.

<sup>179</sup> See Ochoa, *Public Domain*, *supra* note 84 (discussing history and related terminology of *publici juris*). I use *publici juris* because it is what *INS* uses when describing *Wheaton v. Peters*. Other terms include public property and common property.

<sup>180</sup> Brandeis’s opinion is considered a dissent (although it is sometimes indicated as a concurrence) because he would have denied all relief to AP, including unfair competition, placing all news in the public domain.



interest and to distribute reports thereof. The [AP] contended that knowledge so acquired is property, because it costs money and labor to produce and because it has value for which those who have it not are ready to pay; that it remains property and is entitled to protection as long as it has commercial value as news, and that to protect it effectively, the defendant must be enjoined from making, or causing to be made, any gainful use of it while it retains such value. An essential element of individual property is the legal right to exclude others from enjoying it. If the property is private, the right of exclusion may be absolute; if the property is affected with a public interest, the right of exclusion is qualified. But the fact that a product of the mind has cost its producer money and labor, and has a value for which others are willing to pay, is not sufficient to ensure to it this legal attribute of property. The general rule of law is that the noblest of human production—knowledge, truths ascertained, conceptions, and ideas—become, after voluntary communication to others, free as the air to common use.<sup>181</sup>

Brandeis's language reflects a changing respect for the news industry as a producer of knowledge serving the public interest. It also reflects property law's limits, including copyright, when "property" is "affected with a public interest." At the turn of the twentieth century, the Court was familiar with debates concerning public interest limits on property and contract because it frequently decided such cases regarding state regulation of ordinary economic affairs. The Court's infamous 1905 *Lochner v. New York* decision confounded states' power to regulate such matters by holding both property and contract inviolable as a matter of fundamental rights.<sup>182</sup> *Lochner* prevented state government from, for example, fixing prices of essential household staples and setting minimum wages and maximum hours.<sup>183</sup> Justices Brandeis and Holmes were at the forefront of this fight, dissenting in *Lochner* and eventually planting the doctrinal seeds for its demise.<sup>184</sup> The point here is twofold: In 1918, "news" was not the same as "facts" (despite *Feist* later equating them); and *INS* made a breakthrough determination that "news agencies" were sufficiently reliable and expert to produce "truths" that people could rely on—and they served the public good—such that exclusivity over the news (via copyright or otherwise) was inappropriate.

<sup>181</sup> *INS*, 248 U.S. at 250.

<sup>182</sup> *Lochner v. New York*, 198 U.S. 45 (1905).

<sup>183</sup> *Id.* (discussing both kinds of regulations).

<sup>184</sup> *Nebbia v. New York*, 291 U.S. 502 (1934) (upholding price regulation for milk because it was an industry "affected with the public interest"); *West Coast Hotel Co. v. Parrish*, 300 U.S. 379 (1937) (upholding the hours and wages regulation as a reasonably in the public interest). Justice Brandeis was on the Court for both decisions (stepping down in 1939). Justice Holmes left the Court in 1932.

Although *Feist* says none of this, it cites *INS*'s holding that "the news element—the information respecting current events contained in the literary production—is not the creation of the writer but a report of matters that ordinarily are *publici juris*."<sup>185</sup> As such, *Feist* affirms the preeminent value of free, accessible, and accurate information as a function of effective and efficient knowledge production in furtherance of the public interest. After designating "history of the day" *publici juris*, *INS* says that "[i]t is not to be supposed that the framers of the Constitution, when they empowered Congress 'to promote the progress of science and the useful arts' . . . , intended to confer upon one who might happen to be the first to report a historic event the exclusive right for any period to spread the knowledge of it."<sup>186</sup> *Feist* itself does not say "knowledge," but after quoting this sentence designating "history of the day" *publici juris*, *Feist* does say:

[C]opyright law has "recognize[d] a greater need to disseminate factual works than works of fiction or fantasy." . . . But "sweat of the brow" courts took a contrary view; they handed out propriety interest in facts and declared that authors are absolutely precluded from saving time and effort by relying upon the facts contained in prior works. In truth, "[i]t is just such wasted effort that the proscription against the copyright of ideas and facts . . . [is] designed to prevent. . . . Protection for the fruits of such research . . . may, in certain circumstances, be available under a theory of unfair competition. But to accord copyright protection on this basis alone distorts basic copyright principles in that it creates a monopoly in public domain materials."<sup>187</sup>

By criticizing copyright protection of "fruits of . . . research" and for the "wasted effort" it creates, this passage shows that "facts" in *Feist* means more than "information" or "data." It means knowledge produced through institutions with disciplinary authority (such as journalism). So understood, *Feist* expands the public domain in the information age.<sup>188</sup>

<sup>185</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 354.

<sup>186</sup> *INS*, 248 U.S. at 235.

<sup>187</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 354 (citations omitted).

<sup>188</sup> *Feist* was about telephone directories, critical information specific to the time of burgeoning competitions among telephone and communication companies. Knowledge and information we care about today might include data fueling algorithms, biochemical processes, and scholarly research. See LAMDAN, DATA CARTELS, *supra* note 6. See also *Hachette Book Grp., Inc. v. Internet Archive*, 664 F. Supp. 3d 370 (S.D.N.Y. 2023) (determining that the Internet Archive, engaging in controlled digital lending, committed copyright infringement unprotected by fair use by scanning and distributing copies of books online as part of the National Emergency Library (NEL) stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic).

5. *Wheaton v. Peters and Knowledge of Law*

*Feist* cites *INS* as a precedent for copyright's *publici juris*, justifying free-riding on labor and investment to collect and publish the news. But from where did *INS* derive it? To be sure, the notion of "public right" or common property—like claims on rainwater or, as Justice Brandeis says in *INS*, that which is "free as the air to common use"—was an enduring concept in English and U.S. law. It is an ancestor of today's "public domain," or the "commons."<sup>189</sup> In deciding *INS*, the Court was well aware of the battles at the time between privatization and maintaining public goods. Yet in *INS v. AP*, the argument for news as public property came from the *INS*'s lawyer, who cited *Wheaton v. Peters* in his argument to justify limiting copyright as a matter of public interest.<sup>190</sup> Although neither *INS* nor *Feist* cites *Wheaton*, the latter is discussed in the *INS* briefs as the canonical case for limiting copyright when public interest demands it.<sup>191</sup>

*INS* argues first that "facts are public not private property," citing *Baker* as controlling precedent (though we know that is not what *Baker* said).<sup>192</sup> Then *INS* explains that because *AP* does not copyright its news—*i.e.*, *AP* does not seek copyright registrations for its news reports before publishing them—it can have, at most a common law right extinguished upon publication.<sup>193</sup> "Yet, by the common law, the publication of such works amounts to a dedication to the public and confers a universal right of reproduction and use whether for purposes of gain or otherwise. *Wheaton v. Peters*."<sup>194</sup> *INS*'s lawyer anchors his argument for news as *publici juris* in *Wheaton*'s 1834 holding that copyright extinguishes when writings are "published" without being properly registered. "As long ago as 1774, the House of Lords in *Donaldson v. Beckett* . . . laid down principles which indicate that there can be no ownership in news at common law *after publication*. To the same effect are [other federal cases and two copyright treatises *Drone* and *Bowker*]." <sup>195</sup> *INS*'s lawyer analogizes this public dedication

<sup>189</sup> See Ochoa, *Public Domain*, *supra* note 84.

<sup>190</sup> *INS*, 248 U.S. at 229 (citing *Wheaton v. Peters*, 33 U.S. 591, 657 (1834)).

<sup>191</sup> *Id.*

<sup>192</sup> *Id.* Petitioner also cited in support lower court decisions, such as *Davies v. Bowes*, 209 F. 53, 56 (S.D.N.Y. 1913); *Tribune Co. v. Illinois Publ'g Co.*, 116 F. 126 (N.D. Ill. 1900); *Edward Thompson Co. v. American Law Book Co.*, 122 F. 922 (2d Cir. 1903); *West Pub. Co. v. Edward Thompson Co.*, 176 F. 833 (2d Cir. 1910); *Clayton*, *supra* note 136. *Baker* discusses *Clayton*, see *Baker*, 101 U.S. at 105.

<sup>193</sup> *INS*, 248 U.S. at 229.

<sup>194</sup> *Id.* The petitioner in *INS* also cites *Holmes v. Hurst*, a 1899 Supreme Court case upholding the public domain status of parts of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes's father's book, *The Autocrat at the Breakfast Table* (1858). 174 U.S. 82 (1899). Those parts were published in the *Atlantic Monthly* prior to registration and deposit with the appropriate government office.

<sup>195</sup> *INS*, 248 U.S. at 229 (emphasis added). Neither *Bowker* nor *Drone* directly address the issue. In relevant part, *Bowker* writes: "There is, therefore, no copyright protection for news as such, but the general copyright of the newspaper or a special copyright may protect

to the common law of trade secrets. “Upon publication, the news becomes the common possession of all to whom it is accessible; private property therein dies with its publication, as in the case of a trade secret.”<sup>196</sup> Citation to *Wheaton* is not out of the blue. It is the Court’s first copyright case and its holding, like *INS*, and like *Feist* eventually, extinguishes copyright in factual works produced with skill and effort.

The works in *Wheaton* were twelve volumes of Supreme Court law reports (arguments and opinions), edited by Court reporter Henry Wheaton from 1816 to 1827.<sup>197</sup> Richard Peters, the Defendant, was alleged to have published a volume called *Condensed Reports of Cases in the Supreme Court of the United States* containing all the Court’s decisions from its beginning through to the commencement of Peter’s reports (in 1827), and including, “without any material abbreviation or alteration, all the reports of cases in the first volume of Wheaton’s reports.”<sup>198</sup> Like *Baker v. Selden*, *INS v. AP*, and *Burrow-Giles v. Sarony*, *Wheaton* concerned competing copies in the marketplace and the scope of copyright’s public domain in works of “science.” *Wheaton* reads like a long, complicated opinion (with a dissent of approximately thirty pages), but the short story is that there was a factual dispute as to whether Wheaton and his publisher failed to adhere to statutory formalities to secure federal copyright in his reports.<sup>199</sup> As such, Wheaton also claimed common law property rights in his manuscripts to prevent Peters from republishing them in the updated annotated volumes. Wheaton justified exclusive control over the manuscript in his labor and skill, even if he failed to effectuate a federal copyright in them. Peters, however, claimed the manuscripts were in the public domain because they had been published absent notice, deposit, and registration, and thus were free to republish and sell.

---

the form of a dispatch, letter, or article containing news.” RICHARD ROGERS BOWKER, COPYRIGHT: ITS HISTORY AND ITS LAW 89 (Project Gutenberg 2012) (1912) (ebook). Drone explains: “But it may be said that the contents of a daily newspaper are too ephemeral and often too insignificant to be worthy of statutory protection. This is doubtless true of much that appears in a newspaper; but . . . among the contents of such publications are frequently found productions of great value and permanent literary merit. There is, then, nothing in the law of copyright, as made by the legislature or as expounded by the courts, to prevent valid copyright from vesting in a magazine or a newspaper, as a whole, or in any of its contents that may be worthy of protection.” EATON S. DRONE, A TREATISE ON THE LAW OF PROPERTY IN INTELLECTUAL PRODUCTIONS IN GREAT BRITAIN AND THE UNITED STATES 169 (1879).

<sup>196</sup> *INS*, 248 U.S. at 215.

<sup>197</sup> *Wheaton v. Peters*, 33 U.S. 591 (1834). See also Craig Joyce, *A Curious Chapter in the History of Judicature: Wheaton v. Peters and the Rest of the Story (Of Copyright in the New Republic)*, 42 Hous. L. Rev. 325 (2005).

<sup>198</sup> *Wheaton v. Peters*, 33 U.S. 591 (1834).

<sup>199</sup> The substantial majority of the Court’s opinion in *Wheaton* considered the relationship and potential conflict between common law copyright (which could ostensibly last in perpetuity) and statutory copyright, which had specific requirements for protection and a limited term. For the full story, see Joyce, *supra* note 197.

Nowhere in the *Wheaton* decision does the Court mention the public domain of facts or knowledge as part of the U.S. copyright regime. However, in deciding that *Wheaton* may have forfeited his copyright by failing to adhere to statutory formalities, the *Wheaton* Court explained the pitfalls of property law and constraints of copyright in light of its purpose: “[E]very man is entitled to the fruits of his own labor . . . ; but he can enjoy them only, except by statutory provision, under the rules of property, which regulate society, and which define the rights of things in general.”<sup>200</sup> While this enjoinder nods to the value of work and authorship as a kind of labor, it also recognizes that turning labor into property requires positive law. The law here is the U.S. Copyright Act, which the Court interprets as *preempting* common law copyright when the work at issue was published, as *Wheaton*’s reports were.<sup>201</sup> Because *Wheaton* (or his publisher) apparently failed to vest and/or renew his copyright in the reports, they were not private property and were instead in the public domain. As *Feist* would say 150 years later, it “may seem unfair that much of the fruit of the compiler’s labor may be used by others without compensation. . . . [But] this is not some unforeseen byproduct of a statutory scheme. It is, rather, the essence of copyright. . . .”<sup>202</sup>

*Wheaton* explains that both the scope of statutory protection and its preemptive effect construct and justify copyright’s public domain despite the labor of authors, even those on whom the Court relies to disseminate its decisions. They sum to the Court’s first holding—that no common law copyright can exist in published works; only federal copyright pertains, and federal law requires statutory formalities. The Court also announced a second holding before sending the factual issue of statutory compliance back to the trial court—that its own writing is unownable by reporters (and potentially, by anyone): “[N]o reporter has or can have any copyright in the written opinions delivered by this Court, and . . . judges thereof cannot confer on any reporter any such right.”<sup>203</sup>

---

<sup>200</sup> *Wheaton*, 33 U.S. at 658.

<sup>201</sup> *Wheaton*, 33 U.S. at 663 (“Congress . . . by this act, instead of sanctioning an existing right as contended for, created it.”). *Wheaton* relied on persuasive English law authority, *Miller v. Taylor*, 4 Burr. 2303 (1769) (holding that absent publication exclusivity over a manuscript could be perpetual) and *Donaldson v. Beckett*, 4 Burr. 2408 (1774) (holding that a published manuscript under the English copyright law, Statute of Anne (1710), was subject to statutory limits and thus could expire and become public property). “This right [to exclusive control over published works], . . . does not exist at common law—it originated, if at all, under the acts of congress. No one can deny that when a legislature are about to vest an exclusive right in an author or an inventor, they have the power to prescribe the conditions on which such right shall be enjoyed; and that no one can avail himself of such right who does not . . . comply with the requisitions of the law.” *Wheaton*, 33 U.S. at 663-64.

<sup>202</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 349.

<sup>203</sup> *Wheaton*, 33 U.S. at 668. It reaffirmed this holding in *Banks v. Manchester*, concerning reports of the Supreme Court of Ohio, holding that “what a court or a judge . . . cannot

The unanimous decision that judicial opinions cannot be copyrighted stems from Wheaton's argument that his reports of judicial opinions were distinct from "law" or "statutes," which he admitted cannot be copyrighted. In so admitting, Wheaton differentiated between his investment and expertise as a "reporter" and the "law" that he reported, a difference that faded over time, only to be contested again in the early twenty-first century.<sup>204</sup> Wheaton's attorney made his case as follows:

It is attempted to put judicial decisions on the same ground as statutes. It is the duty of legislators to promulgate their laws. It would be absurd for a legislature to claim copyright. . . . Statutes never were copyrighted. Reports always have been. . . . It is the bounden duty of government to promulgate its statutes in print, and they always do it. It is not considered a duty of government to report the decisions of courts, and they therefore do not do it. The oral pronunciation of the judgments . . . of courts is considered sufficient. Congress never employed a reporter, and they never gave any one compensation, before Mr. Wheaton. Mr. Cranch reported without compensation, and relied upon his copyright; and Mr. Wheaton continued, with full understanding that he was to report in the same way. [Is] the court prepared to deprive all authors of [judicial] reports in this country of their copyrights? Of property which they have labored to acquire?<sup>205</sup>

The answer, according to *Wheaton*, is yes. But the distinction between "judicial decisions" and "reports" remains important. Annotations and abridgments of opinions are copyrightable as to that which the author or reporter added himself; this is how, for example, Westlaw retains copyright over its headnotes and summaries.<sup>206</sup> The opinions themselves, as part of the "law," however, are in the public domain. This is one version of the "government edicts" doctrine, embodying the public policy that people must have access to the laws that govern them.<sup>207</sup> The doctrine is an early incarnation of open access principles and prevents copyright's monopolization of especially useful information. Indeed, Wheaton's lawyer made this precise point to barter a compromise in the case:

If either statutes or decisions could be made private property, it would be in the power of an individual to shut out the light by which we guide

---

confer on a reporter as the basis of a copyright in him, they cannot confer on any other person or on the state." *Banks v. Manchester*, 128 U.S. 244 (1888).

<sup>204</sup> *Public.Resource.Org*, 590 U.S. at 277 ; *Matthew Bender & Co v. West Publ'g*, 158 F.3d 674 (2d Cir. 2001).

<sup>205</sup> *Wheaton v. Peters*, 1834 U.S. LEXIS 619, at \*20-21, *aff'd*, 33 U.S. 591 (1834).

<sup>206</sup> *Matthew Bender*, 158 F.3d at 674.

<sup>207</sup> *Public.Resource.Org*, 590 U.S. at 264-67 (describing history of government edicts doctrine).

our actions. . . . [But] it is proper here to draw [a] distinction between *reports*, the immediate emanations from the sources of judicial authority, and . . . *treatises*, or even *compilations*. These may be of great utility, but they are not the law. Exclude or destroy them, and the law and the knowledge of it still exists. . . . The owner may close them at his pleasure, and no one can complain. But the entrance to the great temple itself, and the highway that leads to it, cannot be shut without tyranny and oppression.<sup>208</sup>

Here is yet another clear path to *Feist*: compilations can be copyrighted, but not the “law” or “knowledge” they contain.

Wheaton lost his case at the Supreme Court because of two principles: there is a copyright public domain even against authors’ “natural” right to the fruits of their labor, and judicial opinions as such are not copyrightable. *Wheaton* is not so strange a precedent for *INS* to declare “news” in the public domain if we understand both cases (as the petitioner in *INS* did) to describe copyright law’s construction and preservation of the public domain as essential to the production of knowledge and self-government. Moreover, *Wheaton*’s outcome depends on court reporters’ evolving professional identity straddling two roles: mouthpieces of the Court transcribing the “law” (*i.e.*, judicial opinions, which are in the public domain), and expert annotators whose authored additions can be owned and sold as their “work” if copyright formalities are met. *INS*’s outcome likewise depends on the evolving industry of journalism, recognized as producing both truths and knowledge about the world, which form part of the public domain, and articles and essays containing truths and knowledge, which can be copyrighted as expressions of authorship if formalities and other statutory requirements are met. Both cases explain that failure to register work prior to publication forfeits copyright and puts the material in the public domain, whatever its nature. And both cases unapologetically prioritize *publici juris* over exclusive rights preserving what *Feist* eventually calls the “essence of copyright.”<sup>209</sup>

\*\*\*

From *Wheaton* to *Feist* is a long journey to establish the bedrock principle that “facts” are in the public domain. But as that journey demonstrates, identifying “facts” is not always self-evident, and their shifting context is subject to dispute. Moreover, the priority of the public domain to accomplish copyright’s goal of producing knowledge in furtherance of the public interest is tacit when it should be manifest and unconditional.

One reason for the long road is that the twentieth century saw two overhauls of the Copyright Act without clarifying the fact-exclusion or prioritizing the

<sup>208</sup> *Wheaton*, 1834 U.S. LEXIS, at \*23-24 (emphasis added).

<sup>209</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 349.

public domain to achieve copyright's goals. Instead, legal debates focused on remunerating authorial labor when technological advances made copying and distribution easier and computing power made catalogs, databases, archives, and libraries copyright's cutting edge. Part II focuses on the story behind the 1976 Copyright Act and its newly minted §102, which strangely omits "facts" in its long recitation of subject matter exclusions. This history contains committee reports describing what should be in and out of copyright, but "facts" are only rarely mentioned. The history also includes an illuminating debate between a renowned copyright lawyer seeking stronger rights for his author-clients and a coalition of librarians advocating for better access to books and the knowledge they contain. We turn now to that history.

## II. LEGISLATIVE HISTORY OF THE 1976 COPYRIGHT ACT: AUTHORIAL LABOR AND THE VALUE OF THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

The 1976 Copyright Act was the last major overhaul of U.S. copyright law. It took more than two decades.<sup>210</sup> The legislative history for those revisions is voluminous.<sup>211</sup> Jessica Litman's definitive history of the copyright legislative process explains it as a series of "meetings and negotiations among representative industries with interest in copyright" that helped address the "dilemma of updating . . . a body of law that seemed too complicated . . . for legislative revision."<sup>212</sup>

Throughout the twentieth century, new communicative forms created controversies over whether "the current copyright statute can adjust to the climate of rapid technological change."<sup>213</sup> The advent of moving pictures (film), the modernization of the news industry, the development and diversification of the music industry, and the popularization of radio, television, and copying/recording technology presented all sorts of challenges for copyright law.<sup>214</sup>

The 1976 Act's innovation was to simplify copyrightable subject matter according to general and elastic (as opposed to specific and rigid) categories.<sup>215</sup> It extended copyright to fixed "original works of authorship" within seven broad

---

<sup>210</sup> The first committee reports date from the late 1950s and the Act was finally passed in 1976. See *infra* citing studies from the 1950s. See also Jessica Litman, *Copyright, Compromise and Legislative History*, 72 CORNELL L. REV. 857, 865 (1987) (describing "the introduction of at least 19 general revision bills over a period of more than 20 years").

<sup>211</sup> *Id.* ("The official legislative history is long, comprising more than 30 studies, three reports issued by the Register of Copyrights, four panel discussions issued as committee prints, six series of subcommittee hearings, 18 committee reports, and the introduction of at least 19 general revision bills over a period of more than 20 years.").

<sup>212</sup> JESSICA LITMAN, *DIGITAL COPYRIGHT* 48 (Michigan Publishing 2017) (2006) [hereinafter LITMAN, *DIGITAL COPYRIGHT*].

<sup>213</sup> *Id.* at 35.

<sup>214</sup> *Id.*

<sup>215</sup> Jessica Silbey & Jeanne Fromer, *Retelling Copyright: The Contributions of the Restatement of Copyright Law*, 44 COLUM. J. L. & ARTS 341, 371 (2021).



categories listed in §102(a), which are illustrative and not exhaustive.<sup>216</sup> At the same time—and for the first time—the 1976 Act also included subject matter exclusions in its new §102(b). Although §102(b) was new, the legislative report accompanying the 1976 Act says that “Section 102(b) in no way enlarges or contracts the scope of copyright protection under the present law.”<sup>217</sup> Its purpose is to restate, in the context of the new single Federal system of copyright, that the basic dichotomy between expression and idea remains unchanged.<sup>218</sup> The report instructs courts to refer to past case law when interpreting §102(b).

At the time, *Feist* was one of just a handful of Supreme Court cases to interpret the 1976 Act and the first to interpret §102(b).<sup>219</sup> It repeats Congress’s intent to “clarify, not change existing law.”<sup>220</sup> Yet *Feist* also says, misleadingly, that the Act’s “revisions explain with *painstaking clarity* that copyright requires originality (§102(a)); that facts are never original, (§102(b)); [and] that the copyright in a compilation does not extend to the facts it contains (§103(b)).”<sup>221</sup> *Feist* is correct on the first point, but the last two points are versions of the question *Feist* granted certiorari to decide. Section 102(b) does not mention facts, and the legislative history only barely does, as demonstrated further below. Likewise, §103(b) mentions “preexisting material,” not facts.<sup>222</sup> Very little is “painstakingly clear” in the legislative history or the statute itself about the omission of “facts” from §102(b).

Indeed, there is very little in thousands of pages of legislative history to explain why Congress excluded “facts” from the language of §102(b). General comments that the section leaves “unchanged” the “basic dichotomy between expression and idea” and denies “any intention to protect a programmer’s algorithms” do not help in identifying and applying the fact-exclusion, as opposed to the idea-exclusion or the method-exclusion.<sup>223</sup> There are, however,

<sup>216</sup> *Id.* at 372 (“As the legislative history explains, Congress set out to list as these illustrative categories ‘the general area of copyrightable subject matter, but with sufficient flexibility to free the courts from rigid or outmoded concepts of the scope of particular categories.’”).

<sup>217</sup> Section 102(b) reads: “In no case does copyright protection for an original work of authorship extend to any idea, procedure, process, system, method of operation, concept, principle, or discovery, regardless of the form in which it is described, explained, illustrated, or embodied in such work.” 17 U.S.C. § 102(b).

<sup>218</sup> H.R. REP. NO. 94-1476, at 57 (1976) [hereinafter *House Report*].

<sup>219</sup> The three other cases interpreting the Copyright Act were *Sony Corp. of Am. v. Universal City Studios, Inc.*, 464 U.S. 417 (1984) (interpreting Section 107), *Harper & Row*, 471 U.S. at 592 (interpreting Section 107), and *Mills Music, Inc. v. Snyder*, 469 U.S. 153 (1985) (interpreting Section 304(c)).

<sup>220</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 360.

<sup>221</sup> *Id.* (emphasis added).

<sup>222</sup> 17 U.S.C. §§ 102, 103.

<sup>223</sup> See *House Report*, *supra* note 218, at 57; Legislative History of the General Revision of the Copyright Law, Title 17 of the United States Code, and for Other Purposes, Pub. L. No. 94-553, 90 Stat. 2541 (October 19, 1976) [hereinafter *Legislative History of the General Revision*]; See generally *Copyright Law Revision: Hearings Before the Subcomm.*

three places in the legislative history spread over nearly twenty years that offer some answers to the puzzle and draw from case law described in Part I.

*A. 1956: Study 3 and “The Meaning of Writings in the Copyright Clause of the Constitution”*

This report, submitted in 1960 to the House of Representatives Committee of the Judiciary’s Subcommittee on Patents, Trademarks, and Copyrights, was the third of four studies submitted that year. It is an exhaustive case analysis of evolving copyright subject matter. Of particular interest for the eventual drafting of Section 102 is the discussion of “subjects denied copyright protection,”<sup>224</sup> including phonorecords, ideas, names and titles, reports of current events, and dress designs and fabrics.<sup>225</sup> Some of these categories were drawn from current debates and court disputes with specific industries (*e.g.*, music and fashion). The point was to focus legislators on disputes that were gaining traction to statutorily settle some of the questions, if possible.

A few things to note about this list. First, phonorecords eventually received protection under the Sound Recording Amendment of 1971.<sup>226</sup> Second, the 1976 Act granted protection for designs and printing on fabric.<sup>227</sup> Third, the Copyright Office would later deny protection for names and titles, along with short phrases, as lacking sufficient originality.<sup>228</sup> Fourth, the 1956 report distinguished “ideas” from “reports of current events,” by which it meant news and other factual reports.

As to the *idea*-exclusion, the report summarizes cases stemming from *Baker v. Selden* that excluded analogous graphic systems for their use as opposed to the expression they convey. The report explains that copyright excludes a range of “ideas” embodied in graphical systems (and thus the systems themselves), such as systems of shorthand, speedwriting, and indexing, as well as charts and game rules.<sup>229</sup> The report further states that the application of *Baker* depends on

---

on Cts., Civ. Liberties, and the Admin. of Just. of the H. Judiciary Comm. on H.R. 2223, 94th Cong. (1975) [Hereinafter *Copyright Law Revision Hearings*].

<sup>224</sup> See *House Report*, *supra* note 218, at 101.

<sup>225</sup> STAFF MEMBERS OF THE N.Y.U. L. REV., THE MEANING OF “WRITINGS” IN THE COPYRIGHT CLAUSE OF THE CONSTITUTION 101–07 (1956) [hereinafter *Study 3*].

<sup>226</sup> Sound Recordings Act, Pub. L. No. 92-140, 85 Stat. 39 (1971).

<sup>227</sup> *House Report*, *supra* note 218, at 55 (“a two-dimensional painting, drawing, or graphic work is still capable of being identified as such when it is printed on or applied to utilitarian articles such as *textile fabrics*, wallpaper, containers, and the like...” (emphasis added)).

<sup>228</sup> U.S. COPYRIGHT OFFICE, CIRCULAR 33: WORKS NOT PROTECTED BY COPYRIGHT 2-3 (2021), <https://www.copyright.gov/circs/circ33.pdf>; cf. Justin Hughes, *Size Matters (or Should) in Copyright Law*, 75 FORDHAM L. REV. 575 (2005) (explaining some short phrases are original, but policy reasons exist to exclude them from protection).

<sup>229</sup> See *Study 3*, *supra* note 225, at 103–04. We might today call this the merger doctrine, but as Pamela Samuelson explains, *Baker v. Selden* did not originate from the merger doctrine. Pamela Samuelson, *Reconceptualizing Copyright’s Merger Doctrine*, 63 J.

“whether [the writing] was an object of explanation or use,” and that “if it did not teach or convey information, it was not copyrightable.”<sup>230</sup> For example, a “chart was not a ‘writing of an author’ within the meaning of the Constitution since it did not convey the thought of the author, was not intended to communicate facts or ideas, and was solely for use in making records of facts.”<sup>231</sup> This summary is confusing: the assumption that works *would be* protected if they communicated “facts or ideas” (or “information”) seems to contradict the assertion that “ideas” are unprotectable. Both statements are true, but neither helps to identify any differences between a “fact,” “idea,” or “information” in light of copyright’s subject matter. The report does suggest, however, that a chart made solely for recording facts is unprotectable, implying that when facts and expression merge, the work is not copyrightable.

In excluding “reports of current events” from copyright protection, the 1956 report relies on *INS v. AP* to exclude news reports “not because they are not ‘writings,’ which they clearly are in the familiar sense of the word, but because they lack distinctive creativity, labor of the brain, and particularly originality.”<sup>232</sup> The report interprets *INS* and previous cases as denying protection to “mere annals” because they lack authorship according to *Burrow-Giles*; it does not justify excluding news reports based on the public interest in the public domain—a theme that *INS* emphasizes, especially in Brandeis’s famous dissent.

These last two examples concerning news and “facts and ideas” foreshadow *Feist*’s reasoning, particularly its facile definition of facts as “unoriginal” because “they do not owe their origin to an act of authorship,” which distinguishes “between creation and discovery.”<sup>233</sup> Yet nothing here explains *Feist*’s rejection of sweat-of-the-brow, denying authors of factual works copyright protection in order to promote the progress of science.

#### B. 1961: Kaminstein Register’s Report

The 1961 *Copyright Register’s Report*, written by newly appointed Register of Copyrights Abraham Kaminstein, holds more clues to *Feist*’s reasoning and result.<sup>234</sup> Jessica Litman describes Kaminstein as a compromiser (compared to his predecessor, who considered interindustry compromise a weakness of prior revision efforts).<sup>235</sup> Kaminstein’s new approach would take fifteen years to achieve a consensus among participants.<sup>236</sup>

---

COPYRIGHT SOC’Y USA 417 (2016) (dispelling myth that *Baker* originated the merger doctrine).

<sup>230</sup> See *Study 3*, *supra* note 225, at 104.

<sup>231</sup> *Id.*

<sup>232</sup> *Id.* at 105.

<sup>233</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 347.

<sup>234</sup> Kaminstein was appointed in 1960 after the death of Register Arthur Fisher. LITMAN, DIGITAL COPYRIGHT, *supra* note 212, at 50.

<sup>235</sup> *Id.*

<sup>236</sup> *Id.* at 51.

In the 150 pages of Kaminstein's initial report, only two mention the eventual §102(b)'s idea-exclusion. The report states that "[c]opyright does not preclude others from using ideas or information revealed in an author's work."<sup>237</sup> It also explains that "anyone is free to create his own expressions of the same concepts, or to make practical use of them," and that the work is always subject to "fair use," whose four factors would be codified in the 1976 Act for the first time.<sup>238</sup> Neither of these statements are revolutionary, and they are not about "facts" (as opposed to "ideas"). But they do endorse as lawful the unauthorized copying of another author's work for certain purposes related to efficiency and other practical uses. In other words, these are not statements about the defense of independent creation; they support a controversial (at the time) view of copyright law that allows copying from previously authored works to promote iterative productivity—a view that some case law approving sweat-of-the-brow would prohibit.<sup>239</sup>

C. 1975–76: *Hearings Before the House Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Courts, Civil Liberties, and Administration of Justice*

In the mid-1970s, the Subcommittee on Courts, Civil Liberties, and Administration of Justice met several times to take testimony and issue reports. Two of these reports specifically discuss the copyrightability of facts.

One mention was in a list of subject matter to be omitted from the new §102(b) and expressly considered by a future Congress. An October 19, 1976 report discussed this list in the context of a deleted footnote from prior 1967 and 1974 Senate reports:

Although the coverage of the present statute is very broad, and would be broadened further [under the revision bill] . . . , there are

<sup>237</sup> REGISTER OF COPYRIGHTS, GENERAL REVISION OF THE U.S. COPYRIGHT LAW 3 (1961). See also *id.* at 24 (same, but changing "revealed" to "disclosed").

<sup>238</sup> *Id.*

<sup>239</sup> Famously, *Bleistein v. Donaldson* said that "[o]thers are free to copy the original. They are not free to copy the copy" and cited *Blunt*, 3 F. Cas. at 765 (upholding copyright in a map that corrected errors in an old map, but otherwise was substantially the same and was based on the author's independent discoveries). 188 U.S. at 249. *Feist*, in ruling against *Rural*, criticized (or silently overruled) the line of cases that required independently sourcing facts to avoid copying from authored works. See 499 U.S. at 352-53 (criticizing *Jeweler's Circular Pub. Co. v. Keystone Pub. Co.*, 281 F. 83, 89 (2d Cir. 1922) in which a "subsequent compiler was 'not entitled to take one word of information previously published' but rather than to 'independently work out the matter for himself, so as to arrive at the same result from the same common source of information'"). Justice Stevens' papers containing the *Feist* file indicate he was focused on whether *Jeweler's Circular Pub. Co.* should remain good law. A copy of the case exists in his files and his oral argument notes mention how both *Jeweler's* and *Leon v. Pacific Tel. & Tel. Co.*, 91 F.2d 484 (9th Cir. 1937) are (in his words) "old cases" upholding "sweat of the brow." See *supra* note 67.

unquestionably other areas of existing subject matter that this bill does not propose to protect but that future Congresses may want to. . . . Without implying that they would be wholly without protection under one or another of the seven categories listed in sec. 102, or that they are necessarily the “writings” of “authors” in the constitutional sense, we cite the following as examples. *These are areas of subject matter now on the fringes of literary property but not intended, solely as such, to come within the scope of the bill:* typography; unfixed performances or broadcast emissions; blank forms and calculating devices; titles, slogans, and similar short expressions; certain three-dimensional industrial designs; interior decoration; ideas, plans, methods, systems, mathematical principles; formats and synopses of television series and the like; color schemes; [and] *news and factual information considered apart from its compilation or expression*. Many of these kinds of works can be clothed in or combined with copyrightable subject matter and thus achieve a degree of protection under the bill, but any protection for them as separate copyrightable works is not here intended and will require action by a future Congress.<sup>240</sup>

Strikingly, the soon-to-be-enacted §102(b) contains many of the exact words listed above—“ideas,” “principles,” “methods,” and “systems.” Here, finally, is a near-complete draft of what would become the first subject matter exclusion section in the 1976 Copyright Act. However, most listed items were eventually expressly mentioned in legislation or regulation, *except for news and factual information*. *Feist* does not cite this history to fill in the absence of “facts” in §102(b) or to justify its holding, perhaps understandably since this passage is from a deleted footnote in an obscure and superseded Senate report. But its relevance to the question in *Feist* seems clear. The copyrightability of news and factual information was left for other Congresses to decide—which they did not, leaving the question for federal courts or the states under common law.

The subcommittee mentioned the deleted footnote in its report, one of the final reports issued before the vote on the new Copyright Act, to clarify the application of statutory preemption regarding the subject matter exclusions in the soon-to-be-enacted §102(b):

Since section 301 pre-empts only what is covered by section 102, and since the Supreme Court’s *Goldstein* decision held that pre-emption is statutory and not constitutional, the States would presumably be free to give unlimited protection to any subject matter outside the scope of section 102. This may be a desirable result, but Congress should consider the consequences before adopting it.<sup>241</sup>

<sup>240</sup> *Legislative History of the General Revision*, *supra* note 223, at 3-4 (emphasis added).

<sup>241</sup> *See id.* at 15.

According to this report, §102(b)'s eventual omission of "news and factual information" is relevant to federal preemption. The above guidance worries that statutory preemption requires clarity. A future Congress (or Court) can decide that "news and factual information" is within the penumbra of §102(b) and not copyrightable.<sup>242</sup> Otherwise, states are free to protect such material.

The bulk of the subcommittee report urges the new legislation to offer more clarity about the copyrightability of computer programs, architectural works, and typeface designs, given their national commercial significance;<sup>243</sup> it does not revisit "news or factual information," and thus, the preemption issue concerning this subject matter is left tacit. Protecting "news and factual information" under state law as private property raises substantial and fundamental First Amendment concerns regarding freedom of press and speech, unlike computer programs, typeface, and architectural works.<sup>244</sup> The report did not discuss this constitutional implication, suggesting that "news and factual information considered apart from its compilation or expression" is not seriously at risk for state protection under common law copyright. But then why include it on the list in the deleted footnote?

Reassurance was necessary. The non-copyrightability of facts was mentioned earlier, on May 14, 1975, during a long day of heated testimony from the American library community represented by Edmon Low,<sup>245</sup> and from Irwin Karp, counsel for the Author's League of America. The testimony concerned library photocopying on behalf of patrons. Low described the question as "whether libraries will be permitted—at no additional expense—to continue to serve the public by the long-standing practice of providing single copies of copyrighted-material for users' research or study."<sup>246</sup> The reason for the question was recent prolonged litigation in which a library was sued for copying medical journal articles. The case lasted seven years and ended with a 4–4 Court decision affirming the library's use as fair.<sup>247</sup> Proposed revisions to the Copyright Act

---

<sup>242</sup> *Goldstein v. Cal.*, 412 U.S. 546 (1973) (holding that U.S. copyright law preemption is statutory not constitutional).

<sup>243</sup> See *Legislative History of the General Revision*, *supra* note 223, at 6.

<sup>244</sup> Of course, computer programs, typeface art, and architectural drawings can also be "speech." *Bernstein v. U.S. Dep't of Justice*, 192 F.3d 1308 (9th Cir. 1999) (encryption software as speech); Compendium (Third) § 906.4, citing 37 C.F.R. § 202.1(a), (e) (excluding typefaces as such but not when it forms part of "original pictorial art . . . such as a representation of an oak tree, a rose, or a giraffe that is depicted in the shape of a particular letter"); Jessica Rizzo, *Federal Architecture and First Amendment Limits*, 16 WASH. J. L. TECH. & ARTS 47 (2021).

<sup>245</sup> Edmon Low was the representative of the six major library associations. Included in that group was the Music Library, Special Library Association, Harvard University Library, American Library Association and Association of Research Libraries. See *Copyright Law Revision Hearings*, *supra* note 223, at 184.

<sup>246</sup> *Id.* at 185.

<sup>247</sup> *Williams & Wilkins Co. v. United States*, 420 U.S. 376 (1975) (the case was 4–4 because Justice Blackmun recused himself).

would add language prohibiting libraries from engaging in “systematic reproduction” of either single or multiple copies of copyrighted material, a limitation the library community thought was problematically ambiguous, risking more lawsuits and substantial harm to library patrons and the public.

The librarians argued that without an exemption for library photocopying, information would be restrained, frustrating the purpose of copyright to promote the progress of science. They also argued that because copyright is a public good and unlike real or personal property, limitations and exemptions such as for libraries are commonplace. Low’s testimony was urgent:

When we are talking about library copying practices, we are talking about the schoolboy in California who may need a copy of an article in the Los Angeles Times for a project . . . or about a judge in the county court . . . who may find he needs a copy of a law review article which bears directly upon a difficult question of law which has arisen in the course of his work. Or about the doctor in downstate Illinois who has a patient with an unusual and rare disease and the only recent material to be found is contained in an obscure journal published in Sweden, and available only through the Regional Medical Library system, but which article may aid him in saving his patient’s life. . . .

The list is endless, but . . . we are talking about an issue that very broadly affects the ability of people in this country to make use of their libraries which are the repository and storehouse of man’s knowledge.

. . . [C]opyright is not a constitutional right, such as trial by jury of one’s peers. The Constitution simply authorizes Congress to create the right. It is therefore a statutory right—one created by law—and may be changed, enlarged, narrowed, or abolished altogether by the Congress here assembled. It is a law enacted not for the benefit of an individual or a corporation but for the public good and with the purpose, as the Constitution expresses it, “to promote the progress of science and useful arts.”<sup>248</sup>

---

<sup>248</sup> See *Copyright Law Revision Hearings*, *supra* note 223, at 185. Other testimony followed by a variety of libraries and librarians. See, e.g., Wisconsin Interlibrary Loan Service: “I am deeply concerned that the interests of the consumers of library and information resources be represented. Too often the user is overshadowed and not heard and remains the silent majority, even though s/he is the ultimate recipient for good or ill in many legislative actions. . . . Of particular concern is the fact that . . . the Bill could be interpreted to effectively discontinue the traditional right of libraries of making a single copy of a copyrighted journal for a single user, even when the number of users and the volume of single copies is substantial. . . . Wisconsin is not alone in this concern. . . . the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science . . . restates its philosophy of greater, not less, access to library and information resources by all the citizens of the United States.” See *House Report*, *supra* note 218, at 216. See also, e.g., Alaska Methodist

How does one respond to a librarian's plea to consider the public good above individual pecuniary interests? With an equally righteous assertion of individual rights. Karp did not dispute the librarian's public interest framing; he inverted it in the service of a right to the fruits of one's labor, echoing copyright's sweat-of-the-brow principle that *Feist* eventually eviscerates:

The instrument chosen by the Constitution to serve the public interest—i.e., the securing of literary and scientific works of lasting value—is an independent, entrepreneurial property-rights system of writing and publishing. The Copyright Act establishes the rights which prevent others from depriving authors and publishers of the fruits of their labor. But it does not guarantee a fair reward, or any reward. For authors and publishers . . . must depend on income derived from uses of their books and journals to compensate for the talent, labor and money expended in creating them. . . . Congress should not disrupt the delicate balance of this essential system. Carving exemptions out of the “enforceable rights” of authors and publishers does not serve the public interest. . . . It has become ritual for library organization and Ad Hoc Committee spokesmen to accompany their demands for new exemptions with a series of attacks on copyright, calculated to suggest that the author has no legitimate claim to reasonable protection for the work he creates.<sup>249</sup>

Karp quoted “enforceable rights” presumably because he thought copyright insufficiently strong for authors to protect what he considered a basic human right: to own the fruits of one's labor. He nevertheless admitted to copyright's limits, responding to the librarian's concern about restraint of information and knowledge:

Library and Ad Hoc Committee spokesmen charge that a copyright places a restraint on information. This is not so. . . . Anyone is free to use the ideas, facts or information presented in a copyrighted book or article. The copyright only protects the author's expressions, not the ideas, facts or information. Other writers can draw on them. Other writers are free to independently create similar (indeed closely similar) works; the copyright only prevents substantial copying of the author's expression.<sup>250</sup>

---

University, College of Nursing, “Photocopying of books and articles is extremely helpful to both students and faculty. It provides an inexpensive and rapid way to acquire, read, and synthesize new materials, thus greatly enhancing the quality of education in schools and universities.” *Id.* at 222.

<sup>249</sup> *Id.*

<sup>250</sup> *Id.* at 221-22.



For this most relevant proposition, Karp quoted the nineteenth-century economist Henry George, who is famous for his theory of redistributive taxation on the rising value of land to alleviate poverty. Karp quoted George presumably because the best-selling social theorist and economist of the 1880s was an early leader in the Progressive Era, when wealth redistribution was embraced to fund public goods.<sup>251</sup> Quoting a Progressive theorist would appeal to those who thought copyright should yield to the public interest. And because George supported authorial copyright, Karp must have thought that public interest advocates should too. Karp quoted George as saying:

“Copyright . . . does not prevent any one from using for himself the facts, the knowledge, the laws or combinations for similar production, but only from using the identical form of the particular book or production—the actual labor which has been expended in producing it. [Copyright] rests upon the natural, moral right of each one to enjoy the products of his own exertion, and involves no interference with the similar right of anyone else to do likewise.” The [c]opyright is therefore in accordance with the moral law.<sup>252</sup>

Karp repeated in his testimony the part he deemed most helpful: that authors have a “natural, moral right . . . to enjoy the products” of their labor.<sup>253</sup> In emphasizing this principle, Karp apparently hoped it would persuade legislators to exclude library copying from newly proposed authorized uses in the soon-to-be 1976 Act. As already noted, the “right to own the fruits of one’s labor” (or sweat-of-the-brow justifications for ownership, even of intangible statutory property) ran deep.<sup>254</sup> It was a well-calculated plea.

Yet reliance on George only helped superficially. To be sure, George did pen the passage, but it is the only part of his famous treatise that mentions copyright. The force of George’s overall theory is redistributivist.<sup>255</sup> It is predominantly a theory of taxation that justifies limiting absolute claims to returns on investment from private property, and it only concedes the retention of some private wealth from private property in order to build or maintain

<sup>251</sup> Henry George, NEW WORLD ENCYCLOPEDIA, [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Henry\\_George/](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Henry_George/) (last visited July 29, 2024).

<sup>252</sup> *Copyright Law Revision Hearings*, *supra* note 223, at 222 (quoting HENRY GEORGE, POVERTY AND PROGRESS 411 (Robert Schalkenbach Foundation 1929) (1879) [hereinafter *Poverty and Progress*]).

<sup>253</sup> *Id.*

<sup>254</sup> See *supra* note 21 (sweat-of-the-brow debates).

<sup>255</sup> Oscar B. Johannesson, *Henry George and His Philosophy: He Sought Equality of Opportunity to Use the Earth’s Resources as Well as the End of Land Monopoly*, 45 AM. J. OF ECON. & SOCIO. 379 (1987).

community solidarity.<sup>256</sup> Karp's use of George was hardly a slam dunk for stronger authorial copyright at the expense of public libraries.

George's *Poverty and Progress* explores structuring taxes "productively" so as not to depress incentives or rewards from labor and land.<sup>257</sup> His most famous innovation is a tax of wealthy landowners on what he called the "unearned increment" of rising land prices, a value the government may tax and redistribute to ameliorate poverty. It resembles an early form of capital gains tax on land only. This theory identifies a windfall to property owners based on societal changes (e.g., land values rising) wherein, absent government intervention, only already prosperous landowners reap the rewards. His theory "prescribed a land-value tax as a way of returning that collectively produced wealth back toward the commonweal."<sup>258</sup> Unlike other taxes, George said, this tax on the "unearned increment" does not disincentivize investments. He compared its mechanism to copyrights (of all things!) as examples of a beneficial tax or temporary monopoly that does not interfere with productivity because, as he says in the above passage, copyright is not a monopoly on the things that actually matter—"the fact, knowledge, the laws or combination for similar production"<sup>259</sup> that are public domain material.

And this is where we come full circle. As an appeal to copyright's balance between public access and private rights on behalf of his author-publisher clients, Karp cited the progressive theorist Henry George for the proposition that copyright rests on "the natural, moral right of each one to enjoy the products of his own exertion."<sup>260</sup> He assures legislators this does not mean copyright will limit access to "ideas, facts or information presented in the copyrighted book" because "copyright only protects the author's expressions, not the ideas, facts or information."<sup>261</sup> This is the question squarely presented in *Feist*. Karp's appeal is one of the only places in thousands of pages of legislative history that discusses the fact-exclusion in the context of sweat-of-the-brow, and it arises in the context of Karp arguing that sweat-of-the-brow should prevail. This is exactly what *Feist* says the Constitution does not allow because it "flout[s] basic

---

<sup>256</sup> *Id.*

<sup>257</sup> *Poverty and Progress*, *supra* note 252, at 358 (Book IX, Chapter 2).

<sup>258</sup> Annika Neklason, *The 140-Year-Old Dream of 'Government Without Taxation'*, THE ATLANTIC (Apr. 15, 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2019/04/henry-georges-single-tax-could-combat-inequality/587197/>.

<sup>259</sup> See *Poverty and Progress*, *supra* note 252, at 411. ("The copyright is not a right to the exclusive use of a fact, an idea, or a combination, which by the natural law of property all are free to use; but only to the labor expended in the thing itself. It does not prevent anyone from using for himself the facts, the knowledge, the laws or combinations for a similar production, but only from using the identical form of the particular book or other production—the actual labor which has in short been expended in producing it. It rests therefore upon the natural, moral right of each one to enjoy the products of his own exertion, and involves no interference with the similar right of anyone else to do likewise.")

<sup>260</sup> See *Copyright Law Revision Hearings*, *supra* note 223, at 122.

<sup>261</sup> *Id.*

copyright principles,” which *Feist* claims §102(b) makes clear.<sup>262</sup> But, to state the obvious, *Feist* does not refer to Progressive Era policies like George’s tax proposal, and §102(b) required the Court’s interpretation to justify its broader application in the public interest.

Karp invoked George to assert authors’ “natural rights” to charge license fees for all copies, even those librarians make for research, restoration, and repair. George’s theory is most innovative and interesting for its radical redistributivist impulse—taking from private investment and giving to the public domain. Most emphatically, it does not simply reserve for the public that which was already public property. And yet that is what Karp said in asserting that ideas, facts, and information belong to no one. *Feist* begins there but goes further to hold that the labor and investment in producing factual matter does not alone justify exclusive rights in its collection.<sup>263</sup> This was a precedent-setting legal change, which the legislative history and case law demonstrate remained undecided in 1976. Fast-forward fifteen years, though, and *Feist* claims to be merely restating a “constitutional requirement” and correcting previously misunderstood cases.<sup>264</sup>

As mentioned earlier, none of this means *Feist* is wrong. It just does not say enough—perhaps typical for Supreme Court decisions, which are jointly authored, resemble brokered deals, and frequently use general terms to fashion compromise, leaving debates about edge cases for later. But the edge cases are here now. Copyright disputes over the nature and scope of “facts” in the public domain and privately owned “original expression” of those facts arise with alarming regularity.<sup>265</sup> Were copyright owners to prevail in these cases, knowledge and useful information would be sequestered. In addition to the disputes already cited above, recent cases concern copyrighting annotated state statutes,<sup>266</sup> aircraft maintenance and repair manuals,<sup>267</sup> emergency room forms,<sup>268</sup> credit scores,<sup>269</sup> weekly average interest rates offered by banks,<sup>270</sup> residential property listings,<sup>271</sup> pesticide instructions,<sup>272</sup> evaluation criteria for

<sup>262</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 353.

<sup>263</sup> *Id.* at 353-54.

<sup>264</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 346, 352, 354. See *supra* note 80 (describing basis for “constitutional requirement”).

<sup>265</sup> See *supra* notes 5-11 (describing scenarios and past cases) and Conclusion (describing pending cases).

<sup>266</sup> *Public.Resource.Org*, 590 U.S. at 259. See also *Am. Soc’y for Testing & Materials v. Public.Resource.Org*, 597 F. Supp. 3d 213 (D.D.C. 2022), *aff’d* 82 F.4th 1262 (D.C. Cir. 2023). See also *Veeck v. S. Bldg. Code Cong. Int’l, Inc.*, 293 F.3d 791 (5th Cir. 2002).

<sup>267</sup> *Honeywell Int’l, Inc. v. Western Support Grp., Inc.*, 947 F. Supp. 2d 1077 (D. Ariz. 2013).

<sup>268</sup> *Utopia Provider Sys. v. Pro-Med Clinical Sys., L.L.C.*, 596 F.3d 1313 (11th Cir. 2010).

<sup>269</sup> *Experian Info. Sols., Inc. v. Nationwide Mktg. Servs.*, 893 F.3d 1176 (9th Cir. 2018).

<sup>270</sup> *BanxCorp v. Costco Wholesale Corp.*, 978 F. Supp. 2d 280 (S.D.N.Y. 2013).

<sup>271</sup> *Salestraq Am., LLC v. Zyskowski*, 635 F. Supp. 2d 1178 (D. Nev. 2009).

<sup>272</sup> *FMC Corp. v. Control Sols., Inc.*, 369 F. Supp. 2d 539 (E.D. Pa. 2005).

building products, components and methods,<sup>273</sup> and legal forms.<sup>274</sup> Many copyright owners say that these works are not factual but original expressions of expertise and judgment, which copyright law privatizes for sale or sequestering. Whether these works are factual or contain “facts” depends on what we mean by that term.

The sparse but illuminating legislative history alleviates some ambiguity by explaining how keeping “facts” in the public domain is important for the dissemination of knowledge, such as with news. This history provides a loose constitutional anchor in the First Amendment for the explanation of public domain “facts,” but little else. It does not help define the scope of “facts,” except to leave the debate concerning sweat-of-the-brow and rights in fruits of authorial labor to future adjudication. Part I provided some examples of debated public domain materials (*publici juris*) akin to “facts” grounded in new industries developing epistemological authority, like photography, financial services, news, and law. Part III examines the history of knowledge production in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the canonical cases that *Feist* relies on were being decided. It explains that twenty-first-century “facts” are the result of disciplinary expertise and social scientific pursuits, placing much more in the public domain at the expense of hard work and investment. But, importantly, such “facts” serve the interest of promoting progress of science and the useful arts as the Constitution demands.

### III. THE EMERGENCE OF “FACTS” AS A TWENTIETH-CENTURY CATEGORY OF TRUTH AND KNOWLEDGE

It turns out that “facts” as a category of “truth” developed slowly over time, reaching ascendancy in the mid-twentieth century along with the institutions (and their processes) that produce them. Of course, historical events, geographical details, and scientific truths were age-old subjects of knowledge and debate.<sup>275</sup> The emergence and diversity of “facts” is as much about the measure of knowledge as how it is produced. The very idea of the “fact-exclusion” could not arise in copyright without understanding how modern facts in all their variety came to be understood. This third path to *Feist* describes the development of institutions and industries producing facts at the turn of the

---

<sup>273</sup> ICC Evaluation Serv. LLC v. Int’l Ass’n of Plumbing & Mech. Offs., No. 16-CV-54-EGS-ZMF, 2022 WL 3025241 (D.D.C. Apr. 27, 2022).

<sup>274</sup> Ross, Brovins & Oehmke, P.C. v. LexisNexis Grp., 463 F.3d 478 (6th Cir. 2006).

<sup>275</sup> See HAYDEN WHITE, *CONTENT OF THE FORM: NARRATIVE DISCOURSE AND HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION* (1987). See also M.T. CLANCHY, *FROM MEMORY TO WRITTEN RECORD 1066-1307* (2d ed. 1993). As both White and Clanchy describe in their path breaking histories of medieval literacy, knowledge of historical events, metes and bounds of land claims, and seasonal harvest yields became important to record especially with the spread of legal claim-making and dispute resolution. These were records of “events” and “measures” (perhaps the precursors to “facts” and “data” today) and their contestability became more viable as, ironically, their recordings by multiple “authors” proliferated.

twentieth century, which are mentioned in both the cases and the legislative history—institutions such as law and courts; journalism and photography; information technologies (including libraries); and the social sciences. Modern facts arise from a nineteenth-century epistemological revolution and gain authority and prominence within the context of knowledge-producing institutions in the early twentieth century.

This Part argues that early twentieth-century pragmatist philosophy's challenge to universal truths combined with legal realist challenges to formalist jurisprudence eventually shape what is (or should be) copyright law's broad public domain in "facts." As the authority and influence of new knowledge-producing institutions develop (along with the increasingly dominant role of social sciences in shaping public policy and law), the facts they produced became less contestable and more self-evidently "facts."<sup>276</sup> But as their authority and influence grew—and were later challenged in the process of knowledge contestation—copyright law came to focus instead on the characterization of the new form of "expression" as "authored" (*i.e.*, a privatization of copyright) instead of on the value of common property (*i.e.*, the public interest in "science" inherent in the copyright system).<sup>277</sup> This third path to *Feist* is a story about the organization of knowledge production and shifting epistemological paradigms, which, taken together, are the prehistory of the twentieth-century fact-exclusion and more fully explain the context of the cases *Feist* relies on. The result justifies a very broad fact-exclusion—one as broad (if not broader) than the idea-exclusion expressly contained in §102(b).<sup>278</sup>

As described below, the story starts in the mid-1800s with contests over universal truths that culminated in early 1900s paradigm shifts in the new sciences, university structures, and understandings of law's function to promote the public good. Before debating whether a "fact" is in or out of copyright, the institutions or professional communities that produce "facts" require authority: an ability to command deference based on established disciplinary practice and

<sup>276</sup> See, e.g., Dan Burk, *Method and Madness in Copyright Law*, 3 UTAH L. REV. 587, 595-96, 602 (2007) (describing this process based in attuned judgment and constrained choices determined by disciplines, with examples *inter alia* of rounding decimals or using telescopes to look at stars).

<sup>277</sup> *Id.* at 594-596 (criticizing evaluation cases for their apparent distinction between "subjective" ideas (opinions), which are copyrightable, and "objective" or "hard" ideas, which are "facts" and uncopyrightable). Burk writes that "it seems obvious that the valuations [of coins and cars published in competing books] are themselves valued for their accuracy, for their predictability, for their determinacy." *Id.* at 594. That there are competing books of valuations doesn't make the valuations any less authoritative in view of those relying on the books. And yet competition made their copyright status contestable in court. *Contra* Baker, 101 U.S. at 107 (holding that similar, but not identical, forms in competing accounting books are uncopyrightable).

<sup>278</sup> Thanks to Tyler Ochoa and Justin Hughes whose comments at IPSC 2022 (Stanford) and later in email correspondence helped me think through the relative breadth of "ideas" versus "facts."

expertise.<sup>279</sup> Copyright is a strange intervenor in this history, but as Margaret Chon writes, “copyright is one of many modalities of knowledge governance and is itself composed of numerous policy levers.”<sup>280</sup> The key copyright cases described in Part I that *Feist* relies on date from this earlier time period and have profoundly shaped copyright law. In 1895, sociologist Émile Durkheim published his canonical essay “What Is a Social Fact?”, which transfigured the burgeoning social sciences.<sup>281</sup> In that essay, Durkheim asserted the existence of “facts” produced by culture that are as durable as natural or scientific facts.<sup>282</sup> The existence and status of facts qua facts—from natural facts to institutional and social facts—developed at this time and continued to evolve as the copyright debate emerged. This history is central to a full understanding of modern facts in copyright law as a species of disciplinary knowledge produced through societal institutions and therefore in the public domain.

This third path also helps clarify the debate contained in the legislative records concerning the protection of the author’s labor as a matter of natural or moral right. *Feist* expunges from copyright law the sweat-of-the-brow doctrine that, until *Feist*, had been debated as both viable policy and law among prominent legal scholars and courts.<sup>283</sup> Collection, production, and

---

<sup>279</sup> Margaret Chon writes about this difference between copyright “content” (which may be protected) and “knowledge” which perhaps cannot if it is “sticky knowledge” – accurate, authentic, reliable knowledge. She highlights the difference in French between “connaissance” and “savoir,” the latter of which is “reliable” in the certified, institutional way. Quoting Paul David and Dominique Foray, “Reliable knowledge (‘savoir’) means certified, robust knowledge that has been legitimized by some institutional mechanism (be it scientific peer review or collective memory and belief systems). Other forms of knowledge (‘connaissance’) also enable action (knowing how to do the gardening, DIY) but have not been put through the same tests as certified knowledge. What separates the two has less to do with the contrast between the scientific and the non-scientific than whether or not the knowledge has been subjected to institutional testing.” Margaret Chon, *Sticky Knowledge and Copyright*, 2011 WIS. L. REV. 177, 181 (2011). In this parlance, “facts” as developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century are a variety of “savoir.”

Robert Post has developed a similar theory around the First Amendment especially in the digital age and a “growing pessimism about the future of free speech in the United States.” Robert Post, *The Unfortunate Consequences of a Misguided Free Speech Principle* (available at [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=4255938/](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4255938/)) (“The best test of truth ... is not the marketplace, but instead the judgment of those trained to assess intellectual quality. And intellectual quality is inseparable from compliance with relevant disciplinary standards.”).

<sup>280</sup> Chon, *supra* note 279, at 202.

<sup>281</sup> DURKHEIM, *supra* note 63, at 1-13

<sup>282</sup> “Social facts” are “collective aspects of the beliefs, tendencies, and practices of a group that characterizes social phenomena.” *Id.* at 7. “Currents of opinion, with an intensity varying according to time and place, impel certain groups [to behave in certain ways]. ... These currents are plainly social facts. At first sight they seem inseparable from the forms they take in individual cases. But statistics furnish us with the means of isolating them. ... It is a group condition repeated in the individual because imposed on him.” *Id.* at 8-9.

<sup>283</sup> See *supra* note 21 (sweat-of-brow scholarship).

dissemination of “facts” can be hard work. Copyright’s first subject matter categories of “maps, charts, and books” were informational, fact-intensive works whose laborious production was meant to be incentivized by the grant of a fourteen-year copyright.<sup>284</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century, and until reproduction and distribution technology radically reshaped industries (such as journalism), the labor theory was entangled with the originality doctrine, which glorified a person’s intellectual labor as inseparable from the physical efforts of collecting information.<sup>285</sup> Indeed, the dignity of work and protection of a person’s independent labor was a political current running through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, undergirding socio-political movements from abolition to the Progressives.<sup>286</sup> As described in Part II, the dignity of labor even played a role in copyright law reform.<sup>287</sup> If facts were produced through hard work, and hard work was to be elevated and incentivized, then rendering facts public property produced through that hard work posed a political problem.

Responses to this political problem in copyright took the forms of philosophical, political, and economic theories like possessive individualism, laissez-faire capitalism, and radical subjectivity.<sup>288</sup> The effect was an exalted originality doctrine originating in *Burrow-Giles* and grossly enlarging the scope of copyright subject matter to the detriment of the public domain. This doctrine would culminate in *Bleistein v. Donaldson*, penned by Justice Holmes during his first year on the Court.<sup>289</sup> *Bleistein* is considered the culmination of *Burrow-Giles*’ originality doctrine glorifying “personality” and “singularity” in authored works that always have in them “something irreducible, which is one man’s

<sup>284</sup> Copyright Act of 1790, 1 Stat. 124. For a comprehensive account of the constitutive relationship between the map-making and copyright doctrine, see ISABELLA ALEXANDER, *COPYRIGHT AND CARTOGRAPHY: HISTORY, LAW, AND THE CIRCULATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL KNOWLEDGE* (2023).

<sup>285</sup> Robert Brauneis recounts in *The Transformation of Originality* that “sweat of his own brow” is a more modern phrase akin to “intellectual labor” or “labor of the mind” or “labor and skill” found in earlier copyright cases. See Brauneis, *Transformation*, *supra* note 21, at 329 n.34 (citing *Amsterdam v. Triangle Publ’ns*, 93 F. Supp. 79 (D. Pa. 1950)). “Sweat of the brow,” Brauneis claims, did not appear in a copyright case until 1950. And it wasn’t used in “its recognized sense” he says until 1984 in the case of *Fin. Info., Inc. v. Moody’s Invs. Serv.*, 751 F. 2d 501, 506 (2d Cir. 1984). *Id.*

<sup>286</sup> This labor movement drew force from abolition, reconstruction, the early women’s movement for full citizenship, and progressivism’s push for social and economic welfare policies to address problems of poverty. CORINNE MCCONNAUGHY, *THE WOMAN SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT IN AMERICA: A REASSESSMENT* 167-170 (2013).

<sup>287</sup> *Supra* Part II.C.

<sup>288</sup> C.B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: From Hobbes to Locke* (1962) (describing these political theories). See also Phillip Hansen, *Reconsidering C.B. MacPherson: From Possessive Individualism to Democratic Theory and Beyond* 125–86 (2015).

<sup>289</sup> *Bleistein*, 188 U.S. at 251.

alone.”<sup>290</sup> *Bleistein* represents a doctrinal broadening of subject matter and an ideological shift in copyright law—a democratization of sorts, wherein any person can be a copyright author.<sup>291</sup> *Bleistein* is a “principal turning point” in copyright law’s development, arriving chronologically in the middle of the other cases discussed in Part I.<sup>292</sup> (As already mentioned, *Feist* itself cites *Bleistein* only once.<sup>293</sup>) But, as Barton Beebe notes, the case and its influence have a dark side.<sup>294</sup> Taken to its extreme, it hurts progressive causes that rely on the incontestability of public goods—a commonweal reliant on common property; and it celebrates individual hard work (with an emphasis on the individual) to the detriment of expanding social welfare and equal citizenship.<sup>295</sup>

This third path to *Feist* is thus the most helpful and the most complicated (political questions always are). The policy question of whether to protect an author’s labor to the detriment of the public domain and the public interest becomes a legal question when human labor produces what are called “facts” in copyright.<sup>296</sup> This quandary raises the specter of the debate between “facts” and “values”—an “ontological politics”<sup>297</sup> that preoccupied the new sciences (and the legal philosophies that drew on them) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the canonical copyright cases leading to *Feist* were being decided.<sup>298</sup> This last Part describes that evolution, including a debate Justice Holmes was having about this very issue (but which did not explicitly appear in his copyright decisions). By situating *Bleistein* in this larger context, Part III aims to tame its bloated originality doctrine and reinforce the authority of institutions producing facts (as well as the importance of access to those facts) that are vital for rational debate over today’s pressing socio-political

<sup>290</sup> Id. at 250-251. See also Beebe, *Aesthetic Progress*, *supra* note 22, at 330.

<sup>291</sup> Jessica Silbey, *Justifying Copyright in the Age of Digital Photography*, 9 U.C. IRV. L. REV. 405, 420-424 (2019) (describing the case, its reputation, and subsequent history). See also SILBEY, *AGAINST PROGRESS*, *supra* note 22, at 8 (2022) (describing *Bleistein*’s influence as lowering copyright originality so much that today “everything from everyday Instagram photographs to shampoo labels” may be copyrighted).

<sup>292</sup> Beebe, *Aesthetic Progress*, *supra* note 22, at 330.

<sup>293</sup> *Feist*, 499 U.S. at 359.

<sup>294</sup> See Beebe, *Aesthetic Progress*, *supra* note 22, at 319-20 (describing *Bleistein*’s “damaging influence” and starting “regressive cultural trends”).

<sup>295</sup> At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, political clashes between progressives and industrial magnates produced policy debates about how to promote a good society. Expanding citizenship privileges (welfare, voting, labor rights) and notions of the “common good” were at the forefront of these debates, but so was freedom of contract and the priority of private property. MICHAEL MCGERR, *A FIERCE DISCONTENT: THE RISE AND FALL OF PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT IN AMERICA* 143 (2005).

<sup>296</sup> According to Brauneis, one explanation for the rise of copyright’s originality doctrine at the turn of the century was in response to the changing structure of the news industry. See Brauneis, *Transformation*, *supra* note 21, at 373.

<sup>297</sup> Law & Urry, *Enacting the Social*, *supra* note 54, at 390.

<sup>298</sup> As described *infra*, Part III.C.3., the modern reading of Holmes’s *Bleistein* opinion short-circuits this analysis and *Feist* fails to address it head on.



problems. Doing so revitalizes *Feist* and broadens its fact-exclusion for twenty-first-century copyright disputes.

*A. Pragmatism, the New Disciplines, and Situated Truths*

American pragmatism, said to originate with Charles Sanders Peirce in the late 1800s, was (among other things) a rejection of universalist thought and absolutism.<sup>299</sup> Peirce, like other pragmatists in his American cohort—William James, John Dewey, and Jane Addams<sup>300</sup>—propounded the notion that what is true should be tested with scientific experimentation, grounding truth in empirically observable reality.<sup>301</sup> While this may seem basic from a twenty-first-century perspective, an epistemology based on experience, rejecting the notions that truths are universal and what we know is stable, was innovative in the nineteenth century.<sup>302</sup> Pragmatism was not a theory of relativism; it was about situated truths, knowable and testable but contingent. Peirce was famous for developing the idea of “fallibilism,” an anti-Cartesian perspective holding that absolute certainty is unnecessary to accept something as true and that all knowledge requires is “fallible progress” based on self-correcting methods of inquiry.<sup>303</sup>

Just a few decades later, in the early 1900s—dubbed the “golden age” of Cambridge philosophy—G. E. Moore, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Bertrand Russell developed a new form of analytical philosophy that also rejected idealism in favor of realism.<sup>304</sup> The methods developed in Cambridge, England, were more mathematical than empirical, based more on logic than lived experience. However, the conclusions and theories for which the Cambridge philosophers became both famous and influential confirmed the new understandings of the contingencies and contextual constraints of knowledge that were circulating among American pragmatists. All three British philosophers combined metaphysics with epistemology. Wittgenstein’s

<sup>299</sup> Catherine Legg & Christopher Hookway, *Pragmatism*, STAN. ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY (Apr. 6, 2021), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/pragmatism/> [hereinafter *Pragmatism Stanford Encyclopedia*]. See also Robert Tsai, *Legacies of Pragmatism*, 69 DRAKE L. REV. 879, 881 (2021).

<sup>300</sup> Jane Addams invented the profession of social work as an expression of pragmatist ideas and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. See *Pragmatism Stanford Encyclopedia*, *supra* note 299.

<sup>301</sup> Tsai, *supra* note 299, at 881–85 (describing the pragmatist’s “epistemological modesty” and practice of using “their mind and experience to sift through information acquired through external senses” while “resisting the inclination to pre-judge the meaning or value of that information”).

<sup>302</sup> WILLIAM JAMES, PRAGMATISM: A NEW NAME FOR SOME OLD WAYS OF THINKING 67 (1907) (the “pragmatist talk[s] about truths in the plural, about their utility and satisfactoriness”).

<sup>303</sup> See *Pragmatism Stanford Encyclopedia*, *supra* note 299.

<sup>304</sup> HERBERT HOCHBERT, RUSSELL, MOORE AND WITTGENSTEIN: THE REVIVAL OF REALISM (2001).

metaphysics famously described the world as consisting of facts, not objects; facts, he said, are a collection of states of affairs, which are themselves combinations of objects.<sup>305</sup> Wittgenstein was primarily concerned with the problem of logically representing facts and the connection between pictures and reality, asserting a distance between them but also an inevitable relation that demanded explanation. Moore's *Principia Ethica*, published in 1903, did to ethics what Wittgenstein did to facts by insisting on context to assess ethical mores and problematizing the notion of intrinsic nature or value.<sup>306</sup> The American pragmatists, including Justice Holmes, read and debated the work of these British philosophers.<sup>307</sup>

*Principia Ethica* rejects a universal definition of "good" with definable, intrinsic properties, asserting that what is taken as good are "intuitions" incapable of proof or disproof.<sup>308</sup> Moore instead embraces a modified form of consequentialism.<sup>309</sup> This philosophy resonated with the American pragmatists, some who adopted legal realism as their judicial philosophy and whose legal innovation would be to defer to iterative policies grounded in shifting but knowable situational facts about groups of people.<sup>310</sup> *Principia Ethica*'s last chapter departs a consequentialist frame and, perhaps paradoxically, asserts two "ideal" goods: human affection and the appreciation of beauty: "Personal affections and aesthetic enjoyments include all the greatest, and by far the greatest goods we can imagine."<sup>311</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre summarizes this part of *Principia* (while also critiquing it as "highly contentious"), saying that "[t]he achievement of friendship and the contemplation of what is beautiful in nature or in art become certainly almost the sole and perhaps the sole justifiable ends of all human action."<sup>312</sup> Moore's theory of ethics appears to swing between consequentialism and aesthetic idealism, which MacIntyre says are (and

---

<sup>305</sup> LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, TRACTATUS LOGICO-PHILOSOPHICUS 2.01 (1922).

<sup>306</sup> G. E. MOORE, PRINCIPIA ETHICA (1903).

<sup>307</sup> See Postal Card from Judge Pollock to Justice Holmes (Feb. 24, 1904), in HOLMES-POLLOCK LETTERS: THE CORRESPONDENCE OF MR. JUSTICE HOLMES AND SIR FREDERICK POLLOCK, 1874-1932 116 (Belknap Press 1961) [hereinafter HOLMES, CORRESPONDENCE].

<sup>308</sup> ALASDAIR MACINTYRE, AFTER VIRTUE: A STUDY IN MORAL THEORY 15 (1981) [hereinafter MACINTYRE].

<sup>309</sup> *Id.*

<sup>310</sup> MORTON J. HORWITZ, THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN LAW, 1870-1960: THE CRISIS OF LEGAL ORTHODOXY 209 (1992) ("the Brandeis Brief, by highlighting social and economic reality, suggested that the trouble with existing law was that it was out of touch with that reality"). This begins the rise of legislative facts that "inform[] a court's legislative judgment on questions of law and policy" and emerged with the Brandeis Brief, made famous in *Muller v. Oregon*, 208 U.S. 412, 419 (1908). See Kenneth Culp Davis, *An Approach to Problems of Evidence in the Administrative Process*, 55 HARV. L. REV. 364, 404 (1942).

<sup>311</sup> MACINTYRE, *supra* note 308, at 15-16.

<sup>312</sup> *Id.*

probably have to be) logically independent of one another.<sup>313</sup> This debate becomes relevant for Holmes's *Bleistein* opinion.<sup>314</sup>

American pragmatism and Cambridge's "golden age" shake up the state of certainty—about what we know, the manner of pursuing truth, and the ideal object of law or life. This shake-up produces epistemological paradigm shifts that fracture disciplines, like philosophy, but that birth others, like sociology, psychology, economics, and urban studies. Thus begins the modern university with its "disciplines" backed by new methods of empiricism and fallibility, housing learned societies and journals that explain, authorize, and propel expertise in the new fields.<sup>315</sup> From skepticism about truth comes multiple forms and topics of truths, along with institutions and associations that propose new ways of knowing.

University leaders refrained from micromanaging the quality of this exponential output, leading to "the growth of professional societies and the creation of an organized peer review system."<sup>316</sup> The Modern Language Association was established in 1883; the American Economic Association in 1885; the *American Journal of Psychology* in 1887; and the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1895.<sup>317</sup> Until then, the job of assessing quality in scholarly and scientific work "was left in the hands of university presidents. . . . As time went on, the locus of authority to determine academic competence . . . was increasingly vested in faculty members, their academic departments and their peers at other universities."<sup>318</sup> In other words, the epistemological revolution of the late nineteenth century generated the modern institutions and organizations that produce what we think of today as disciplinary *knowledge*—humanistic, social, and scientific pursuits following generally accepted reality-based epistemic rules for establishing truth (or facts) about the world and its objects.<sup>319</sup>

<sup>313</sup> *Id.*

<sup>314</sup> Justice Holmes in *Bleistein* was evidently caught within this "highly contentious" debate. In Holmes's attempt to reconcile that which perhaps cannot be reconciled—consequentialism with aesthetic idealism—he birthed via *Bleistein* a problematic originality doctrine that grossly expanded copyright protection and unmoored it from a foundation in a reasonable commercial basis for anti-copying protection. See *supra* Part III.B.

<sup>315</sup> JONATHAN COLE, *THE GREAT AMERICAN UNIVERSITY* 43 (2012). "The founders of the research universities were linked to the new ideas of a host of thinkers in different fields. Those in the intellectual limelight included pragmatist philosophers and psychologists John Dewey and William James; legal philosophers such as Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., and the stars of the new discipline of sociology—people like Lester Ward and Charles Sumner. The professional culture in law, medicine, and in many academic disciplines developed, and higher education witnessed enormous economic growth." *Id.* at 46.

<sup>316</sup> *Id.*

<sup>317</sup> *Id.*

<sup>318</sup> *Id.* at 43.

<sup>319</sup> Jonathan Rauch calls these "reality-based inquir[ies]" "orderly, decentralized, and impersonal social adjudication" characterized by objective, iterative, and transparent processes of error-correction. RAUCH, *THE CONSTITUTION*, *supra* note 28, at 103.

This revolution eventually changed how courts decide cases and how legislatures inform legal policy.<sup>320</sup>

With the birth of the modern university came new “professions”—law, journalism, social work, accountants, and statisticians—some with their own schools, licensing requirements, and disciplinary experts.<sup>321</sup> For example, the first school of professional journalism opened in 1908 at the University of Missouri.<sup>322</sup> This followed the news industry’s reorganization in the 1880s as a response to the recent fake news crisis and “yellow journalism.”<sup>323</sup> The professional newsroom, with its fact-checkers, expertise, and authority, was born at this time.<sup>324</sup> The same was true of law. Not until the late 1800s did law schools proliferate, although they did not have entrance requirements or final examinations and were mainly vehicles for apprenticeships.<sup>325</sup> In 1890, when Harvard’s Christopher Columbus Langdell revamped the university’s legal education program with the case method as a more “scientific” method of studying legal doctrine,<sup>326</sup> most lawyers in the country had not graduated from a law school.<sup>327</sup> But the study of law—like journalism, medicine, and other professions—evolved quickly within institutions of higher learning, asserting qualitative standards of excellence for their practice and metrics of “truths” within each discipline.<sup>328</sup> In Jonathan Rauch’s explanation, this is the story of the “constitution of knowledge,” grounded in democratic processes that enable the social adjudication of disciplinary truths (“science” in the words of the Constitution) through impersonal, professional institutional mechanisms. The notion of “facts” as outputs of disciplinary communities arose in this historical context. Not until this time, therefore, could copyright law begin to wrestle with

<sup>320</sup> See *supra* note 310.

<sup>321</sup> See COLE, *supra* note 315, at 46. RAUCH, *supra* note 28, at 100-03 (describing the world of “professional scholarship, science, and research,” journalism, government agencies, and law/jurisprudence).

<sup>322</sup> Betty Houchin Winfield, *Introduction*, in JOURNALISM, 1908: BIRTH OF A PROFESSION 9 (Betty Houchin Winfield ed., 2008).

<sup>323</sup> See Merrill Fabry, *Here’s How the First Fact-Checkers Were Able to Do Their Job Before the Internet*, TIME (Aug. 24, 2017, 10:00 AM), <https://time.com/4858683/fact-checking-history/> (describing the professionalization of journalism as a response to “sensational yellow journalism of the 1890s” and the early history of professional “fact-checkers” within Time Magazine as mostly performed by women).

<sup>324</sup> See *id.*; See also Jean Folkerts, *History of Journalism Education*, 16 JOURNALISM & COMMUN MONOGRAPHS 227 (2014).

<sup>325</sup> Brian J. Moline, *Early American Legal Education*, 42 WASHBURN L. J. 775, 800 (2003) [hereinafter *Moline*]; see also Hugh MacGill & R. Newmyer, *Legal Education and Legal Thought, 1790-1920*, in THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF LAW IN AMERICA 36-67 (Michael Grossberg & Christopher Tomlin eds., 2008).

<sup>326</sup> Dorsey Ellis, Jr., *Legal Education: A Perspective on the Last 130 Years of American Legal Training*, 6 WASH. U. J. L. & POL’Y 157, 166 (2001).

<sup>327</sup> See *Moline*, *supra* note 325, at 801.

<sup>328</sup> See COLE, *supra* note 315, at 46.

what to do with “facts” in terms of its constitutional goal of “Progress of Science.”

*B. Legal Realism and Deference to Disciplinary Knowledge*

Oliver Wendell Holmes, considered a forerunner of legal realism,<sup>329</sup> was a participant in the above-described revolution within the philosophy of knowledge and its new institutions.<sup>330</sup> Legal realism was a reaction to legal formalism.<sup>331</sup> As Joseph Singer writes in the context of reviewing Laura Kalman’s *Legal Realism at Yale: 1927–1960*, “[t]he original realists sought to understand legal rules in terms of their social consequences. To better their understanding of how law functions in the real world, they attempted to unify law and the social sciences.”<sup>332</sup> The realists “hoped to make judicial decision-making more predictable by focusing on both the specific facts of cases and social reality in general, rather than on legal doctrine.”<sup>333</sup> A realist critique of nineteenth-century jurisprudence was similar to that made by pragmatists of universalist philosophy: “Rules do not decide cases; they are merely tentative classifications of decisions reached.”<sup>334</sup> The concern was that universal or formal principles applied to concrete cases in an increasingly complex and diverse society lead to inconsistent and unjust outcomes—abstractions divorced law from reality draining it of legitimacy.<sup>335</sup>

The realists pursued a “larger enterprise” than unifying law and social science:

The legal realists wanted to replace formalism with a pragmatic attitude toward law generally. This attitude treats law as made, not found. Law therefore is, and must be, based on human experience, policy, and

<sup>329</sup> See David Seipp, *Holmes’ Path*, 77 B.U. L. REV. 515, 553 (1997) [hereinafter *Seipp*]. But see Neil Duxbury, *The Birth of Legal Realism and the Myth of Justice Holmes*, 20 ANGLO-AM. L. REV. 81 (1991) (admitting that Holmes while understood as the “primary intellectual inspiration behind American legal realism” was in fact not a “forerunner of legal realism” but an “apologist for legal formalism”).

<sup>330</sup> An avid reader and writer beyond the law, Holmes’ letters and writings provide insight into the backdrop of his many decisions. See *Seipp*, *supra* note 329, at 553. See also Beebe, *Aesthetic Progress*, *supra* note 22, at 358-61, 368-69 (proposing extra-judicial influences on Holmes’ *Bleistein* opinion).

<sup>331</sup> Legal realism has been described as a “form of functionalism and instrumentalism.” Joseph Singer, *Legal Realism Now*, 76 CAL. L. REV. 465, 468 (1988) [hereinafter *Singer, Realism*]. See also LAURA KALMAN, *LEGAL REALISM AT YALE: 1927-1960* (1986).

<sup>332</sup> Singer, *Realism*, *supra* note 331, at 468.

<sup>333</sup> *Id.*

<sup>334</sup> *Id.* at 469. This echoes Holmes’s famous statement in *Lochner* that “general propositions do not decide concrete cases. The decision will depend on a judgment or intuition more subtle than any articulate major premise.” *Lochner v. N.Y.*, 198 U.S. 45, 65 (1905) (Holmes, J. dissenting).

<sup>335</sup> See Singer, *Realism*, *supra* note 331, at 470; see also Felix Cohen, *Transcendental Nonsense and the Functional Approach*, 35 COLUM L. REV. 809, 809-21, 838-42 (1935).

ethics, rather than formal logic. Legal principles are not inherent in some universal, timeless logical system; they are social constructs, designed by people in specific historical and social contexts for specific purposes to achieve specific ends.<sup>336</sup>

This enterprise included an attack on the “public/private distinction” and on “the idea of the self-regulating market,”<sup>337</sup> which Singer traces to, among other influential texts, Holmes’s *Privilege, Malice, and Intent* (1894).<sup>338</sup>

Pragmatism and the new sciences directly affected legal realism. The studies of socio-economic institutions and organizational behavior became the fodder on which realist judges based their decisions. When applying general rules to specific cases, judges could defer to experiences and behaviors that the new sciences explained—whether economics, urban studies, labor relations, or industrial production. Constitutional litigators know this historical practice to originate with the “Brandeis Brief,” what Philippa Strum describes as “the first brief that had more pages of statistics by far than of legal principles.”<sup>339</sup> Then-attorney Louis Brandeis filed such a brief in the 1908 case of *Muller v. Oregon*, justifying restrictions on work hours as reasonable for women to protect their health and well-being.<sup>340</sup> *Muller* was decided just three years after *Lochner v. New York* held otherwise for working men.<sup>341</sup> Holmes joined the majority in *Muller* and dissented in *Lochner*, believing that the state’s legislative factual findings amply supported the labor regulations protecting all workers. Brandeis would go on to author the famous *INS* opinion that *Feist* relies on, writing that “the general rule of law is that the noblest of human production—knowledge, truths ascertained, conceptions, and ideas—[become], after voluntary communication to others, free as the air to common use.”<sup>342</sup>

Legal realism can be understood as an abdication of judicial authority in favor of reasonable state (or federal) legislative judgment, which should be given substantial latitude. The alternative is for an unaccountable and elite judiciary, isolated from the facts and lived experience under consideration, to decide substantive government policy. When Justice Holmes in *Lochner* said in dissent that it is not the judiciary’s job to second-guess the legislature’s judgment when it rests on some rational basis, even if disagreement about that

---

<sup>336</sup> See Singer, *Realism*, *supra* note 331, at 474.

<sup>337</sup> *Id.* at 475.

<sup>338</sup> *Id.* Singer also cites as influential Walter Wheeler Cook’s *Privileges of Labor Unions in the Struggle for Life*, 27 YALE L.J. 779 (1918).

<sup>339</sup> Philippa Strum, *Brandeis and the Living Constitution*, in BRANDEIS AND AMERICA 120 (Nelson Dawson ed., 1989). See also *Seipp*, *supra* note 329, at 517 (explaining Holmes said that lawyers need to study economics and statistics). See also *supra* note 310 (citing Horwitz and Davis).

<sup>340</sup> *Muller v. Oregon*, 208 U.S. 412 (1908).

<sup>341</sup> *Lochner v. N.Y.*, 198 U.S. 45 (1905).

<sup>342</sup> *INS v. AP*, 248 U.S. 215, 250 (1918). See also *supra* Part 1.B.3.

basis exists,<sup>343</sup> he embodied the then-pragmatist imperative of deferring to legislative facts as authoritative. These legislative facts derived from the legitimacy of the legislature itself, its representative nature, and its fact-finding practices, all fueled by the new social sciences that would substantiate Progressive social policies like welfare-sustaining programs and economic and industrial regulation benefitting laborers.<sup>344</sup> The *Lochner* crisis, preceding legal realism's heyday, was a failure of formalism: the Supreme Court denied local legislatures the ability to craft policies tailored to specific local contexts and instead prioritized universalist principles like "freedom of contract." *Lochner*'s dissents and eventual demise were a success of pragmatism (and its eventual jurisprudential instantiation, legal realism) by emphasizing factual investigations and "empirical research designed to answer questions about the efficacy of institutions and rules of law in aid of understanding what social policy was appropriate in each functionally defined area" of society.<sup>345</sup>

When Holmes wrote in *Lochner* that "a constitution is not intended to embody a particular economic theory, whether of paternalism and the organic relation of the citizen to the State or of *laissez faire*," he was writing about the New York labor law, which aimed to protect the safety of industrial workers,

---

<sup>343</sup> "This case is decided upon an economic theory which a large part of the country does not entertain. If it were a question whether I agreed with that theory, I should desire to study it further and long before making up my mind. But I do not conceive that to be my duty, because I strongly believe that my agreement or disagreement has nothing to do with the right of a majority to embody their opinions in law. It is settled by various decisions of this court that state constitutions and state laws may regulate life in many ways which we, as legislators, might think as injudicious, or, if you like, as tyrannical, as this, and which, equally with this, interfere with the liberty to contract." *Lochner*, 198 U.S. at 75 (Holmes, J. dissenting).

<sup>344</sup> See HOROWITZ, *supra* note 310.

<sup>345</sup> John Henry Schlegel, *Legal Realism*, in 13 INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE 774 (2nd ed. 2015). Justices Harlan and Holmes each authored famous dissents in *Lochner*. Harlan cites as justification for the New York labor law various studies, including Professor Hirt's "Diseases of Workers" and the "Eighteenth Annual Report by the New York Bureau of Statistics of Labor." *Lochner*, 198 U.S. at 69. Harlan's dissent is based on the new facts of the day. Similarly, Holmes pens the famous line "The Fourteenth Amendment does not enact Mr. Herbert Spencer's Social Statics" criticizing the majority opinion for deciding the case "upon an economic theory which a large part of the country does not entertain." *Lochner*, 198 U.S. at 75. Justice Holmes writes: "General propositions do not decide concrete cases. . . . I think that the word liberty in the Fourteenth Amendment is perverted when it is held to prevent the natural outcome of a dominant opinion, unless it can be said that a rational and fair man necessarily would admit that the statute proposed would infringe fundamental principles as they have been understood by the traditions of our people and our law. It does not need research to show that no such sweeping condemnation can be passed upon the statute before us. A reasonable man might think it a proper measure on the score of health. Men whom I certainly could not pronounce unreasonable would uphold it as a first installment of a general regulation of the hours of work." *Lochner*, 198 U.S. at 76.

who were in weak bargaining positions vis à vis employers.<sup>346</sup> This famous passage criticized constraining state legislatures with antique notions of “natural law.” Holmes’s dissent, which would become the majority thirty years later,<sup>347</sup> proclaimed that “[a constitution] is made for people of fundamentally differing views, and the accident of our finding certain opinions natural and familiar or novel and even shocking ought not to conclude our judgment upon the question whether statutes embodying them conflict with the Constitution.”<sup>348</sup>

Holmes was talking about labor law, but he could have been talking about copyright. Two years earlier in *Bleistein*, he said that copyrightable subject matter should not be constrained by judges’ elite sensibilities. The circus advertisements at issue in *Bleistein* were just as much copyrightable expression as the fine arts, he said:

If there is a restriction, it is not to be found in the limited pretensions of these particular works. *The least pretentious picture has more originality in it than directories and the like, which may be copyrighted.* . . . [T]he act, however construed, does not mean that ordinary posters are not good enough to be considered within its scope. The antithesis to “illustrations or works connected with the fine arts” is not works of little merit or of humble degree, or illustrations addressed to the less educated classes. . . . Certainly works are not the less connected with the fine arts because their pictorial quality attracts the crowd, and therefore gives them a real use—if use means to increase trade and to help to make money. A picture is nonetheless a picture, and nonetheless a subject of copyright, that it is used for an advertisement. And if pictures may be used to advertise soap, or the theater, or monthly magazines, as they are, they may be used to advertise a circus.<sup>349</sup>

We see here impulses of pragmatism’s consequentialism and deference to majoritarian preferences. We also see (in dicta) confirmation that even directories contain the requisite originality for copyright. Twenty years later, the

---

<sup>346</sup> *Id.*

<sup>347</sup> *Lochner*’s overly formalistic concepts did not stand the test of time. The Supreme Court eventually adopted Holmes’s *Lochner* dissent as the majority rule embracing a more flexible view of judicial review in *West Coast Hotel Co. v. Parrish*, 300 U.S. 379 (1937), which historicizes “freedom of contract” through the due process clause. That case says: “The Constitution does not speak of freedom of contract. It speaks of liberty and prohibits the deprivation of liberty without due process of law. In prohibiting that deprivation, the Constitution does not recognize an absolute and uncontrollable liberty. Liberty in each of its phases has its history and connotation. But the liberty safeguarded is liberty in a social organization which requires the protection of law against the evils which menace the health, safety, morals and welfare of the people.” *Id.* at 392.

<sup>348</sup> *Lochner*, 198 U.S. at 76.

<sup>349</sup> *Bleistein v. Donaldson Lithographing Co.*, 188 U.S. 239, 251 (1903) (emphasis added).



Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit (affirming a district court decision by Judge Learned Hand) would repeat *Bleistein*'s language and protect a jeweler's catalog from copying by a competitor.<sup>350</sup> *Bleistein*'s holding expands copyrightable subject matter even to advertisements, catalogs, directories, and other commercial matters that may contain low originality or "authorship," as typically understood in terms of intellectual labor and creativity. Holmes's deference to the new industries, their laborers, "and people of fundamentally differing views" meant that anyone can be an author and almost everything is authored.

*Bleistein* is celebrated for its "aesthetic democracy" and for inaugurating the "aesthetic nondiscrimination" principle.<sup>351</sup> Its often-quoted sentences foreground the risk of judicial elitism in copyright:

It would be a dangerous undertaking for persons trained only to the law to constitute themselves final judges of the worth of pictorial illustrations, outside of the narrowest and most obvious limits. At the one extreme, some works of genius would be sure to miss appreciation. . . . At the other end, copyright would be denied to pictures which appealed to a public less educated than the judge. Yet if they command the interest of any public, they have a commercial value—it would be bold to say that they have not an aesthetic and educational value—and the taste of any public is not to be treated with contempt. . . . That these pictures had their worth and their success is sufficiently shown by the desire to reproduce them without regard to the plaintiffs' rights.<sup>352</sup>

*Bleistein* results in copyright for the circus advertisement because, as Holmes says, "personality always contains something unique . . . a very modest grade of art has in it something irreducible which is one man's alone. That something he may copyright unless there is a restriction in the words of the act."<sup>353</sup> This "personality" theory of copyright is *Bleistein*'s other legacy, lowering the originality standard below even *Burrow-Giles* (which reserves the possibility that "ordinary" photographs lacked originality<sup>354</sup>). By setting the originality bar at "personality," *Bleistein* trades the value of a person's labor for the value of individualism, measured here by market preferences and commercialism.<sup>355</sup>

---

<sup>350</sup> *Jeweler's Circular Pub. v. Keystone Pub.*, 281 F. 83, 85 (2d Cir. 1922) ("It was at one time intimated in certain judicial opinions that directories were not entitled to copyright. But the law is now well established to the contrary in England. . . . Mr. Justice Holmes, writing for the court, speaks of directories as being capable of copyright."). See *supra* note 67 (discussing Justice Stevens's notes on *Jewelers* in his *Feist* file).

<sup>351</sup> Beebe, *Aesthetic Progress*, *supra* note 22, at 359 (citing LINDA DOWLING, *THE VULGARIZATION OF ART: THE VICTORIANS AND AESTHETIC DEMOCRACY* (1996)).

<sup>352</sup> *Bleistein*, 188 U.S. at 252.

<sup>353</sup> *Id.* at 250.

<sup>354</sup> *Burrow-Giles*, 111 U.S. at 59.

<sup>355</sup> Beebe, *Aesthetic Progress*, *supra* note 22, at 363.

Who needs sweat-of-the-brow if all human expression for which there is demand for copies contains something copyrightable?

Just two years after *Bleistein*, Holmes's *Lochner* dissent argues against the power of a "free" market to define rights and supplant legislative choices regarding contractual limits and labor standards. This view is plausibly inconsistent with *Bleistein*, which relied on markets to shape rights (in copyright), and with the Copyright Act, which did not expressly extend to advertisements.<sup>356</sup> Holmes's views seem in flux, shifting between abdicating judicial authority for aesthetics, his deference to legislatures, and his reverence for the practice of art (and the pursuit of science) as an ideal.<sup>357</sup>

Holmes's engagement with evolving strands of philosophical debate about both aesthetics and utilitarianism might explain his confusion. He read Moore's *Principia Ethica*, published the same year as *Bleistein*.<sup>358</sup> In Holmes's letter to Sir John Pollock, one of hundreds in their thirty-year correspondence, he appears to have expressed dismay with Moore's theory of the "good" as a universal ideal (as opposed to a contingent and situated value).<sup>359</sup> Pollock corrected Holmes in a response dated February 24, 1904:

<sup>356</sup> "The advertisements were not fine art by even a broad definition of the term, and the *Bleistein* Court should not have granted them copyright protection. Present-day accounts of *Bleistein* strangely overlook the statutory context of Holmes's ruling. They celebrate his declaration later in the opinion that judges should not impose their own aesthetic standards when deciding copyright cases, but they omit the fact that this is precisely what he did in his highly tendentious statutory interpretation." *Id.*

<sup>357</sup> Holmes was an art connoisseur and his wife was an accomplished artist. Rebecca Curtin, *The Art (History) of Bleistein*, 69 J. OF COPYRIGHT SOC'Y OF THE USA 395 (2023) (describing Holmes's affection for and attention to his wife's artistic work as another explanation of his decision in *Bleistein*). Barton Beebe describes Holmes' reverence for the pursuit of knowledge and art in a 1902 speech at Northwestern University School of Law just one year before the *Bleistein* decision. Beebe, *Aesthetic Progress*, *supra* note 22, at 360. Holmes says in that speech, "[t]he justification of art is not that it offers prizes to those who succeed in the economic struggle, to those who in an economic sense have produced the most, and thus that by indirection it increases the supply of wine and oil. The justification is in art itself, whatever its economic effect." OLIVER W. HOLMES, COLLECTED LEGAL PAPERS 272–73 (1920). Holmes goes on to say: "the opening which a university is sure to offer to all the idealizing tendencies—which I am not afraid to say, it ought to offer to the romantic side of life—makes it above all other institutions the conservator of the vestal fire." *Id.* at 275. Beebe describes *Bleistein* as having an "almost schizophrenic quality" when compared to Holmes's Northwestern University speech a year earlier in 1902. Beebe, *Aesthetic Progress*, *supra* note 22, at 360–61. As David Seipp writes, Holmes was known for his "playful cynicism" with many people failing to get the joke. *See Seipp*, *supra* note 329, at 558. Whether Holmes was being playful, hypocritical, changed his mind, or remained undecided on his views of copyright, it may be time to take *Bleistein* less seriously and to reconsider copyright originality.

<sup>358</sup> HOLMES, CORRESPONDENCE, *supra* note 307, at 116. Moore's lectures previously circulated as draft lectures. G.E. MOORE, *PRINCIPIA ETHICA* (Revised Edition) xiii (Thomas Baldwin, ed. 1993).

<sup>359</sup> This letter is missing from the correspondence, but Holmes' journal at the time indicates he read Moore's work. HOLMES, CORRESPONDENCE, *supra* note 307, at 116. The

I don't think you differ with the ingenious G.E.M. so much as you suppose. He does not set up an absolute good; on the contrary, he says that the predicate "good" in our various judgments of what is "good" is *sui generis* and unanalyzable, and therefore no universal external criterion of goodness can be assigned—such as pleasure-giving quality, utility however defined, or conformity to any one ideal. In short, so far as we know, there is not one good, but very many goods with apparently nothing in common but just being good. And the question—what ought we to judge good?—seems on this view to be rational only in the sense: By preferring what sort of "goods" do men and nations succeed? Not much catching the tail of the Cosmos there. I don't say that I agree with this view myself, but I think it at least worth going through. A great deal of the detailed criticism—on utilitarianism e.g.,—seems to me quite excellent.<sup>360</sup>

If we are to understand Pollock's assurance, Holmes was having an internal debate with Moore about the possibility of an ideal good, questioning the Cambridge philosopher's groundbreaking work, and perhaps also misinterpreting it given its somewhat confusing embrace of *both* utilitarianism and aesthetic idealism.<sup>361</sup> *Bleistein*'s similarly confounding result—celebrating both aesthetic practice and market consequences as a justification for copyright protection—might reflect Holmes's extracurricular study of Moore. Prompted by Moore's celebration of the aesthetic as an ideal, *Bleistein* also celebrates it by blessing almost anything as authored expression despite the Copyright Act's ambiguity on the subject of advertisements as fine art. Holmes defers to market behavior in *Bleistein* as a measure of rational preferences of "men and nations" (as Pollock says), only to reject it as a guiding principle in *Lochner* two years later in deference to New York's labor regulations.

Holmes's unsettled philosophy of aesthetics and utilitarianism does not alleviate *Bleistein*'s troublesome effect on twentieth-century copyright law. But it may explain the instability of the "two sides of *Bleistein*."<sup>362</sup> It also may justify limiting *Bleistein*'s expansive reach and constraining its aesthetic nondiscrimination principle to pragmatism's core tenets. These include

---

editor's footnote to "G.E.M." says: "In Holmes' Journal there appears among the volumes read in the early part of 1904, George Edward Moore, *Principia Ethica* (1903). The letter concerning the book, which he had apparently written to Pollack, is missing." *Id.* David Seipp describes Sir Pollock as "one of England's leading legal historians." See Seipp, *supra* note 329, at 532.

<sup>360</sup> HOLMES, CORRESPONDENCE, *supra* note 307, at 116-17.

<sup>361</sup> See MACINTYRE, *supra* note 308, at 15. See *supra* Part III.A.

<sup>362</sup> See Beebe, *Aesthetic Progress*, *supra* note 22, at 376 ("one side was driven by the imperatives of romanticism and the aesthetic. The other was driven by the imperatives of industrial capitalism, the very imperatives against which romanticism and the aesthetic at least in part defined themselves").

deference to institutional and disciplinary expertise, even when disputes exist concerning facts on which experts base their judgments. In this context of revitalizing *Feist*, note that *Feist* tacitly repudiates *Bleistein* by denying copyright to the directory in the case (Rural's phone book), and it expressly overrules another case, *Jeweler's Circular v. Keystone* (1922), as to sweat-of-the-brow. In this light, *Feist* counsels an even less deferential originality standard in tandem with a broader application of §102(b).

### C. *Taming Bleistein and Broadening the Fact-Exclusion*

*Bleistein* was the beginning of Holmes's tenure on the Court, during which he became known for operationalizing his conception of "experience." Perhaps contrary to how *Bleistein* is understood today, "experience" is not "individual and internal but collective and consensual; it is social, not psychological."<sup>363</sup> This is to say that *Bleistein* should be read with more humility than it is today, as Holmes might have meant it in light of the full panoply of his judicial philosophy—not as a justification for copyright protection over all human expression exhibiting even a spark of "personality," but as merely one manifestation of Progressive Era and pragmatist theory that embraces diverse aesthetic forms reflecting changing socio-economic institutions and practices. *Bleistein*'s celebration of radical subjectivity or "personality," in other words, should not undermine (and indeed should give way to) the authoritative production of facts and their designation as objective truths, which produce institutional stability and ideological common ground.

When Holmes decided *Bleistein* in 1903, there was no free speech doctrine as we know it today.<sup>364</sup> There were, however, many crises of propaganda and misinformation at the turn of the twentieth century, which were eventually managed by journalistic standards, the protection of a free press, and the rise of university disciplines.<sup>365</sup> When in 1918, Brandeis proclaimed in *INS* that "knowledge, truths ascertained, conceptions, and ideas become after voluntary

<sup>363</sup> LOUIS MENAND, *THE METAPHYSICAL CLUB* 343–45 (2001) (describing Holmes' jurisprudence).

<sup>364</sup> John Witt, *Weaponized from the Beginning*, 4 J. OF FREE SPEECH L. 715 (2023) [hereinafter Witt, *Weaponized*]. For historical accounts of First Amendment free speech law forcing a reexamination and critique of the contemporary approach, see, e.g., Joseph Blochner, *Free Speech and Justified True Belief*, 133 HARV. L. REV. 439 (2019); Genevieve Lakier, *The Invention of Low-Value Speech*, 128 HARV. L. REV. 2167 (2015); ROBERT POST, *DEMOCRACY, EXPERTISE, ACADEMIC FREEDOM: A FIRST AMENDMENT JURISPRUDENCE FOR THE MODERN STATE* (2012).

<sup>365</sup> Early observers for the World War One-era crisis of propaganda and misinformation did not treat it as a problem of free speech law. Freedom of speech in 1919 had barely been invented as a judicial doctrine; courts would not begin to protect speech against repressive laws until at least the late 1920s and 1930s. "Absent a First Amendment to rely on, critics and advocates turned not to free speech doctrine in the courts ... but to mediating institutions that offered bulwarks against distortions in the domain of public opinion." Witt, *Weaponized*, *supra* note 364, at 718-19.

communication to others free as the air to common use,” he and Holmes were developing that early free speech doctrine in which freedom of information was critical to the testing and assessment of facts as foundations of knowledge.<sup>366</sup>

Holmes was paying attention when, in the early 1900s, philosophers like Peirce, Wittgenstein, and Moore, and new “social scientists” like Durkheim and Max Weber, began a century-long debate over the difference between “facts” and “values.”<sup>367</sup> This epistemological paradigm shift troubles copyright law’s fact-exclusion. If, as some believed, objectivity is impossible and human subjectivity both inevitable and celebrated, facts are always “created” by intellectual labor and therefore copyrightable. In *Bleistein*, this may have manifested as Moore’s highest ideal—the appreciation of beauty—as Holmes worked through the intersection of consequentialism and aesthetic contemplation in *Principia Ethica*. On the other hand, pragmatists and burgeoning legal realists established that objectivity may be contingent and contextual but still grounded in social processes and institutions that establish institutional authority and stability. That is, facts are often produced by individuals within institutions. And more important than protecting individual labor in every instance is sustaining those institutions that protect the public interest. This is what Brandeis said eventually in *INS*, and it is what *Feist* should be understood to say seventy-five years later.

The “modern notion of objectivity” producing a new understanding of “facts” arose from turn-of-the-century epistemological debates, professional

---

<sup>366</sup> *INS*, 245 U.S. at 250 (Holmes, J. dissenting). In 1919, Justice Holmes authored another famous dissent in *Abrams v. United States*, a case in which the Supreme Court upheld the 1918 Sedition Act that criminalized critique of the United States’ war policies. *Abrams v. U.S.*, 250 U.S. 616 (1919). Disagreeing with the majority’s statutory interpretation and its finding of criminal intent to incite resistance to the U.S.’s war effort in Germany, Holmes pens the famous “fighting faiths” passage in which he melds theories of free speech, democratic resilience, and pragmatism, again espousing the humility with which he believes judges should approach contested issues of fact. “To allow opposition by speech seems to indicate that you think the speech impotent, as when a man says that he has squared the circle, or that you do not care wholeheartedly for the result, or that you doubt either your power or your premises. But when men have realized that time has upset many fighting faiths, they may come to believe even more than they believe the very foundations of their own conduct that the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas—that the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market, and that truth is the only ground upon which their wishes safely can be carried out. That, at any rate, is the theory of our Constitution. It is an experiment, as all life is an experiment. Every year, if not every day, we have to wager our salvation upon some prophecy based upon imperfect knowledge. While that experiment is part of our system, I think that we should be eternally vigilant against attempts to check the expression of opinions that we loathe and believe to be fraught with death, unless they so imminently threaten immediate interference with the lawful and pressing purposes of the law that an immediate check is required to save the country.” *Id.* at 630.

<sup>367</sup> Law & Urry, *Enacting the Social*, *supra* note 54, at 1 (describing this debate as “ontological politics”).

organizations, and emerging institutions of learning.<sup>368</sup> Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison explain that “objectivity” of knowledge was advanced through, among other features of modern society, the new technologies of manufacturing, mechanical reproduction, and especially image-making (microscopy, lithography, and photography).<sup>369</sup> As Daston and Galison describe, these new technological practices and outputs depended for their believability on “epistemic virtue,” a “moral attribute of the people recognized as makers of knowledge.”<sup>370</sup> These early twentieth-century changes begat the further notion of “structural objectivity”—taming individual idiosyncrasies through professional expertise and a new idea of “trained judgment.”<sup>371</sup> Holmes was engaged with these ideas as an intellectual interlocutor and a jurist. His opinions about copyright law (and labor law) must be understood in this light to appreciate how *Feist* is a subtle but no less critical repudiation of a bloated originality doctrine that started with *Bleistein* and carried through the twentieth century.<sup>372</sup>

*Bleistein*’s deferential evaluation of copyright authorship betrays Holmes’s allegiance to pragmatism as a process of knowledge-making.<sup>373</sup> His decision is thereafter marshaled as a misapplication of the aesthetic nondiscrimination principle, which freed copyright judges from being art critics but also helped identify minimal creativity in the output of information-producing industries, rendering their facts copyrightable and proprietary.<sup>374</sup> Privately-owned facts that do not circulate for testing, evaluation, contestation, and acceptance undermines the expertise and knowledge-producing institutions that Holmes celebrated as a pragmatist and early legal realist. Although *Bleistein* did not originate the sweat-

<sup>368</sup> DASTON & GALISON, OBJECTIVITY, *supra* note 43 at 26-34.

<sup>369</sup> *Id.* at 42.

<sup>370</sup> Jan Golinski, *How to Be Objective*, 96 AM. SCIENTIST 332 (2008) (book review), <https://www.americanscientist.org/article/how-to-be-objective/>. See DASTON & GALISON, OBJECTIVITY, *supra* note 43 at 39-42 (describing “epistemic virtue”). See also STEPHEN SHAPIN, A SOCIAL HISTORY OF TRUTH: CIVILITY AND SCIENCE IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND 193 (1995) (describing “the role of trust in constituting systems of both social order and empirical knowledge. There have to be working answers to the questions ‘whom to trust?’ and ‘who tells the truth?’ if there is to be shared knowledge and shared social order.”).

<sup>371</sup> DASTON & GALISON, OBJECTIVITY, *supra* note 43 at 356-57 (structural objectivity); 19, 346-57 (trained judgment).

<sup>372</sup> See Joyce & Ochoa, *Reach Out*, *supra* note 31, at 308 (for proposition that *Feist* is a repudiation of *Bleistein*).

<sup>373</sup> Beebe describes Holmes’ betrayal of pragmatism in terms of its deference to commercial activity instead of allegiance to aesthetic practice. Beebe, *Aesthetic Progress*, *supra* note 22, at 335, 345-50.

<sup>374</sup> For a discussion of cases in which factual works are incorrectly deemed original works of expression, see Dan L. Burk, *Madness and Method in Copyright Law*, 2007 UTAH L. REV. 587, 593-97 (2007) (criticizing application of § 102(b) and “fact/expression” dichotomy as based on “manifestly untrue” assertions about understandings of science in numerous cases).

of-the-brow doctrine, which was debated mid-century until *Feist*, *Bleistein* fed it by glorifying human creativity and the “singular[]” “personality” of each person who claims copyright authorship.<sup>375</sup> The effect of *Bleistein*’s inflated originality doctrine on the public domain of facts—resulting in cases that protect databases, informational catalogs, financial assessments, and evaluations<sup>376</sup>—could have been squelched by the realist revolution underway beginning with Holmes’s *Lochner* dissent. But it was not.

In *Lochner*, Holmes understood and embraced the newly emerging social sciences—organized in institutions and disciplines producing knowledge (and facts) that legislatures (and courts) can and should rely on—as an inevitable feature of law’s application.<sup>377</sup> To be sure, that knowledge is produced by human labor and within organizations, often through collective and collaborative practices. But at the time, scholars and policy advocates also understood that the value of public property serving the general welfare supersedes the importance of private ownership (and, for our purposes, copyright ownership). *Bleistein* appears to have come too early in Holmes’s tenure on the Court for his study of pragmatism as a process of knowledge-making, and its relation to aesthetics as a disciplinary practice, to have influenced him. *Lochner*’s formalism was not overruled until the 1930s; and *Bleistein*’s aesthetic nondiscrimination principle, which promises that anyone can be a copyright author (and almost anything can be copyrighted), remains good law and stronger than ever.<sup>378</sup>

The overextension of *Bleistein* predicts the twentieth-century expansion of copyright as a form of private property and the weakening of copyright’s core commitment to the public domain.<sup>379</sup> These outcomes run counter to turn-of-the-century debates about progressivism and capitalism (*i.e.*, critiques of labor and ownership) from which *Bleistein* originates. Holmes’s elevation of authorship as a way to celebrate democratic participation and protect labor—both Progressive causes misapplied in the copyright context—is in tension with the current scope of the fact-exclusion, which today is quite narrow in part due to *Bleistein*. This dichotomy makes the result in *Feist* (dispensing with sweat-of-the-brow and enlarging the public domain) all the more surprising *and* compelling. Given *Feist*’s legal roots and the intellectual history from which they sprung, a strong reading of *Feist* and its broader application is appropriate.

The result should be a revitalization of *Feist* for the twenty-first century, defining “facts” not as “pebbles waiting to be picked up”<sup>380</sup> but as knowledge produced within and through institutions and organizations characterized by

<sup>375</sup> *Bleistein*, 188 U.S. at 250.

<sup>376</sup> Burk, *Madness and Method in Copyright Law*, 2007 UTAH L. REV. at 593-97.

<sup>377</sup> This is the “logic” in law that is “experience.” HOLMES, THE COMMON LAW 1 (1881) (“Lecture 1: Early Forms of Liability”).

<sup>378</sup> See The Andy Warhol Found. for Visual Arts v. Goldsmith, 598 U.S. 508 (2023), at Slip Op. 31-32 & n.19 (affirming the centrality of the aesthetic nondiscrimination principle to copyright law).

<sup>379</sup> SILBEY, AGAINST PROGRESS, *supra* note 22, at 1-12, 20-21.

<sup>380</sup> Hughes, *Ontology*, *supra* note 31, at 53.

contemporary epistemic virtues. This revised reading resets the metric for evaluating copyrightability and puts more pressure on that evaluation than current doctrine dictates. It prioritizes the public interest over the author, which *Feist* does too, but *Bleistein* arguably does not. Also, it reestablishes “Progress of Science and the useful Arts” as a collective good measured not by the aggregate of individual contributions (or “personalities,” to use *Bleistein*’s term) but by institutions and the communities they form. The rule is judicial deference to those institutions and communities—not to commerciality and the market.<sup>381</sup> This is not such a substantial change in copyright practice: expertise and disciplinary knowledge have been part of the adjudication of important recent copyright cases.<sup>382</sup> But it does shift legal doctrine and strategy, moving the focus of judicial analysis to the beginning of the copyright dispute—to subject matter protection instead of the affirmative defense of fair use—with the possibility of early and speedier dispositions. As explained in the conclusion, this should affect the outcome of recent disputes, resulting in a richer informational public domain and the judicial imprimatur of knowledge-producing institutions as authoritative and reliable, both of which help defend deliberative democracy.

#### CONCLUSION: FEIST’S FUTURE APPLICATION

A strong reading of *Feist*, as this Article recommends, would result in different outcomes in many important copyright cases.

**Evaluations.** In cases wherein the copyrighted work is a set of values or projections of value (e.g., about car prices or coin prices), copyright is often asserted over the values themselves. For example, in *CCC Information Services v. Maclean Hunter Market Reports*, Maclean Hunter (the “Red Book” publisher) asserted copyright over its car valuations produced from a selection, coordination, and arrangement of factors made by the book’s editors that, the Court said, “were based not only on a multitude of data sources, but also on professional judgment and expertise.”<sup>383</sup> Whereas the district court determined that the values were “like the telephone numbers in *Feist*, pre-existing facts that had merely been discovered by the Red Book editors,” the Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit disagreed and held the Red Book and its numerical predictions of value copyrightable.<sup>384</sup> The Court of Appeals described the valuations as “approximative statements of opinion by the Red Book editors,” rejecting the Defendant’s claim that the valuations were “ideas” or represented

<sup>381</sup> Beebe, *Aesthetic Progress*, *supra* note 22, at 373 (describing *Bleistein* as defining aesthetic progress as “the market’s judgment of [the copyrighted work’s] worth”).

<sup>382</sup> See, e.g., *Google v. Oracle*, 593 U.S. 1, 31-32 (2021) (relying on amicus briefs describing the practices of computer programmers and software companies).

<sup>383</sup> *CCC Info. Servs.*, 44 F.3d at 63.

<sup>384</sup> *Id.* at 67. “Maclean’s evidence demonstrated without rebuttal that its valuations were neither reports of historical prices nor mechanical derivations of historical prices or other data. Rather, they represented predictions by the Red Book editors of future prices estimated to cover specified geographic regions.” *Id.*



the result of a “method, process or procedure” that would be excluded under §102(b).<sup>385</sup> No one argued that the valuations were “facts.” But the Court’s lengthy discussion of *Feist*, resulting in a determination that the “compilation of informational matter” is copyrightable as original, demonstrates *Feist*’s influence.<sup>386</sup>

Significant scholarly criticism exists about *CCC*, the most relevant explaining that “all facts involve judgment and creative selection.”<sup>387</sup> Understanding facts as produced through expertise and judgment is a lesson from the history this Article recounts. The twentieth-century emergence of modern facts is the result of the new sciences and professional disciplines claiming epistemic authority for their work. The Red Book sought to be known as *the* authoritative source for used car valuations, and it succeeded in that it was the referenced standard for insurance payments and in some state statutes.<sup>388</sup> Under a strong reading of *Feist*, much of the Red Book should be in the public domain as containing facts about car values made by professionals with skill and knowledge purportedly superior to that of others.<sup>389</sup> Are the facts contestable? Yes. Does that make them any less facts according to the Red Book professionals’ expertise? No. Does that mean the Defendant can copy the whole Red Book? Probably not, but much more of it should be in the public domain than *CCC* allows.

There are many cases like *CCC*, concerning evaluations and ratings of a range of items and services, for almost all of which a strong reading of *Feist* would allow more copying than less.<sup>390</sup> Many of these cases analyze copyrightability in terms of idea-exclusion (and merger), which makes the analysis more complicated because the appropriate level of generality and the

---

<sup>385</sup> *Id.* at 73.

<sup>386</sup> *Id.* at 63.

<sup>387</sup> Burk, *Method and Madness*, 2007 UTAH L. REV. at 596. *See also* Hughes, *Ontology*, *supra* note 31, at 68.

<sup>388</sup> *CCC Info Servs.*, 44 F.3d at 73.

<sup>389</sup> In some ways, this is a version of the copyright estoppel doctrine in which courts will not protect parts of the work held out by copyright owners to be factual, even if those parts turn out to be false. These cases are relatively rare and most recently have occurred in the context of historical fiction. *See Corbello v. Valli*, 974 F.3d 965 (9th Cir. 2020) (calling the issue one of “asserted truths”). “It would hinder, not promote the progress of science and useful arts to allow a copyright owner to spring an infringement suit on subsequent authors who built freely on a work held out as factual, contending after the completion of the copyrighted work, and against the work’s own averments, that the purported truths were actually fictions.” *Corbello*, 974 F.3d at 979.

<sup>390</sup> *Experian Info. Sols. v. Nationwide Mktg. Servs.*, 893 F.3d 1176 (9th Cir. 2018) (credit scores); *Health Grades, Inc. v. Robert Wood Johnson Univ. Hosp. Inc.*, 634 F. Supp. 2d 1226 (D. Colo. 2009) (healthcare ratings and awards for hospital and other healthcare providers); *N.Y. Mercantile Exch., Inc. v. Intercontinental Exch., Inc.*, 497 F.3d 109 (2d Cir. 2007) (evaluation of settlement prices); *CDN Inc. v. Kapes*, 197 F.3d 1256 (9th Cir. 1999) (coin price evaluations).

dividing line between idea and expression are frequently fraught questions.<sup>391</sup> Deciding, instead, that these cases contain factual matter would be more straightforward.

**Manuals and Catalogs.** Cases concerning manuals and catalogs can be analyzed the same way. In these cases, the plaintiff asserts copyright over technical manuals, practice standards, and catalogs that organize parts and procedures for purchase or practice. In some cases, manuals are necessary to repair or keep track of maintaining critical equipment, such as airplanes.<sup>392</sup> In other cases, catalogs or code books are essential to the continued practice of a skilled profession—be it dentistry, medicine, airplane maintenance, or building construction.<sup>393</sup> It is frightening to think about airplane maintenance or safe hospital construction regressing because copyright law constrains access to this essential information. To be sure, paying for books that contain knowledge (or “science” in the constitutional sense) is how copyright is supposed to work. Yet a strong reading of *Feist* might prevent only the whole copying of these books—replacing them in the marketplace with near or exact copies.<sup>394</sup> And it would allow generous quotation and selective copying for use and improvements. Most of these cases resolve on fair use grounds and not at an earlier and more efficient

<sup>391</sup> *Nichols v. Universal Pictures Co.*, 45 F.2d 119 (2d Cir. 1930) (“Upon any work, and especially upon a play, a great number of patterns of increasing generality will fit equally well, as more and more of the incident is left out . . . Nobody has ever been able to fix that boundary, and nobody ever can.”); Hughes, *Ontology*, *supra* note 31, at 91 (discussing malleability of merger doctrine).

<sup>392</sup> *Honeywell Intern., Inc., v. West Support Grp., Inc.*, 947 F. Supp. 2d 1077 (D. Ariz. 2013).

<sup>393</sup> *Practice Mgmt. v. AMA*, 133 F.3d 1140 (9th Cir. 1998); *Am. Dental Ass’n v. Delta Dental Plans Ass’n*, 126 F.3d 977 (7th Cir. 1997); *ATC Distrib. Grp., Inc. v. Whatever It Takes Transmissions & Parts*, 402 F.3d 700, 711 (6th Cir. 2005); *Facility Guidelines Inst., Inc. v. UpCodes*, No. 4:22-cv-01308-AGF, 2023 WL 4026185, (E.D. Mo. June 15, 2023); *Southco, Inc. v. Kanebridge Corp.*, 258 F.3d 148 (3d Cir. 2001) (tools/part numbers and requiring three trips to the Court of Appeals). See Hughes, *Ontology*, *supra* note 31, at 61–79 (discussing cases in terms of “naming facts,” “evaluative facts” and “legal facts”).

<sup>394</sup> This is how the first Copyright Act of 1790 worked, protecting “maps, charts, and books” from exact and whole copying. Fair use (or “fair abridgement”) was always a part of copyright law, but that concerned questions of shortening and summarizing. See Matthew Sag, *The Pre-History of Fair Use*, 76 BROOKLYN L. REV. 1371, 1377, 1398 (2011) (describing law distinguishing exact copying and comparative uses). *Feist* only implicitly wrestles with the dramatic change to copyright law under the 1976 Act, going from an opt-in system (under the 1909 Act, one had to register copyright for protection) to an opt-out system (under the 1976 Act, original works fixed in a tangible medium of expression are automatically protected). The new framing means now copyright’s *absence* requires justification, rather than its protection. The slipperiness of *Feist*’s reasoning is symptomatic of this implicit reframing as it tries to make what should be an obvious point (not everything is under copyright), but which is in fact less often the case. Also, copyright’s growing scope is related to the viability of infringement claims. If only parts of a work are protected, copying only those parts is plausibly infringement. Determining which parts of the work are in (or out) of copyright becomes more important as only parts of work (information and data) and not the whole work are copied..

stage of subject matter analysis, making for more protracted litigation.<sup>395</sup> Instead, when publishers assert that written works contain expertise and skilled knowledge, that information—which a strong reading of *Feist* would call factual matter—should be in the public domain as *publici juris*.

The case of *FMC Corp. v. Control Solutions* is a particularly egregious example of a court's erroneous and stingy application of *Feist* in upholding copyright in a pesticide label's instructions for use. Defendant Control Solutions copied FMC's label as part of a regulatory filing to the Environmental Protection Agency.<sup>396</sup> Control Solutions produced a generic form of FMC's expired-patented formula and used the instructions on FMC's label to describe use of the exact same product. The pesticide was dangerous, and testimony of FMC employees explained that the label provided instructions for its most effective and safe use.<sup>397</sup> After extensive discussion of *Feist* and copyright's idea-exclusion and merger rules, the court held that the label was protected expression and that its use by Control Solutions was not fair use.<sup>398</sup> The case was decided on a motion for a preliminary injunction, but the very long and thorough court opinion determined that the Defendant had no likelihood of success on the merits and that the public interest favored the Plaintiff. The court described the "public interest" as protecting copyright's exclusivity, saying that "protecting a company's rights to its intellectual property is in the public interest"; and that FMC had "invested considerable creativity, talent, resources, time and money to develop the . . . label"; and that "[t]he public interest is not served by permitting [Defendant] to pilfer and profit from FMC's copyrighted work product."<sup>399</sup> This notion of public interest is contrary to *Feist* and the cases it cites; it sounds much more like Irwin Karp's 1976 testimony in support of authors' rights (and sweat-of-the-brow), which *Feist* rejects.

A strong application of *Feist* in this case and ones like it would interpret the label and its indisputably expert instructions on the pesticide's use as factual matter. The creative choices, expert judgment, and "talent, resources, time and money" spent to devise the instructions for the pesticide should not convert what is meant to be an authoritative explanation of use.<sup>400</sup> Cases like this resemble

<sup>395</sup> See, e.g., *Google LLC v. Oracle Am., Inc.*, 593 U.S. 1 (2020) (deciding software copyright case on fair use and reserving §102(b) question for another day). Compare *Comput. Assocs. Int'l, Inc. v. Altai, Inc.*, 982 F.2d 693, 707-10 (2d Cir. 1992) (describing unprotectable elements as those dictated by efficiency and those constrained by external factors, such as compatibility needs).

<sup>396</sup> *FMC Corp. v. Control Sols. Inc.*, 369 F. Supp. 2d 539, 543 (E.D. Pa. 2005).

<sup>397</sup> *Id.* at 561.

<sup>398</sup> *Id.* at 561-67.

<sup>399</sup> *Id.* at 578 (citing *Klitzner*, 535 F. Supp. at 1259-60 ("the public interest can only be served by upholding copyright protections and, correspondingly, preventing misappropriation of the skills, creative energies, and resources [that were] invested in the protected work")).

<sup>400</sup> *Id.*

*Baker v. Selden* and are often decided on merger grounds.<sup>401</sup> But that analysis is fraught with traps and too easily manipulated in the copyright claimant's favor, which here frustrates the dissemination of information about what is admittedly the best and safest use of a dangerous product.<sup>402</sup> A strong reading of *Feist* declaring the instructions as a whole factual matter would avoid that result.

**Legal Matter.** In some ways, this category of works should be the easiest to declare public domain material under a strong reading of *Feist*, because *Wheaton v. Peters* says as much. Recently, however, the Supreme Court affirmed *Wheaton*'s holding under the "government edicts" doctrine, not under §102(b).<sup>403</sup> The government edicts doctrine says that no one can own the law because its author is "the people," and judges or legislatures work on the people's behalf.<sup>404</sup> *Georgia v. Public.Resource.Org*, which concerns state statutes annotated by private parties under the state legislature's guidance, extends the government edicts doctrine beyond laws to state-approved annotations of laws. Yet in many cases, the government edict doctrine is less easily applicable. Those cases confront the question as to whether a previously copyrighted work (not a statute), referenced by law or adopted by law as a standard or best practice, is similarly excluded from copyright protection.<sup>405</sup>

<sup>401</sup> See, e.g., *PortionPac Chem. Corp. v. SaniTech Sys., Inc.*, 217 F. Supp. 2d 1238, 1247-49 (M.D. Fla. 2002) (sanitation reference manual including forms could be copied under merger doctrine); *Cont'l Micro, Inc. v. HPC, Inc.*, No. 95 C 3829, 1997 WL 309028, (N.D. Ill. 1997) (section 102(b) precludes protection of data compilation because it constituted "sets of directions designed to enable locksmiths to accurately cut keys"); *Publ'ns. Int'l, Ltd. v. Meredith Corp.*, 88 F.3d 473, 480 (7th Cir. 1996) (holding recipes for yogurt unprotectable under 102(b)); *Morrissey v. Proctor & Gamble Co.*, 379 F.2d 675 (1st Cir. 1967) (merger doctrine precluded copyright protection in sweepstake rules). For a thorough discussion of merger cases after *Baker v. Selden*, see Pamela Samuelson, *Reconceptualizing Copyright's Merger Doctrine*, 63 J. COPYRIGHT SOC'Y OF THE USA 417 (2016).

<sup>402</sup> Burk, *Method and Madness*, 2007 UTAH L. REV. at 596.

<sup>403</sup> *Public.Resource.Org*, 590 U.S. at 286-87.

<sup>404</sup> *Id.* at 259, 263. ("Under what has been dubbed the government edicts doctrine, officials empowered to speak with the force of law cannot be the authors of—and therefore cannot copyright—the works they create in the course of their official duties. ... In a democracy, the Court reasoned, 'the People' are 'the constructive authors of the law, and judges and legislators are merely 'draftsmen . . . exercising delegated authority.'").

<sup>405</sup> See *Am. Soc'y for Testing & Materials v. Public.Resource.Org*, 597 F. Supp. 3d 213 (D.D.C. 2022), *aff'd* 82 F.4th 1262 (D.C. Cir. 2023); *Veeck v. S. Bldg. Code Cong. Int'l, Inc.*, 293 F.3d 791 (5th Cir. 2002); *Bldg. Offs. & Code Admin. v. Code Tech. Inc.*, 628 F.2d 730 (1st Cir. 1980); *Public.Resource.org v. Sheet Metal & Air Conditioning Contractors' National Ass'n, Inc.*, Case No. 13-CV-00815-SC (resolved in favor of Public.Resource.org, see stipulation and judgment, <https://www.eff.org/document/smacna-stipulation-and-judgement/>); Mike Masnick, *Sheet Metal & Air Conditioning Contractors Agree Not To Use Bogus Copyright Claims to Block Publication Of Official Standards*, Techdirt (Jul. 16, 2013, 11:03 PM), <https://www.techdirt.com/2013/07/16/sheet-metal-air-conditioning-contractors-agree-not-to-use-bogus-copyright-claims-to-block-publication-official-standards/>.

Consider the ten-year litigation between the American Society for Testing and Materials [ASTM] et al. and Public.Resource.Org, which was first filed in 2013 and finally concluded in 2023.<sup>406</sup> Plaintiffs are nonprofit professional organizations that develop private-sector standards to facilitate technical training, ensure compatibility across products and services, and promote public safety.<sup>407</sup> The standards they produce begin as voluntary guidelines for self-regulation, but oftentimes, federal, state, or local governments adopt these standards or incorporate them by reference into law.<sup>408</sup> The Plaintiffs sell the standards as downloadable PDFs or hard-copy books; purchasing the standards is the only way an interested party may obtain a copy. Public.Resource.Org, another nonprofit organization, aims to make “law and other government materials more widely available so that people, businesses, and organizations can easily read and discuss [the] laws and the operations of government.”<sup>409</sup> When the Plaintiffs’ standards become required reading to follow the law, Public.Resource.Org purchases a copy of the relevant standard and makes it available for free on its website.<sup>410</sup>

The Plaintiffs sued Public.Resource.Org for copyright infringement, and the district court found that they held valid and enforceable copyrights in the incorporated standards, and that Public.Resource.Org did not have a fair use defense. The Court of Appeals reversed the decision, finding that the fair use analysis required a case-by-case analysis for each Plaintiff, “leaving for another day the far thornier question of whether standards retain their copyright after they are incorporated by reference into law.”<sup>411</sup> In 2022, the district court ruled that the standards retained their copyright but that the Defendant engaged in fair use for those incorporated by reference into law or are identical in text to

---

<sup>406</sup> *Am. Soc’y for Testing & Materials v. Public.Resource.Org*, 597 F. Supp. 3d 213 (D.D.C. 2022), *aff’d* 82 F.4th 1262 (D.C. Cir. 2023).

<sup>407</sup> “Each Plaintiff relies on volunteers and association members [to produce] . . . standards [that] include technical works, product specifications, installation methods, methods for manufacturing or testing materials, safety practices, and other best practices or guidelines. . . . ASTM has developed over 12,000 standards that are used in a wide range of fields, including consumer products, iron and steel products, rubber, paints, plastics, textiles, medical services and devices, electronics, construction, energy, water, and petroleum products, and are a result of the combined efforts of over 23,000 technical members. NFPA has developed over 300 standards in the areas of fire, electrical, and building safety, including the National Electrical Code, first published in 1897 and most recently in 2020. And ASHRAE has published over 100 standards for a variety of construction-related fields, including energy efficiency, indoor air quality, refrigeration, and sustainability.” *Id.* at 221.

<sup>408</sup> *Id.*

<sup>409</sup> *Id.* at 223.

<sup>410</sup> *Id.*

<sup>411</sup> *Am. Soc’y for Testing & Materials v. Public.Resource.Org.*, 896 F.3d 437, 441 (D.C. Cir. 2018).

standards incorporated by law.<sup>412</sup> Public.Resource.Org was nonetheless liable for copyright infringement of 32 of the 217 standards it posted, because the laws that incorporated the standards differed in “substantive ways.”<sup>413</sup> The range of interested amici underscores this litigation’s high stakes. Amici include the American Insurance Association, American National Standards Institute, American Society of Safety Engineers, International Association of Plumbing & Mechanical Officials, and American Society of Civil Engineers (on behalf of Plaintiffs) and 62 Library Associations, Nonprofit Organizations, Legal Technology Companies and Former Senior Government Officials (on behalf of Defendant).<sup>414</sup> Amici, on the Defendant’s behalf, explain their interests as access to the

text of the law for purposes [of] education, dissemination of knowledge, development of new and innovative technologies, public advocacy, and investigative journalism. . . . These purposes ultimately all work toward the larger project of a vibrant national discourse in the advancement of the critical project of constitutional self-government.<sup>415</sup>

Amici on the Plaintiffs’ behalf explain their interest as relying on

the objective, high quality research and guidance that underpins these safety standards. . . . Without copyright protection, the critical source of funding that makes possible the production of these world class standards will disappear, calling into question the future independence, quality and even existence of these standards.<sup>416</sup>

These interests directly reflect the twentieth-century shift in knowledge production and the rise of knowledge-producing institutions, which are implicit in *Feist*’s reasoning and compel a broader public domain in factual matters.

Generating objective knowledge according to disciplinary standards is vitally important to public welfare. When that knowledge becomes “law” to be followed in exact or approximate form, the interests that disciplinary knowledge serves magnify. As the Court of Appeals explained, “faithfully reproducing the

---

<sup>412</sup> Am. Soc’y for Testing & Materials v. Public.Resource.Org., 597 F. Supp. 3d at 240-41.

<sup>413</sup> *Id.* at 241.

<sup>414</sup> Am. Soc’y for Testing & Materials v. Public.Resource.Org, Inc., Nos. 17-7035, 17-7039, 2017 WL 6055366 (D.C. Cir. Dec. 6, 2017); Am. Soc’y for Testing & Materials v. Public.Resource.Org, Inc., No. 17-7035, 2017 WL 6205552 (D.C. Cir. Dec. 6, 2017); Am. Soc’y for Testing & Materials v. Public.Resource.Org, Inc., Nos. 17-7035, 17-7039, 2017 WL 4251422 (D.C. Cir. Sept. 25, 2017).

<sup>415</sup> Am. Soc’y for Testing & Materials v. Public.Resource.Org, Inc., Nos. 17-7035, 17-7039, 2017 WL 4251422 (D.C. Cir. Sept. 25, 2017).

<sup>416</sup> Am. Soc’y for Testing & Materials v. Public.Resource.Org, Inc., Nos. 17-7035, 17-7039, 2017 WL 6055366 (D.C. Cir. Dec. 6, 2017).

relevant text of a technical standard incorporated by reference. . . for purposes of informing the public about the law obviously has great value.”<sup>417</sup> This is a version of the Defendant’s argument that “[t]echnical standards incorporated into law are some of the most important rules of our modern society. In a democracy, the people must have the right to read, know, and speak about the laws by which we choose to govern ourselves.”<sup>418</sup> It is a tragedy of the commons that debates over these standards continued for a decade, including two appeals, although not the kind of tragedy Garrett Hardin made famous in his 1968 essay.<sup>419</sup> It is a tragedy of the digital age commons, in which knowledge and information are relied upon for important regulations but are kept sequestered by copyright law from open debate, discussion, and evaluation. Standard-setting organizations produce these codes in unprecedented supply and claim copyright because the contents are “evaluative,” the product of human “expertise and judgment,” and because professional labor deserves remuneration. A strong reading of *Feist* privileging the role of expertise and knowledge-producing institutions to promote “the progress of science” would reject an authorial labor argument and designate these codes as factual matters in the public domain.

\*\*\*

This Article does not argue that professionals should work for free. But the cases that *Feist* relies on and the historical era that frames its reasoning explain that skilled labor does not justify copyright protection over its output and that sometimes, it is precisely skill and expertise that make a work “factual” public domain material. Further, the history and the cases *Feist* relies on make clear that copyright’s incentive theory insufficiently justifies a property right to subsidize knowledge-producing work, by and through knowledge-producing institutions, whose output can and should be promoted in other ways. Put differently, copyright is not just concerned with property incentives. History and experience demonstrate that copyright incentives are peripheral to knowledge-producing or data-driven industries’ bottom line, rendering claims for copyright’s necessity self-serving and overblown.<sup>420</sup>

<sup>417</sup> *Am. Soc’y for Testing & Materials v. Public.Resource.Org, Inc.*, 896 F.3d 437, 451 (D.C. Cir. 2018).

<sup>418</sup> *Freeing the Law with Public.Resources.Org*, ELECTRONIC FRONTIER FOUNDATION, <https://www EFF.org/cases/publicresource-freeingthelaw/>.

<sup>419</sup> Garrett Hardin, *The Tragedy of the Commons*, 162 *SCIENCE* 1243, 1243-48 (1968).

<sup>420</sup> Copyright’s economic incentive rationale rooted in utilitarianism is exaggerated to the point of being inaccurate. The critical literature is vast and continues to expand. *See e.g.*, GLYNN LUNNEY, *COPYRIGHT’S EXCESS: MONEY AND MUSIC IN THE U.S. RECORDING INDUSTRY* (2018); JESSICA SILBEY, *EUREKA MYTH: CREATORS, INNOVATORS, AND EVERYDAY INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY* 276-279 (2015). *See also* Glynn S. Lunney, Jr. and Glynn Lunney, *Reexamining Copyright’s Incentives-Access Paradigm*, 49 *VANDERBILT L. REV.* 483 (1996); Margaret Chon, *Intellectual Property and the Development Divide*, 27

This Article began with troubling scenarios regarding the cartelization of climate data in the insurance market, copyrightability of building codes impeding access to the law, and restricted use of history to tell new stories about the past. The subsequent examples show that a stingy reading of *Feist* (and a typical reading of *Bleistein*) limits “facts” to discoveries or ideas, metastasizing rather than staunching these problematic scenarios. By contrast, a strong reading of *Feist* resolves them in favor of a richer public domain comprising more factual matters broadly construed as objective explanations about our world. Copyright should not impede the progress of science. When recalibrated according to a strong reading of *Feist* comporting with the history and legal precedent on which *Feist* relies, copyright can tolerate the contestability of facts and knowledge while still designating them public property. Copyright can thus serve the institutions that promote democratic self-governance—such as the university sciences, journalism, and law—by supporting their epistemic authority in public discourse as producers of facts and knowledge in the public domain. This path is the way forward in our information age and is true to the first principles of copyright law. *Feist* was decided before this age blossomed. As the information age is here to stay, a strong reading of *Feist* is both vital and just.

---

CARDOZO L. REV. 2821 (2006); Diane Leenheer Zimmerman, *Copyrights as Incentives: Did We Just Imagine That?*, 12 THEORETICAL INQ. IN LAW 29 (2011); Eric Johnson, *Intellectual Property and the Incentive Fallacy*, 39 FL. ST. U. L. REV. 623 (2011); Jeanne Fromer, *Expressive Incentives in Intellectual Property*, 98 VA. L. REV. 1745 (2012). As for copyright protection’s marginal relevance to data protection industries, see JEANNE FROMER AND CHRISTOPHER SPRIGMAN, COPYRIGHT LAW: CASES AND MATERIALS 56 (v.4.0 2022) (describing “continuing doubts about the wisdom of database protection” in light of European Union’s study that EU database protection had no beneficial impact on production of databases whereas U.S. database production has grown despite lack of copyright protection for fact-based databases). Research on standard setting organizations shows that sale of complementary products and services related to the standards (and not the books themselves) are the substantial contributor to market value. See, e.g., Timothy Simcoe, Stuart Graham and Maryann Feldman, *Competing on Standards? Entrepreneurship, Intellectual Property, and Platform Technologies*, 18 J. OF ECON. & MGMT STRATEGY 775 (2009). See also Mark Lemley and David McGowan, *Legal Implications of Network Economics Effects*, 86 CAL. L. REV. 479 (1998) (describing how access to a wide selection of complementary products and services creates network effects that drive market behavior).