

NO, IT'S NOT YOUR OPINION. YOU'RE JUST WRONG



I have had so many conversations or email exchanges with students in the last few years wherein I anger them by indicating that simply saying, "This is my opinion" does not preclude a connected statement from being dead wrong. It still baffles me that some feel those four words somehow give them *carte blanche* to spout batshit oratory or prose. And it really scares me that some of those students think education that challenges their ideas is equivalent to an attack on their beliefs.

-Mick Cullen

I spend far more time arguing on the Internet than can possibly be healthy, and the word I've come to loath more than any other is "opinion". Opinion, or worse "belief", has become

the shield of every poorly-conceived notion that worms its way onto social media.

There's a common conception that an opinion cannot be wrong. My dad said it. Hell, everyone's dad probably said it and in the strictest terms it is true. However, before you crouch behind your Shield of Opinion you need to ask yourself two questions.

1. Is this actually an opinion?

2. If it is an opinion how informed is it and why do I hold it?

I'll help you with the first part. An opinion is a preference for or judgment of something. My favorite color is black. I think mint tastes awful. *Doctor Who* is the best television show. These are all opinions. They may be unique to me alone or massively shared across the general population but they all have one thing in common; they cannot be verified outside the fact that I believe them.

There's nothing wrong with an opinion on those things. The problem comes from people whose opinions are actually misconceptions. If you think vaccines cause autism you are expressing **something factually wrong**, not an opinion. The fact that you may still believe that vaccines cause autism does not move your misconception into the realm of valid opinion. Nor does the fact that many other share this opinion give it any more validity.

To quote [John Oliver](#), who referenced a [Gallup poll](#) showing one in four Americans believe climate change isn't real on his show, *Last Week Tonight...*

Who gives a shit? You don't need people's opinion on a fact. You might as well have a poll asking: "Which number is bigger, 15 or 5?" or "Do owls exist?" or "Are there hats?"

You saw this same thing recently when questions about the Confederate flag started making the rounds. It may be your opinion that slavery was not the driving cause of the Civil War, but the [Texas Articles of Secession](#) mention slavery 21 times (rights are mentioned only six, and only once in a sentence that doesn't mention either slavery or how way more flippin' awesome white people are than black people). Do I even need to point out that some people are also of the opinion the Holocaust was fake, and that their opinion

means absolutely nothing to the reality?



Pictured: A bunch of people who were murdered regardless of someone's opinion on the subject
The Auschwitz Album

And yes, sometimes scientific or historical data is wrong or unclear or in need of further examination. Everyone knows water expands when it freezes. Do you know why it does that when literally nothing else in the world does? Nope, and **neither does science**. Or hey, here's a question; what was the racial heritage of the Ancient Egyptians because historians **can't come to a consensus** and their art is too stylized to accurately judge.

Subjects like that are the sort of things that are ripe for an opinion. Water expands when it freezes because of the shape of the molecule. The Egyptians were a displaced black African race that settled the Nile. Here, opinion can be a placeholder for a greater understanding assuming there ever is a greater understanding. There is no verification; it can only be guessed at. Hopefully in an educated manner.

That's where the second question comes in; is your opinion informed and why do you believe it? Though technically these opinions cannot be wrong they can be lacking in worth simply because they are lacking in structure.

Here's an example. Let's say I meet a fellow *Doctor Who* fan, and this fan's favorite Doctor is David Tennant. Nothing wrong so far. However, upon further discussing the subject this fan tells me that he or she has never seen any of the pre-2005 episodes or heard any of the radio plays. Now, it's possible that even if he or she had David Tennant would still be his or her favorite Doctor, but it's also possible that it would be Tom Baker or Paul McGann or someone else.

In a perfect world someone confronted with this would simply say, "Well, David Tennant is my favorite that I've seen." There's plenty of reasons to not have seen any older *Doctor Who*. It's not all on Netflix, there's a lot of it, radio plays can get rather expensive, etc. Having a narrow opinion from a narrow set of information is only natural.

What mucks it all up when a narrow set of information is assumed to be wider than it is. There is a difference between a belief and things you just didn't know. It's easy to believe, for instance, that whites face **as much discrimination as people of color**, but only if you are completely ignorant of the **unemployment rates of blacks versus whites**, the fact that of the Fortune 500 CEOs **only five are black**, or the fact that of the 43 men who have been president 42.5 of them have been white.

In other words, you can form an opinion in a bubble, and for the first couple of decades of our lives we all do. However, eventually you are going to venture out into the world and find that what you thought was an informed opinion was actually just a tiny thought based on little data and your feelings. Many, many, many of your opinions will turn out to be uninformed or just flat out wrong. No, the fact that you believed it doesn't make it any more valid or worthwhile, and nobody owes your viewpoint any respect simply because it is yours.

You can be wrong or ignorant. It will happen. Reality does not care about your feelings. Education does not exist to persecute you. The misinformed are not an ethnic minority being oppressed. What's that? Planned Parenthood is chopping up dead babies and selling them for phat cash? No, that's not **what actually happened**. No, it's not your opinion.

You're just wrong.

Jef has a new story about robot sharks out now in [Lurking in the Deep](#). You can also find him on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).